

Campus Academic Resource Program

How to Read and Annotate Poetry

This handout will:

- Provide brief strategies on reading poetry
- Discuss techniques for annotating poetry
- Present questions to help you analyze a poem's:
 - Title
 - Speaker
 - Situation
 - Word Choice
 - Sonic Elements
 - Imagery
 - Schools of Thought/Time period/Location of Poet
 - Form
- Review approaches to paraphrasing poems
- Suggest methods for reading difficult poetry
- Address further issues about reading poetry

Strategies for reading poetry:

A common misconception about poetry is that poems are like little boxes with secret meanings inside them. To understand a poem is to obtain the key and unlock the secret meaning that lives inside. One should be able to read a poem once or twice, obtain the meaning, and move on. On the contrary, poems usually have a multitude of meanings that can vary from reader to reader. Sometimes you may have to read a single poem several times before one of its potential meanings begins to arise in you. Edward Hirsch likens reading poetry to playing a game. Once you choose to play with the poem, you will have to give it your attention and even be willing to rise to the challenge the poem may pose.

- Make sure you read the poem slowly so that you become aware of as many elements at work in the poem as possible.
- Read the poem once quietly to yourself to get a general feel for the poem, how it moves, the tone it is in, its form, etc.
- Read the poem a second time out loud to yourself. It is incredibly important to always read a poem more than once because poetry contains multiple elements at work simultaneously.
- When reading the poem out loud, pay special attention to how the words sound in your own voice. How is the way that you read the poem out loud affecting your understanding of the poem?
- How do the punctuation, line breaks, **enjambment**¹, and use of the page (white space, line length, and length of the piece) affect how you read the poem? How do you address this when reading aloud? How does this affect your understanding of the poem?

¹definitions of boldfaced words can be found in the glossary section at the end of this handout

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How to Annotate Poetry

The goal of annotation is to illuminate one's understanding of a poem by identifying the elements at work and making connections between them. Annotating gives you a space to ask more pointed questions of the poem and brings you closer to the poem's motive or purpose.

- Begin by using a pen or pencil to underline or mark anything that initially catches your interest. This includes images, sounds, quotations from other poems, line breaks, punctuation, white space, form, etc.
- Write notes in the margin that indicate why you are underlining what you are underlining. Ask any questions you feel might help you dig deeper into the poem.

Title:

- What does the title of the poem tell you? How does the poem relate to its title? What does the title tell you about the tone?
- Is there an **epigraph** presented after the title? What does it tell you about the idea or tone the poem might be presenting? What kind of conversation might the poet be creating between the poem at hand and the writer or work referenced in the epigraph?

Speaker:

- Who is the speaker in the poem? Is the poet writing in the **private voice** or **public voice**? Can you identify a speaker or is the speaker unknown?

Situation:

- Is there a specific situation presented in the poem?
- What is the speaker's attitude towards that situation?
- What is the **emotional register** of the situation at hand?

Word Choice:

- Because a poem is compressed, word choice is extremely important. What does the poet's word choice tell you about the feeling or idea at work in the poem? Is the language concrete or abstract, direct or mysterious, immediate or distant, or a mixture of different elements?
- Is the diction of the speaker highly academic? **Colloquial**? Somewhere in between? How does this affect the emotional register of the poem? Does the diction comment on the roles language plays in specific parts of society?
- If there are any words you don't understand or are confused by, look them up! It can even be incredibly helpful to look up words you think you know well. You may find that the words you know and use regularly have multiple meanings, and the context in which those words appear can change their meaning dramatically.

Sonic Elements:

- Is there a distinct sonic element at play in the poem? How is your understanding of the poem affected by the sounds that the words make while you read them aloud? Is there a distinct rhyme, **rhythm**, or **meter**? How regular is the rhythm/rhyme/meter? Does this emphasize certain words in the poem? Why might this be?
- Is there repetition in the poem? What kind of effect does it create (**insistence**, persistence, exhaustion)? Does the poem work through **anaphora**? Does the poem have a **refrain**? What might the significance of the repetition of that particular line?

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- What is the emotional register of the poem? How does the poet use tone with image, form, line length/line breaks etc. to effectively establish an emotional register?

Imagery:

- What role does imagery play in this poem? Does it paint a scene? Is the picture clear? Opaque? Disjointed? What kind of feeling is evoked by the specific images in the poem? What is the speaker's relation to these images? Do the images collaborate to create a metaphor?
- Does the poem utilize religious imagery? Mythical imagery? Symbolism? How do these symbols affect your understanding of the poem? What do you know about the cultural meanings of these symbols? What do you need to know more about the symbols in the poem?

