



WRITING ACROSS THE CURRICULUM

Explicating a Poem

In order to explicate or give a detailed literary analysis of a poem, it is useful to ask questions about elements such as the literal sense of the poem, diction, tone, the rhetorical situation, figurative language, imagery, sound, and structure. The following list of questions provides a strategy to approach a poem for meaning and appreciation. Note that the list need not apply to all poems and you do not necessarily have to follow this order.

What is the literal sense of the poem?

- Can it be broken down into sentences?
- What is the meaning of each sentence?
- How could the poem be paraphrased: restated in prose form?
- In what ways is the poem different from a prose paraphrase?

What is the diction of the poem?

- What sort of language does the poem use: formal or colloquial, abstract or concrete, vivid or vague, obsolete words, slang?
- Does it create vivid expressions or innovative ideas by manipulating syntax (word order), semantics (word meaning), structure, effects or associations of normal language?
- Do any words have other connotations: associations beyond the standard denotation, or definition?
- Is the etymology (the history of a word's meaning) of any word important to the meaning of the poem? This information can be found in any good dictionary, but especially the *Oxford English Dictionary*.

What is the tone of the poem?

- What sort of attitude, mood or emotion does it convey?
- Is it happy, sad, humorous, angry, nostalgic, serious, frivolous, sarcastic, ecstatic, grotesque?
- Is there irony: a discrepancy between what is stated and what is meant, conveyed through a tone of voice or contradiction between words and the matter at hand?

What is the rhetorical situation implied by the poem?

- Who is speaking? To whom? On what occasion? For what purpose?
- What is the speaker's relationship to you, the reader? Are you being spoken to directly? Are you being ignored? Are you overhearing the speaker?

Does the poem use figurative language?

- Does it contain simile: the comparison of one thing with something else using "like" or "as"?
- Does it use metaphor: a comparison made by direct association, through substitution of one thing or idea for another?
- Does it use personification: attributing human qualities to an inanimate object or an abstract concept?

What kind of imagery does the poem use?

- What mental pictures (representations that can be visualized) does it create?
- What do you see, hear, taste, smell, touch in your imagination through the words of the poem?
- Does the poem use symbolism: an image that has a meaning beyond what it literally represents?

How does sound contribute to the effect of the poem?

- Does it have rhyme, either exact or approximate repetition of a final sound?
- Does it use repetition of sounds, words, lines, refrains?
- Does it contain alliteration: repetition of consonant sounds, particularly initial consonants (the first sound in a word), either within or between lines?
- Is there assonance: the repetition of a vowel sound in a line or passage?
- Are any of the words onomatopoeic: approximately representing the sound of the thing they represent?
- Is the effect of these devices cacophony: harsh or discordant sounds, or euphony: pleasing, harmonizing sounds?

How is the poem structured?

- Does it have a standard form, as, for example, of a sonnet?
- Does it have stanzas: lines grouped together, or is it free verse: having no formal structure?
- Is there a rhyme pattern: a repeated order of rhyme at the ends of lines within or between stanzas?

These questions will help to "open up" the poem in order to comprehend it more fully and to provide information you can use in presenting a thorough and organized written interpretation.