

Writing Handout L-4

Analyzing a Poem

Overview

An analysis of a poem is not a summary. An analysis requires an interpretation (explication) by the reader.

An analysis may focus upon a single element of a poem (plot, character, point of view, symbol, tone, figurative language, irony, etc.). An explication (or interpretation) of a work may concentrate on a close reading of a specific part of the work (line-by-line or word-by-word). An explication entails not only what the work means, but how it accomplishes the author's purpose.

The General Process

1. **Examine the title:** Is it indicative of a conflict or a human condition? Is it symbolic of something else? Is it sarcastic, satiric, humorous, or serious? Is it descriptive? Why do you think the author chose it?
2. **Read the poem:** Are there any indications of the meaning? What is the topic? The setting? The voice (the speaker)? What images are evoked? Is there a historical or cultural link?
3. **Study the ending:** Where has the poem taken you?
4. **Examine the poem by parts:** Is there an organization? A sequence?
5. **Determine the tone:** What is the author's attitude toward the subject?

Characteristics of Poetry

Poetry tends to differ from other literary works by its sound: its use of language.

Start by reading the poem silently. Then read it aloud. Take care to note the literal meaning and figurative meaning. The literal meaning is what actually happens; the figurative meaning is the main idea behind the work, the underlying theme.

The figurative meaning may be discovered by asking yourself the following question: What does the author expect the reader to *learn* or *experience* from the poem?

Writing the Poetry Analysis

1. Write a clear introduction on the work, indicating the title and author. Follow the introduction with a precise thesis statement that tells the reader "the point" of the paper.
2. Move point by point through the paper, making certain that each paragraph has a topic sentence and the other sentences in the paragraph support or expand upon the topic sentence.
3. Write a conclusion that ties the paper together. It should re-state the thesis in different words.

Ten Clues to Analysis

Approach a poem by looking for clues. The following questions might help you discover what a poem means and how the poet attempts to convey the meaning. When writing your paper, you may concentrate on only one of these "clues" or many of them. The first clue (theme), however, is usually the most critical.

Read the poem several times before starting your analysis. A slow, careful reading of the work is essential.

1. **What is the theme of the poem?** What is the poet trying to say? What is the poem about?
2. **What happens in the poem?** Are conflicts or themes introduced? Resolved?
3. **Who is the speaker?** What is the “point of view” or perspective of the speaker? The perspective might be social, intellectual, political, or even physical.
4. **What is the setting?** What is the time and place? How does the poet make use of the physical description? Does it create a mood?
5. **Are there any key statements or lines that indicate meaning?** Look for one key line or symbol; however, the poet may make use of recurring symbols, actions, or motifs.
6. **How does the sound or language contribute to the poem’s meaning?** Does the rhythm affect what the poet is trying to convey? What kinds of words are used? Are there words with double meanings?
7. **Does the poem refer to other literary works?** For example, is there a Biblical reference or reference to another poem? How does the other work relate to the meaning?
8. **Is there a historical, ideological, or cultural aspect?** Does the poem refer to a world event, period of time, or particular aspect of culture (race, status, gender, class)? What are the basic ideas of the world or human condition or experience (love, hate, orderliness of the universe, etc.)?
9. **What qualities or emotions does the poem evoke?** How does the poem make you feel?
10. **What imagery is used?** Does the poet use physical imagery or figures of speech, such as metaphors?

Poets use language to express or represent thoughts, ideas, feelings, actions, or experiences. What do you “see” when you read a poem? Imagery may involve the other senses (hearing, smell) or an abstract concept (thought, intellect). When analyzing a poem, take note of the devices a poet uses to convey or emphasize meaning. The following are a few of the more common poetic devices. Refer to your textbook or class notes for a complete guide.

Simile: Directly stated comparisons, using the words “like” or “as.” *He fought like a lion.*

Metaphor: Implied comparisons of things that are not really alike. *“All the world’s a stage.”* – Shakespeare.

Personification: Ascribed human attributes to non-human objects. *“Meantime the heaven wept upon our heads.”* – Stevenson.

Onomatopoeia: The sound of the word reflects its sense: *crack, whiz, whoosh, sputter.*

Irony: The expressed thought is actually opposite from the intended meaning.

Alliteration: The repetition of consonant sounds – *“Some sat, some stood, some slowly strayed.”* – Scott.

Further Information

If you are in doubt about any aspect of your assignment, schedule an appointment with your teacher or a conference in the ASC Writing Center. Consult your textbook for detailed explanations. Additional writing handouts and a sample MLA research paper are available at the following ASC website.

<http://www.irsc.edu/students/academicsupportcenter/writinglab/writinglab.aspx?id=943>