

The dictionary meaning of a word. Writers typically play off a word's denotative meaning against its connotations, or suggested and implied associational implications. In the following lines from Peter Meinke's "Advice to My Son" the references to flowers and fruit, bread and wine denote specific things, but also suggest something beyond the literal, dictionary meanings of the words:

Diction

The selection of words in a literary work. A work's diction forms one of its centrally important literary elements, as writers use words to convey action, reveal character, imply attitudes, identify themes, and suggest values. We can speak of the diction particular to a character, as in Iago's and Desdemona's very different ways of speaking in *Othello*. We can also refer to a poet's diction as represented over the body of his or her work, as in Donne's or Hughes's diction.

Carlos Williams, write poems that lack discursive explanation entirely and include only images. Among the most famous examples is Pound's poem "In a Station of the Metro":

The apparition of these faces in the crowd; Petals
on a wet, black bough.

Irony

A contrast or discrepancy between what is said and what is meant or between what happens and what is expected to happen in life and in literature. In verbal irony, characters say the opposite of what they mean. In irony of circumstance or situation, the opposite of what is expected occurs. In dramatic irony, a character speaks in ignorance of a situation or event known to the audience or to the other characters. Flannery O'Connor's short stories employ all these forms of irony, as does Poe's "Cask of Amontillado."

Literal language

A form of language in which writers and speakers mean exactly what their words denote. See Figurative language, Denotation, and Connotation.

Metaphor

Onomatopoeia

The use of words to imitate the sounds they describe. Words such as *buzz* and *crack* are onomatopoeic. The following line from Pope's "Sound and Sense" onomatopoetically imitates in sound what it describes:

When Ajax strives some rock's vast weight to throw,
The line too labors, and the words move slow.

Most often, however, onomatopoeia refers to words and groups of words, such as Tennyson's description of the "murmur of innumerable bees," which attempts to capture the sound of a swarm of bees buzzing.

Personification

The endowment of inanimate objects or abstract concepts with animate or living qualities. An example: "The yellow leaves flaunted their color gaily in the breeze." Wordsworth's "I wandered lonely as a cloud" includes personification.

Quatrain

A four-line stanza in a poem, the first four lines and the second four lines in a Petrachan sonnet. A Shakespearean sonnet contains three quatrains followed by a couplet.

Rhyme

The matching of final vowel or consonant sounds in two or more words. The following stanza of "Richard Cory" employs alternate rhyme, with the third line rhyming with the first and the fourth with the second:

Whenever Richard Cory went down town,
We people on the pavement looked at him;
He was a gentleman from sole to crown
Clean favored and imperially slim.

Satire

A literary work that criticizes human misconduct and ridicules vices, stupidities, and follies. Swift's *Gulliver's Travels* is a famous example. Chekhov's *Marriage Proposal* and O'Connor's "Everything That Rises Must Converge," have strong satirical elements.

Sestet

A six-line unit of verse constituting a stanza or section of a poem; the last six lines of an Italian sonnet. Examples: Petrarch's "If it is not love, then what is it that I feel," and Frost's "Design."

Setting

The time and place of a literary work that establish its context. The stories of Sandra Cisneros are set in the American southwest in the mid to late 20th century, those of James Joyce in Dublin, Ireland in the early 20th century.

Simile

A figure of speech involving a comparison between unlike things using *like*, *as*, or *as though*. An example: "My love is like a red, red rose."

Sonnet

A fourteen-line poem in iambic pentameter. The Shakespearean or English sonnet is arranged as three quatrains and a final couplet, rhyming abab cdcd efef gg. The Petrarchan or Italian sonnet divides into two parts: an eight-line octave and a six-line sestet, rhyming abba abba cde cde or abba abba cd cd cd.

Style

The way an author chooses words, arranges them in sentences or in lines of dialogue or verse, and develops ideas and actions with description, imagery, and other literary techniques. See Connotation, Denotation, Diction, Figurative language, Image, Imagery, Irony, Metaphor, Narrator, Point of view, Syntax, and Tone.

