

The Elements of Poetry and Poetic Devices

When reading poetry, pay careful attention to several of the same elements which are important to short stories and plays, such as plot, character, setting, point of view, theme, style, tone, and irony. In addition, however, you should be conscious of the important differences between reading a short story or play and reading a poem. For example, in poetry, the sound and rhythm of language often plays a much more important role than in other genres. While the following elements of poetry are not always strictly separable from one another, and must therefore be appreciated in tandem, it is nonetheless helpful to break things down a bit for analysis.

Diction and Vocabulary:

The poet's diction, or choice and ordering of words, can be classified as formal, middle, or informal. Formal diction consists of a formal, elevated, and dignified use of language. Middle diction consists in the language spoken by most educated people. Informal diction is conversational, or colloquial, in nature and may contain slang expressions. Obviously, a poet can also create irony and changes in tone by juxtaposing different diction levels.

English has the largest recorded vocabulary of any recorded language, in part, because it combines the wordstock of two major etymological groups, the Germanic tongues (containing many concrete monosyllables) and the Romance languages (derived from Latin and containing many abstract polysyllables). The particular etymology of a word, or its origin and history, may itself have great significance within a given context. Moreover, many words have a very large number of meanings (in fact, some words are their own antonyms). You must therefore make regular use of an unabridged dictionary or even the OED to look up words you don't know, to consider the full range of meanings of familiar words, to learn the changes of meaning and pronunciation a word has undergone, and to appreciate the etymological significance of a poet's word choice.

Word Order:

The ordering of words into meaningful patterns, called syntax, can be varied so as to place emphasis on a particular word or achieve some other effect. Syntax which deviates from the typical subject-verb-object pattern often confuses students. My advice is to relax, take a psychic step back, and try reading in units of thought rather than word by word.

Denotations and Connotations:

Whereas denotations are the literal or dictionary meanings of a word, connotative meanings derive from the personal and emotional associations one has with the word. Poets, especially, use both denotative and connotative meanings of words to achieve specific intellectual and emotional effects with concision.

Simile, Metaphor and Other Figures of Speech:

A simile is an explicit comparison between two things, which uses words such as *like*, *as*, *seems*, *appears*, and *than*. A metaphor is an implicit comparison between two things, which asserts the identity of the two different things without using words such as *like* or *as*.

Other figures of speech, in addition to simile and metaphor, include synecdoche, metonymy, apostrophe, understatement, paradox, oxymoron, and many other artful deviations from the usual means of speaking or writing. See a handbook for definitions and examples of individual figures of speech. Typically, however, figures of speech are divided into two groups. The first group includes the *tropes*, which involve alterations in the usual meaning of words or phrases. The second group includes the *schemes*, which involve the stylistic arrangement of ideas, words, or phrases.

Symbolism:

As in other kinds of literature, poetry often adds to the literal meaning of objects, actions, characters, etc. by investing them with symbolic meaning as well. Symbols may be conventional, having traditional and widely recognized meanings, or they may be contextual, gaining meaning from the context in which they appear. Symbols may also combine all three types of significance: literal, conventional, and contextual. In order to avoid reading things into a poem that aren't really "there," try reading poems as literally as possible first, and base your interpretations of any symbols on this foundation.

Sound and Rhyme:

Poetry has always been closely associated with music, and the sounds of words in poetry can act to unify a work, as well as to change and add to its meaning(s). Poets may use onomatopoeia, in which the sound of a word resembles the sound it denotes; alliteration, in which the same consonant sounds are repeated at the beginnings of nearby words; and assonance, in which the same vowel sounds are repeated in nearby words. Various rhymes may also be used, such as end rhyme and internal rhyme, masculine rhyme and feminine rhyme, exact rhyme and near rhyme. See a handbook for definitions and examples of individual sound effects and rhymes.

Rhythm:

While all language has some sort of rhythm, in poetry rhythm refers to the patterns of stressed and unstressed sounds. Syllables of words are either stressed or unstressed, and a rhythmic pattern of stresses results in meter. Measuring the stresses in a line of poetry to uncover its metrical pattern is called *scansion*, while the general analysis and description of rhythm or meter in poetry is called *prosody*. Also, the metrical unit by which a line of poetry is measured is called a *foot*, and a metrical foot usually consists of one stressed and one or two unstressed syllables.

The rhythm of a poem is also affected by whether the lines of the work have a pause at the end, or whether one line continues on into the next without pause. The former type of lines is called end-stopped, while the latter type is called run-on. Running one line over into the next without pause is also called *enjambment*. See a handbook for further explanation and examples.

Form and Layout:

The overall structure of a poem may follow a fixed form which has been established over time, or may be open form. In either case, poems often have stanzas or groups of lines which are somewhat like paragraphs in prose. These stanzas may also follow an established rhyme scheme, or pattern of end rhymes. Common fixed forms include the sonnet, villanelle, sestina, haiku, ode, etc. The poet's choice of form is not only a matter of structure, meter, rhythm, rhyme scheme, and tone—any or all of which may be prescribed by a fixed form—but is also a matter of meaning, since particular forms have become associated with particular themes. Traditional forms can also be modified in unexpected ways for various effects.

Layout involves the overall appearance of a poem, and is determined by font size and style, use of upper and lower case letters, italics, boldface, margins, indentation, spacing between and within lines and words, the shape of the textual material, and the relationship of the text to images—all of which may be of considerable importance to a poem's effect.

Punctuation:

There is a sense in which punctuation (and grammar generally) is neither correct nor incorrect in poetry; it is merely conventional or unconventional. Like layout, punctuation is often not thought about, but it has a profound influence on a poem's meaning and effect.

This is because it is a means of regulating the pace of a poem and of organizing material both spatially and conceptually.

Speaker and Audience:

Even the most "personal" sounding poems may be voiced by a "speaker" or persona who is created by the author and who may or may not share the author's attitudes and beliefs. Indeed, poems may have two or more speakers or characters who may or may not be reliable. Hence, when discussing a poem it is important to draw a distinction between the speaker and the poet, between the poetic voice and the voice of the author him or herself.

Also, the presence of a speaker presumes the existence of a listener or audience as well. However, just as the speaker of the poem is not necessarily the author, so the audience is not necessarily the reader. For example, there may be a fictional listener inside the poem itself, whose presence influences the speaker. It is also possible that the speaker is addressing a listener who is absent or dead, or that the speaker is addressing her or himself.

See also the handout on prose fiction for discussions of "Plot," "Character," "Setting," "Point of View," "Theme," and "Style, Tone and Irony."

Consider some of the following questions as you read and analyze the assigned poems.

1. What does the title of the poem emphasize?
2. Who is the speaker and who is the speaker addressing?
3. Is there a specific setting?
4. Is there any action being described?
5. What words are repeated or carry strongly connotative meanings?
6. Do any objects, persons, places, events, or actions have symbolic meaning?
7. What sound patterns are there? How do they affect you or influence the poem's meaning?
8. What, specifically, did you like or dislike about what was expressed and how it was conveyed?
9. Does one of the critical approaches we have discussed seem especially appropriate to understanding the poem? How and why?
10. What kinds of evidence from the poem could you use to support your interpretation of its meaning?
11. Does your interpretation of the poem leave out important elements that conflict with or undercut your interpretation?
12. Is the theme directly stated in the poem, or is it developed implicitly? Does the theme confirm or challenge common values or ideas?