

Getting Comfortable with Poetry: Some General Tips

Answering the question “What is this poem about?” is always a challenge, in part because there’s rarely ever *one* simple answer! We use the cues the poem gives us to develop an understanding of its meaning, but our answer to the question might be slightly different from another reader’s. Because of that, we often describe our understanding of a poem’s meaning as an **interpretation**. In this course, the way that we will develop our own interpretations is through the process of **close reading**: *slowly* and *carefully* reading and then **analyzing** and **interpreting** a literary text.

Read and then read again...and again...and again...

Because poetry relies on the compression of meaning and the relationship between **form** and **content** (how a poem looks/sounds/is organized and its meaning(s)), reading a poem several times over can help you unpack its layered meanings. Identifying the relationship between both can take time and practice, so don’t worry if you feel a little lost: just keep practicing!

Reading **out loud** helps you to follow the cues of the poem’s punctuation, syntax, and diction. If you can’t read out loud, *read slowly* and pay attention to the poem’s punctuation, line breaks, and stanza organization. Try not to worry too much about unfamiliar words or phrases; read the poem as written.

After an initial read, you can grab a pen/pencil (or PDF reader) and **mark up the poem**: underline, circle, write exclamation points and question marks, write notes in the margins... Here are some things to look for:

- Repetition of words/phrases
- Related ideas
- Confusing or unclear words/phrases
- Surprising words/phrases/sounds

- Rhythm/rhyme
- Places where the poem might be quoting from/alluding to another source

Questions about **FORM**:

What do you notice about the **rhythm** of the poem’s language?

Think especially about which syllables/words seem to be emphasized. Is the rhythm regular throughout? Are some lines shorter than others? Are there certain places that are rhythmically different than others?

What about **rhyme**? Does the poem have a rhyme scheme?

Rhyme is the repetition of ending sounds of words and while it most often comes at the end of a line of a poetry, it doesn’t always; rhyme within a line is called *internal rhyme*

What **aural strategies** does the poem use? You might notice...

alliteration (repetition of beginning sound: e.g. "Sally sells seashells.")

assonance (repetition of vowel sound: e.g. "The rain in Spain stays mainly in the plains.")

consonance (repetition of consonance sound: "Sally sells seashells"—both the repeated -s sounds and -ll sounds are examples of consonance.)

onomatopoeia (words that sound like the thing they describe: e.g. "BOOM!")

How is the poem organized? Are there **stanzas**? If so, what do they look like?

Stanzas are section breaks within a poem, usually indicated by a blank space between lines

Questions about **CONTENT**:

Does the poem have a title? If so, what would you expect about the poem if you only saw the title?

Who seems to be **speaking** in the poem? What can we know about them?

How would you describe the speaker's *tone*? What is their attitude towards the poem's *subject*? (Rhythm and sound can help you here!)

What ideas or **themes** does the poem discuss? What are the relationship(s) between them?

What is the content of each **stanza**? Does each stanza develop a different idea? Are they related? What is the relationship between the poem's stanzas and the poem as a whole?

Do any words have multiple meanings? Consider...

Denotative meaning: a word's literal, dictionary definition

Connotative meaning: the ideas/feelings a word evokes

Double meaning: Does this word have more than one connotative or denotative meaning?

If so, how does the double meaning impact the poem?

Puns: Does this word sound like another word? If so, how does the pun impact the meaning of the poem?

Does the poem use **figurative language**? You might notice...

Metaphor (refers to one thing by way of another)

Personification (attributing human characteristics to something nonhuman)

Paradox (seemingly contradictory, but may prove true)

Hyperbole (exaggeration for a purpose)

If you're feeling especially lost, *find the verbs*. What is/are the *action(s)* and who is doing it? If there's no active verb, why might that be?

*Developing an **interpretation** based on the relationship between **form** and **content** in a poem is the goal of **close reading** and is also called **literary analysis**.*