Subject

What a poem, story or play is about; to be distinguished from plot and theme. Faulkner's "A Rose for Emily" is about the decline of a particular way of life endemic to the American south before the civil war. Its plot concerns how Faulkner describes and organizes the actions of the story's characters. Its theme is the overall meaning Faulkner conveys.

Symbol

An object or action in a literary work that means more than itself, that stands for something beyond itself. The glass unicorn in *The Glass Menagerie*, the rocking horse in "The Rocking-Horse Winner," the road in Frost's "The Road Not Taken"--all are symbols in this sense.

Synecdoche

A figure of speech in which a part is substituted for the whole. An example: "Lend me a hand." See Metonymy.

Theme

The idea of a literary work abstracted from its details of language, character, and action, and cast in the form of a generalization. See discussion of Dickinson's "Crumbling is not an instant's Act."

POETRY READING

This is a guide to what you might look for in analyzing literature, particularly poetry and fiction. An analysis explains what a work of literature means, and how it means it; it is essentially an articulation of and a defense of an interpretation which shows how the resources of literature are used to create the meaningfulness of the text. There are people who resist analysis, believing that it 'tears apart' a work of art; however a work of art is an artifice, that is, it is made by someone with an end in view: as a made thing, it can be and should be analyzed as well as appreciated. There are several main reasons for analyzing literature:

1. The ultimate end of analysis is, first and foremost, a deeper understanding and a fuller appreciation of the literature -- you learn to see more, to uncover or create richer, denser, more interesting meanings. I have a brief page on the ideas of depth, complexity and quality as they relate to literature.
2. Secondly, as literature uses language, images, the essential processes of meaning-making, analysis can lead to a more astute and powerful use of the tools of meaning on the reader's part.
3. Thirdly, analysis should also teach us to be aware of the cultural delineations of a work, its ideological aspects. Art is not eternal and timeless but is situated historically, socially, intellectually, written and read at particular times, with particular intents, under particular historical conditions, with particular cultural, personal, gender, racial, class and other perspectives. Through art we can see ideology in operation. This can be of particular use in understanding our own culture and time, but has historical applications as well. See my brief page on ideology for an expansion of this.
4. A fourth function of analysis is to help us, through close reading and through reflection, understand the way ideas and feelings are talked about in our culture or in other times and cultures -- to have a sense both of communities of meaning, and of the different kinds of understanding there can be about matters of importance to human life. Art can give us access to the symbolic worlds of communities: not only to the kinds of ideas they have about life, but also to the way they feel about them, to the ways they imagine them, to the ways they relate them to other aspects of their lives.

You might also look at my page On the Uses of Studying Literature.

I: CRITICAL ANALYSIS OF POETRY

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I: CRITICAL ANALYSIS OF POETRY

The process of analyzing a poem

The elements of analysis discussed below are designed to help you identify the ways in which poetry makes its meaning, especially its 'parts'; they do not give a sense of how one goes about analyzing a poem. It is difficult to give a prescription, as different poems call on different aspects of poetry, different ways of reading, different relationships between feeling, images and meanings, and so forth. My general advice, however, is this:

1. look at the title
2. read the poem for the major indicators of its meaning -- what aspects of setting, of topic, of voice (the person who is speaking) seem to dominate, to direct your reading?
3. read the ending of the poem -- decide where it 'gets to'
4. divide the poem into parts: try to understand what the organization is, how the poem proceeds, and what elements or principles guide this organization (is there a reversal, a climax, a sequence of some kind, sets of oppositions?)
5. pay attention to the tone of the poem -- in brief, its attitude to its subject, as that is revealed in intonation, nuance, the kind of words used, and so forth.
6. now that you've looked at the title, the major indicators of 'topic', the ending, the organization, the tone, read the poem out loud, trying to project its meaning in your reading. As you gradually get a sense of how this poem is going, what its point and drift is, start noticing more about how the various elements of the poetry work to create its meaning. This may be as different as the kind of imagery used, or the level of realism or symbolism of its use.

and
ideology or 'world-view'

1. What is the genre, or form, of the poem?

Is it a sonnet, an elegy, a lyric, a narrative, a dramatic monologue, an epistle, an epic (there are many more). Different forms or genres have different subjects, aims, conventions and attributes. A love sonnet, for instance, is going to talk about different aspects of human experience in different ways with different emphases than is a political satire, and our recognition of these attributes of form or genre is part of the meaning of the poem.

