

Reading a Poem

The following is presented as general map or checklist of things to think while analyzing a poem. The order is approximate; as you become more used to reading poetry, you will discover that many of these steps become conflated--run together. Also, remember that some aspects of analysis are more relevant and/or important to a particular poem than others. Syntax is *always* important, but only to be discussed in an analysis. A consideration of rhythm, meter, rhyme, and conventional poetic forms may or may not illuminate your understanding of a particular poem. Tone and tonal shift are of central importance to some analyses, while following a narrative line is more important in others. Nevertheless, whenever you read a poem for the first time (and for the first few times; most poems require *at least* SEVERAL readings) you should count on going through *all* these steps. You don't know that rhythm isn't important until you have looked at it and understand how it works in relationship to the rest of the poem.

1. LANGUAGE--THE LITERAL LEVEL

a) The first step in figuring out any poem is to untangle and sort out the SYNTAX of the poem. Almost all poems are written with reference to normative rules of grammar; there is always a relationship between the apparently messed-up grammar of the poem and the grammar of an ordinary English sentence. So, you must be sure, first of all, that you understand the relationships between the various words which make up each sentence of the poem: which antecedents go with which pronouns. Oftentimes poetry does utilize syntactical shifts: *ambiguity* (a word being used as two different parts of speech at the same time), *inversions* (places where normal English sentence order is turned around for emphasis; the subject put after the verb, for instance), and *elipses* (places where words seem to have been left out). *You should note ANYPLACE where the language becomes difficult to understand or seems to deviate from normal English usage; try to create a temporary paraphrase of these sections of the poem into ordinary English so that you can be sure that you know what is going on.* Oftentimes, trying to read the poem out loud to yourself until it moves smoothly will help you to figure out the syntax. Also remember that poets do things for a *reason*. If the grammar of a poem is all screwed up, it is generally because the poet is trying to emphasize something. You should, therefore, always be thinking about *why* the syntax is abnormal.

2) At the same time that you are sorting out the syntax, you also need to be figuring out the DENOTATIONS of the words used. This means using the dictionary to look up words you don't know. At this point you also need to look for ambiguities and puns: places where a given word may mean two or more things at once. Again, you must always be asking yourself *why*: why did the poet choose *this* word?

2. LANGUAGE--THE IMAGISTIC AND FIGURATIVE LEVELS

a) You need to pay attention to the CONNOTATIONS of specific words--the atmosphere, or aura, or mood which surrounds them and suggests wider associations and significances. Always be asking *what does this particular word make me think of?*

b) At the same time, you need to be sensitive to the SENSORY IMAGES--of sight, smell, taste, touch, sound--which the poem evokes. This means sitting back and letting the poem work in your head; reading a poem can be like watching a movie if you really let the images unroll in your mind. While you are doing this, you should still be thinking of connotations--of the moods the images are creating. You also need to start grouping the images into clusters, noticing how they fit together, or contrast and play off one another with one cluster creating a kind of ironic commentary or tension with another.

c) Some imagery is literal; oftentimes though it is associated with FIGURATIVE LANGUAGE etc. Everything said about images applies to experiencing the figurative language in a poem. You also need to identify what figures of speech are used in a poem and should, as always, think about *why* the poet might have chosen them. Why a metaphor instead of a simile?

3. POETIC FORM

a) Check out METER, RHYME, AND RHYTHM, look for patterns of expectation which are built up and then destroyed or changed. What is usually most important in poetic form are the irregularities. Notice what such irregularities emphasize.

b) Look for SOUND EFFECTS in the poem-- *alliteration, assonance, onomatopoeia*. Try to figure out how these effects work with the imagery, connotations, etc.

c) Try to identify whether or not the poem uses any TRADITIONAL FORMS. Is it a sonnet? Is it written in heroic couplets? What does the choice of form say about what the poet is trying to do?

4. TONE

a) Who is the SPEAKER of the poem? What kind of person does s/he seem to be?

b) What does the speaker's ATTITUDE towards his/her subject matter seem to be? What do you think is the poet's motive for writing the poem?

c) Who is the speaker's implied AUDIENCE? What is his/her attitude towards the audience? What is s/he trying to do to the reader? How close is the speaker to the reader?

d) Does the tone change from stanza to stanza throughout the poem? Oftentimes a poem will not have a plot or narrative line; instead the movement of the poem may be from one emotion to another or from one idea to another.

5. NARRATION

a) What happens in the poem? If it is a series of events, be sure you understand their sequence from stanza to stanza.

b) Does the poem follow a chronological order? Are there flashbacks? Is there foreshadowing? Distinguish the order to the PLOT from the order of the poem.

6. ALLUSIONS, ARCHETYPES, AND SYMBOLS--EXTERNAL REFERENCES

a) ALLUSIONS are references to anything outside the poem--an event, another work of art, a place, a person--which may or may not be specifically identified by the author but which s/he expects you to know. Read footnotes to the poem for explanations of these. Otherwise, note places where there are allusions which you don't understand and ask about them. It is also possible to figure out allusions by consulting reference books in the library such as encyclopedias, biographical dictionaries, etc.

b) MYTHS AND ARCHETYPES are allusions to plots or patterns of association common to a given culture or religion. These may take the form of references to gods or goddesses; there are mythological dictionaries in which you can look up references to Greek, Roman, Norse, and other myths.

c) SYMBOLS are objects or actions which *both* represent themselves and at the same time have a larger meaning--a meaning which can be multiple or ambiguous. They are even more suggestive than figures of speech or images and usually a good deal more complex. An image can be a symbol, but not *all* images are (sometimes a cigar is just a cigar).

7. THE BIG PICTURE

Now that you've gone through the whole poem identifying this stuff comes the really hard part--making it all make sense. By the time that you've read the poem for the sixth or tenth time, you should be coming to some basic conclusions as to what it is about. Oftentimes the point will be a complex thing--a tension of forces between potentially opposed moods or images or ideas. You know that you are coming to an adequate explanation of a poem when you find that each aspect of the analysis fits the general purpose you have discovered. A really good analysis covers the whole poem, uniting all its parts.