

Analysing Poetry – top tips from Tutor in Leeds

We've all been there - we all have to study poetry and we all know that it can be very daunting to be faced with a complicated poem that sometimes looks like it is written in a different language. Well fear no more because Tutor in Leeds has put together this simple guide to help you understand and analyse any poem.

The trick with even the most difficult poetry is to take it step by step: unpicking the language, understanding the poem's meaning and the poetic methods used to get that across. We've set out the steps to take when looking at a poem below ...

Step 1: Meaning – what is the poet actually saying?

This sounds obvious, but the first thing you need to do is understand the meaning of the poem. Look at the following areas to help you:

- **Title** – the title of the poem can give you a great insight into the overall meaning. Think about why the poet has chosen this title and what it tells you about the subject.
- **Poet and context** – look at some background on the poet and what was going on at the time he or she was writing. Think about what their influences were.
- **Content** – now look at the content of the poem itself. At face value what is the poem saying, who is the speaker and what message is it trying to communicate?

Step 2: Form and structure

Next, think about the form and structure of the poem...

- **Structure** – how the poem is set out on the page – look at the number and size of stanzas, the length of lines and the use of punctuation.
- **Form** – does the poem follow a certain, specific pattern (in terms of structure, rhythm and/or rhyme? Examples are sonnets, narrative poems, ballads etc.

The crucial thing is not only to pick out details about the form and structure of the poem, but to also link this back to the meaning and message of the poem from step 1. Ask yourself why the poet has used a particular form and structure and how that might reflect their message.

Step 3: Rhyme and rhythm

Examining the rhyme and rhythm is linked to step 2 on form and structure. A particular form of poem might have a specific rhyme scheme and rhythm to look out for.

Make sure you look to identify if the poem has:

- a regular rhyme and rhythm;
- an unusual rhythm or rhyme scheme (or none at all); and
- whether they change at all during the course of the poem.

Again, once you've identified the features of a poem's rhyme scheme and rhythm you need to make sure you relate this back to the meaning and message of the poem. Think about why a poet has chosen to write in a specific way and how that helps to strengthen the purpose of the poem.

Step 4: Poetic methods

Finally, look at the language and poetic techniques used by the writer. We haven't gone through every possible method and technique in this guide, but here are some areas to think about:

- Start by considering what sort of language the poet has used – is it emotive, humorous, violent, descriptive etc?
- Then look for whether there is any imagery – has the poet included any good metaphors or similes that you can pick out?

After identifying key uses of language and imagery, have a look for things like:

- Enjambment (when lines run on so a sentence continues beyond the end of a line or stanza)
- Alliteration (the first letter of a word is repeated in a sequence of words);
- Dialogue
- Assonance (the same vowel sound is repeated);
- Hyperbole
- Irony
- Onomatopoeia (a word that sounds like the noise it describes e.g. bang or splash)
- Personification (attributing a human quality to an idea or thing);
- Pathetic fallacy (where the weather/ natural environment reflects the mood);
- Repetition
- Tone (the type of voice or atmosphere that pervades the poem, e.g. sadness, anger, joy, regret, melancholy)

Bring it all together...

Once you've thought about all of these different areas you need to bring it all together and think carefully about how and why the poet included these different effects at particular points. Consider how the poetic techniques are used to reinforce the message of the poem and add emphasis to specific points.

Now, find yourself a great a poem and get reading!