2. Who is speaking in the poem?

Please remember that if the voice of the poem says "I", that doesn't mean it is the author who is speaking: it is a voice in the poem which speaks. The voice can be *undramatized* (it's just a voice, it doesn't identify itself), or *dramatized* (the voice says "I", or the voice is clearly that of a particular persona, a dramatized character).

Identify the voice. What does the voice have to do with what is happening in the poem, what is its attitude, what is the tone of the voice (tone can be viewed as an expression of attitude). How involved in the action or reflection of the poem is the voice? What is the perspective or 'point of view' of the speaker? The perspective can be social, intellectual, political, even physical - there are many different perspectives, but they all contribute to the voice's point of view, which point of view affects how the world of the poem is seen, and how we respond.

3. What is the argument, thesis, or subject of the poem?

What, that is to say, is it apparently 'about'? Start with the basic situation, and move to consider any key statements; any obvious or less obvious conflicts, tensions, ambiguities; key relationships, especially conflicts, parallels, contrasts; any climaxes or problems posed or solved (or not solved); the poem's tone; the historical, social, and emotional setting.

4. What is the structure of the poem?

There are two basic kinds of structure, formal and thematic.

Formal structure is the way the poem goes together in terms of its component parts: if there are parts -- stanza's, paragraphs or such -- then

there will be a relation between the parts (for instance the first stanza may give the past, the second the present, the third the future).

Thematic structure, known in respect to fiction as 'plot', is the way the argument or presentation of the material of the poem is developed. For instance a poem might state a problem in eight lines, an answer to the problem in the next six; of the eight lines stating the problem, four might provide a concrete example, four a reflection on what the example implies. There may well be very close relations between formal and thematic structure. When looking at thematic structure, you might look for conflicts, ambiguities and uncertainties, the tensions in the poem, as these give clear guides to the direction of meanings in the poem, the poem's 'in-tensions'.

5. How does the poem make use of setting?

There is the setting in terms of time and place, and there is the setting in terms of the physical world described in the poem.

In terms of the physical world of the poem, setting can be used for a variety of purposes. A tree might be described in specific detail, a concrete, specific, tree; or it might be used in a more tonal way, to create mood or associations, with say the wind blowing mournfully through the willows; or it might be used as a motif, the tree that reminds me of Kathryn, or of my youthful dreams; or it might be used symbolically, as for instance an image of organic life; or it might be used allegorically, as a representation of the cross of Christ (allegory ties an image or event to a specific interpretation, doctrine or idea; symbols refer to broader, more general).

Consider the

Is the poem direct or indirect in making its meanings? If there are no key statements, are there key or central symbol, repetitions, actions, motifs (recurring images), or the like?

8. How does the sound of the poetry contribute to its meaning?

Pope remarked that "the sound must seem an echo to the sense": both the rhythm and the sound of the words themselves (individually and as they fit together) contribute to the meaning.

9. Examine the use of language.

What kinds of words are used? How much and to what ends does the poet rely on connotation, or the associations that words have (as "stallion" connotes a certain kind of horse with certain sorts of uses)? Does the poem use puns, double meanings, ambiguities of meaning?

10. Can you see any ways in which the poem refers to, uses or relies on previous writing?

This is known as *allusion* or *intertextuality*. When U-2's Bono writes "I was thirsty and you kissed my lips" in "Trip Through Your Wires," the meaning of the line is vastly extended if you know that this is a reference to Matthew 25:35 in the Bible, where Jesus says to the saved in explanation of what they did right, "I was thirsty and you wet my lips."

