

## ***I. First Article on Poetry Analysis***

Poetry is the dramatization of experience in metrical language. To study or analyze poetry, one must consider many elements. A good way to start is by reading the poem silently. Then read the poem a second (third, fourth) time aloud. Reading the poem aloud makes its meaning clearer and you will hear the various poetic sound devices such as alliteration, rhyme, rhythm, etc. Then try writing down a brief summary to make sure that you understand the poem. Remember to read sentence by sentence not line by line.

### **Questions To Answer Before Writing**

1. Who is speaking?
2. To whom?
3. About?
4. Tone?
5. Examples of abstract imagery?
6. Examples of concrete imagery?
7. Examples of denotative language?
8. Examples of the 5 figurative devices?
9. Examples of rhetorical devices?
10. End rhyme scheme?
11. Alliteration?
12. Assonance?
13. Consonance?
14. Caesura?
15. Enjambment?
16. Theme?
17. Rhythm / Meter?
18. Syntax?

### **Writing Your Paper**

The actual writing of the paper is probably the easiest task because you have already identified everything that needs to be covered. You may wish to cover all the important items in your own order, however, the order listed above does work well.

Most likely you will not be able to simply write a few lines for each device, rather you must group these devices together. A proper order of paragraphs may flow like this:

#### **I. Dramatic Situation**

- A. Who is speaking?
- B. To whom is that speaker speaking?
- C. What is the situation?
- D. What is the speaker's tone?

#### **II. Imagery**

#### **III. Theme**

#### **IV. Diction (word choice)**

- A. Connotation (suggested meaning of words)
- B. Denotation (dictionary definition)
- C. Abstract (can only be understood intellectually)
- D. Concrete (words describing physical objects)
- E. Kinds of language
  1. Figurative
    - a. Metaphor (implied comparisons)
    - b. Simile (comparison using 'like' or 'as')

- c. Personification (giving human characteristics to an inanimate object)
- d. Metonymy (the use of an attribute or quality of an object to represent the object itself)
- e. Synecdoche (substitutes a significant part of something for the thing itself)

2. Rhetorical

- a. Irony (opposite of what is meant)
- b. Hyperbole (exaggeration)
- c. Allusion (reference to something)
- d. Pun (play on words)
- e. Paradox (contradictory)
- f. Oxymoron (self contradictory term)
- g. Litotes (form of understatement)

V. Syntax (sentence structure)

- A. Length
- B. Transposed elements
- C. "Unusual" sentences

VI. Conclusion

Remember, when you are writing this paper you should use direct quotes wherever you can, you should vary your sentence structure, and all rules of grammar still apply.

## ***II. Second Article on Poetry Analysis***

If you are just beginning to delve into the world of poetry, you may initially feel overwhelmed by the occasional ambiguity and inaccessibility of this literary style. However, learning the elements and poetic tools used to build a poem will help to understand and analyze poems.

### **Getting Started**

- 1) Give yourself a lot of time to read the poem several times. Try reading it out loud.
- 2) Have a copy of the poem that you can take notes on. As you read, write down every observation, question, or feeling you get from the poem as you read. Pay special attention to how the poem begins and ends.
- 3) Use your notes as entry points to begin your investigation and analysis of the poem. Ask yourself what elements in the poem lead you to the particular observation and how the poet achieves this effect.
- 4) Always keep in mind that the poet uses poetic devices to achieve a particular effect. Breaking up the poem into formal poetic components enhances your understanding of the poem's overall theme, tone, and/or general purpose. In other words, use form to understand the content and create a thesis about the poem.

Here are some elements and corresponding poetic devices you can focus on. Note: Many of these divisions are arbitrary. Poetic elements frequently overlap. For definitions of the underlined terms see the UWC Definitions of Poetic Devices handout.

**Content:** How does the tone of the speaker and the context of the work change your understanding of the poem?

**1) Speaker:** Is the speaker the poet or a specific persona? How is the speaker involved in the poem? Is the speaker an omniscient narrator or casual observer? Does the speaker refer to himself/ herself in the 1st person? Is the speaker from an identifiable time period? How does knowing the historical context of the poem change your understanding of the speaker's attitude?

**2) Tone:** How is the tone of the poem developed through the language used to create imagery? How does diction influence the understanding of the tone? Does the tone change as the poem progresses? Is it consistent at the beginning and ending of the poem?

**3) Tension:** What is the conflict or point of tension in the poem? Is there an external or internal conflict? Physical, spiritual, moral, philosophical, social, etc? How is the tension in that conflict developed with poetic elements? Is it resolved?

**4) Context:** When was the poem written? What were the historical, political, philosophical, and social issues of that time? Does that change your understanding of the poem's theme? Did poets during that time period follow particular style? Is the poem consistent with the literary conventions of that era? How is it inconsistent?

