Poetry Analysis

Digging Deeper Into Poetry

English 521
What We’re Looking For:

• When we analyze a poem, there are three main categories we examine:

  1. Content
  2. Style
  3. Theme & Evaluation
Content:

- When we examine the content of a poem, we’re looking for things like:
  - The reader’s first impressions
    - This includes what the poem may look like on its surface
  - An examination of the poet (or poetic voice)
  - The poem’s context
  - An examination of the poem’s title
  - A discussion about tone and mood
Style:

• Looking at a poem’s style requires the reader to dig deeper than the surface and examine such things as:

  ▫ The type of poem we’re examining
  ▫ The poem’s language and diction (word choices)
  ▫ Identification and examination of all its figures of speech
  ▫ Identification of images and symbolism in the poem
    • The parts of the poem appealing to the reader’s senses
  ▫ The structure of the poem (if it has any structure, that is)
Theme & Evaluation:

- In the final part of the analysis, the reader offers his/her ideas about possible themes that are present in the poem.

- Also, the reader communicates his/her final thoughts about the poem in general and the poem’s relationship to modern life.
Digging Deeper

What All That Stuff Actually Means

1. Content
2. Style
3. Theme & Evaluation
Analyzing Content

Digging Deeper Into Poetry
First Impressions

- After reading the poem for the first time, it is helpful to record your first impressions:
  - Interesting Words
  - Possible Subject
  - Your impressions will change as you re-read the poem

- You might begin by writing something like:
  
  Upon first reading, a reader may be given the impression that Robert Frost is writing about walking through a woods on a nice fall day. He speaks of two roads and...
On the Surface

• This accompanies the first impressions part of your analysis.

• This is where the reader tells the audience what the poem appears to be about before he/she looks at the figures of speech and imagery.

  ▫ Like the analysis a child might provide, not being aware of the deeper meaning most poems exhibit
Poet & Poetic Voice

• Before offering any sort of analysis, you must also find out a little bit about the poet who created the poem.
  ▫ This requires a little bit of research.

• It is also important to remember that some poets don’t write as themselves. They often adopt a persona to be the speaker (or voice) of the poem.
  ▫ Often, the poetic voice could be expressing an emotion that the poet may or may not share.

• Who is the ADDRESSEE of the poem?
  ▫ To whom is the speaker speaking?
Context

• This is where learning a little bit about the poet also comes in very handy.

• What circumstances must have existed to make this poet create this poem?
  ▫ What are some details about the poet’s life that may have resulted in his/her writing this poem?
  ▫ What’s happening in society (wars, marriage, etc) at the time when the poem is written.
  ▫ Does the poem address a social, psychological, historical, or mythical phenomenon?
Title

• You have to assume that the poet chose the title of his/her poem after a lot of thought.
  ▫ How does it fit?
  ▫ Is it a good title to represent the poem?
  ▫ How does it relate to the ideas in the poem?
  ▫ Do you think it is an appropriate title?
  ▫ Why do you think he/she decided to name the poem by this title?
Tone: All About the Poet

• Tone is the poet’s attitude towards his/her subject.
  ▫ Tone is projected through poetic voice.
  ▫ It is created through diction (word choice), rhythm, rhyme, and use of imagery.
  ▫ It may be mournful, angry, reflective, melancholy, joyful, bitter, ironic, etc. (Usually expressed as an adjective)
  ▫ By picking up the tone of a poem, you’ll be better able to understand its intended meaning.

• When discussing tone, it is important for you to find examples of lines/diction in the poem which support your choice.
Mood: All About You

- Mood is how the reader is supposed to feel after reading the poem. It describes the atmosphere the poem creates.

  ▫ How do you think the poet wanted you to feel?
  ▫ Chances are that a poet who uses a melancholy tone will not create a bright and lively mood in the reader.
  ▫ Choice of words and imagery are what create tone.
  ▫ Again, mood is usually expressed as an adjective (angry, reflective, melancholy, bitter, excited, happy, etc.)

- Again, find examples of lines/diction in the poem which explain how this mood is created.
Analyzing Content

Using your notes, find the CONTENT elements in:

I Lost My Talk by Rita Joe
Page 42
I Lost My Talk by Rita Joe

lost my talk
The talk you took away.
When I was a little girl
At Shubenacadie school.

You snatched it away:
I speak like you
I think like you
I create like you
The scrambled ballad, about my world.

Two ways I talk
Both ways I say,
Your way is more powerful.

