English 56B
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How to Make Sense of a Poem[1]

Poetry is imaginatively intense language, usually in verse. Poetry is a form of fiction. It is distinguished from other fictions by the compression resulting from its heavier use of figures of speech and allusion[2] and, usually, by the music of its patterns of sound.

Initial Contact

1. **READ** the poem several times both silently and aloud.
2. Examine the title carefully – sometimes the meaning of a poem depends on it.
3. Consider the poem as a dramatic situation in which a speaker addresses an audience or another character. In this way, begin your analysis by identifying and describing the speaking voice or voices, the conflicts or ideas and the language used in the poem.

The Large Issues

Determine the basic design of the poem by considering the *who, what, when, where* and *why* of the dramatic situation.

- ¬ <u>What </u>is being dramatized? What conflicts or themes does the poem present, address or question?
- ¬ <u>Who </u>is the speaker? Define and describe the speaker and his/her voice. What does the speaker say? Who is the audience? Are other characters involved?
- ¬ <u>What </u>happens in the poem? Consider the plot or basic design of the action. How are the dramatized conflicts or themes introduced, sustained, resolved, etc?
- ¬ <u>When </u>does the action occur? What is the date and/or time of day?
- ¬ <u>Where </u>is the speaker? Describe the physical location of the dramatic moment.
- ¬ <u>Why </u>does the speaker feel compelled to speak at this moment? What is his/her motivation?

The Details

To analyze the design of a poem, we must focus on the poems' parts, namely <u>how</u> the poem dramatizes conflicts or ideas in language. By concentrating on the parts, we develop our understanding of the poem's structure, and we gather support and evidence for our interpretations. Some of the details we should consider include the following:

- ¬ <u>Form:</u> Does the poem represent a particular form (sonnet, elegy, ode, lyric, etc.)? Does the poem present any unique variations from the traditional structure of that form?
- ¬ <u>Rhetoric:</u> How does the speaker make particular statements? Does the rhetoric (word choice) seem odd in any way? Why? Consider the verbs and what they reveal about the speaker.
- ¬ <u>Syntax:</u> Consider the subjects, verbs and objects of each statement and what these elements reveal about the speaker. Do any statements have convoluted or vague syntax?
- ¬ <u>Vocabulary:</u> Why does the poet choose one word over another in each line? Do any of the words have multiple or archaic meanings that add other meanings to the line?

The Patterns

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[1] Adapted from "Writing Poetry Explications," UNC-CH Writing Center, http://www.unc.edu/depts/wcweb/, October 17, 2000. Definitions adapted from Vol. 2A, *Longman Anthology of British Literature*, 2003.

[2] **Allusion**: A meaningful reference, direct or indirect, as when William Butler Yeats writes, "Another Troy must rise and set," calling to mind the whole tragic history of Troy.

As you analyze the design line by line, look for certain patterns to develop which provide insight into the dramatic situation, the speaker's state of mind or the poet's use of details. Some of the most common patterns include the following:

- ¬ Rhetorical Patterns: Look for statements that follow the same format.
- ¬ Rhyme: Consider the significance of the end words joined by sound; in a poem with no rhymes, consider the importance of the end words and enjambment[3].
- ¬ Patterns of Sound: Alliteration[4] and assonance[5] create sound effects and often cluster significant words.
- ¬ Visual Patterns: How does the poem look on the page?
- ¬ Rhythm and Meter: Consider how rhythm and meter influence our perception of the speaker and his/her language.

ROMANTIC-ERA POETIC FORMS

Lyric poetry: A brief, emotive poem written in first person; it emphasizes sound and pictorial imagery rather than narrative or dramatic movement.

Ode (odal hymn): A long, stately lyric poem in stanzas of varied metrical patters. The poem represents divine creative power separate from the poet, but which the poet seeks to possess.

Elegy: A poem on mourning or lamentation (usually about a death).

Sonnet: A poem with 14 lines and a particular end-rhyme scheme. Various types include Spenserian, Petrarchan (Italian or Miltonic), Shakespearean (illegitimate English form). This form was used by women during the Romantic-Era to move away from logic and reason and more toward feeling and mood.

Petrarchan (or Italian or Miltonic) Sonnet (considered "legitimate" form):
Structure: 14 lines
          an *octave* (a stanza of 8 lines) and a *sestet* (a stanza of 6 lines)
          rhyme scheme: *abba abba cdecde*
For an example, see Mary Robinson's sonnets

Shakespearean (or English) Sonnet (considered "illegitimate" form):
Structure: 14 lines
          three *quatrains* (a stanza of 4 lines; the most used stanzaic form in English poetry)
          ends with a rhyming *couplet* (a stanza of 2 lines)
          rhyme scheme: *abab cdcd efef gg*
For an example, see Charlotte Smith's sonnets

3**Enjambment**: Run-on lines in which grammatical sense runs from one line of poetry to the next without pause or punctuation.
4**Alliteration**: Two or more words, or accented syllables, chime on the same initial letter (*lo*st *lo*ve a*lo*ne; *a*fter *a*pple-picking) or repeat the same consonant.
5**Assonance**: Repetition of middle vowel sounds: *fight, hive*; *pane, make*.