An Introduction to Poetry

Most of us are more familiar with the conventions of prose than of poetry; after all, we use prose to communicate every day. In reality, we aren't always aware of the conventions we are using when we write in prose or that in analyzing literary prose we are using many of the conventions of everyday writing. The major difference is that when you analyze literary prose, you are using the conventions *more self-consciously*. The self-conscious awareness of conventions and special techniques applies even more to the analysis of poetry, which is typically more formal and compressed than prose and usually makes greater use of linguistic and figurative devices.

How to Approach the Poem

Intuitive Approach: Approach a poem, if you can, without preconceptions or expectations; read it in spite of what you know *about* it or have been taught to look for *in* it. Read it, at first, as if it were a living entity (well, it *is*) in order to engage with it, to catch its moods, its vagaries—to sound its depths. As discussed in "Writing a Literary Analysis" (step 1 "Method in the Madness"), the intuitive approach should enable you to respond to what the poem has to offer. Beyond this, there are two basic approaches: the text-centred approach and the context-centred approach. These approaches apply to all the literary genres, so some of the comments below apply to the literary genres in general.

Text-Centred Approach (the inside-out approach): This approach focuses on the wide range of technical strategies and poetic devices the poet uses to make the poem what it is. Since this approach often considers the formal elements of a work and explores the connections between form and meaning, it is often referred to as the *formalist* method. Here are some specific strategies that you as both a reader and a writer can use to analyze the poem from *the inside out*. (*See page 3 for the opposite approach*.) Terms related to poetic techniques and devices are **bolded** and defined in the brief glossary that follows the section on the "context-centred approach"; those that can be defined concisely when they come up are *italicized*.

- *Structure*: the arrangement of parts: the way they work together yet contribute separately to the whole. Divide the poem into parts: How is it put together? Are there distinct divisions? What are their functions? Do the parts suggest contrast? Do they suggest a movement of some kind, a progression? Do they parallel one another? What can you say about the poem's structure?

- Divide the **stanzas** into parts. Within the larger structure, are there smaller but significant structures? Smaller structures might include *parallelism* (repetition) or *juxtaposition* (words or images placed beside other words or images for contrast); **anaphora** and **chiasmus** are specific kinds of parallelism. Examples of smaller structural elements in lines of poetry are the

caesura, a pause in the middle of a line, and *enjambment*, in which one line runs into the next one, rather than being *end-stopped*.

- Listen to the poem. You determine speaker and voice by listening to what is *between* the lines (*see below*); you determine sound patterns by looking at and hearing the *lines themselves*. Read the lines aloud. What kind of **rhythm** do they have? Is the rhythm regular, with repeated units recurring at predictable intervals? If so, can you characterize the poem's **metre**? *Scansion* is the reading of a line of poetry to determine the pattern of stressed and unstressed syllables. Are there departures from a regular metre? If so, what purpose might they serve?

- If the poet uses **rhyme**, where are the rhymes? At the end of each line? Are they ever in the middle of a line? Do the words rhyme exactly, or do they just sound similar. If there is a distinctive pattern of rhyme, what is it? Are there other aural features in the poem, such as repeated sounds: **alliteration**? Are there examples of *onomatopoeia* (words that sound like their meanings—examples: "buzz," "splash").

- Look at the poem's *speaker* (the main *voice* in the poem) or *narrator* (if the poem is "narrated"—told as a story). Can you determine the speaker? Not just *who* it is, but what is his/her perspective? How is the poem told? Does the poet seem to be addressing anyone or anything? Is the person or object absent, as in an **apostrophe**? What is the **mood** of the poem, and how does it make you feel? What is the predominant emotion? Is it constant, or is there a shift at some point? What is the poem's **tone**? Does the poet use **irony**? What kind and for what effect? Is *hyperbole* used (extreme exaggeration)? *Understatement*? (drawing attention to something by minimizing it): both are figures of speech but often help convey a work's tone; use of hyperbole is common in comic works; both can be used to convey irony.

  ☞ Remember that the voice in the work is seldom that of the "real" author; a literary work cannot be taken as a reliable form of autobiography—writers may use facts or apparent truths about themselves but subordinate them to poetic ends. The primary impulse for the poet is creative and artistic, not autobiographical.

- Pay close attention to stylistic and rhetorical devices. Some of the more important devices are **diction, syntax**, and **figures of speech**, like **metaphors, metonymy, similes, allusions,** and **personification**. Rhythm and structure are also related to style. Other rhetorical elements are logic-centred; they include **paradox** and *oxymoron* (the verbal juxtaposition of contraries, as in "darkness visible"). Oxymoron is also considered a device of compression. Another similar device is **ellipsis**.

- Look at the poem's **imagery**. Try to discover patterns of images. What kind are they? Can you characterize them? Do they refer to the senses? Which ones? How do the images connect with other elements referred to above to lead you to a more complex reading of the poem? Does the poet use one or more **symbols**? Some symbols resonate as **archetypes**, while others combine with narrative elements to create **allegory**.

Context-Centred Approach (the outside-in approach): The context-centred approach could serve as a beginning point for a textual analysis. On the other hand, you may be concerned primarily or even exclusively with viewing the poem in a larger context, perhaps a poetic tradition or a specific poetic form with its set of formal requirements or expectations (*conventions*). You could look at the ways that the poem conforms to conventions, the ways that it departs from them, or the ways that the writer adapts the conventions for his or her own purposes.

