

# **Suppose you were asked to analyze a poem (or short piece of fiction): Five steps and a sample outline**

## **Step One: Make some observations about the work's form...**

- Point of view
- Tone
- Sonic Notation
- Line breaks (enjambé v. end-stopped)
- Syntax
- Stanza structures
- Repetition
- Overall form (villanelles, sonnets, sestinas etc.)

## **Step Two: Make some observations about the work's content,,,**

- Plot
- Character(s)
- Setting
- Ideas

## **Step Three: Make some observations about figures of speech (metaphor, simile, metonymy, allusion, hyperbole etc.)...**

## **Step Four: Look for ambiguities and complexities: (undermines v emphasizes)**

- To what extent, for example, does the sonic notation undermine the plot or the apparent theme?
- To what extent does the stanza structure emphasize the speaker's point of view?
- To what extent do the figures of speech in the beginning of the work have a different tone from the figures of speech near the middle or the end?

## **Step Five: State, explain and then develop your big picture idea grounded in this work:**

Should be arguable (acknowledge the other side). Should be provable (use as much combinable evidence as possible from form, content, and figures of speech observations). Should allow for and explain complexities and ambiguities. Should be persuasive. Develop the thesis. Use transitions. Should be interesting but should never digress.

## **1. Form...**

Point of view will be useful:

Who is speaking (or who is the narrator)? (age, sex, personality, frame of mind, emotional center) How aware is the speaker of what he or she is saying? How does the reader know? What is the relationship between the speaker and the poet? (Hint: The poet is not the speaker!, the author is not the narrator) What does the speaker seem to value? How conscious is the speaker's word choice? What event may have caused this speaker to speak? Provide context of time and place, if possible. Who is the presumed audience?

Tone is useful (Tone and point of view almost always overlap):

How straightforward does the speaker seem? What are the ten most important tone-controlling words? Why? Is the tone the same throughout? If so, why? If not, why not? What moments can you find where the poet or the speaker may have intentionally created tensions in tone, dissonances of sound or sense, paradoxes for the mind or ear? Does there seem to be an overarching word bank or idea bank, a sort of default metaphorical position, such as religion or economics or the body?

Sonic notation, usually, is important:

Is there end rhyme, internal rhyme, slant rhyme, assonance, alliteration, consonance, or onomatopoeia? Does any of this stuff seem significant? Does the poet seem interested in using sound to convey sense? How? Why? Reference to meter (iambic, trochaic, spondaic, etc.) can be useful discussing the "music" of a piece: Why, for example, is the rhythm of this piece in alternating, rhymed couplets of eight beats followed by six beats? Why is the meter of the first three lines of a stanza broken in the fourth?

Repetition is almost always intentional and interesting:

What words are repeated? (especially important in short poems where words other than articles and simple verbs are repeated) What lines are repeated? What syntactical constructions are repeated? Does the placement of words in different stanzas but in similar positions within those stanzas relate to each other?

The line and the stanza can be an important unit of meaning:

Why did the poet choose to create line breaks where he or she did? Are there particularly short lines or long lines? Are there lines of varying lengths? Are there positions in the lines (the end or the beginning of the lines, for example) that seem to hold more weight for some reason? The fancy word associated with line breaks is caesura. Caesura is actually the breath (so to speak) between lines.

Overall form can be important:

Short unrhymed lyrics feel different from sonnets; sonnets feel different from long

narrative blank verse; poems broken into short stanzas feel different from poems not broken up into stanzas or poems whose stanzas are long and daunting; elegies often feel different from dramatic monologues; ballads feel different from epics. Poets, usually, care about what form they are using. Poets, usually, are aware of the history of that form.

## **2. Content...**

Plot is useful to note in narrative poetry (as well as in fiction::

What happens in the poem? Is the series of events told in a straightforward, chronological order? Are there flashbacks? Are there discrepancies of perception in the narration of the events?

Character can be a useful entry point for analysis:

Who is speaking the poem or narrating the story? Where is he standing - is he central or peripheral? What is the relationship to what the speaker is speaking about? How trustworthy is the speaker? Is he self-deceived or deceptive? How do the characters in the poem interact? Do the characters represent values, ideas, or concepts bigger than themselves? Does the soldier represent the army or just himself as a soldier?

Ideas expressed by characters or by the speaker can be useful:

What fears do you notice being expressed? What large, abstract issues does this poem directly address, magically allude to, and/or slyly puncture?

The setting of the poem can help ground analysis or even, sometimes, provide clues to allusions or themes on the poet's mind while he or she wrote the poem:

Where does the poem take place? When does the poem take place? How much of the poem is spent describing the time or the place? What is the speaker's attitude towards the poem's time and place? How does the reader know?