11. What qualities does the poem evoke in the reader?

What sorts of learning, experience, taste and interest would the 'ideal' or average reader have? What can this tell you about what the

understood it? Is it possible that your reading might be different from theirs because of your particular social (race, gender, class, etc.) and historical context? What about your world governs the way you see the world of the text? What might this work tell us about the world of its making?

13. What is the world-view and the ideology of the poem?

What are the basic ideas about the world that are expressed? What areas of human experience are seen as important, and what is valuable about them? What areas of human experience or classes of person are ignored or denigrated? A poem about love, for instance, might implicitly or explicitly suggest that individual happiness is the most important thing in the world, and that it can be gained principally through one intimate sexually-based relationship -- to the exclusion, say, of problems of social or political injustice, human brokenness and pain, or other demands on us as humans. It might also suggest that the world is a dangerous, uncertain place in which the only sure ground of meaningfulness is to be found in human relationships, or it might suggest on the other hand that human love is grounded in divine love, and in the orderliness and the value of the natural world with all its beauties. What aspects of the human condition are foregrounded, what are suppressed, in the claims that the poem makes by virtue of its inclusions and exclusions, certainties and uncertainties, and depictions of the way the natural and the human world is and works? For a brief elaboration of the concept of ideology, see my page on the subject.

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II: ANALYZING FICTION

The analysis of fiction has many similarities to the analysis of poetry. As a rule a work of fiction is a narrative, with characters, with a setting, told by a narrator, with some claim to represent 'the world' in some fashion.

The topics in this section are plot, character, setting, the narrator, figurative language, the way reality is represented, the world-view.

1. Plot.

As a narrative a work of fiction has a certain arrangement of events which are taken to have a relation to one another. This arrangement of events to some end -- for instance to create significance, raise the level of generality, extend or complicate the meaning -- is known as 'plot'. Narrative is integral to human experience; we use it constantly to make sense out of our experience, to remember and relate events and significance, and to establish

the basic patterns of behaviour of our lives. If there is no apparent relation of events in a story our options are either to declare it to be poorly written or to assume that the lack of relation is thematic, meant to represent the chaotic nature of human experience, a failure in a character's experience or personality, or the lack of meaningful order in the universe.

In order to establish significance in narrative there will often be coincidence, parallel or contrasting episodes, repetitions of various sorts, including the repetition of challenges, crises, conciliations, episodes, symbols, motifs. The relationship of events in order to create significance is known as the plot.

2. Character.

Characters in a work of fiction are generally designed to open up or explore certain aspects of human experience. Characters often depict particular traits of human nature; they may represent only one or two traits -- a greedy old man who has forgotten how to care about others, for instance, or they may represent very complex conflicts, values and emotions. Usually there will be contrasting or parallel characters, and usually there will be a significance to the selection of kinds of characters and to their relation to each other. As in the use of setting, in fact in almost any representation in art, the significance of a character can vary from the particular, the dramatization of a unique individual, to the most general and symbolic, for instance the representation of a 'Christ figure'.

3. Setting.

Narrative requires a setting; this as in poetry may vary from the concrete to the general. Often setting will have particular culturally coded significance -- a sea-shore has a significance for us different from that of a dirty street corner, for instance, and different situations and significances can be constructed through its use. Settings, like characters, can be used in contrasting and comparative ways to add significance, can be repeated, repeated with variations, and so forth.

4. The Narrator.

A narration requires a narrator, someone (or more than one) who tells the story. This person or persons will see things from a certain perspective, or point of view, in terms of their relation to the events and in terms of their attitude(s) towards the events and characters. A narrator may be external, outside the story, telling it with an ostensibly objective and omniscient voice; or a narrator may be a character (or characters) within the story, telling the story in the first person (either central characters or observer

characters, bit players looking in on the scene). First-person characters may be *reliable*, telling the truth, seeing things right, or they may be *unreliable*, lacking in perspective or self-knowledge. If a narration by an omniscient external narrator carries us into the thoughts of a character in the story, that character is known as a *reflector character*: such a character does not know he or she is a character, is unaware of the narration or the narrator. An omniscient, external narrator may achieve the narrative by telling or by showing, and she may keep the reader in a relation of *suspense* to the story (we know no more than the characters) or in a relation of *irony* (we know things the characters are unaware of).