**Language:** How does the language and rhythm contribute to the meaning, purpose or emotional force?

**1) Word Choice:** How would you characterize the poet's word choice? Is it formal, conversational? Does the poet use a specific dialect for the speaker?

**2) Meaning:** What are the connotations and denotations of particular words? Are certain words repeated? Are they abstract or concrete, literal or metaphorical?

**3) Rhythm:** Does the poem have an identifiable rhythm arranged in the meter (iambs, spondees, trochees, dactyls, etc)? How many syllables are in each line? Does it follow a pattern? What syllables are stressed and unstressed? How does alliteration, assonance, or consonance enhance the rhythm and musicality of the poem?

**Imagery:** How does the imagery construct the poem's theme, tone, and purpose?

**1) Visuals and Sensory:** Are the images literal or figurative, abstract or concrete? What sensory experiences are evoked? Are certain images repeated?

**2) Metaphor:** Does the poet use metaphors to make comparisons and express images or abstract ideas? Is there an extended metaphor? What is the effect of the metaphors on the tone and theme of the poem?

**3) Symbolism:** Are certain objects or actions developed in the imagery symbolic of an abstract idea? Do these symbols reoccur? Do they help to create an allegory?

**Form:** How does the form of the poem correspond to theme and main idea of the work?

**1) Structure:** Does the poem follow a formal poetic structure such as a sonnet, haiku, sestina, ode, blues poem, etc.? If so, what are the characteristics of that form? How does it deviate from that form?

**2) Stanza and Lines:** Are stanzas and lines consistently the same length? Do they follow a particular pattern? Are there any stanzas, lines, words, or that diverge from the pattern?

**3) Rhyme Scheme:** Does the poem follow an identifiable rhyme scheme corresponding to a specific poetic form? What kind of rhyme is used internal or end rhyme, slant or true rhyme, etc.? Is it consistent or scattered throughout? If not, where does the rhyme change or appear and why? What is the overall purpose or effect of the rhyme scheme?

**Syntax:** How do the poet's syntactical choices change or expand the ideas in the poem?

**1) Enjambment:** How are lines broken? Are they broken before a grammatical or logical completion of a thought to create an enjambment? Or are they end-stopped, breaking after the completion of a sentence or other grammatical pauses? How does the use of enjambment create a duality of meaning in the lines?

**2) Verbs:** Are verbs active or passive? What tense does the poet use? Is it consistent? How does tense consistency (inconsistency) affect the passage of time within the poem?

**3) Sentence Structure:** Does the poet use complete sentences, fragments, or a combination of both? Is there a pattern? How does the poet's sentence choices contribute to the understanding of the poem? Within the sentence, is the word order natural or grammatically irregular?

**4) Punctuation:** How is punctuation used or not used? Is it consistent with grammatical conventions? What effect does the punctuation create on how the poem is read? How does it affect the speed? Where are the pauses? Does the poet use italics, bold fonts, dashes, or any other uncommon fonts or punctuation devices? If so, why?

### *III. Third Article on Poetry Analysis*

#### *Origins of Verse*

Poetry comes from an oral tradition dating back to the songs of minstrels. The verse form may be lyrical or narrative. Narrative poetry (telling a story in rhythmic language) was probably the earliest form of one of humanity's earliest arts. Verse containing rhyme and rhythm made it easier for both performer and audience to remember the songs/poems. Minstrels sang of historical and contemporary events, and were expected to deliver elevated narratives in inspiring language. The term lyrical refers broadly to a poem, sentence, or phrase that is a rhythmic and reflective way of stating something. Lyric Greek poetry is found in the work of Sappho, who lived in the early 6th century B.C.E. and who may have been the first poet on record to write about her personal feelings (the joys of love were her main subjects).

#### *Figurative Language*

Why is poetry so hard to understand? The figurative language (metaphor, symbolism, analogy) of poetry allows for the expression of deeper meanings. Shakespeare and Donne mastered the technique of conceit, an elaborate way of talking about something in terms of other things, suggesting to the reader more than one interpretation (the literal/concrete/physical vs. the hidden/abstract/symbolic/figurative).

Metaphor is a literary technique used to describe one object, situation or idea through an implicit (direct) comparison with another. In the below example, pay close attention to what is being compared:

Little boys lie still, awake,  
Wondering, wondering,  
Delicate little boxes of dust.

In order to create a visual picture of these little boys, the poet chose an image that the audience could easily visualize, in this case the delicate little boxes of dust. Imagine what a "delicate little box of dust" looks like. Then place that image onto the boys. Now visualize the boys. What is their life like? What do they look like? By comparing the boys to the boxes, the poet has placed a known subject (a box of dust) onto an unknown subject (these particular boys), making the unknown knowable to the audience.

