

A Guide to Reading and Interpreting Poetry

Poetry is highly compressed language, but still uses punctuation and complete sentences, as well as sound and rhythm. Poets work to strip out all the extemporaneous words writers usually include as glue between the essential words and that give us context about meaning. While the language's compression may make the poem seem difficult to understand, most poems are, in the end, interpretable.

It's best to approach a poem systematically in an academic reading. Treat the poem as if it is a puzzle to be sussed out, or travel luggage waiting to be unpacked. While one may read poetry outside of school simply for pleasure, in academia, we are attempting to construct defensible interpretations, which means we are attempting to *agree as a community* on the most complete meaning of the poem being read and discussed.

The most beloved and enduring poetry does not abandon literal meaning in its focus on figurative language, sound rhythm and imagery. The most successful poems actually blend somehow both literal and figurative meaning in a way that is difficult to explain but resonates with us nonetheless—it's actually the tension between the two that builds meaning.

Let's follow the system listed here to annotate and interpret a poem's most likely meaning.

*When you read and understand a poem,
comprehending its rich and formal
meanings, then you master chaos a little.*
- Stephen Spender

Reading the Poem

1. Read the poem through 1-3 times and see how much of the author's meaning you can immediately grasp. Ask yourself:

- Who is speaking?
- Who is the audience?
- What is the topic?
- Where and when is the action taking place?
- What is motivating the speaker?

2. Then, go back through the poem, line by line. Define all the images and symbols, if necessary referring to outside reference works or to other poems by the same author.

3. If you are still having difficulty understanding the poem, consider "translating" each line into prose. Or substitute simpler words for the more difficult ones. You may need a dictionary.

4. When you understand all the basic words and ideas in the poem, reread the poem a few more times and pull it all back together again.

Interpreting the Poem

1. Look at the title—it's often as important as any line.
2. Follow the punctuation like a road map.
3. Look for symbols, allusions and other clues to meaning.
4. Identify tone (based on diction) and any ambiguities.
5. Read first for literal meaning, and then for metaphorical meaning.
6. Look for recurring words, ideas, sounds.
7. Pay close attention to the closing lines.

*Prose consists of words in their best order.
Poetry consists of the best words in the best order.*
- Samuel Taylor Coleridge

Annotating the Poem

Annotating literature means taking careful, extensive notes on any important plot or character clues, themes, and use of literary devices (rhyme, allusion, alliteration, irony, metaphor, etc.), as well as your personal responses to the work—noting the author's tone, intended audience, speaker, etc.—and how you react or think about it.

In the analysis of a poem, remember to consider "who is speaking to whom," "when and where is the poem taking place," and "what is topic being discussed," and "what is the primary purpose—to persuade, to instruct, to inform, to reflect, to discover, and/or to entertain?"

*The only really difficult thing about a
poem is the critic's explanation of it.*
- Frank Moore Colby

Writing the Literary Explication/Analysis

When writing an explication paper, we essentially write out a detailed interpretation of a work of literature, particularly of shorter work like poetry. This type of essay looks at all aspects of a poem—its surface meaning, as well as its underlying tone and themes, any and all use of literary devices and their influence on the poem. We will be writing many timed poetry analysis papers during the year. To write with expertise, you'll need to know the following terms. Define them in your journal.

General Vocabulary (setting, character, tone, diction, narrative, pacing, dialogue, monologue, point-of-view,

Verse (poem, couplet, epiphany, invocation, mimesis, muse, octave, persona, poetic license, pun)

Meter (beat, caesura, enjambment, foot, iambic pentameter, refrain, stanza)

Rhyme (alliteration, assonance, consonance, euphony, cacaphony, eye-rhyme, half-rhyme, internal rhyme, masculine rhyme, feminine rhyme, true rhyme)

Figurative language (allegory, allusion, ambiguity, anaphora, apostrophe, conceit, connotation, denotation, contrast, dead metaphor, dramatic irony, sophoclean irony, tragic irony, extended metaphor, hyperbole, implicit or submerged metaphor, image, invocation, irony, cosmic irony, litotes, metaphor, metonymy, mixed metaphor, onomatopoeia, oxymoron, pathetic fallacy, parallelism, personification, romantic irony, sarcasm, simile, socratic irony, symbolism, synecdoche, synaesthesia, transferred epithet, trope, verbal irony)

Types of Poems (ballad, blank verse, burlesque, didactic, dramatic monologue, elegy, emblematic, epic, epigram, epitaph, eulogy, free verse, haiku, limerick, lyric, ode, prose poems, sonnet, villanelle)

*Poetry is the renewal of words, setting them free,
and that's what a poet is doing: loosening the words.*
- Robert Frost

How to Get Good at Reading Poems

Every week, you should read, analyze and annotate several poems. Just set aside 15-20 minutes and do it, generally when you have a few moments of silence, free from distraction. Maybe in the mornings if you're an early riser, or at night, at the end of the day before you go to bed (but not as you're falling asleep, obviously). By the end of the year, you'll have read and comprehended many poems.

