

A Guide for Analyzing Poems

Poems can sometimes mystify us. Other times they can affect us so strongly, we hardly know where to begin talking about what we felt, heard, or understood from the poem. To get started, we usually ask ourselves “what did it mean?” but that question doesn’t always help. It’s too general. It may help to break down the intent behind the question and ask ourselves “what has been said” and “how was it said” and “why was it said in this particular way?” Here’s how.

1. Experience before you analyze. If you have seen the film about Neruda ‘Il Postino’, do like the postman Mario did: simply explain how the poem makes you feel. Write it down. Then return to the text and identify the passages that made you feel this way.
2. Make a chronology of what happened in the poem so you can say it back to yourself. Why is it important that the lines appear in this order and not in some other order? If you rearrange the lines or take away certain words or sections, what happens to the meaning of the poem? Can you divide the poem into sections or movements?
3. What is the author’s attitude toward his subject? Does he offer any moral lessons, warnings, jokes, statements of truth, complaints, or provocations? If so, what do they imply?
4. Describe the voice you hear in the poem. Is it angry, sad, impatient, jealous, exalted, wise, suspicious, or something else? Question the poet’s choice of words—the diction and the vocabulary—and his line breaks. If you change the vocabulary or the break the lines another way, can you change the voice or the intent of the poem?
5. Listen to the sounds of the language. As a point of reference, when we talk about vowel sounds, we are talking about “assonance.” An example of this in Spanish from Explico Unas Cosas would be “pero de cada casa muerta sale metal ardiendo” or ‘(the vowel “a” in cada and casa and muerta etc). When we talk about consonant sounds, we are talking about “alliteration.” An example of this from I’m Explaining a Few Things would be “bandits with black friars spattering blessings’ (the “b” sound). Do these sounds emphasize the author’s intent? If so, how do they guide your experience of the theme?
6. Explore the logic of the metaphors. Begin by separating the elements and defining them. Then ask yourself how one NORMALLY experiences or understands each thing. Finally, put the metaphor back together again.

Example: in Ode to the Seagull, Neruda says to the seagull, “lift up / your emblem across / the shirt / of the cold firmament”

Separating and defining the elements: Okay, we know that an emblem is an object that functions like a symbol. (For example, the three arrows shaped in a triangle = the emblem for recycling) Next comes the shirt. We all know what a shirt is. And last comes the firmament--a fancy word for sky: the expanse of the heavens.

How do we normally experience/understand the elements? Normally, we see emblems in society, not in nature. And we see shirts on other people. We wear shirts to protect

our body from the elements and to hide it from other people. And we don't see firmaments. We see the sky.

Putting it all together. To say that the bird is an emblem is to say that the bird is functioning as a symbol. By placing this symbol in the firmament, Neruda endows it with cosmic or heavenly significance. This, of course, fits the purpose of the odes—to praise common things. But the seagull is not the only thing getting praised. Neruda places this symbol of heavenly wisdom on the “shirt of the cold firmament.” By choosing to endow the heavens with this human quality (wearing a shirt), he seems to be saying that the heavens are really here on earth: the mysteries of life are human mysteries that can be analyzed from a human point of view, in this case, a person watching a bird. Ultimately, what the person observes out there is not God but humanity, because the bird's movements through the sky are analogous to our own movements through life. We wear the shirt with the bird-emblem on it. And underneath the shirt is our own body—not the “the heavens.”

7. Finally, return to your original question—what does the poem mean? Although individual poems will have individual meanings, they will also share something in common with the author's other work. In what ways is this poem like the author's other poems you read? To answer this question is to define the author's poetics, where “poetics” = what was said (content) + how it was said (form).