Schools of Thought/Time period/Location of Poet:

- What time period is the poet from? What do you know about the political, economic, and social environment the poet was living in? How might these factors affect the social context of the poem?
- What poetic school (Beat, Black Mountain, Romantic, Victorian, etc.) is the writer associated with? If the poet is not associated with any poetic school, how might their political, philosophical, or religious affiliations affect the poem?
- Are there any social, political, or philosophical implications in the poem?

Form:

- Is the poem written in a certain form (eg. **Sonnet**)? Is the poem written in **free verse**?
- Are there divisions in the poem? Stanzas or sections? Shifts in rhyme, tone, or perspective?
- Are the ideas in the poem placed in a specific order? Do they move from internal to external? Past to present? Opaque to clear? One place to another?
- How are the line breaks and line lengths functioning in the poem?
- Does the poem follow a specific concept that directs the progression?

Paraphrasing:

- After you have read the poem once or twice, read it line by line through the poem and try to break it down into a form you can understand by re-writing the lines in your own words.
- Try to unfold the poem by considering how the nouns, verbs, and modifiers are working. How is the poet using articles to speak specifically or generally? How does your word choice compare or contrast with the poet's word choice? How do you see punctuation, line breaks, rhythm, and the poem's overall form functioning now that you have paraphrased it?
- As you analyze your paraphrased version of the poem, be aware of the visual, sonic, and tactile elements apparent within the original poem. How do these elements direct the **emotional register** of the poem?
- Do you feel your paraphrase is an accurate illumination of the poem? What differences or similarities do you see between your paraphrase and the original poem?

Confronting Difficult Poetry:

- Some poets (Hart Crane, T.S. Eliot, Gertrude Stein, etc.) intend for their poetry to be incredibly difficult. If a poem is so challenging that you can hardly imagine enjoying it and

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are completely turned off by its elusiveness, use these two techniques to help you “break through the gates” of the poem:

- First, name three specific elements at work in the poem, how they are functioning, and why you think they are written in that specific form within the poem.
- Then identify three specific elements you dislike or find challenging in the poem, what about these elements is tripping you up, why you think these elements are causing you trouble, what their functions may be in the poem, and why the poem is written this way. After this analysis you may find that you admire the poem for the very elements that challenge your understanding.

What does it all mean?

“If the meaning of a poem is the essential characteristic, people would be putting themselves to a lot of trouble about nothing to set the meaning in poetic form.” (Wallace Stevens)

The most common, and often most confounding question in poetic analysis is: “What does this poem mean?” A poem’s meaning can appear differently to every person that reads it depending on the person’s personal history, preferred critical theory, personal poetic enjoyments, religious, philosophical, or political ideologies, etc. The list of factors that can affect a poem’s meaning is endless. One thing is certain: without a poet’s written or spoken explanation of their intent in writing the piece in question, we cannot make an assumption about authorial intent. What we can do is consider the specific elements at hand: form, image, sound, metaphor, symbolism, time period, diction, tone, speaker, etc., and use what we know, and what we can learn about how these elements are functioning in the poem, to determine what we think the poem means, or more pointedly, what we think the poem’s motive or purpose may be. You may find a different and equally significant meaning to the poem than every other person that has read it or will read it. The goal is to realize what the poem means to you, on what levels it is affecting you, and how you see the poetic elements functioning in the piece. Remember, the important element in a poem is not its meaning but the experience it creates.

Glossary:

- **Anaphora:** repetition of the same word or words at the beginning of successful phrases, clauses, sentences, or lines.
- **Colloquial:** language used in, or characteristic of familiar and informal conversation
- **Emotional register:** emotional response felt when reading the poem; or, more simply, the emotion embodied by the sounds, images, form, diction, etc. in the poem
- **Enjambment:** the continuation of a syntactic unit from one line to the next without a major juncture or pause; the opposite of an end-stopped line.
- **Epigraph:** a quotation set at the beginning of a literary work or one of its divisions to suggest its theme
- **Free verse:** poetry without a combination of a regular metrical pattern and a consistent line length
- **Insistence:** the act of demanding something or saying something in a way that does not allow disagreement
- **Meter:** repetition of a single basic pattern
- **Private voice:** the poet talking as themselves, to themselves, or to nobody. Can also address the audience/readers of the piece.

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- **Public voice:** poet attempts to create and embody a dramatic character speaking in verse; or when the poet attempts to embody the voice and feelings of a particular social group
- **Refrain:** a line, lines, or final part of a line repeated verbatim within a poem, especially at the ends of stanzas
- **Rhythm:** an ordered recurrent alternation of strong and weak elements in the flow of sound and silence
- **Sonnet:** a 14 line poem. Classic English sonnets typically appear in rhymed iambic pentameter, but modern/postmodern sonnets have been widely written in free verse as well.

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