

The Poetry Interpretation Crib

When thoroughly analyzing a poem, a reader should consider a number of issues:

- **TITLE: First**, examine the title before reading the poem. Consider connotations, allusions, etc.
- **PARAPHRASE: Next**, try to casually restate what the poem is saying in your own words. This needs to be a literal interpretation. Look for meaningful punctuation like commas, dashes, and colons.
- **FIGURE OUT THE “SOAPS”:**
 - Speaker:** Who is speaking? What do you know about that person? What is the perspective and point of view? (see frame)=>
 - Occasion:** What are the time and place of the situation. How did these encourage the writing to happen?
 - Audience:** Other than the reader, to whom is the speaker directing this work? Is it a type of person?
 - Purpose:** Why is the speaker speaking? To persuade the audience of something?
 - Subject:** What is the general topic? Is there more than one subject?
- **RHETORICAL DEVICES:** Now, examine the poem for meanings beyond the literal meaning. An author employs these devices to serve his/her purpose. Ask what ideas are connoted through the use of particularly powerful or obvious rhetorical devices? (*See reverse side for devices*)
- **ATTITUDE and TONE:** Examine the speaker’s attitude toward his/her subject(s)—including himself, his audience, other characters, ideas, etc. Attitude and tone are closely related. Thus, you may say that a speaker’s attitude toward death is fearful and that the tone created by the devices is gloomy.
- **SHIFTS IN TONE:** Make sure that you note any changes in the tone or attitude from line to line or stanza to stanza. There may not be a central tone in the poem if the speaker changes his/her mind or shows a progression of thought. We call these shifts in tone.
- **MOOD and ATMOSPHERE:** What is the overall feel of the poem? These regard tone as applied to the entire work, not just to the poem’s subjects.

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Words to use when talking about tone:

General: formal, objective, incredulous, nostalgic, ceremonial, candid, shocked, reminiscent, restrained, clinical, baffled, sentimental, detached, disbelieving, questioning, urgent, instructive, matter-of-fact, admonitory, learned, factual, didactic, moralistic, pedantic, informative, authoritative, authoritarian, dramatic, diffident, lugubrious, effusive, insipid, pretentious,

Positive: lighthearted, hopeful, exuberant, enthusiastic, complimentary, confident, cheery, optimistic, loving, passionate, amused, elated, sympathetic, compassionate, proud

Angry/negative: disgusted, outraged, accusatory, condemnatory, furious, wrathful, bitter, inflammatory, irritated, indignant, threatening, scornful, disdainful, contemptuous, sarcastic, cynical, critical, patronizing, condescending, sardonic, insolent, pompous, contentious, candid

Humor: facetious, satiric, mock-heroic, bantering, irreverent, mock-serious, taunting, ironic, flippant, whimsical, amused

Sorrow/fear/worry: somber, elegiac, melancholic, sad, disturbed, mournful, solemn, serious, apprehensive, concerned, fearful, despairing, gloomy, sober, foreboding, hopelessness, staid, resigned.

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POINT OF VIEW

1) Person:

1st person = the speaker referring to himself as a character in the story.

2nd person = the speaker speaks to the reader as if in the same room.

3rd person = the speaker is not a character and just speaks of others in the story. If the speaker can see inside their heads, it is 3rd p. omniscient POV. . . if just into the head of the main character, his POV is 3rd person limited omniscient.

2) The speaker’s perspective deals with the particular background of the speaker—upbringing, regional dialect, environment, etc., that influences the values/attitudes of the speaker.

- **CONFLICT** Traditionally, conflict involves one or more of the following situations involving the characters: man vs. himself
man vs. man (usually an antagonist)
man vs. society (or the State)
man vs. nature
man vs. God (or the universe, fate, etc.)
Insert the names of the characters and forces for those above that apply. Other conflicts exist, like good vs. evil, and the artificial vs. the natural.
- **ORGANIZATION** Organization involves the order imposed on the poem. Examples include chronological, spatial, cause/effect, centrifugal, and centripetal. Organization also involves how the parts are divided, the length of the stanzas, the meter, the sequences of events, the flow of the speaker’s thoughts, etc.
- **TITLE** Look again at the title of the poem, this time with a deeper understanding of the poem. Does it present more than one meaning? Are there any devices used in the title? Does it shed new light on the subjects of the poem?
- **THEME** Based on everything you have seen in the poem from the previous steps, decide what the general truths that it conveys are. Remember, “death” is NOT a theme—it’s a subject. A theme has to be stated as a **complete thought**, like *“Man’s ambition and pride often causes him to ignore the ethical repercussions of his actions, resulting in the suffering of his fellow men.”* (as in Shelley’s *Frankenstein*)