In any case, who it is who tells the story, from what perspective, with what sense of distance or closeness, with what possibilities of knowledge, and with what interest, are key issues in the making of meaning in narrative. For a fuller discussion, see my page Narrative point of view: some considerations.

5. Figurative language.

As in poetry, there will be figurative language; as in drama, this language tends to be used to characterize the sensibility and understanding of characters as well as to establish thematic and tonal continuities and significance.

6. Representation of reality.

Fiction generally claims to represent 'reality' (this is known as representation or *mimesis*) in some way; however, because any narrative is presented through the symbols and codes of human meaning and communication systems, fiction cannot represent reality directly, and different narratives and forms of narrative represent different aspects of reality, and represent reality in different ways. A narrative might be very concrete and adhere closely to time and place, representing every-day events; on the other hand it may for instance represent psychological or moral or spiritual aspects through symbols, characters used representatively or symbolically, improbable events, and other devices. In addition you should remember that all narrative requires selection, and therefore it requires exclusion as well, and it requires devices to put the selected elements of experience in meaningful relation to each other (and here we are back to key elements such as coincidence, parallels and opposites, repetitions).

6. World-view.

As narrative represents experience in some way and as it uses cultural codes and language to do so, it inevitably must be read, as poetry, for its structure

of values, for its understanding of the world, or world-view, and for its ideological assumptions, what is assumed to be natural and proper. Every narrative communication makes claims, often implicitly, about the nature of the world as the narrator and his or her cultural traditions understand it to be. The kind of writing we call "literature" tends to use cultural codes and to use the structuring devices of narrative with a high degree of intentionality in order to offer a complex understanding of the world. The astute reader of fiction will be aware of the shape of the world that the fiction projects, the structure of values that underlie the fiction (what the fiction explicitly claims and what it implicitly claims through its codes and its ideological understandings); will be aware of the distances and similarities between the world of the fiction and the world that the reader inhabits; and will be aware of the significances of the selections and exclusions of the narrative in representing human experience.

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III: ANALYSIS OF PROSE IN FICTION

Someone is always speaking in a novel -- whether it is a narrator who is not a character within the fiction, or a character within the narrative. Consequently both the particular ideas, attitudes, feelings, perspectives of that speaker, and the concerns and attitudes of the novel as a whole, will be presented through the prose. The analytical reader needs to understand what information is conveyed and how it is conveyed. The following is a guide to some things to look for, and contains:

A. prose: the language; sentence structure; imagery and setting; discourse

are evoked? When Conrad writes that a gate was "a neglected gap," we have to take notice, as a gate is not ordinarily a gap, nor is the issue of neglect or care usually applied to gaps.

Conrad intends to imply, to connote, certain qualities through his language use.

3. How forceful is the language (see also imagery and sentence structure)?
4. what aspects of feeling are supported or created by the sound of the language?
 1. by the vowel and consonant sounds -- soft or hard long or short
 2. by how the words go together -- e.g. smoothly, eliding, so that one slides into the other, or separated by your need to move your mouth position.
2. **Sentence structure:** Meaning is created by how the sentences sound, by how they are balanced, by the force created by punctuation as well as by language:
 1. by the stresses on words, and the rhythm of the sentence
 2. by the length of the sentence
 3. by whether the sentence has repetitions, parallels, balances and so forth

4. does the speaker avoid saying things, deliberately or unconsciously withhold information, communicate by indirection?
5. to what extent and to what end does the speaker use rhetorical devices such as irony?

B. Characterization The idea here is that the various features of the prose, above, will support features of characterization which we can discuss in somewhat different terms.

