



The University Writing Center

Connecting Writers with Readers

Unpacking a Poem

THE PRINCIPLE

The Oxford English Dictionary defines poetry as, “a composition in verse or some comparable patterned arrangement of language in which the expression of feelings and ideas is given intensity by the use of distinctive style and rhythm; the art of such a composition. Traditionally associated with explicit formal departure from the patterns of ordinary speech or prose, e.g. in the use of elevated diction, figurative language, and syntactical reordering.” Poetry uses many devices which can make it a bit more complicated than works written in prose. The following questions are meant to help you perform what is referred to as a **CLOSE READING** of a poem; in other words, attempting to reach beneath just the surface of the words.

After reading a poem aloud several times, consider the following questions. Examining the inner mechanics of a poem will help you ‘unpack’ its meaning.

1. How many stanzas are there? Do they vary in **SIZE** or **SHAPE** on the page?
2. How many lines make up each stanza? In shorter poems, how many lines appear?
3. Are there any **ENJAMBED** or **END-STOPPED** lines?
4. Can you distinguish any rhyme scheme or pattern? If so, is it full-rhyme or slant rhyme?
5. How **LONG** is each line? Can you find any syllabic or metrical constructions?
6. What type of **VERSE** is the poem written in? Free? Blank?
7. How does the poet manipulate **SYNTAX**?
8. What poetic devices- alliteration, assonance, consonance, onomatopoeia, etc., does the poet employ?
9. How does the poet use **PUNCTUATION**? What is its effect on the rhythm? Does it speed it up? Or slow it down?
10. Are sentences **DECLARATIVE**, **INTERROGATIVE**, or **IMPERATIVE**?
11. Is the poem written in 1st, 2nd, or 3rd person point of view?
12. To whom is the narrator speaking? To whom is the poem addressed?
13. What is the poems overall **TONE**?
14. Is the language modern or dated? Does the poet use high, formal diction, or vernacular and slang?
15. Is the poem a narrative, a dramatic, or a lyric piece?
16. To what senses does the poem appeal?
17. What **SYMBOLS** or **METAPHORS** might the poet be using?