QUICK ESSAY-WRITING THESAURUS

Says: expresses, purports, concludes, confirms, clarifies, expands upon, denotes, discloses, divulges, explains, elucidates upon, proclaims, states, remarks, voices, pronounces, iterates, maintains, asserts, alleges, affirms, answers, responds, argues, intimates, suggests, insinuates, hints at, assumes, refers to
Shows: demonstrates, exhibits, represents, reveals, illustrates, signifies (that), evinces, manifests (itself), makes apparent, displays, reflects (that)

COMMON RHETORICAL DEVICES TO LOOK FOR:

DEVICES INVOLVING

FIGURATIVE LANGUAGE and COMPARISON

IMAGERY The use of words that appeal to one or more of the five senses for effect. Combined images often create a particular mood or atmosphere in a work. *[look for words that invoke sensory impressions of all kinds, even inner physical sensations, like hunger and pain. The comparison is often physical reality to some connection that stimulates an idea.]*

SYMBOL Something that represents what it is and something more. *[The mother wipes her daughter's fingerprints off of coffee table with a rag, representing the desire to wipe away of her daughter's identity—fingerprints and rag are the symbols]*

METAPHOR A figure of speech in which two things are compared, usually by saying one thing is another. *"My love is a red, red rose"*

CONCEIT A type of metaphor that likens one thing to something else that is seemingly very different: *"My love is a dark branding iron"*

SIMILE A figure of speech in which two things are compared in an obvious way through the use of the word "like" or "as": *"My love is like a red, red rose"*

PERSONIFICATION A figure of speech in which things or abstract ideas are given human attributes. *"Your essay will wait patiently until I decide to grade it."* *[the "patient" essay represents the teacher's desire for a relaxed deadline]*

APOSTROPHE Words that are spoken to a person who is absent or imaginary, or to an object or abstract idea. *"Oh storm, why dost thou pelt me so?"* *[Storm = Lear's own inner turmoil]*

ALLUSION indirect reference to events or people in another literary work or a history event. *[Margaret alludes to the biblical mark of Cain that should be on Richard III's forehead.]*

DEVICES INVOLVING IRONY

SITUATION IRONY When the opposite happens of what is expected. (cosmic irony) *[A character about to die of starvation unexpectedly inherits a billion dollars]*

VERBAL IRONY Where the literal meaning is opposite of the actual meaning (sarcasm): *"Hey you, with the lime green tie that looks like it came off of a circus performer, nice tie!"*

DRAMATIC IRONY When the audience knows something that a character doesn't, usually making what he says more true (or false) than he realizes. *[Richard lovingly tells Clarence, "We are not safe" when we, the readers, know that Richard is about to have Clarence killed.]*

OTHER FIGURATIVE DEVICES

HYPERBOLE A figure of speech in which deliberate exaggeration is used for emphasis. *"I could drown you with my tears."*

UNDERSTATEMENT Emphasizing by de-emphasizing. *"We weren't uncomfortable in that expensive yacht."*

OXYMORON Two opposite terms stuck next to each other used to show complexity in a situation: *"Cold fire" "Fully depleted" "loving hate"*

PARADOX A seemingly self-contradictory statement that in a sense contains some truth.: *"The child is the father of the man."*

EROTEMA (Rhetorical question) question asked for the sake of making a point to which no answer is expected: *"What, I ask, is the meaning of life?"*

STRUCTURAL DEVICES

ANASTROPHE Reversing the usual word order for effect. *"There but for the grace of God go I."*

PARALLELISM Similarity in grammatical structures of two connected sets of words for effect: *"It's not what you know; it's who you know."*

ANTITHESIS A structure of speech in which words and phrases with opposite meanings are balanced against each other: *"One small step for man—one giant leap for mankind."*

ANAPHORA repetition of words at the beginning of successive clauses or phrases for emphasis: *"I live to see the day; I live for that vengeance!"*

STICHOMYTHIA verbal fencing between characters with brief line-for-line parallel structures: *[Gertrude: Come come, you question with an idle tongue. Hamlet: Go, go, you answer with a wicked tongue.]*

DICTION the use of particular words for effect in contrast to other words that could have been used to convey a similar idea but weren't. Also, consider the emotion (connotation) surrounding a chosen word.

SOME SOUND DEVICES

ONOMATOPOEIA A figure of speech in which words are used to imitate sounds: *"boom!" "crack" "rip" "burp"*

PUN Use of a word that could have more than one meaning: *The dying Mercutio states, "Ask for me tomorrow and you shall find me a grave man."*, or the use of two identically sounding words with different meanings and spellings: *"That fowl is foul!"*