

Critical Analysis of Poetry: Two Perspectives

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Poet's Perspective

- Poetry may be defined “as a kind of language that says more and says it more intensely than does ordinary language” (*L. Perrine*).
- A poet uses the elements of poetry to get his/her point/meaning across to the reader, and these elements consist of a variety of ways to use words to convey meaning.

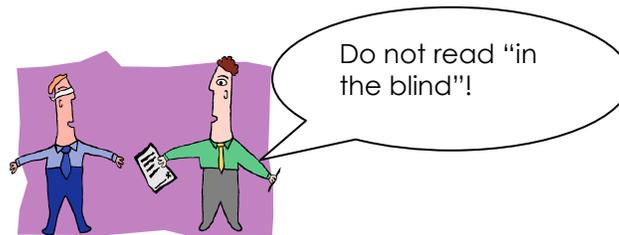
What is an analysis?

- It is helpful to think of analysis as **decoding** (to uncover, to see more).
- The combination of elements the poet uses makes up the **code** of the poem.

Reader's (Student's) Perspective

- Decode a poem in terms of its elements (e.g. imagery, metaphor, poetic language, etc.) in order to see how they work together to produce the poem's meaning.
- You are writing for a reader/marker. Your writing needs to make sense to the reader and convince him/her that your interpretation is a valid one (by quoting evidence).
- You have 150 words to do this. So, make every word count!

Critical Reading of Poetry: A Guide



Before Reading

- Read the question.
- In an abbreviated form, write the question at the top of the literary piece.
- Your job will be to look for good evidence to answer the question. Be an **active** reader, as you read the poem, underline or highlight words or phrases and make notes in the margin.

During Reading / Read to identify:

What kind of poem are you looking at?

- Keep in mind. **Different genre** will have **different subjects, aims, conventions** and **attributes** (e.g. sonnets talk about aspects of human experiences).
- Ask yourself. Does the poem fit into a specific literary movement such as Modernism, Romanticism?

Who is speaking in the poem?

- Identify the voice (speaker). The voice can be **undramatized** (not identified) or **dramatized** (identified).
- What does the voice have to do with what is happening in the poem?
- What is the tone (attitude) of the speaker toward the subject matter? Is the speaker involved, detached? Does the tone change as the poem progresses?
- Keep in mind. If a **voice** in the poem says "I", that does **not** mean it is the author who is speaking; it is a voice in the poem which speaks.

What is the poem about (theme)?

- **Start** with the **basic situation** (e.g. love, death, war).
- **Then, consider** any **key statements** (e.g. conflicts, tensions).
- **Next**, consider **key relationships** (e.g. conflicts, parallels, contrasts, problems posed or solved).
- **Finally**, consider the poem's **tone** and the **setting** (terms of time and space; historical, social, and emotional).

How is the poem organized?

- **Formal** How does the poem fit together in terms of component parts (e.g. stanzas, paragraphs, or such)? ☒ Look for relationships between

the parts (e.g. the first stanza may give the past, the second the present, the third the future).

- **Thematic** How is the argument or presentation of the material of the poem developed? ☒ Look for conflicts, ambiguities, uncertainties, the tensions in the poem as these give clear **guides** to the direction of the meaning in the poem.

How does the poem make use of setting?

- **Terms of time and place**
- **Terms of the physical world** ☒ For example, a tree might be **described** in specific detail; ☒ **tonal way** to create mood or associations (wind blowing mournfully through the willows); ☒ **motif** (the tree reminds me of Katie); ☒ symbolically (image of organic life); ☒ allegorically (representation of the cross of Christ).

How does the sound of the poetry contribute to its meaning?

- Look closely at the poem's rhyme and meter. Is there an identifiable rhyme scheme? Is there a set number of syllables in each line?

Are there literary elements (some examples included) being used that affect how you read the poem?

- **Imagery** ☒ Concrete 'word pictures' having to do with the five senses touch, smell, taste, sound, movement, and especially sight.
- **Figurative Language** ☒ Involves a comparison between two things a literal term or the thing being compared, and a figurative term, or the thing to which the literal term is being compared.
- **Simile** ☒ Explicit comparison between two things (like, though, seems, similar to, than are 'dead-giveaway words).
- **Metaphor** ☒ A comparison that it is not made explicitly in that it is a comparison between two things that are basically unlike.
- **Personification** ☒ A kind of metaphor, which seems to speak of an impersonal thing such as a natural element as though it were a person.

