

A GUIDE TO READING POETRY EFFECTIVELY

OR EVERYTHING YOU EVER WANTED TO KNOW ABOUT A POEM BUT WERE AFRAID TO ASK...

In many ways poetry is no different than other forms of communication. It consists of a speaker (i.e. the narrator) attempting to convey something to an audience. In poetry, however, the act of communication has been changed from regular colloquial speech into a consciously stylized work of art, which often subtly conveys thoughts, emotions, and implications that are not explicitly present in the poem. By its hinting, suggesting, and implying, a poem entices you—as a sensitive, astute reader—to engage the poem, questioning its meaning, form, style, and effects.

Obviously not every question will be applicable to every poem. Moreover, many questions will have to be revisited multiple times as your analysis of the poem proceeds, an interpretative phenomenon called the “Hermeneutic circle.”

I. Content

- **Does the poem have a title?** Remember that modern editors have invented the titles of most classical texts. Consider why the editor may have appended this title but do not let it color your own interpretation of the poem.
- **What are the theme(s) of the poem?** To some extent your understanding of the theme of a poem will develop as your analysis proceeds.
 - Is the theme directly or indirectly stated?
 - If there are multiple themes; does the poem shift from one theme to another or are the themes interwoven?
- **What is the setting of the poem?**
 - When and where does the poem take place?
 - Is the setting closely linked to a specific time and/or place or does the narrator aim at universality/timelessness?
- **Who is the narrator?**
 - Is the narrator implicit or explicit?
 - What (grammatical) person and number is the narrator? Does this change in the course of the poem?
 - Does the poem invite you to equate the narrator with the author?
- **Does the poem have an internal addressee or is the implied reader the assumed audience?**
- **Does the poem contain characters besides the narrator and audience?**
 - Do these characters have agency (*i.e.* they act and/or speak in their own right) or does the narrator report their actions and/or statements?
- **What is the mood of the poem?** somber/serious/joyous/ironic/satiric...
 - Is the mood consistent throughout the poem?
- **What is the implied world outside of the poem?**
 - **What is the antecedent scenario?** What has been happening before the poem starts? What has disturbed the status quo and set the poem in motion?
 - **What is the consequent scenario?** What state has been reached to bring the poem to a close? Does the poem anticipate subsequent actions?
- **What allusions are present in the poem?**
 - Are the allusions citations or evocations?
 - Do the allusions reinforce or subvert the explicit meaning?

II. Structure

- **What is the genre and meter of the poem?** Does it deviate from the expectations of its genre or meter?
- **Does the poem have a rhyme scheme?** Rhyme at the verse-end is extremely rare in antiquity. Internal rhymes, *i.e.* between the first and second section of a line or section, are more frequent but still uncommon in most ancient authors.
- **Can the poem be divided in sections?**
 - How many sections? Where are the breaks?
 - What are the formal sections (stanzas, stichic lines, etc.) of the poem? Do the formal sections match the poem's thematic sections? When looking at thematic structure, you might look for conflicts, ambiguities and uncertainties, the tensions in the poem, as these give clear guides to the direction of meanings in the poem, the poem's 'in-tensions'.
 - Do the sections match the punctuation? Remember that all punctuation in classical works is the product of editorial, not authorial, decisions.
 - Can the poem be divided differently? What variations in meaning do the various divisions yield?
- **Where is the climax of the poem?** Is there a climax?
- **What is the emotional/rhetorical curve of the poem?** a crescendo? an hourglass, a steep peak/fall?
- **Are words and/or constructions repeated and/or varied in the sub-sections of the poem?**
- **What tense(s) does the narrator employ?** How do these relate to the poem's setting?

III. Style

- **Is the poem's language primarily literal or symbolic?**
- **What is the narrator's stylistic register?** formal/informal/colloquial/slang
- **How would you describe the syntax of the poem?** As declined languages, Latin and Greek allow the author a massive degree of flexibility in the placement of words within a sentence. Is the syntax simple, disjointed (hyperbaton), or interlaced (synchysis)?
- **Does the poem demonstrate an abundance of any stylistic, grammatical, or morphological forms?**

IV. Poetic Effects: does the poem demonstrate (for example):

- imagery or figurative language
- symbolism
- metaphor and simile
- consonance or assonance
- alliteration, anaphora, anadiplosis, or onomatopoeia
- technopaignic effects
- anacoluthon
- aposiopesis or parapsodokian
- chiasmus
- hyperbaton
- hysteron proteron
- punning or word play
- pleonasm
- syllepsis or ambiguity

V. Hermeneutic Questions (questions to consider and reconsider as you read and re-read):

- How do the poem's content, structure, style, and poet effects combine to create the meaning of the poem?
- What is the purpose of the poem? Persuasion? Catharsis? Entertainment?
- Can you imagine the poem written in a different person, or a different tense, or with the parts rearranged, or with a stanza added or removed?
- What does the poem reveal about the narrator/author/audience?