



Analyzing Poetry

A poetry analysis is the process of investigating a poem's content, word usage, and format to improve your understanding of a piece of poetry and its multiple meanings. Analyzing poetry can lead to a greater understanding of the piece's significance, and the context the piece was written in, as well as reveal major themes, images, and ideas.

Why Is Analyzing Poetry Important?

Poetry explores many rich meanings and ideas, most of which center on universal human experiences and emotions such as loss, loneliness, relationships, and forgiveness. By analyzing and appreciating poetry, readers connect to others, share meaningful experiences and become more aware of their own feelings and circumstances.

Step One

The first step to analyzing a poem is to simply look at it and note any observations.

Questions to ask:

- Does anything about the poem stand out?
- Does the poem have a title? If so, does it catch your attention?
- What do you notice about how the poem is organized?
- Does there appear to be a rhyme scheme of any sort?

Format

Format is simply the way the poem is organized or the way in which the writer chooses to break up the poem. There are two basic elements to consider when taking formatting into account: **line** and **stanza**.

- ⇒ **Line:** Similar to a sentence, a line is the smallest unit of technical meaning within a poem.
- ⇒ **Stanza:** Where the line resembles the sentence, the stanza mimics a paragraph. A stanza is a collection of lines grouped together to create yet another "unit" of poetic structure. The excerpt below represents one stanza from a popular poem.
- ⇒ **Example:** an excerpt from Dylan Thomas' "Do not go Gentle into that Good Night"

Do not go gentle into that good night, (line 1)

Old age should burn and rave at close of day; (line 2)

Rage, rage against the dying of the light. (line 3) .



Though wise men at their end know dark is right, (line 4)
Because their words had forked no lightning they (line 5)
Do not go gentle into that good night. (line 6)

Step Two

The second step to analyzing a poem is to read it. Once in your head and then a second time out loud. If the poem is particularly complex or long, you may find that reading it aloud several times helps you to better comprehend and identify formal elements such as rhythm or enjambment, which are key components explored below.

Questions to ask:

- Where was your attention drawn?
- Was the word choice engaging?
- Is the author making use of enjambed or end stop lines?
- Did the poem make use of concrete or abstract language?

Rhythm:

Rhythm concerns how a poem is stressed. When you read a poem aloud, you may notice certain words which you emphasize; these words are considered stressed. The stresses may vary depending on the speaker. Some speakers may speak slower whereas others speak more quickly. Some speakers may take longer pauses where others keep pauses more brief.

Rhyme:

Rhyme is like the melody of the poem. As you read a poem aloud, you may notice certain words resonate with complimentary sounds; when words either sound similar or mimic each other's sound, they rhyme. Rhyme scheme is often shown by using letters. There are many different types of rhyme, but here are some of the most common:

- ⇒ Internal Rhyme: Internal rhyme occurs when two or more words within a single line rhyme.
- ⇒ End Rhyme: End rhyme occurs when words at the end of a line rhyme.
- ⇒ Exact Rhyme: The most noticeable form of rhyme, exact rhyme occurs when two words mimic the same sound E.g. break and take.



⇒ Slant Rhyme: Unlike exact rhyme, slant rhymes occur when words sound similar because of a shared vowel or consonant sound. E.g. years and yours

Rhyme Scheme:

Rhyme scheme refers to the pattern of rhymes within a poem. Often, letters (in alphabetical order) are used to represent a poem's rhyme scheme. Words that rhyme are assigned the same letter.

⇒ **Example:** an excerpt from Edgar Allan Poe's "A Dream Within a Dream"

I stand amid the roar (A)
Of a surf-tormented shore, (A)
And I hold within my hand (B)
Grains of the golden sand —(B)

Step Three

The third step to analyzing a poem is to use steps one and two to analyze the poem's meaning and theme.

Questions to ask:

- How does the format of the poem affect the poem's meaning?
- Does the rhyme scheme add to the overall effect of the poem?
- How does the language used affect the overall meaning of the poem?

Enjambéd vs. End Stop Lines:

- **Enjambéd lines** are lines that continue on to the next line without any use of punctuation.
- **End stop lines** are lines that end in one line either with a period or another punctuation mark.

⇒ **Example:** An excerpt from Robert Frost's "The Road Not Taken."

Two roads diverged in a yellow wood,
And sorry I could not travel both
And be one traveler, long I stood
And looked down one as far as I could

Lines two, three and four are all enjambéd lines because the sentence continues on to the next line without any form of punctuation. Line one would be considered an end stop line because of the comma at the end of the line.



Concrete vs. Abstract language:

- **Concrete language** is language that engages any of the five senses taste, touch, sight, smell and hearing through description.
- **Abstract Language** is language that leads to a sentimental feeling or nostalgia. It can also be words that are vague in meaning, such as: dream, love, nightmare, hate.
⇒ **Example:** an excerpt from Edgar Allan Poe's "A Dream Within a Dream"

I stand amid the roar
Of a surf-tormented shore,
And I hold within my hand
Grains of the golden sand —
How few! Yet how they creep
Through my fingers to the deep,
While I weep—while I weep!

Notice the concrete language— “amid the roar,” “surf-tormented shore” and “Grains of the golden sand.” These three lines each touch one of the senses. “Amid the roar” makes use of hearing, while “surf-tormented shore” evokes sight because you can picture a beach while in a storm. The last line, “Grains of the golden sand,” also makes use of sight because we can imagine the color of the sand.

Sample Poetry Analysis

Source: Gwendolyn Brooks' "We Real Cool"

The Pool Players

Seven at the Golden Shovel

We real cool. We
Left school. We
We Lurk late. We
Strike straight. We
Sing sin. We
Thin gin. We
Jazz June. We
Die soon.



Observations: In this poem, the poet makes heavy use of enjambment. Every line of this poem is enjambed except the terminal line. The poet's use of enjambed lines helps the poem to flow well and read quickly. It also creates an emphasis on the "we," which comes at the end of almost all of the lines of the poem. Despite the poet's use of enjambment, the lines are short and use precise language. The poet's language choices are casual, reminiscent of slang.

Meaning: Because the terminal line of the poem is the only line of the poem which ends with punctuation, it stands out. The abrupt ending of the poem with a period may signify the idea of death (another type of a abrupt ending), which also emerges as an idea within the line. The use of enjambment creates a quick flow, which also mimics the fast and easy lifestyle of the pool players described in the poem.

Tips for Understanding

- Look for rhymes. Often, rhymed words have a relationship to each other within a poem. Think about how certain words are associated with each other through rhyme.
- Note any patterns or perhaps even a lack of pattern. Ask yourself how any patterns which emerge might contribute to your understanding of the poem.
- Consider the length of the lines and how quickly the poem reads. Notice how end marks are used in the poem or if they are used at all.
- When in doubt, go with your instincts. Poems are complex and often represent a variety of possible meanings.

Further Assistance: For more detailed help or if you have questions, visit the Writing Center located in the Lewis University Library or call 815-836-5427.

Sources Consulted: *The Poet's Companion* by Kim Addonizio and Dorianne Laux, *Imaginative Writing* by Janet Burrowing, and *Writing Poems* by Michelle Boisseau, Robert Wallace, and Hadara Bar-Nadav.