UMass Dartmouth Writing and Reading Center

**Understanding Poetry**

Although understanding poetry can seem overwhelming at first, there are some guidelines that you can follow to make the reading and interpretation process easier. **Reading the poem aloud** is the best way to start. This may seem silly, but it is important to hear the poem's rhythm and rhyme scheme. As you read, you should also pay attention to the language and to what it evokes.

Your response to the author's words is crucial to your analysis, and written notes will come in handy when you start writing about the poem. What is your initial reaction to the poem? What does it make you think? How does it make you feel? What do you think the author is trying to communicate?

**TAKING A POEM APART**

The best way to analyze the poem is by identifying its three main elements.

1) Basic details

2) Structure

3) Language

**1) BASIC DETAILS**

Outlining the poem's basic details is the first step to gaining a clear understanding of what the poem is about.

1. What is the title?

2. Who is the speaker? (The author is not necessarily the speaker when the character in

the poem speaks in the first person.)

3. What characterizes the speaker?

4. To whom is he or she speaking?

5. What is the speaker's tone, attitude, or emotional state?

6. What is the setting? Is there any action? Where does that take place?

7. What is the subject of the poem? What does the speaker talk about?

8. When was the poem written? Why was it written?

9. Does the poem belong to a specific genre?

10. How does it compare to other poems by the same author, or similar poems by

different authors?

Read this poem by Robert Frost, and take note of the poem's basic details.

**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.

--Robert Frost

**2) STRUCTURE**

A poem's structure functions on two levels: its physical form and the arrangement of its ideas. It is important to analyze structure because the relationship between a poem's form and its organization emphasizes its meaning.

1. Does the poem follow an established form?

2. How are the lines organized?

3. Does the poem have a rhyme scheme or is it in free verse?

4. What is the poem's meter? (Meter refers to the pattern of stressed and unstressed

syllables in a poem.)

5. Are words placed on the page for specific effect?

6. How do the ideas in the poem develop?

This is one of Shakespeare'smost famous poems. Notice its form and its arrangement of ideas, and compare its structure with that of the poem that follows by E. E. Cummings.

**Sonnet 18**

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 sometimes declines,

By chance or nature's changing course untrimmed.

But thy eternal summer shall not fade,

Nor lose possession of that fair thou ows't;

Nor shall death brag thou wanders't in his shade,

When in eternal lines to time thou grows't:

So long as men can breath or eyes can see,

So long lives this, and this gives life to thee.

-- William F. Shakespeare

Buffalo Bill's

Defunct

who used to

ride a watersmooth-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

--E.E. Cummings

**3) LANGUAGE**

Language is the primary tool of poets, so they use it in creative ways. Poets use diction and imagery, including descriptive and figurative language, to create a mood that contributes to a poem's meaning.

**DESCRIPTIVE LANGUAGE**

1. What are the descriptive images in the poem? To what senses do the images appeal?

2. Is there a dominant, unifying image? Is there a progression in the images?

3. What kind of mood do these images create?

4. Why do you think the poet uses these images?

**FIGURATIVE LANGUAGE**

1. What literary devices does the poet employ? (Some common devices are metaphor,

simile, analogy, and personification.)

2. What are the implications of the poets' metaphors and analogies?

3. Does the poet make an abstract quality more concrete?

Consider the desciptive and figurative language in the following poem by Twentieth Century poet Langston Hughes:

**Harlem**

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?*

--Langston Hughes

**DICTION**

1. Which words in the poem seem particularly meaningful or well-chosen?

2. What are the connotations and denotations of these words?

3. How does this contribute to the poem's overall effect?

4. Are there any double entendres or puns?

5. Does the poet use slang, create new words, use existing words in a new way, or write

in a dialect?

Here is a selection from Gerard Manley Hopkins, a poet who is renowned for his unconventional use 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-laboring-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.

--Gerard Manly Hopkins

**FINDING MEANING**

After considering the basic details, structure, and language of the poem, review your initial reaction to it.

1. Did your experience of the poem change after examining it more closely? If so, how

and why? If not, why?

2. Do the structure and language support your initial reaction? Why or why not?

3. Does the poem have an identifiable theme, subject, and mood?

4. How do the structure and the language support the poem's theme, subject, and

mood?

5. What do you think the poet is trying to say? What informs your understanding of the

meaning?

6. Is the meaning of the poem stated or implied? How does that affect your

understanding of the poem's meaning?

By looking at how all the parts of a poem work together, its meaning is often easier to determine. Keep in mind that there are many ways of interpreting one poem. As long as you can support your idea with examples from the poem, you have nothing to be afraid of.

In this poem by Walt Whitman,the meaning is not stated but implied.

**When I heard the Learn'd 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.

--Walt Whitman

The world of poetry is vast and deep. The above questions may help you begin to understand and enjoy its many pleasures.

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