

1. Poetry Introduction Part 1

by C BARRINGTON - 29 Aug 2017 @ 19:16

Hello Everyone!

This week we will be looking at poetry!

Poetry

What is poetry?

When people think of poetry, they tend to think of complicated, dense and difficult works. The good news is that poetry, while compact and filled with saturated meaning, can sometimes be easier to understand and analyse than any other type of prose.

This is because, due to the limited space available to poets (other than Epic Poems, such as [The Homeric Poems](#) ~800 BC), traditionally poems tend to have fairly ridged structures which rely on **figures of speech** (FoS) (Such as **metaphor**, and **oxymoron**) which are striking to the reader, presenting vivid images, and therefore allowing for greater 'colour' or meaning to be transferred through the language. Other techniques used in poetry are **sound patterns** (part of the FoS: onomatopoeia, alliteration and assonance), **verse** and **meter**, **rhetorical devices** (see the figures of speech file and this link: <https://hhs-english-iv.wikispaces.com/file/view/Rhetorical+Devices.pdf>), **style** and **stanzas shape and structure**.

Clarity:

Figures of Speech versus Rhetorical Devices

A figure of speech not only provides a visual image, but is also **alters the meaning of the words used**.

A rhetorical device provides emphasis or seeks to have a specific effect (i.e. to convince the reader of something), but **without altering the meaning of the words used**.

They are however, often grouped together as they provide added effect and greater depth to a text.

Example of a figure of speech:

An extract from *Lycidas* written by John Milton

But now my oat proceeds,
 And listens to the herald of the sea
 That came in Neptune's plea,
 He asked the waves, and asked the felon winds,
 What hard mishap hath doomed this gentle swain?

Within this extract is what we call an example of **metonymy**. Metonymy provides symbolic meaning by replacing a word or concept with something that is related but not exact. The word 'Pen' may (and has been used) be used in place of the concept of 'writing' and 'the written word'.

The first line ("But now my oat proceeds) might make no sense, unless you are aware of the specific use of the word "oat". There are (and were in Milton's era) musical instruments made from [oat straw](http://www.thefreedictionary.com/oat+straw) (<http://www.thefreedictionary.com/oat+straw>).

Therefore, within Milton's poem, the use of "oat" is intended to link to the notion of the oat made instrument, and through that, to the poet/speaker's 'song'. The first line, and indeed the entire extract, now has some coherence with this knowledge:

