

Critical Analysis of Poetry

The process of analyzing a poem

The elements of analysis discussed below are designed to help you identify the ways in which poetry makes its meaning, especially its 'parts'; they do not give a sense of how one *goes about* analyzing a poem. It is difficult to give a prescription, as different poems call on different aspects of poetry, different ways of reading, different relationships between feeling, images and meanings, and so forth. General advice, however, is this:

1. look at the title
2. read the poem for the major indicators of its meaning -- what aspects of setting, of topic, of voice (the person who is speaking) seem to dominate, to direct your reading?
3. read the ending of the poem -- decide where it 'gets to'
4. divide the poem into parts: try to understand what the organization is, how the poem proceeds, and what elements or principles guide this organization (is there a reversal, a climax, a sequence of some kind, sets of oppositions?)
5. pay attention to the tone of the poem -- in brief, its attitude to its subject, as that is revealed in intonation, nuance, the kind of words used, and so forth.
6. now that you've looked at the title, the major indicators of 'topic', the ending, the organization, the tone, read the poem out loud, trying to project its meaning in your reading. As you gradually get a sense of how this poem is going, what its point and drift is, start noticing more about how the various elements of the poetry work to create its meaning. This may be as different as the kind of imagery used, or the way it uses oppositions, or the level of realism or symbolism of its use of the natural world.

Reading poetry well is a balance among and conjunction of qualities: experience, attention, engagement with the qualities which make the poem resonant or compelling, close reading of structure and relationships. It's an acquired talent, you have to learn it. When you do, however, more and more meaning, power and beauty start leaping out at you.

Elements of analysis

Here then are some questions to apply to your analysis in order to see how the poem is making its meaning:

1. What is the genre, or form, of the poem?

Is it a sonnet, an elegy, a lyric, a narrative, a dramatic monologue, an epistle, an epic (there are many more). Different forms or genres have different subjects, aims, conventions and attributes. A love sonnet, for instance, is going to talk about different aspects of human experience in different ways with different emphases than is a political satire, and our recognition of these attributes of form or genre is part of the meaning of the poem.

2. Who is speaking in the poem?

Please remember that if the voice of the poem says "I", that doesn't mean it is the author who is speaking: it is a voice in the poem which speaks. The voice can be *undramatized* (it's just a voice, it doesn't identify itself), or *dramatized* (the voice says "I", or the voice is clearly that of a particular persona, a dramatized character).

Identify the voice. What does the voice have to do with what is happening in the poem, what is its attitude, what is the tone of the voice (tone can be viewed as an expression of attitude). How involved in the action or reflection of the poem is the voice? What is the perspective or 'point of view' of the speaker? The perspective can be social, intellectual, political, even physical -- there are many different perspectives, but they all contribute to the voice's point of view, which point of view affects how the world of the poem is seen, and how we respond.

3. What is the argument, thesis, or subject of the poem

What, that is to say, is it apparently 'about'? Start with the basic situation, and move to consider any key statements; any obvious or less obvious conflicts, tensions, ambiguities; key relationships, especially conflicts, parallels, contrasts; any climaxes or problems posed or solved (or not solved); the poem's tone; the historical, social, and emotional setting.

4. What is the structure of the poem?

There are two basic kinds of structure, formal and thematic.

Formal structure is the way the poem goes together in terms of its component parts: if there are parts -- stanza's, paragraphs or such -- then there will be a relation between the parts (for instance the first stanza may give the past, the second the present, the third the future).

Thematic structure, known in respect to fiction as 'plot', is the way the argument or presentation of the material of the poem is developed. For instance a poem might state a problem in eight lines, an answer to the problem in the next six; of the eight lines stating the problem, four might provide a concrete example, four a reflection on what the example implies. There may well be very close relations between formal and thematic structure. When looking at thematic structure, you might look for conflicts, ambiguities and uncertainties, the tensions in the poem, as these give clear guides to the direction of meanings in the poem, the poem's 'in-tensions'.