So gently I offer my hand and ask,
Let me find my talk
So I can teach you about me.
Analyzing Style

Digging Deeper Into Poetry
Type of Poem

● Includes Form

  ▫ Popular poetry forms include:
    • Lyric (short and musical; most often rhymed), includes:
      ▫ Sonnet (14 lines with a definite rhyme scheme)
      ▫ Ballad (a lyric poem which tells a story)
      ▫ Ode (poem written in praise of something)
    • Epic (a long, heroic poem with elevated language)
    • Dramatic Monologue (a one-sided conversation)
    • Blank Verse (unrhymed iambic pentameter)
    • Free Verse (no particular structure)
    • Elegy (like a eulogy, only in poem)
The Many Types of Poetry

- ABC poem
- Alexandrine Poetry
- Allegory
- Analogy
- Ballad
- Blank Verse
- Burlesque
- Cacophony
- Canzone
- Cinquain
- Classicism
- Conceit
- Couplet
- Dactyl
- Doggerel
- Elegy
- Enjambment
- Epic
- Epigram
- Epitaph
- Epithalamium Form
- Free Verse
- Haiku
- Idyll
- Imagery
- Irony
- Lay
- Limericks
- Lyric
- Name Poem
- Narrative
- Odes
- Pastoral
- Quatrain
- Refrain
- Rhymes
- Romantic
- Senryu
- Sonnets
- Tanka
- Terza rima
- Verse
- Prose and Prose Poetry
Structure

- Structure usually applies to poems that must follow a certain structure like sonnets, limericks, haiku, etc.
  - The way the lines are organized and grouped.
  - Line length?
  - Rhyme, rhythm, and its division (or not) into stanzas.
  - Stanzas (line groupings)
  - Couplet (a pair of lines that rhyme)
  - Triplet (three rhyming lines)
  - Quatrain (four rhyming lines)
  - Rhyme Scheme (lines that rhyme with one another)
  - Rhythm (the existence of a regular beat – it can give the poem a feeling of energy and life; think of how rhythm enhances music).

- How does the structure enhance/take away from the piece?
  - Many modern poems don’t follow a specific structure, making an analysis of a poem’s structure unnecessary.
Language & Diction

• This is the poet’s word choice
  ▫ Upon reading the poem, make sure to discover the meanings of unfamiliar words and phrases, allusions, and other unfamiliar stuff.
    • *This doesn’t necessarily have to be part of your analysis, but it will definitely help your understanding.*
    • Is the poem free of clichés?
    • Are the words concrete or abstract?
    • How does the diction contribute to or detract from the poem?

  ▫ Remember, you must comment on the diction and then offer examples to support your claims.
Figures of Speech

• The key to discussing and understanding poetry is in deciphering its figurative language, which includes:
  ▫ Figures of speech (simile, metaphor, oxymoron, etc.)

• Does the poet use figurative language?

• Each must be identified and then explained.
  ▫ Without an explanation of what the figure of speech means, all you have proven is that you can identify various figures of speech.
    • Tie them to the poem by telling what they mean, both literally and figuratively.
Imagery & Symbolism

• Are there concrete images that the poet wants the reader to see, hear, smell, touch, taste?
  ▫ Identify them and explain their significance.

• What images does the poem evoke?
  ▫ How are they evoked?
  ▫ How do different images connect or contrast with one another?
  ▫ Are there other aural (onomatopoeia, alliteration) and visual (achieved through simple description) details?
Analyzing Style

Using your notes, find the **STYLE** elements in:

*Kindly Unhitch that Star, Buddy* by Ogden Nash
Page 40
Analyzing Theme & Evaluation

Digging Deeper Into Poetry
Theme & Evaluation

• Theme
  ▫ Does this poem have an underlying message?
    • Does this poem try to tell us something about life, humanity, or something else?
    • Is the poem trying to teach the reader a lesson of some sort?

• Evaluation
  ▫ Does the poet succeed in recreating his/her experiences within the reader? How?
  ▫ Is the experience intensely felt by the reader?
  ▫ Does the poem succeed in sharpening the reader's awareness of something significant?
Theme & Evaluation:

• In the final part of the analysis, the reader offers his/her final thoughts about the poem in general.
  ▫ An educated guess about the poem’s theme
  ▫ The reader’s judgment of the poem
  ▫ You decide whether the poet achieved his/her purpose
  ▫ Discussion of how the poem’s theme relates to present-day life and/or experiences.
    • Of the reader
    • Of society in general
Poetry Analysis Checklists

Content
- First Impression
- On the Surface
- Poet/Poetic Voice
- Context
- Title
- Conflicts
- Tone & Mood

Style
- Type of Poem
- Language & Diction
- Figures of Speech
- Imagery & Symbolism
- Structure

Theme/Evaluation
- Theme
- Evaluation
- Final Thoughts

If you can speak to all of these, you’ve completed a solid analysis.
Analyzing Evaluation

Using your notes, explore the various EVALUATION elements in:

I Lost My Talk (42)
&
Kindly Unhitch that Star, Buddy (40)
A Paper About a Poem

- Poems must be chosen from *Inside Poetry* texts.
- MLA Format is a must! No frilly cover pages!
- When researching the poet, make note of websites/books so you can include a References page at the end of your paper (in proper MLA format please).
- Each of the categories discussed must appear in the paper.
- Go through the poem line by line – don’t leave anything out.
- This is a formal paper. You don’t write using ‘I’. Instead, when commenting on the poem, you should say ‘the reader’ or ‘one’.
- Remember, you are making judgments about this poem. Any time you make a judgment, you should support yourself with evidence (lines/phrases) from the poem itself.
- Most explications fall in the 500-700 word range.
- Revision is important. Don’t forget it!