What is your historical or cultural distance from the poem?

- What might this poem tell you about the world of its making?

What is the world-view of the poem?

- What are the basic ideas about the world expressed?
- What areas of human experience are seen as important, and what is valuable about them?
- What aspects of human conditions are fore-grounded, what are suppressed in the claims that the poem makes?

Writing Model for the Poetry Literary Analysis

Note: All examples (unedited) have been written by Grade 12 students from Britannia Secondary.

Begin with a question in mind – How is the metaphor of ice-dancing used to express the relationship between hunter and prey?

Introductory Sentence(s)

1. Provide the title and author for the work.

Like the “death duo” dance of the eagle and the gull in *Death Over Water* by Elizabeth Rhett Wood, ice dancing brings to mind the electrifying jumps and spins of a dance that is intricately choreographed.

Body Sentences

1. Provide proof for your point/claim by drawing examples/evidence from the poem itself.
2. Follow that evidence with a sentence or two to explain (analysis) the connection between the point/claim and the evidence.
3. Use transitions so that the reader can follow the logic of the analysis.

(1) The speaker equates the eagle to “the male of a pair of a pair of ice dancers spreading his dark arms above his partner’s every move”. (2) This gives the eagle a sense of strength and superiority as in ice-dancing where the male traditionally leads the female dancer. Like the male lead in ice-dancing, the eagle is seen as having “every advantage of size and speed”. (3) Whereas, it is the weaker gull that is driven by the eagle “bleating over the bay”.

Summary Sentence

1. Sum up your findings and bring the reader back to the insights about the poem your analysis has led you to.

Through the metaphor of the ice dancers, we perceive imagery that is both graceful and savage and thus, can interpret the relationship of the hunter and prey in new ways.

Tips for Writing the Poetry Literary Analysis

- This is a must. Write in the **present tense!**
- Keep out of your analysis!
- Use literary terms.

The way the speaker describes the effects of the wind and sea indicates that she is under duress. The **metaphor** of the wind “gagging” her mouth

with her own hair **personifies** the wind as an aggressive, constrictive force that is trying to kill her.

- Trust what the poem says. Don't assume. Avoid importing your own opinions, fantasies into the poem.
- Do **not** rely on summary or paraphrase (i.e. retell). Quote from the poem and analyze what you have quoted in order to show how it contributes to your overall interpretation. Your job is to analyze and explain the poet's work.
- Do not generalize.

"½ Point Mark" Tips

- Do **not** use "in the poem". Avoid phrases such as "When I read this poem".
- Choose evidence from different parts of the poem.
- Use interesting verbs. Suggested **verbs** you can use: **dramatizes, presents, illustrates, characterizes, asserts, enacts, connects, portrays, suggests, implies, shows, addresses, emphasizes, stresses, accentuates.**
- Use **transition words or phrases** between the topic sentence, support and analysis which let the reader know where the argument is going. Suggested transitions and phrases you can use:

Adding ideas	<i>also, as well as, equally important, furthermore, in addition, in the first place, moreover, similarly, too</i>
Emphasizing ideas	<i>above all, equally, for instance, in particular, namely, specifically, such as, to illustrate</i>
Illustrating ideas	<i>an illustration of, for example, for instance, in other words, in particular, namely, specifically, such as, thus, to illustrate</i>
Comparing ideas	<i>in the same way, likewise, similarly</i>
Contrasting ideas	<i>and yet, but, but at the same time, despite, even so, for all that, however, nevertheless, notwithstanding, on the contrary, on the other hand, otherwise, rather, regardless, still, though</i>
Showing cause and effect	<i>accordingly, as a result of, for that reason, for this purpose, hence, otherwise, so, thus, to this end</i>
Placing ideas in time	<i>again, at first, at that time, concurrently, eventually, finally, gradually, in the past, last, now, presently, simultaneously, subsequently, then, thereafter, until now</i>
Summarizing ideas	<i>all in all, altogether, finally, in conclusion, in other</i>

	words, in terms of, on the whole, that is, to put it in another way, to put it differently, to summarize
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Example: “The diver **first** shows a sense that she fears the waters of the quarry when she describes the quarry as “the dead city awaited”. That she is fearful to leave the surface is **also** evident in the following quote, “I hung on the last rung of daylight.”