Sources for good poems:

[Poetry Foundation](#)
[Poetry Out Loud](#)
[Poets.org](#)

The challenges:

1. Reading and comprehending a poem requires focus, mindfulness. This is not part of everyday life anymore for most of us. Find a quiet place to read and think without distractions. (Alternatively, you may attend the bag lunch sessions in Ms. Hamill's room where 1-2 of the poems will be addressed in a 15-20 minute session.)
2. Vocabulary. Texting, visual media and the internet have seriously shrunk the size of people's vocabulary. Poetry exalts language. Only reading can develop vocabulary. You may need to look up the meaning of words. Be prepared to do it. In prose, you can figure out words based on context, in poetry, that's not usually an option. Have a bound or online dictionary at hand when you read and annotate each poem.
3. Outside knowledge and experience. If you spend most of your down time texting friends, playing video games and posting selfies on Instagram, your range of knowledge about the world will be much leaner and slighter than if you read the news every day, have political debates over the dinner table with actual adults in your household, and have some education and training in a religion (i.e. you went to Sunday School). Literature is about life, about the human experience. There is no topic that has not been explored in depth: love, family, religion, politics, science, history, human rights, sex, food, sleep, phobias, pets, stubbed toes, etc...you get the idea. No topic is too great or too small. If your own wealth of ideas fits into a child's piggy bank, your ability to interpret the treasury of literature will also be poor and will negatively impact your ability to think intelligently about each poem. Read or listen to the news every day (NPR has morning and afternoon radio broadcasts; the major networks are on in the morning and evening

around mealtime; the internet is 24-7). You have no excuse. Stick with reputable news organizations (see Ms. Hamill's handout on biased news sources). Avoid fake news or heavily biased-news (on both ends). These sources might break a story first, but if it's valid, it'll get picked up and fact-checked by the mainstream media.

4. Recording your responses. Use color marking and heavy marginalia. Below is an example of what your annotated poems should look like in order to get your full credit (10 points per poem).

Dover Beach

title = setting

by Matthew Arnold

The sea is calm tonight.

The tide is full, the moon lies fair *moon = romance*

Upon the straits; on the French coast the light

Gleams and is gone; the cliffs of England stand, *contrast*

Glimmering and vast, out in the tranquil bay. *g-alliteration*

Come to the window, sweet is the night-air! *who is speaking?*

Only, from the long line of spray *to whom?*

Where the sea meets the moon-blanch'd land, *imagery*

Listen! you hear the grating roar *auditory image*

Of pebbles which the waves draw back, and fling,

At their return, up the high strand,

Begin, and cease, and then again begin, *sound imitates sense*

With tremulous cadence slow, and bring

The eternal note of sadness in. *time motif*

Sophocles long ago *Greek allusion, tragedy*

Heard it on the Ægean, and it brought

Into his mind the turbid ebb and flow

Of human misery; we *contrast we/speaker/Sophocles*

Find also in the sound a thought,

Hearing it by this distant northern sea.

The Sea of Faith *metaphor*

Was once, too, at the full, and round earth's shore

Lay like the folds of a bright girdle furled. *simile*

But now I only hear *contrast--past, present*

Its melancholy, long, withdrawing roar,

Retreating, to the breath *change in mood, setting*

Of the night-wind, down the vast edges drear

And naked shingles of the world. *N-alliteration*

Ah, *love*, let us be true *Tone, audience*

To one another! for the world, which *seems* *key word*

To lie before us like a land of dreams, *simile*

So various, so beautiful, so new, *repetition*

Hath really neither joy, nor love, nor light,

Nor certitude, nor peace, nor help for pain;

And we are here as on a darkling plain *change in we context*

Swept with confused alarms of struggle and flight,

Where ignorant armies clash by night. *Repeats from first line*

Tone seems sad, reflective, philosophical. A love poem though, in which the speaker sees the harshness of the world and seeks his companion's love as a balm to the pain of the world—human connection.

Sets of questions to ask that will help you access the meaning of a poem and talk/write about it:

Set #1

The following questions will direct you towards developing an analysis of a poem. Not all the questions apply to all poems, but many will apply to many poems.

In the *Nature of Poetry*, Donald Stauffer states that poetry is exact, intense, significant, concrete, complex, rhythmical, and formal.

Whenever possible, always read a poem aloud, softly, then loudly, then with the volume and tone that reflect your perception of the poem's effect.

