

Reading and Writing About Poetry

Isn't poetry just the worst?

It's hard to believe that many poets even speak English after reading some of their work. None of the words are in order, the vocabulary is confusing, and the meaning is, well...who knows what the meaning is. So how on earth did these poems end up in your Lit. class, and how are you going to write five pages about one?

Step One: Relax.

Poetry doesn't have to be a nightmare if you know how to approach a poem. That's what this worksheet is for.

Step Two: Read the poem aloud, more than once.

This may seem silly, but it is always better to read a poem aloud than silently. Find a quiet place (or an audience, if that's what you prefer), and read the poem in your normal speaking voice. Most likely the sound effects will come out on their own, so there's no need to get too dramatic. If you're really shy (even when alone), slip a friend a nice crisp George Washington to read it to you. But never approach a poem without actually listening to it. Take note of the sound effects; absorb the rhythm. Pay attention to the language and what it evokes.

Step Three: Take it all in.

How does it make you feel?

(Think of how the poem makes you feel. Consider writing down your initial reaction to the poem and the feelings and thoughts it evokes in you. Remember these notes might come in handy when you start writing your analysis of the poem.)

WRITING ABOUT A POEM

Once you've read and thought about the poem, you can tackle the writing. The best way to start is by identifying the key features of the poem—such as factual details, imagery, and literary devices—then trying to figure out how they coincide with the poem's purpose or meaning. You might have an idea of what the meaning is at first, but if you start by clearing up the essential features, you'll know whether or not you're on the right track.

And don't worry if you can't answer all of the questions on this worksheet. Not all of them will apply. Just answer the questions you know, and work from there. Sometimes not finding an answer is an answer in itself—perhaps the poet is indicating that we aren't able to find the answers. (But don't try using this interpretation as a cop-out—you still have to prove it within the poem.)

Remember: there's no one right interpretation of a poem, so feel free to take chances. As long as you can show evidence with examples from the poem to support your idea, you have nothing to be afraid of.

BASIC DETAILS

Outlining the basic details is the first step to getting a clear understanding of what a poem is about. Points to keep in mind:

1. What is the title?
2. Who is the “speaker”? (The speaker is not always the author.) To whom are they speaking?
3. What is the tone (attitude of the speaker)?
4. What is the setting? Is there any action? Where does that take place?
(try to link subjects with their verbs and verbs with their objects to get an idea of what’s going on)
5. What is the subject of the poem?
6. When was the poem written? For what reason? (to woo a loved one, respond to another poet, rouse patriotism, protest a ruler, etc.)

Take a look at this poem by **Robert Frost**, and note how the details pop right out.

A Time to Talk
When a friend calls to me from the road
And slows his horse to a meaning walk,
I don’t stand still and look around
On all the hills I haven’t hoed,
And shout from where I am, “What is it?”
No, not as there is a time to talk.
I thrust my hoe in the mellow ground,
Blade-end up and five feet tall,
And plod: I go up to the stone wall
For a friendly visit.

STRUCTURE

Structure can be divided into two categories: structure of the words and lines (form) and structure of the ideas. Analyzing how these two types of structure relate to each other helps expose the poem’s meaning.

1. How are the lines organized (parts, stanzas, etc.)?
2. Is a traditional form used for the poem? (sonnet, haiku, etc.)
3. Are words placed on the page for specific effect? (for example, a word all the way on the right for emphasis)
4. How does the idea develop? (chronologically, rhetorically (an argument—If A...But B...So C), through flashbacks or free-association, etc.)
5. Does the poem express complex ideas with only a few words? (compactness—especially true of haikus)

Here is one of **Shakespeare**’s most famous sonnets. He develops this poem’s idea through argument, using highly descriptive language throughout.

Shall I compare thee to a summer's day?
Thou art more lovely and more temperate:
Rough winds do shake the darling buds of May,
And summer's lease hath all too short a date;
Sometime too hot the eye of heaven shines,
And often is his gold complexion dimmed;
And every fair from fair sometime declines,
By chance or nature's changing course untrimmed.
But thy eternal summer shall not fade,
Nor lose possession of that fair thou ow'st;
Nor shall death brag thou wander'st in his shade,
When in eternal lines to time thou grow'st:
So long as men can breathe or eyes can see,
So long lives this, and this gives life to thee.

Now compare that poem's structure and development with this one by **E.E. Cummings**:

Buffalo Bill's
defunct
who used to
ride a water-smooth silver
stallion
and break onetwothreefourfive pigeonsjustlikethat
Jesus

he was a handsome man
and what i want to know is
how do you like your blueeyed boy
Mister Death

FEATURES OF LANGUAGE

Language is the sole tool of poets, so they use it in creative ways to get their meanings across. Determining which features and devices are used is fundamental to examining a poem.