Broadly speaking, poetry can be classified as lyric, narrative, or dramatic: *lyric* ("song") poetry expresses strong emotions or thoughts. By contrast, *narrative* poetry tells a story; *dramatic* poetry has drama-like qualities, such as a speaker who addresses an imaginary listener (*dramatic monologue*). The voice in lyric poetry can be referred to as "the poet" (which is not, however, synonymous with the actual author); in narrative poetry, the voice can be referred to as "the narrator"; in dramatic poetry, the voice can be referred to as "the speaker." Both narrative and dramatic poetry can also be highly lyrical in places; as well, a lyric could have narrative or dramatic elements. Although these three divisions were introduced by Aristotle in 350 B.C.E., they are still often used today.

Other traditional poetic forms include the ode, the elegy, the sonnet, the villanelle, the haiku (examples of lyric poetry); the ballad and the epic (examples of narrative poetry); and the dramatic monologue (an example of dramatic poetry). Each employs specific conventions; for example, the *sonnet* always has 14 lines and has two possible stanzaic arrangements; others, like the haiku and the villanelle, have an even more strict and exacting form than the sonnet; all three are examples of *fixed forms*, which allow for little flexibility. Still others, like the elegy and the ode, have characteristics that may vary widely from one era to another or from poet to poet. At the other extreme from fixed forms are *open forms*: free verse is an open form that does not conform to any set conventions of **stanza**, **rhyme**, or **meter**.

Literary works can be explored through biographical, historical, cultural, racial, gender-based, or theoretical perspectives. Although the formalist (text-centred) critic tends to take an "art for art's sake" approach to poetic analysis, the context-centred critic sees valid and vital connections between literary art and the "real" world, considering many of the oppositions erected between "life" and "art" as artificial, arbitrary, or, at the very least, limiting.

Biographical: What was the poet's childhood like? Who/what were major influences in his or her life? Does the poem appear addressed to someone the poet knew or does it mention names or places connected with the writer's life? Does the poem focus on a

family member or friend: an *elegy* mourns the death of a well-known person or someone the poet knew, providing consolation and usually celebrating that person's life.

As mentioned, the poet is seen as an impersonal figure—the creator of the work, not the autobiographical equivalent of the voice, speaker, or narrator of the work. In *confessional poetry*, however, strong emotions and intense personal experiences surface; such poetry is characterized by feelings of painful honesty and unsettling rawness. The tone can range from despair to anger. Even in confessional poetry, though, you should not assume that the voice of the poem is the same as that of the biographical poet.

Historical/cultural: What historical or cultural factors can be brought to bear on the poem? Does the poem reflect a particular time period? Can it be studied as an historic, social, or cultural document? In the following excerpt, student-writer Rory Wizbicki explores Al Purdy's poem "The Country North of Belleville" in an historical context. The poem evokes the hardships of poor immigrant 19th-century farmers who travelled to Canada in the hopes of finding prosperity and freedom in a new country.

> Although, geographically, the plots north of Belleville are every farmer's nightmare, within this shallow soil lies their blood, sweat, and tears produced from endless days of work and toil. A farmer becomes so connected to his land, "plowing and plowing [his] ten acre field" that the "convulsions [begin to] run parallel with his own brain" (57). The land is both his greatest enemy and his most respected companion. Despite his plot's stubborn resistance to human cultivation, a man of this area "might have some / opinion of what beauty / is and none deny him / for miles" (5-8). This timeless beauty and respect for the land is paralleled by the lasting cultural values engraved into the farmer's stony fields.

Cultural, racial, gender-based: Awareness of the culture that the poet is part of has been instrumental in extending and broadening the canon of literature in the last few decades. For example, the fact that Dionne Brand and George Elliot Clarke are of black heritage and that Adrienne Rich and Margaret Atwood have strongly identified with the feminist movement can be important in analyzing their works as vehicles that give voice to the concerns of the marginal. Was the poet a member of a "group"? Did he or she contribute intellectually to a social, political, or aesthetic movement? Was the poem written as a radical response to a present-day reality: does it protest something? Cultural, racial, gender, and socio-economic class issues can serve political ends, as in poems of protest or resistance; their object may be to express collective or personal empowerment.

The *traditional (Western) canon* was based on the belief of critics and readers—mostly, white, middle-class, and male—that specific creative works exemplified high artistic standards and were the most worthy objects of study and scholarship. Due to the increasing interest today in the productions of marginalized individuals and groups, literature has become responsive to a broad range of human experience, rather than primarily to the experience of a narrowly defined, elitist group. The *literary canon* is now seen as more inclusive of different cultural, racial, ethnic, economic, and gendered perspectives.

Theoretical: Was the work written from within an established theoretical tradition or does it try to establish a new theoretical position? Theoretical approaches to literature can be divided into two types: those formulated by artists themselves who have sought to explain their own goals by theorizing about them, and approaches that represent different critical schools.

Attempts to systematize poetry and other literary genres have brought about what might seem a confusing array of critical approaches today. The profusion of "–isms" began around the turn of the 20th-century through the attempts of writers and critics to categorize technical innovations of that time. Some of these innovations came to be associated with *literary movements*—for example, *imagism*, with its focus on the concrete image, and *surrealism*, with its focus on the unconscious.

Today, the widely divergent "schools" of criticism are often the collaborative efforts of educated theorists whose original training was in non-literary fields. Their theories often seek to incorporate theory and practice from other disciplines—for example, linguistics, visual art, history, education, philosophy, psychology, anthropology, economics, or mythology. If there is a collective goal of modern literary theories, it is to break down the notion of a "centre," to stress the ways that all literary art is dependent on and engages with aspects of language and culture. The interdisciplinary approach to literature enables us to study it from many different angles and viewpoints. These kinds of approaches are common in literary criticism today.