But now my [**song**] proceeds,
 And listens to the herald of the sea
 That came in Neptune's plea,
 He asked the waves, and asked the felon winds,
 What hard mishap hath doomed this gentle swain?

~~~~~\*~~~~~\*~~~~~\*~~~~~\*

Example of a rhetorical device:

John Donne addresses death in his *Death, be not Proud*

Thou 'art slave to fate, chance, kings, and desperate men,  
 And dost with poison, war, and sickness dwell,  
 And poppy 'or charms can make us sleep as well  
 And better than thy stroke; why swell'st thou then?

Here a rhetorical question is used (last line: "Why swell'st thou then?") to reduce the finality and natural fear of death.

·**Rhetorical questions:** the act of asking a question when a) you already know the answer and it is obvious, and/or b) when no answer is expected. Such questions draw attention to the subject matter *in* question. However, it may also be used in a patronising manner, which reduces the subject or object of the question.

Thus, within *Death, be not Proud*, Donne, having already called Death a “slave” further reduces Death, who, in his capacity of the ‘harbinger **of death**’, is the physical manifestation (representation) of the final fate of every living organism. By reducing Death, the concept of dying is not as terrifying as it might be.

<https://prezi.com/obpgbw9vxhrg/poetry-what-it-iswhat-it-isnt/>

<https://prezi.com/8k-z8wc8ls34/analyzing-poetry-with-sift/>

<https://prezi.com/6tucdc99bzxh/poetry/>

This next link suggests ways in which to approach a unseen poem in an exam situation. While the marking rubric is different from the one Unisa uses, it is quite a nice compact way of approaching such a task:

<https://prezi.com/spwazzxlq0wa/igcse-literature-unseen-poetry/>

Taken from Whatsapp group

Put another way, what is the subject of the poem, or what is the poem about?

Section two of the Study Guide explains how one needs to examine not only each singular line of a poem, but then relate each line to other lines in the poem. This idea of connectivity was also touched upon within topic one of this tutorial unit.

The study guide makes reference to the word “context” (p. 36), which asks that you attempt to link the words, lines and stanzas together to determine what a poem is actually about.

Remember that the guide also makes the distinction between the “poetic subject” (the topic) and the “grammatical subject” (words, phrases, and clauses that perform the action of or act upon the verb in a sentence).

At the same time, you must never forget that a poem’s theme and its subject matter are also two distinct concepts. The theme would be the central point or main idea which the poet is attempting to make. Examples of themes in poetry include: love, death, hate, greed, pride, liberty, autonomy.

The Subject, on the other hand, is the topic through which the poem expresses its themes.

Practically, this is best expressed through an example. Take Keats' famous Ode to a Nightingale: (<http://www.poetryfoundation.org/poem/173744>)

- Themes: Mortality and creative expression. The poem contrasts the inevitable cycle of aging and death with the seemingly immortal song of the nightingale, which acts as an inspiration to the speaker.
- Subject: A nightingale singing. The poem uses the subject matter of the nightingale singing in the trees as a platform for the speaker to complain about the transience of life.

So how do we identify the poetic subject?

Explore the title:

Activity 1 asks that you consider the title when attempting to determine the subject of the poem.

Titles can confirm, challenge or seek to confuse the reader. Some are playful, others are accurate, but all are important, as they provide a first impression of the poem which must then be in some way be fulfilled through the text itself.

Read the poem more than once:

Activity 2 asks that you read the poems more than once. I will go a step further. Within your packs from Unisa is a CD with audio recordings of the poems for this course on it. The reason for this is twofold.

- It can be easier for individuals to sometimes listen to a poem and then read it, which will accelerate understanding for those more audio-inclined individuals.
- Poems are meant to be read aloud. There is tone and texture which can be lost when reading silently. The pace and the rhythm of poetry, which often has a strong impact on understanding, will almost always be found in the speaking or reading aloud of poems.

Thus, do not just read the poems more than once, read them aloud, with the CD there to pace you.

It takes time and practice to figure out what words should be emphasised and which should be softly spoken or glossed over. You will find that when your interpretation of a poem is different, the chosen words which are emphasised are also different.

Once again, in your study guide there is a note about the terms 'poet' and 'speaker'.

- A poet is the author of a poem, the person who actually wrote the poem.
- The speaker is the "main character" in a poem, the person actually relating the poem to the reader.

- Just because the poet wrote the poem, it does not automatically mean that it is his or her voice which is meant to be heard when reading said poem. Thus, there is always that distinction between the terms.

Study the poem sentence by sentence:

Poems are often structured in a very specific manner. Where words are placed, the particular verbal stress placed on vowels and consonants, on syllables of words, how often a word is repeated and where the repetition is placed, what figures of speech are present and where and in what language are all elements of poetry that are carefully planned by the poet and, thus, have great significance in understanding and interpreting the poem.

Not only this, but poems are often broken up into stanzas and then lines. A poem of 24 lines could have 5 stanzas, two of which are made up of only two lines each. The grouping of each stanza is important because each might consider a particular idea or at least a particular aspect of such an idea.

You need to break the poem down, stanza by stanza, line by line and word by word.

The study guide indicates a need to seek out verbs which are used in each line. This is because it is the verbs (and adjectives) which give meaning to the nouns and to the poem itself. These are the words which will help define the poem's expression and power.

I came across a very good article about the importance of verbs and adjectives in poetry by A. H. R. Fairchild, entitled *The Verb and the Adjective in Poetry*. You can find the article through this link: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/801577?seq=3>

Earlier, I mentioned the grammatical subject. Once you have looked for verbs and adjectives you must then be able to find the grammatical subject in every sentence or line of the poem.

The grammatical subject is:

- The agent of the action performed by a verb (p. 37)
- You need to consider what that verb is acting on to identify the grammatical subject:  
Here,  
where men sit and hear each other groan; / Where palsy shakes a few, sad, last gray hairs,
- Given the verbs presented and the grammatical subjects on which these verbs are acting,  
what does the sentence mean? What is the literal meaning and what is the symbolic meaning?
- Once you understand the action of the verbs, begin linking the verbs, the nouns and the adjectives. Men sitting and listening to each other groan. Are they old, ill or in pain (the palsy

shaking gray hairs would indicate that they are old)? Why are they sitting, listening to each other groan? Not the adjective “sad”, which might well indicate that they have given up in their old age. Remember, though, that these are only two lines of a ‘poem’ (the line split is indicated with the forward slash: “/”) and therefore the actual subject of the poem, as well as the poem’s themes are unknown, as the men and the hairs might well be metaphors for something else.

Examine Form and Argument:

I have briefly written about the poetic structure previously. This ‘step’ within the study guide mentions poetic structure as well and suggests that the form of a poem; how structures in rhyme scheme, in meter and in line structure, can and will provide certain contextual clues as to what the meaning of the poem is.

For example, there are certain expectations which arise by the fact that the poem’s structure is a sonnet. Going farther, there are conventions of a Petrarchan sonnet which differ from a Shakespearean sonnet, both in structure and in subject and theme.

Within poetry, much as within any other form of literature, when the poem was written is as important as the poem’s actual setting, bringing us back to context. In this way, hopefully, you begin to see how every type of analysis is connected, in a broad sense.

Diction and Mood:

What words are used, how they are used? Is there a focus on light imagery or darker imagery in the poem you are analysing? If so, what themes are linked with these images? Is the poem a pastoral one, whose focus is on the perfect rural life and its rustic yet charming landscapes? Does the poem focus on gleaming streams of clean water or the muddy stale runoff of the city?

This is diction.

This sort of word choice adds to and helps to shape the tone of a poem and the other way around. A sombre and dark poem will have heavy and hard words and syllables, whereas a light, happy poem will most likely be the opposite.

Go through each activity from 01-07 very carefully. These activities will give you the basic understanding of what it means to read a poem.

When writing an essay on poetry, it is possible that you use only the poem, your toolkit (for figurative language and other terminology) and the study guide (and if needed a dictionary). If you follow the steps laid out for you in the study guide (break down the poem, what kind of poem is it? What are the expected conventions? Does the poem meet those criteria? How? Why? How is language used? How many lines does it have? What is the stanza Structure? The structure of entire poem? Verbs? Adjectives? Grammatical Nouns? Mood? Theme? Subject? Title? And on and on and on) you will have more than enough information for the poetry section.

Don't rely on the internet to find one-stop analyses of specific poems, as you need to show us what the poem means to you, not some lecturer in America!!