Writing about Poems

Imagery

Just as you should be open to the idea that there are frequent symbols in nature and other things, so should you pay special attention to the images in poems. All poems, whether they're written in prose or poetry, make use of visual images to create an illusion of a certain place and time. The more you can see the image in your mind, the better your appreciation of the poem will be. Try to imagine the scene, and try to visualize what the poet is seeing.

First, consider the speaker of the poem. Imagine that you are speaking in the voice of the poet. If you can, imagine yourself in the scene. What does the poet see? What does the poet hear? What does the poet feel? By doing this, you can better understand the poem.

The Listener

Be aware of the setting of the poem. Is it a night scene, or a day scene? Is the poem set in a rural area, or an urban area? Is the poem set in the present, or the past? These are all important questions to consider when analyzing a poem.

Consider these lines from John Donne's 'The Good Morrow':

My face in thine eye, thine in mine appears,
And true plain hearts do in the faces meet,
With no sharp worth, without declining west (lines 15-18).
are an improvement upon whatever instruments explorers and learned men use to understand the world. By examining the images in a poem, their placement, juxtaposition, and effect, you will have gone a long way toward understanding the poem as a whole.

**Sound and Sense**

Of all the genres, poetry is the one that most self-consciously highlights language, so it is necessary to pay special attention to the sounds of a poem. In fact, it is always a good idea to read a poem aloud several times, giving yourself the opportunity to experience the role that sound plays in the poem’s meaning.

**Rhyme**

Much of the poetry written in English before the twentieth century was written in some form of rhyme, and contemporary poets continue to experiment with its effects. Rhymes may seem stilted or old-fashioned to our twenty-first-century ears, but keep in mind that rhymes have powerful social meanings in the cultural context in which they’re written. And even today rhyme remains a viable and significant convention in popular songs, which are, after all, a form of poetry. As you read poems, ask yourself how rhymes work. Do they create juxtapositions? Alignments of meaning? And what is the effect of that relationship as the poem progresses?

**Assonance and Consonance**

While it is important to look at the end of a line to see how the poet uses sounds, it is also important to look inside the line. Poets use assonance, or repeated vowel sounds, to create an aural effect. Consider these opening lines from Gerard Manley Hopkins’s “Pied Beauty”:

> Glory be to God for dappled things—
> For skies of couple-colour as a brindled cow;
> For rose-moles all in stipple upon trout that swim;
> Fresh-firecoal chestnut-falls; finches’ wings;
> Landscape plotted and pieced—fold, fallow, and plough;
> And all trades, their gear and tackle and trim. (lines 1–6)

Throughout these lines, Hopkins pays special attention to “uh” and “ow” sounds. Notice “couple-colour” and “cow” in line 2, “upon” and “trout” in line 3, “fallow” and “plough” in line 5. As you read through each line, ask yourself: Why does the poet align these sounds? Do these sounds speed up the tempo of the line, or slow it down? What do these sounds—and words—reveal about the poet’s praise of “dappled things”?

Poets also use consonance, repeated consonant sounds, to create alignments and juxtapositions among consonants. Consider these first lines from Christopher Marlowe’s “The Passionate Shepherd to His Love”:

> Come live with me and be my love,
> And we will all the pleasures prove (lines 1–2)

In line 1, Marlowe aligns “live” with “love” to suggest that there is an equation between cohabitation and romance. In line 2, he aligns the “p” sound in “pleasures prove”; in addition, though, the slant rhyme of “love” and “prove” also creates meaning between the lines. What “proof” is there in love? Is love what will make the speaker feel most alive?

**Meter**

Poetry written in English is both accentual and syllabic. That is, poets count the number of accents as well as the number of syllables as they create each line of poetry. Patterns of syllable and accent have names like “iambic pentameter” and “dactylic tetrameter,” and each meter has its own unique properties and effects. Your literature instructor may help you learn about the specifics of meter, or you can find several sites online that explain the art—called scansion—of determining the meter of a poem. Whether or not you have a clear understanding of the many meters of poetry in English, when you read a poem, listen to each line to find out how many accents and syllables it contains. If you can determine what that meter is, consider how the poet uses—and subverts—that formula as part of a strategy for the poem.

**Form**

Poets writing in English use dozens of traditional forms from a variety of traditions. Some of the most common of these forms are the sonnet, the villanelle, and the ballad, but there are too many to name here. As you read a poem in a traditional form, think of the form as a kind of template in which poets arrange and explore challenging emotional and intellectual material. A sonnet, for example, has a concise fourteen-line structure that allows the poet to address a religious, romantic, or philosophical argument in a very compressed space. As you read a sonnet, you might ask yourself: What does its form accomplish that is different from
a looser, more extended form like a ballad? The two sample poems later in this chapter provide a good opportunity to compare a short, highly conventional form with a longer, more loosely structured one.

Note, too, that many contemporary poets write in free verse, which means that they don’t necessarily use a strict traditional form or meter for their poems. That doesn’t mean that the free verse poet is writing without rules; it just means that the poet is creating his or her own system for the unique needs of each poem.

**Stanzas**

A stanza is any grouping of lines of poetry into a unit. The term stanza comes from the Italian word for “room.” As you read poetry, imagine each stanza as a room with its own correspondences and relationships, and consider how that stanza creates a singular effect. Sometimes a stanza can be one line long; sometimes the poet creates a block of lines with no stanza breaks. All of these choices create distinct effects for readers of poetry.

**Lineation**

Lineation—or how a poet uses the line breaks in the poem—is a crucial component of poetry. Sometimes poets use punctuation at the end of every line, but more often they mix end-stopped lines with enjambed lines. Enjambment occurs when the line is not end-stopped with a comma, dash, or period. Its meaning spills over onto the next line, creating the effect of acceleration and intensity. Poets also use caesuras in the middle of lines to create variety in the pattern of the line. A caesura is a deep pause created by a comma, colon, semicolon, dash, period, or white space.

Poetry written in English can have many kinds of rhyme schemes, forms, and meters. For more information, see the “Elements of Poetry” online tutorial at http://bcs.bedfordstmartins.com/virtualit/poetry/rhyme_def.html.

**TWO POEMS FOR ANALYSIS**

Take a few minutes to read William Shakespeare’s Sonnet 116 and T. S. Eliot’s “The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock” and consider the student annotations and the questions that follow the poems. Both of these poems are complex, though in very different ways. What elements of poetry do you notice in these poems? What insights do you have in addition to those suggested by the annotations and questions?