

My mistress' eyes are nothing like the sun (Sonnet 130)

by William Shakespeare

My mistress' eyes are nothing like the sun;
Coral is far more red than her lips' red;
If snow be white, why then her breasts are dun;
If hairs be wires, black wires grow on her head.
I have seen roses damasked, red and white,
But no such roses see I in her cheeks;
And in some perfumes is there more delight
Than in the breath that from my mistress reeks.
I love to hear her speak, yet well I know
That music hath a far more pleasing sound;
I grant I never saw a goddess go;
My mistress when she walks treads on the ground.
And yet, by heaven, I think my love as rare
As any she belied with false compare.

Words

Pay exceedingly close attention to what individual words mean—and especially to what you think might be keywords, since this is where meaning can be concentrated.

- Which words stand out, and why?

Consider how words may carry more than one meaning. A dictionary is obviously useful, especially one based on historical principles, since it will point to how the meanings of words may have changed over time. “Silly” once meant “helpless.”

- Do any words carry non-contemporary or unfamiliar meanings?
- Do any words likely carry multiple and/or ambiguous meanings?
- Do repeated words carry the same meaning when repeated, or do they change? Words often gather or evolve in meaning when repeated.
- Do particular words or phrases seem drawn to or connected with each other? These often add up so that a clearer sense of the poem emerges.
- Do you notice lots of material or immaterial things (nouns) or lots of action (verbs)? Is the poem concrete, about specific things and places, or is the poem more abstract, about concepts or ideas? Is the poem full of movement, or does it seem to stay still and look at one thing?
- Do certain words seem to clash with each other, and what effect does this have? Think in terms of oppositions, tensions, conflicts, and binaries.

Diction

- Is the word choice distinctive? Does it add up to a kind of **style**—for example, is it elaborate, dense, simple, archaic, formal, conversational, descriptive, abstract, and so on?
- How would you describe the level of language and vocabulary (**register**): informal, formal, common, casual, neutral, mixed?

Tone

Address the tone of the **speaker** or **narrator**, which is the attitude taken by the poem's voice toward the subject or subjects in the poem:

- *What is the attitude taken by the "voice" of the poem toward the subjects of the poem? Is the tone serious, **ironic**, amorous, argumentative, distant, intimate, somber, abrupt, playful, cheerful, despondent, conversational, yearning, etc.—or is it mixed, changing, ambiguous, or unclear?*

Word Order

Focus on how the words are ordered. Look for patterns; in drawing attention to themselves, they require your attention:

- *Is the word order or sentence structure (**syntax**) unusual in any way, and what is the effect of this?*
- *Are there any noticeable patterns in the ordering of words? If so, how do the patterns contribute to meaning?*
- *Do the lines have strong **end-stops**, or do they break across lines (**enjamb**)? Do the lines end with a final **stress** or **rhyme**? Does each line tend to be a self-contained, grammatical unit, or does it vary? What effect does this have?*
- *Are there lots of long, complete sentences (simple or complex?), or are there many sentence fragments and phrases? Does the poem stop and start, or does it move or flow continuously? What is the effect of this?*

Punctuation

Punctuation organizes and creates relationship between words, phrases, clauses, and sentences. In poetry, where lines are often seen as units of meaning, the importance of punctuation is sometimes magnified, though often overlooked. Punctuation can create or reinforce rhythm. It can also control meaning or make meaning uncertain by its placement and usage, especially if it is used minimally, or in some cases, not at all.

- *What role does punctuation have in the poem?*
- *Does it follow accepted rules and conventions, or is it used in unusual ways?*

Figurative Language

Related to word meaning is **figurative language**, which often plays a crucial role in both condensing language yet expanding meaning. Most generally, figurative language refers to language that is not literal. The phrase "fierce tears" (the **personification** of tears) is not literal, but it is both precise and suggestive in carrying meaning.