1. How would you describe the poem's verbal style? (simple, complex, pretentious, minimal, etc.)
2. Are there any peculiar dialects or terminologies used? (fishing terms, flower terms, localized accent)
3. Does the poet create any new words, or use existing words in a new way?
4. Are there ambiguous meanings or double-meanings?
5. Does the poem have a rhyme scheme, or is it free verse?
6. What language devices are used? (repetition, alliteration, assonance, onomatopoeia, etc.—for a full list, see the COMMON LITERARY TERMS handout)

7. What is the meter of the poem? How does the rhythm flow? (Meter and rhythm can be easily confused for the same, but as in music, they are quite different. Meter is the number and type of beats per line—for example, iambic pentameter. The meter of a poem is constant. However, rhythm is the flow of the language; it can diverge from the metrical pattern, just like musical rhythm.)
8. Are there any sound effects? (pauses, rapidity, choppiness, etc.)

Here is a selection from **Gerard Manley Hopkins**, a poet renowned for his unconventional uses of language.

The Caged Skylark

As a dare-gale skylark scanted in a dull cage
Man's mounting spirit in his bone-house, mean house, dwells—
That bird beyond the remembering his free fells;
This in drudgery, day-labouring-out life's age.

Though aloft on turf or perch or poor low stage,
Both sing sometimes the sweetest, sweetest spells,
Yet both droop deadly sometimes in their cells
Or wring their barriers in bursts of fear or rage.

Not that the sweet-fowl, song-fowl, needs no rest—
Why, hear him, hear him babble and drop down to his nest,
But his own nest, wild nest, no prison.

Man's spirit will be flesh-bound when found at best,
But uncumbered: meadow-down is not distressed
For a rainbow footing nor he for his bones risen.

IMAGERY

Poets use visual images to help us “see” the world of the poem; therefore, it is critical to analyze the imagery in order to fully appreciate a poem. Fortunately, imagery is also the most fun to explore because it inspires our imaginations. Sample imagery questions:

1. What visual images are used in the poem? How would you describe them? (original, striking, vivid?)
2. Is there a dominant, unifying visual image, or are there any repeated visual images?
3. Are the images symbolic of something else, or do they just create a pleasant picture?

The poem “Dream Deferred” by **Langston Hughes** travels from image to image, searching for a visual analog of the title.

Dream Deferred

What happens to a dream deferred?
Does it dry up
Like a raisin in the sun?
Or fester like a sore—
And then run?
Does it stink like rotten meat?
Or crust and sugar over—
like a syrupy sweet?
Maybe it just sags
like a heavy load.
Or does it explode?

LITERARY DEVICES

Literary devices include such things as allusion, simile, and metaphor. These devices add complex layers that expand the meaning beyond obvious definitions. Some questions to ask:

1. Are inanimate objects personified?
2. Are there literary or cultural allusions? What does the reader need to know in order to appreciate these allusions?
3. Are there any similes or metaphors? What effects do these have?
4. Does the poet make use of hyperbole (exaggeration) in his descriptions?

William Wordsworth used personification in the following poem to communicate his feelings about death.

A Slumber Did My Spirit Seal

A slumber did my spirit seal;
I had no human fears:
She seemed a thing that could not feel
The touch of earthly years.

No motion has she now, no force;
She neither hears nor sees;

Rolled round in earth's diurnal course,
With rocks, and stones, and trees.

MEANING, OR LACK THEREOF

1. Does the poem belong to a specific genre? (Romantic, Cavalier, Realist) How does it compare to other poems by the same author, or similar poems by different authors?
2. Does the poem have an identifiable theme? If not, what feeling does it create in the reader?
3. How does the structure coincide with the meaning? Was the structure a good choice?
4. How is the particular language used to communicate the meaning of the poem?

In this poem by **Walt Whitman**, the meaning is not stated; it is implied.

When I Heard the Learned Astronomer

When I heard the learn'd astronomer,
When the proofs, the figures, were ranged in columns before me,
When I was shown the charts and diagrams, to add, divide,
and measure them,
When I sitting heard the astronomer where he lectured with
much applause in the lecture-room,
How soon unaccountable I became tired and sick,
Till rising and gliding out I wander'd off by myself,
In the mystical moist night-air, and from time to time,
Look'd up in perfect silence at the stars.

Hopefully this pamphlet has helped you to write your paper, but more importantly, increased your enjoyment of poetry. Poetry's magic is not in its numbers or terms but in its mystery.

Isn't poetry just the greatest?

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