

Approaching Poetry Analysis

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WHAT'S COVERED

In this lesson, you will learn about why you should invest time in analyzing works of poetry after reading them. Specifically, this lesson will focus on:

1. The Practice of Analysis
2. Analytical Questions

1. The Practice of Analysis

What is the point of analyzing poetry? One simple answer is that the more we know about anything, the more interesting it becomes: Listening to music or looking at paintings with someone who can tell us a little about what we hear or see – or what we're reading – is one way of increasing our understanding and pleasure.

That may mean learning something about the people who produced the writing, music, or painting that we are interested in, and why they produced it. But it may also mean understanding why one particular form was chosen rather than another.

↪ **EXAMPLE** Why did the poet choose to write a sonnet rather than an ode, a ballad, or a villanelle? To appreciate the appropriateness of one form, we need to be aware of a range of options available to that particular writer at that particular time.

In the same way, we also need to pay attention to word choice.

↪ **EXAMPLE** Why was this particular word chosen from a whole range of words that might have said much the same? Looking at manuscript drafts can be really enlightening, showing how much effort was expended in order to find the most appropriate or most evocative expression.



BIG IDEA

Only an analytical approach can help us arrive at an informed appreciation and understanding of the poem. Whether we like a poem or not, we should be able to recognize the craftsmanship that has gone into making it, the ways in which stylistic techniques and devices have worked to create meaning. General readers may be entirely happy to find a poem pleasing, or unsatisfactory, without stopping to ask why. But studying poetry is a different matter and requires some background understanding of what those stylistic techniques might be, as well as an awareness of the constraints and conventions within which poets have written throughout different periods of history.

2. Analytical Questions

Poetry is a form of expression in which poets use their own personal and private language. This leaves poetry open to different interpretations; although the poet may have had one specific idea or purpose in mind, the reader's response may be completely different.

Nevertheless, this does not mean that you may interpret poetry any way you wish. All interpretations must be supported by direct reference to the text. As with any type of literary analysis, you need a basic knowledge of the elements of poetry. These guiding questions will help you as you progress through the following lessons.

After reading a poem in its entirety to get a general impression, ask yourself:

- What is the poem about?
- What is the significance of the poem's title?
- Who is speaker or narrative voice of the poem?
- To whom is the speaker speaking?
- What is the purpose of the poem (e.g. to describe, commemorate, grieve)?
- What is the tone of the poem (e.g. sad, happy, melancholy, bitter)?



SUMMARY

In this lesson, you learned that **the practice of analysis** helps you learn more about the poems you read. As a result, you will hopefully gain a stronger appreciation for the art of poetry. You also learned some **analytical questions** that you can ask after reading a poem in order to better understand the piece as a whole.

Best of luck in your learning!

Source: This content has been adapted from Lumen Learning's "Approaching Poetry" and "How to Analyze Poetry" tutorials.