5. How does the poem make use of setting?

There is the setting in terms of time and place, and there is the setting in terms of the physical world described in the poem. In terms of the physical world of the poem, setting can be used for a variety of purposes. A tree might be described in specific detail, a concrete, specific, tree; or it might be used in a more tonal way, to create mood or associations, with say the wind blowing mournfully through the willows; or it might be used as a motif, the tree that reminds me of Kathryn, or of my youthful dreams; or it might be used symbolically, as for instance an image of organic life; or it might be used allegorically, as a representation of the cross of Christ (allegory ties an image or event to a specific interpretation, a doctrine or idea; symbols refer to broader, more generalized meanings). Consider this a spectrum, from specific, concrete, to abstract, allegorical: **concrete --- tonal -- connotative -- symbolic --- allegorical**

6. How does the poem use imagery?

"Imagery" refers to any sort of image, and there are two basic kinds. One is the images of the physical setting, described above. The other kind is images as figures of speech, such as metaphors. These figures of speech extend the imaginative range, the complexity and comprehensibility of the subject. They can be very brief, a word or two, a glistening fragment of insight, a chance connection sparked into a blaze (warming or destroying) of understanding; or they can be extended analogies, such as Donne's 'conceits' or Milton's epic similes.

7. Are there key statements or conflicts in the poem that appear to be central to its meaning?

Is the poem direct or indirect in making its meanings? If there are no key statements, are there key or central symbol, repetitions, actions, motifs (recurring images), or the like?

8. How does the sound of the poetry contribute to its meaning?

Pope remarked that "the sound must seem an echo to the sense": both the rhythm and the sound of the words themselves (individually and as they fit together) contribute to the meaning.

9. Examine the use of language.

What kinds of words are used? How much and to what ends does the poet rely on connotation, or the associations that words have (as "stallion" connotes a certain kind of horse with certain sorts of uses)? Does the poem use puns, double meanings, ambiguities of meaning?

10. Can you see any ways in which the poem refers to, uses or relies on previous writing?

This is known as *allusion* or *intertextuality*. When U-2's Bono writes "I was thirsty and you kissed my lips" in "Trip Through Your Wires," the meaning of the line is vastly extended if you know that this is a reference to Matthew 25:35 in the Bible, where Jesus says to the saved in explanation of what they did right, "I was thirsty and you wet my lips."

11. What qualities does the poem evoke in the reader?

What sorts of learning, experience, taste and interest would the 'ideal' or 'good' reader of this poem have? What can this tell you about what the poem 'means' or is about? The idea is that any work of art calls forth certain qualities of response, taste, experience, value, from the reader, and in a sense 'forms' the reader of that particular work. This happens through the subject matter, the style, the way the story is told or the scene set, the language, the images, the allusions, all the ways in which we are called by the text to construct meaning. The theorist Wayne Booth calls the reader as evoked or formed by the text the "implied reader."

12. What is your historical and cultural distance from the poem?

What can you say about the difference between your culture's (and sub-culture's) views of the world, your own experiences, on the one hand, and those of the voice, characters, and world of the poem on the other? What is it that you might have to understand better in order to experience the poem the way someone of the same time, class, gender and race might have understood it? Is it possible that your reading might be different from theirs because of your particular social (race, gender, class, etc.) and historical context? What about your world governs the way you see the world of the text? What might this work tell us about the world of its making?

13. What is the world-view and the ideology of the poem?

What are the basic ideas about the world that are expressed? What areas of human experience are seen as important, and what is valuable about them? What areas of human experience or classes of person are ignored or denigrated? A poem about love, for instance, might implicitly or explicitly suggest that individual happiness is the most important thing in the world, and that it can be gained principally through one intimate sexually-based relationship -- to the exclusion, say, of problems of social or political injustice, human brokenness and pain, or other demands on us as humans. It might also suggest that the world is a dangerous, uncertain place in which the only sure ground of meaningfulness is to be found in human relationships, or it might suggest on the other hand that human love is grounded in divine love, and in the orderliness and the value of the natural world with all its beauties. What aspects of the human condition are foregrounded, what are suppressed, in the claims that the poem makes by virtue of its inclusions and exclusions, certainties and uncertainties, and depictions of the way the natural and the human world is and works?

This material is from <http://www.brocku.ca/english/jlye/criticalreading.html>