

NOTES ON ANALYZING POEMS

To effectively analyze a poem, you must first read the poem a number of times. Reading it aloud, paying careful attention to the way in which its lines are punctuated, will usually help you to understand it, while alerting you to any special effects created by its rhythms, rhymes, or other sounds.

As you read and reread the poem, underline words and phrases you suspect may be particularly significant. Make notes in the margins. Ensure that you fully understand every word used in the poem: no word is there by chance! And go “the extra mile” – consult a dictionary when you are in doubt about word meanings.

Ask yourself questions to guide you in coming to terms with the poem. Then, attempt to say in your own words what theme you feel the poem is addressing, and to decide which poetic elements and techniques, evident in the poem, are particularly responsible for conveying that theme. Then select from among them those elements and devices about which you feel you can write most intelligently and compellingly. Now you can try to formulate a rough thesis statement.

Next, try to integrate this thesis statement into a good introduction that

- names the poem and the author
- makes clear the poem’s subject and thematic intent
- provides your thesis or claim
- identifies the poetic devices you will discuss in support of that thesis or claim
- indicates the way you plan to develop your argument

Now proceed to introduce and discuss the poetic elements you mentioned in your introduction, in the order in which you mentioned them. Ensure that you deal with each poetic element in a paragraph of its own, and that you introduce the topic of each paragraph with a carefully-focussed **topic sentence**. Also ensure that you end each paragraph with a concluding sentence that sums up the thrust of that paragraph’s argument and paves the way for the next poetic element to be discussed. (Alternatively, you can begin the **next** paragraph with a transitional phrase that links the new element with the one you have just summarized.)

Finally, write a conclusion that restates your thesis (but using different words), briefly reviews the key poetic elements you discussed in your essay, and provides a sense of closure. A good closing technique is to

somehow link the claim you have made about this particular poem with the poet's general style or preoccupations, or to suggest a way in which the topic you have just discussed relates more generally to some aspect of human existence.

SAMPLE ANALYSIS:

The sonnet "Second Winter," by Sylvia Plath, uses the unwelcomed return of winter in springtime as a metaphor to express disappointment over failed love. The sonnet form enables Plath to sharply contrast the promise of springtime with the negation of cold and snow - a contrast made particularly vivid by the differing imagery of the octave and the sestet. And the poem's conversational style engages the reader in the thought processes of a speaker who, in making this contrast, does not reveal the metaphor until the final line, where it has maximum effect.

By writing "Second Winter" as a sonnet, Plath is able to evoke for the reader a vision of erupting beauty and promise, and then to abruptly stifle the beauty and renege on that promise, just as a spring snowstorm brings to an abrupt halt the unfurling of spring blossoms. The octave and sestet therefore become vehicles for sharply contrasting images. The first eight lines of the poem evoke the energy, pulse, excitement, and riotous colours associated with springtime: "greening buds" are ready to "leap" from their "cage," while flowers prepare to "kindle" the air "to flame." Moreover, these flowers are described as "bright fireworks"; they have "radiant petals" with "scarlet tongues." And they are received by an "atmosphere" that is "eager," culminating in "ecstasy." Indeed, the ancient phoenix, itself, is evoked as an image, suggesting the mystical rebirth that occurs in springtime. The octave of "Second Winter" thus vibrates with hope and movement, while shimmering with colour and warmth.

The remaining six lines of "Second Winter," by contrast, create images that effectively cancel the hope, arrest the movement, and dim the warmth and colour of the octave. In five lines, beginning with the warning word "suddenly," the sestet reduces the vibrant world created by the octave to a winter void that seems doubly chilling because new life has been aborted. Here, the "climate" is a "traitor" that causes "honey" to be "stiffen[ed] in the honeycomb, and the sun to be "frozen." The language used evokes images of cruelty and murder: the "sweet fluid in the stem" of plants is not merely frozen, it is "strangled," while the sun is fixed in a "crown of thorns," suggesting the cruelty of the Crucifixion. The speaker tells us that spring, the "tender season," has been caused to "fall[] with falling snows." It clearly is not the time of year when things are supposed to be "falling";

the reader is thus made aware that something has gone unexpectedly wrong, and that an attempt at birth has been thwarted. The first five lines of the sestet have negated the hope and beauty raised by the octave. All that is required now is a final descriptive line by way of closure.

The concluding line of the poem, however, startles the reader by revealing that the speaker has evoked these images of a “Second Winter” to address a more personal matter: the “falling” from a state of love to a state of lovelessness. Moreover, the phrase with which the line ends – “and so it goes” – is a repetition of the phrase that begins the poem, which suggests that all this conjuring-up of a blighted spring was intended to be was a metaphoric expression of the speaker’s personal loss. The conversational style of the phrase, beginning as it does in mid-thought, reinforces the personal nature of this expression of loss: the speaker, it seems, is speaking primarily to him or herself. And waiting until the very end of the poem to name the way seasonal imagery relates to his or her plight turns out to be a very natural way for the speaker to come to terms with the loss alluded to at the start of the poem. But because this final revelation comes as a surprise to us, we must then return to the poem’s opening phrase for clarification, and in this way we recognize that we have been unwitting witnesses to the speaker’s private thought processes. Now the metaphor is clear; now we understand the thought process onto which we have stumbled; now the opening phrase of the poem makes sense to us. And because of this trick the poet has played on us, we are doubly-engaged.

“Second Winter,” it turns out, is a private musing on blighted love in which the speaker uses the image of an abruptly-terminated springtime to convey the depth of his or her personal loss. By using the sonnet form, Plath underscores the contrast between spring and spring’s undoing; by informing us only at the sonnet’s conclusion that this undoing is only a metaphor for a different kind of loss, Plath underscores the poignance of that loss. The poem’s conversational style shows us a mind at work transforming sorrow into something abstract and thus bearable. Indeed, “Second Winter,” like many artistic statements, epitomizes the process of using pain to create a thing of beauty – a process with which a poet like Plath is most familiar.

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