A poet could also write a simile, a direct comparison using the words like or as. The simile is an explicit, stated comparison:

The child's cry opens like a knife blade.  
I wandered lonely as a cloud.

Since poetry comes from an oral tradition, the sound of poetry influences tone, mood, and meaning. As you read poetry out loud, pay attention to the sounds of the letters and words. Soft-sounding letters (such as "o" sounds) will create a smooth, pleasant tone. Hard sounding letters (such as "c" or "k") will create a harsh, tense mood. Alliteration is the repetition of the initial sound of words in a line of verse:

Blackbirds whistled and chirped near the barren church.

Sometimes alliteration includes both initial sounds and interior sounds as in blueberry. The repetition of the "b" sound is also an example of consonance. The repetition of vowel sounds within words or lines is called assonance, which creates a rhyme or a near-rhyme:

...and land so lightly  
And roll back down the mound beside the hole.

In personification, an inanimate object is described as if it were human:

Driving past the fields, I could hear the soybeans breathing.  
I bowed my head, and heard the sea far off  
Washing its hands.

Poets may use universal symbols to reveal a deeper meaning. For instance, the sun is a symbol of warmth/light/God, the return of spring as resurrection/rebirth, the bird as a symbol of spirit/freedom, the lion as an emblem of courage, the rose as an example of beauty/love. The use of color can also be symbolic. In Western culture, a poet may use dark, bleak images and colors to create a depressing or horrifying mood. Lighter, more "bright" colors and images may inspire or "brighten" a mood, or show a sense of enlightenment or wisdom. In other cultures, the opposite may hold true: bright/white may indicate a sterile, colorless environment, or a funeral procession! Darker images may indicate a sophisticated/created style or depth of character.

### ***Basic Questions for Rhetorical Analysis***

These following questions will help you, the reader, to pinpoint the poet's intent and the possible meanings:

- What is the rhetorical situation (the situation/problem/conflict for the poem's speaker)?
- Who is the speaker of the poem? (Don't assume the poet is the speaker! You may choose to view the speaker as you would a character in fiction.)
- What occasion or event (historical or personal) may have compelled the poet to write this poem? (Research the poet's life and times.)
- What is the speaker's intention? How does the speaker come across? Define the emotion or reason in the tone and word choices.
- Who is the intended audience? What values does the audience hold that the author or speaker appeals to?
- What is the relationship between the poem's form and content? (Closely examine the stanza structure, line breaks, formatting, etc.)
- What does the style of the writing reveal about the culture that produced it? (Again, educate yourself on the poet's life and times!)

## *Free Verse Poetry*

At the turn of the 20th Century, artists demanded more freedom of expression; in a poetic sense, Modern and Contemporary Poets began to structure language as it suited their own needs. Free Verse poetry lacks a traditional system of measure; however, it is not without a certain sense of form and strategy. Poets began to choose line beginnings and endings to create specific meaning and feeling. Stanza breaks could serve as a device to create tension or to create a natural pause. Poets began to build toward the last line -- to move us, startle us, give us sudden insight. Subjectivity increased, and by the 1950s and 60s, Beat and Confessionalist Poets turned to a style of emotional autobiography, shifting the role of audience from objective observer to personal confidant.

Consider how style and form creates meaning in the following free-verse poem by Charles Bukowski. Note how the line lengths and breaks reinforce the poem's title, and carefully examine how the poet's deliberate use of the lower case helps to convey tone and meaning:

### **Confession**

waiting for death  
like a cat  
that will jump on the  
bed  
I am so very sorry for  
my wife  
she will see this  
stiff  
white  
body  
shake it once, then  
maybe  
again  
"Hank!"  
Hank won't  
answer.  
it's not my death that  
worries me, it's my wife  
left with this  
pile of  
nothing.  
I want to  
let her know  
though  
that all the nights  
sleeping  
beside her  
even the useless  
arguments  
were things  
ever splendid  
and the hard  
words  
I ever feared to  
say  
can now be  
said:  
I love  
you.

by Charles Bukowski

In the following poem by James Wright, please consider the poet's choice of line and stanza breaks. Note the shift in tone from stanza one to stanza two, and how the poet uses descriptive and symbolic imagery to convey a sense of transformation and inspiration.

### **Small Frogs Killed on the Highway**

Still,  
I would leap too  
Into the light,  
If I had the chance.  
It is everything, the wet green stalk of the field  
On the other side of the road.  
They crouch there, too, faltering in terror  
And take strange wing. Many  
Of the dead never moved, but many  
Of the dead are alive forever in the split second  
Auto headlights more sudden  
Than their drivers know.  
The drivers burrow backward into dank pools  
Where nothing begets  
Nothing.

Across the road, the tadpoles are dancing  
On the quarter thumbnail  
Of the moon. They can't see,  
Not yet.

by James Wright