

#26) Poetry Explication

Steps for first reading:

Read the poem intuitively and emotionally, allowing it to "happen" to you as much as possible.

Before re-reading the poem, notice, but do not analyze, the **form** and **length** of the poem. Consider the **title** and determine whether it could function as an allusion, a symbol, or a poetic image.

Notice the **date** of composition/publication, or the general era of the poet. Identify the poet.

In rereading the poem:

- * Read the poem once through, noting the places where the **rhymes** and **rhythms** are easy or hard. Jot down any reaction you have to the poem. Decide what the meaning of the poem is TO YOU.
- * Continue re-reading the poem until you can read it smoothly. Not until you have formed some sense of an overall experience for the poem are you ready to analyze it.
- * Study the poem line-by-line and establish a **dramatic situation** as follows:
 - * What, if any, is the narrative action (e.g., a man stops by the woods)?
 - * How many **personae** appear in the poem? Do they all take part in the action? To what extent?
 - * What is the relationship between the characters? Do they interact?
 - * What is the setting for the poem? Time of day or year? Does the time period change during the poem?
 - * Is the action happening in the present? Or is the narrator remembering a past incident?
 - * What does the setting look like? Does the personae act in any particular manner because of the setting?

Establish the point of view as follows:

Who is speaking? Is the speaker thinking, talking to himself, or addressing someone else? Is the poet speaking directly to the reader, or through a narrator?

Is the narrator able to understand, or see, everything happening to him, or does the reader know things the narrator does not?

What is the correlation between point of view and dramatic situation? Does point of view change when the dramatic situation changes?

Do point of view and dramatic situation seem complete and consistent? If not, mark these places, because they may provide good clues about the meaning.

Locate the images and sound patterns as follows:

- ❖ What are the **concrete images**--those that are formed from objects which can be touched, smelled, seen, felt, or tasted. What do these images look like? Is the image projected by the poet consistent with the physical object?
- ❖ If the image is abstract, or so different from natural images that it can't be associated with a real object, then what are the properties of the image?
- ❖ What part do dramatic situation and point of view play in presentation of the images?
- ❖ Is any image repeated in the poem? How has it been changed? Is there a controlling image (e.g., dark/light)?

- ❖ Are any images compared to each other? Do the compared images form a metaphor, or do they simply reinforce one another?
- ❖ Is there any difference between the way the reader perceives the image and the way the narrator sees it?
- ❖ What seems to be the poet's attitude toward the image? Does he laugh at it or take it seriously?
- ❖ Determine the **sound** patterns of the poem.
- ❖ Does the poem's sound conform to any traditional sound patterns, such as those of nursery rhymes or folk songs?
- ❖ Is the rhyme pleasing, harsh, emotional? Can you articulate what mood the sounds are put in (fear, jocundity)? Is the sound casual or formal?
- ❖ What devices has the poet used for creating sound (e.g., types of words, rhyme, or rhythm)?

Look for poetic language and word control:

Look up any unfamiliar words or words of which you are unsure of the meaning.

Determine any allusions, symbols, allegories, paradoxes, metaphors, similes, or irony.

Is the poem relying especially on any particular device for affect (e.g., sound, imagery, allusion)?

How does punctuation function as an element and how does it control that way the lines are read?

Examine the structure and rhyme:

- ❖ Determine how form of stanza, rhyme, and overall structure are working.
- ❖ Is the stanza a traditional form? Is the poet adhering to or deviating from the structure?
- ❖ Is the poem composed of stanzas? How are they tied together?
- ❖ Are there any shifts in the speaker, structure, action, tone, etc?

- ❖ How does the rhyme scheme work to hold the stanza poem together?
- ❖ What type of rhyme appears? Rhyme scheme?

Determine the theme:

Characterize the **persona**; determine if his statements can be taken at face value or whether there is a discrepancy between the speaker, poet, or reader?

Look for paradox, hyperbole, irony, and try to determine the poet's tone (attitude) toward his persona, reader, and subject matter.

Place the poem in **historical context**.

Correlate the controlling devices, seeing the poem as a composite of emotion, intellect, craftsmanship, and tradition.

What idea is the poet trying to convey? Is it a new idea?

Does the poet seem sure of his positions? Is he probing or preaching? Is he optimistic or pessimistic?

Is the poet trying to achieve social, moral, or religious criticism or change? If so, how does the poem relate to the present age and the age in which it was composed?

Does the poem appeal primarily to the emotions, intellect, or both?

List all the themes (central ideas) and motifs (smaller, recurring, ideas incidents, controlling images, or symbols) and relate them back to the poem and draw parallels between them.

Read other poems by the same author, particularly those in the same volume. Read as much criticism as you can. Be sure to acknowledge any ideas other than your own that you have used.

Creating an Outline

Depending on your purpose, you can approach this task in a couple of ways:

- 1) You can focus your paragraphs by discussing the poem stanza by stanza and/or by major plot sequences OR
- 2) You can focus your paragraphs by discussing the elements that help to create the theme

A formal outline may help you structure and develop ideas. Here are two examples of the different types of essays you can write. For more help with creating an outline, you might want to consider taking a look at "Creating and Using Outlines" on our website.

Stanza outline:	Element outline:
<p>Thesis: Tell the reader what is the theme of the poem.</p> <p>I. Stanza 1 or Exposition and Rising Action</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">A. Paraphrase the action1. Give examples2. Discuss/Analyze poetic elements <p>II. Stanza 2 or Climax</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">A. Paraphrase the action1. Give examples2. Discuss/Analyze poetic elements <p>III. Stanza 3 or Falling Action and Resolution</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">A. Paraphrase the action1. Give examples2. Discuss/Analyze poetic elements	<p>Thesis: Tell the reader what the theme is AND which elements you plan on discussing.</p> <p>I. Element 1</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">A. Identify the element in the poem1. Explain how the element functions2. Analyze how the element helps to create the theme <p>II. Element 2</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">A. Identify the element in the poem1. Explain how the element functions2. Analyze how the element helps to create the theme <p>III. Element 3</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">A. Identify the element in the poem1. Explain how the element functions2. Analyze how the elements helps to create the theme

Notice that both of the outlines have very similar thesis statements; however, the **element outline** asks that you also include which elements you plan to focus on in your body paragraphs in the form of an essay map. The **stanza outline** is useful if the assignment calls for you to explain what is going on in the poem in an organized way. If you have to, think of the stanza outline as a summary of the poem. The **element outline** helps you identify and determine the most important poetic elements in the poem, and the focus of the body paragraphs is on how the element functions in the poem and how it helps to create the theme of the poem.