1. What does the title state literally and what does it imply?
2. Who is the speaker, the author or the persona or character created by the author?
3. What is the setting in time and space?
4. What images does the poet create?
5. How does the poet arouse the reader's five senses (sight, sound, taste, touch, smell)?
6. Where is the central, charged image of the poem?
7. Where does the poet use figures of speech?
8. Does irony—verbal, situational, or dramatic—have a function in the poem?
9. Is paradox a device used in the poem?
10. Does the poet employ symbolism?
11. Does the poet make use of objective correlatives (subjective suggested by an object)?
12. How does sound echo sense?
13. Why does the poet use alliteration?
14. Why does the poet employ the device of allusion (historical, literary, religious, mythological)?
15. Does the poet employ the device of personification?
16. What is the effect of the poet's use of contrast and/or comparison of elements in the poem?
17. Does the poet set up analogies and parallels?
18. Where does the poet use techniques for emphasis (punctuation, enjambment, caesura and line-endings)?
19. Are there refrains in the poem (patterned repetition of phrases and lines)?
20. Is the poem written in blank verse or free verse?
21. Of what type is the poem and example: lyrical, ode, amatory, pastoral, devotional, metaphysical, allegorical, symbolic, elegiac, introspective, meditative, romantic, satirical, narrative, dramatic monolog or other)?
22. Is the poet's approach generally subjective or objective?
23. What are key words or phrases in the poem?
24. How does the poet make use of denotation and connotation in the handling of diction (word choice)?
25. What is the tone of the poem?
26. What is the poet's attitude toward the elements in the poem?
27. Is the poet deliberately employing the technique of ambiguity?
28. Does the poet make use of the technique of understatement (implication) or overstatement (hyperbole)?
29. How does the poet use external context and internal context to create implications?
30. What thematic elements are developed (love, time, mutability, seize the day)?

Set #2

1. What is your response to the poem on first reading? Did parts of it please you, displease you, shock you, puzzle you? Does your investigation into word meanings change or modify your response?

2. **Speaker and Tone:** Who is the speaker (age, sex, personality, frame of mind, tone of voice)? Is the speaker defined fairly precisely or is the speaker simply a voice meditating. Does the speaker seem fully aware of what he or she is saying, or does the speaker unconsciously reveal his or her personality and values. What is your attitude toward this speaker?
3. **Audience:** To whom is the speaker speaking? What is the situation, including time and place? Sometimes it's to someone specific, sometimes it's just the reader who "overhears" the speaker.
4. Consider the **structure** of the poem. Does it proceed in a straightforward manner, or at some point, does the speaker reverse course, alter tone or perception? What do you make of the shift? Is the poem in sections? Compare and contrast those sections—do they shift tone, or group in rhymes? Are they tidy little stanzas, or do the ideas, patterns overflow into the next set of lines?
 - a. Repetitive—common in lyrics, where a single state of mind is repeated throughout the poem.
 - b. Narrative—common in lyrics in which there is a sense of advance that comes to an end.
 - c. Logical—A poem in which the speaker sets up an argument and presents evidence. Common devices in logically structured poems: verbal irony usually presented via understatement, litotes, overstatement, hyperbole, paradox.
5. What is the poem about? Is it chiefly psychological or philosophical? Is the theme stated explicitly (directly) or implicitly? State the theme into a sentence. What is lost by reducing the poem to a statement of theme?
6. How do you characterize the language? Is it colloquial slang, public speech, especially rich in figurative devices, elevated? Do certain words have rich and relevant associations to other words? Do they define the speaker or the theme or both? What is literal? what is figurative?
7. What role does sound play in the poem? Consider alliteration, assonance, consonance, cacophony, rhyme, repetition. If there are off-rhymes (like home and come), what effect do they have on you? Do they add a note of tentativeness or uncertainty? If there are unexpected stresses or pauses, what do they represent about the speaker? What is the effect on you?

Set #3

1. Does the poem imply a story of some sort, or a report of an event, say a love story, or is it a response to nature or some other human condition? If it is a story, what is the beginning, middle, and end?
2. Is there a shift in tone at any point? Is the change communicated by diction, syntax, metrical shifts?
3. If the poem has a title (other than a number or the first line of the poem), what are the implications of it.
4. Are there clusters of patterns of imagery—religious, economic, or images drawn from nature? How do they contribute to the poem?
5. Is irony used? To what effect?
6. How does connotation help establish meaning—using the word 'Dad' instead of 'Father', for example.
7. What are the implications of syntax—simple, complex, compound, fragments etc. What about the use of polysyndeton and asyndeton? Loose sentences vs. periodic sentences vs. telegraphic? What does it imply of the speaker?
8. Do metrical variations occur, and if so, what is their significance?
9. Do rhyming words have some meaningful connection? Consider the clichés 'moon' and 'June,' 'love' and 'dove.'
10. What are the implications of the appearance of the poem on the page—for example, of an indented line, or of the stanzaic pattern?