

# Poetry Analysis: A Step-by-Step Guide

(with thanks & apologies to Dr. Margaret Sims)

## I. First Impressions

1. Title. Consider your initial impressions of the title. How does it set the tone for the poem? What does it suggest about the subject of the poem?
2. Paraphrase. Translate the poem into your own words; be able to drain the descriptive and figurative language from the poem to reduce it to its core meaning.
  - a. Identify a speaker in the poem and speculate as to the speaker's purpose/aim.
  - b. Focus on one syntactical unit (sentence/clause) at a time. Sometimes just rewriting the poem as a passage of prose aids in understanding.
  - c. Locate the verbs—these will show the central action of the poem. Analyzing verb choice should also be key to your attention to diction (see below).
  - d. Locate the tension. All poetry presents or implies some kind of conflict, problem, question, unsettled feeling, twinge, etc. If you can identify this tension, your analysis will become much easier.
3. Diction.
  - a. *Denotations*: Look up and define any words you do not recognize or fully understand.
  - b. *Allusion*: Research any historical/literary/mythological references you do not know.
  - c. *Connotations*: Explore the implied meanings and associations of key words. Note any patterns of diction (what the French call *champs lexical*): What are the suggestions, implications, or hints in these word choices? What do these patterns indicate?
4. Tone/Mood. Based on diction, images, and sound devices, identify the speaker's attitude toward her subject (tone) and the impression the poem communicates to the reader (mood).

## II. Close Reading (Literary Devices & Techniques)

1. Devices. Locate as many poetic devices as you can. Consider the following:
  - a. sound devices (alliteration, assonance, consonance, onomatopoeia, rhyme, euphony, cacophony, etc.)
  - b. figurative language (metaphor, metonymy, hyperbole, personification, pun, etc.)
  - c. imagery, synaesthesia, motifs, juxtaposition, etc.
  - d. symbolism, allegory, apostrophe, allusion, etc.

2. Technique. Note aspects of style and structure. Consider the following:
  - a. aspects of pacing: enjambment, end stop, caesura, line breaks, stanza breaks, etc.
  - b. syntax, sentence style, sentence types, etc.
  - c. repetition, parallel structure, anaphora, etc.
  - d. rhythm/ meter
  - e. closed form vs. open form

3. Shifts.
  - a. transitional words/phrases: but, yet, now, however, still, although, etc.
  - b. punctuation: dashes, periods, colons, question marks, ellipses, etc.
  - c. stanza breaks/line breaks
  - d. changes in point of view, diction, focus, direction, pacing, etc.

### III. Making Connections (Literary Features & Effects)

1. Effects & Significance of Your Close Reading. Look through the annotations and observations from your close reading. Do you see any patterns? Connect your initial observations about what the poem was saying (the content of the paraphrase, the title, the diction) to how it was said (the formal elements). What are the effects of the metaphors, the repetition, the pacing, etc? Find relationships between literary devices and their effects. To make meaning out of the poem, you have to put all of these things together. Consider the following effects (many will overlap):
  - a. irony
  - b. ambiguity
  - c. character development (epiphany)
  - d. tension
  - e. paradox
  - f. tone/mood
  - g. theme
2. Resist Absolute Closure. Explore the *many* motifs (issues, ideas, etc.) and the *many* themes (statements, lessons, questions) that the poem provokes. Consider making "If-then" statements. (eg. If we are to assume that rabbits are associated with fear, then perhaps the speaker is trying to destroy his fears.)
3. Make connections. The more you read of a certain poet, start linking and comparing to his/her other works. Or make connections to historical events, political/social observations, literary counterparts. Put the poem in context.

### IV. Organize Your Thoughts into a Brilliant Commentary