1. What ideas are expressed in the passage, and what do they tell you about the speaker?
2. What feelings does the speaker express? What does that tell you about them? Are their feelings consistent?
3. Does the character belong to a particular character type or represent a certain idea, value, quality or attitude?
4. What is the social status of the character, and how can you tell from how they speak and what they speak about?
5. What is the sensibility of the speaker? Is the person ironic, witty, alert to the good or attuned to evil in others, optimistic or pessimistic, romantic or not romantic (cynical, or realistic?).
6. What is the orientation of the person -- how aware are they of their own and others' needs, and of their environments?
7. How much control over and awareness of her emotions, her thoughts, her language does the speaker have?
8. How does the narrator characterize the character through comment or through description?

C. Genre & Tradition

but perhaps, to pursue

simplest way to open your essay is with a statement of what you have decided the meaning of the text, the most sufficient interpretation, is. The body of your essay is then a presentation or 'defense' of your interpretation: you demonstrate the ways in which the text makes the meaning you believe it to have. In the conclusion you sum up your findings or recapitulate your argument briefly, and extend the significance of your reading if you wish -- this is where you comment on the more general, cultural or moral or technical significances of the theme and techniques of the text. You may begin your essay in other ways -- by stating what the main barriers are to an interpretation of the poem or what the main difficulties with arriving at an interpretation are, for instance, and how consequently you intend to deal with the text, or by stating what sorts of options you have in terms of emphases and why you have chosen the one(s) you have chosen. It is important to give the reader a sense of *how* you are proceeding in the essay and *why*.

There is no sure-fire formula for essay writing. The form your essay takes will likely vary with the nature of your evidence (quotations from the text, principally, or from other sources), with your sense of how the text is structured and shaped, with your interpretation, and with your sense of what issues are most relevant. Obviously, you will have to make some organizational decisions. In writing on a poem, for example, do you go through a poem stanza by stanza showing how the meaning is developed? If this is your method, be sure you avoid the pitfalls: mere paraphrase, providing an unselective running commentary, and disorganization of kinds of evidence. An alternative approach might focus on the poem aspect by aspect (the point of view, the voice, the setting, and so forth). The pitfalls here are not being able show how the various aspects tie together to create meaning, and assuming that each aspect deserves equal and exhaustive treatment. Fiction is usually analyzed by considering one or more aspects of the work in the categories of theme (ideas, meanings), and/or of fictional techniques (plot, point of view, etc.).

Remember that there are different kinds of literature in each genre, and that different kinds may rely on different devices. A poem may be narrative; it may be a dramatic monologue; it may be a collection of images with no human in sight; it may develop a logical argument; it may work allusively, analogically, symbolically and so forth; it may have a careful stanza-by stanza development, or it may depend on repetitions, images, and so forth. A work of fiction might be allegorical, it might use magical realism, it might concentrate on the effects of the environment, or it might attempt metaphorically to represent the interior lives of characters. Figure out what the main devices and strategies are, and concentrate on them, adding the lesser ones later and not necessarily in full. Try, if you are not sure of your

*"Bear his mild yule" is an allusion.
Personification "Bod pebbled, to prevent"*

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interpretation, starting with the simplest, most obvious situation -- two lovers are meeting, say -- and add other possible points of meaning as they seem to extend or illuminate the dramatic situation -- for instance a storm is threatening, the meeting is seen from only one lover's point of view, each stanza gives a different meaning to what the significance of physical love might be, and so forth. Always deal with the 'form' as well as the 'content', however, with how the way something is said shapes what it means. Write what you have to say as clearly and precisely as you can. Have someone proof-read your paper for you for spelling and grammatical errors and for intelligibility.

Style of a poem (tone, mood, atmosphere)

- ④ Rhythm
- ④ Diction
- ④ Literary Devices
- ④ Sound Devices (Rhyme, alliteration, assonance, consonance)
- ④ Imagery { metaphor, simile, symbolism, allegory etc. }
- ④ Stanzic Arrangement
- ④ Structure organization and Verifications
{ meter }