## **3. Figures of speech...**

**Allusion** – A tacit reference to another work of art; consider why the poet would refer to this other work.

**Apostrophe** - (No, not the possessive punctuation mark...) – A direct address by the poem's speaker an object (or sometimes a person). Often the object being addressed is not present, physically, during the setting of the poem, but is called into being, as it were, because of the poem's address. Why is the poet addressing this object? How is this poet addressing this object? What does it reveal about the speaker and/or the poet?

**Hyperbole** - Exaggeration, for effect. What effect?

**Irony**- A statement whose apparent meaning is opposite of its actual meaning Why?

**Litotes** - Understatement for effect, often involving a double negative. Why write, “Mary is not unattractive,” rather than “Mary is attractive”?

**Metaphor** - Comparison without “like” or “as.” Consider why the poet has chosen not to use like or as but, instead, brought the two elements of the comparison closer together than he would have in a simile; if the two (or more) elements of the comparison come from different word banks, analyze why and how these different worlds are being brought together. A **conceit** is an extended metaphor or even, sometimes, a series of interwoven similes; why does the poet choose to extend the metaphor? Does it become overly ornate?

**Metonymy** – Metaphor is based on the comparison of two elements, metonymy is based on the substitution of one element for another with which it is closely associated. “The pen is mightier than the sword,” for example, or “By the sweat of thy brow, thou shalt eat thy bread.” **Synecdoche** is a form of metonymy in which the part stands for the whole: “All hands on deck.” Consider why the poet has chosen to refer to an idea only by citing an object associated with it or to the whole only by highlighting a part of it. Consider the effect of absence of the explicit idea or of the rest of the whole: does the reader, for example, feel the absence or ignore the absence? Consider these examples: “The White House announced today that another 33000 troops would be sent to Afghanistan”; “If Bush had not invaded Iraq, the country’s deficit crisis would not be as severe.”

**Personification** – The attribution of animate qualities to non-animate objects. Consider why the poet might choose to animate the inanimate aspects of the world? What does the speaker of the poem reveal that he or she values if he or she is animating a fish or a mountain or a gun?

**Simile** – A comparison using “like” or “as.” Consider why the poet has chosen to make this comparison. Usually the two elements in the comparison are from different word-banks, different worlds. Compare and contrast the worlds; what kind of commentary does one element of the comparison make on the other?

#### **4. Ambiguity and Complexity (Undermines v Emphasizes) ...**

Once they are summarized, poems are rarely profound. It is not the depth of what they say, usually, that draws us to this medium, but how they work. For more straightforward depth, look to philosophy. In poetry, ideally, one needs to examine how each part of the poem’s form relates to every other part of the poem’s form, and how each part of the poem’s form relates to every aspect of the poem’s content and figures of speech. In the real world, this task becomes impossible. The close reader of poetry, however, is still expected to approach the ideal.

#### **5. Big Idea...**

In two sentences, create a big idea thesis that addresses the question "What have we learned about human beings from this work of literature?" Make sure you can back up this statement through analysis of specific examples of form, content and figures of speech...

# Outline

## **Introduction** (usually one paragraph):

1. Catchy Opening - in a few sentences, draw the reader's attention to the work of literature you will be analyzing and to the big idea you will be developing.
2. Background and definitions - in a few sentences, place the work of literature into a general context (time period or author or theme), mention the form of the work (sonnet, short story, etc.), define any non-literary terms you intend to use in the essay (especially true of abstract words from your big idea thesis), and transition neatly into your thesis.
3. Thesis - from #5 on page three of this handout. Argue. Persuade. But be reasonable.

## **Body Paragraphs** (as much evidence as you can write about without digressing):

1. Each body paragraph should clearly link back to the big idea regarding what one can learn about human beings from this work of literature.
2. You must quote specific lines from the poem in every body paragraph.
3. You must use two form terms (pages 1-2 of this handout), two content terms (page 2 of this handout) and two figures of speech terms (pages 3-4 of this handout) somewhere in your body paragraphs.
4. Often, the best paragraphs will combine observations regarding several different terms. For example, "The **repetition** of the **allusions** to classical Greek drama reinforces the speaker's self-conscious **point of view**."
5. Always pay attention to the verbs you use.. This metaphor emphasizes.. This series of similes draws the reader's attention to....The setting of this poem creates contrast with the tone of the speaker...
6. Paragraphs may be short or long as their content dictates.
7. Transitions should be thematic. Do not, for example, fall back on the meaningless constructions such as "Another example is.. Secondly.. etc." Instead, be sure to think of the transition as a hinge, connecting paragraph theme to paragraph theme.

## **Conclusion** (usually one paragraph):

1. Recapitulate your main points, with special attention to tying together any digressions you have inadvertently explored.
2. Link to other works of literature, art or music. Explain link.