- *Are certain words used in unusual, non-literal, non-standard, exaggerated, or **metaphorical** ways? What effect do these **figures of speech** have?*
- *Which words or phrases are used literally (they **denote** something literal) and which are used figuratively (they **connote** something figurative)?*

Much of what we read is literal: *The evening sky was dark; he looked up; he felt sick.* Figurative language refers to language not used literally—it is used abstractly, indirectly, and often evocatively. *The evening is spread out against the sky like a patient etherized upon a table.* Here we have an evening (a thing), spreading (an action), a patient (thing), etherizing (an action), and a table (thing). But an evening cannot be a drugged patient spread out upon a table, perhaps ready to be operated upon; this description cannot be literally true (there is no patient, no etherizing, no table, and evenings don't literally spread out against skies); this language is used figuratively.

- *How does non-literal or figurative language suggest a certain meaning?*

- *What mood or feeling is evoked via this figurative, non-literal language?*

Imagery

When **figurative language** (like **metaphor** or **simile**) provides a picture that evokes any of the senses, we call this **imagery**. “She is the sun” (a simile) contains imagery of light and warmth (the senses of sight and touch).

- *What imagery—pictures or senses that are evoked in words—is present in the poem? What imagery, if any, is most striking, frequent, or patterned?*
- *What images seem related or connected to each other?*
- *What mood or atmosphere is created by the imagery?*
- *Which details stand out? Why?*
- *What sense (if any) seems to dominate the poem: sight, sound, taste, touch, smell?*

Allusion

Poetry sometimes contains brief references to things outside itself—a person, place, or thing—that will expand, clarify, or complicate its meaning. Sometimes they are obvious and direct, and sometimes they are subtle, indirect, and debatable. **Allusions** are frequently references made to other texts (for example, to the Bible, or to another poem).

- *What allusions, if any, can you detect?*
- *What effect do the allusions have upon the poem?*
- *If it is a literary allusion, how does it relate to or connect with the original text?*

Sound

You probably first read a poem to yourself, silently, but most poems also create sense through sounds, unlike **concrete poetry**, which operates visually. Try reading the poem aloud. Sound brings attention to both individual words that are drawn together through their sound as well as to the overall “feeling” or experience. For example, repetition of sounds like “s,” “m,” “l,” and “f” might encourage a soft or sensuous feeling: “Season of mists and mellow fruitfulness . . .”

- *What words are drawn to each other because of sound, and how does this influence meaning? What tone do these sounds create (quiet, loud, sensual, aggressive, etc.)?*

Also, think about whether the poem “moves” slowly or quickly, jerkily or fluidly.

- *Does the poem move differently at different places in the poem? What effect does this have?*
- *How do the poem’s sounds contribute to its meaning? Does a particular sound or sounds dominate the poem? What is the effect of this?*

Rhythm

A poem’s **rhythm** can be regular or irregular. When it has regular rhythmical sound patterns, we say the poem has a certain **meter**. The type of meter is based on the number of syllables per line and how many unstressed (x) or stressed (/) syllables there are. (“I **WAN**-dered **LONE**-ly **AS** a **CLOUD**”; x / x / x / x /). A small, distinct group of accented words is called a **foot** (“a **CLOUD**”; x /). The various meters—tetrameter, pentameter, etc.—are based on the number of **feet**

per line. (The meter in the above example has four regular feet, and is therefore tetrameter; because each foot has an unstressed syllable [x] followed by a stressed one [/], this is called an **iamb**. We would then say that the line is in iambic tetrameter; if it had an extra foot—that is, five feet—we would call it iambic pentameter.)

- *When you count out (**scan**) the syllables of a line, do they follow a rhythm? Is there a name for it?*
- *How prominent is the poem's rhythm? Does the rhythm have any influence on the poem's meaning? If so, in what way or ways?*

Melody

Melody refers to sound effects, such as **rhyme**, **alliteration**, **assonance**, and **consonance**, with each producing a unique melodic effect. **Rhyme** is a type of melody, and rhymes can be **perfect** with identical vowel sounds ("guy" and "high") or **slant**, when the sound of the final consonants is identical, but not the vowels ("shell" and "pill," "cement" and "ant").

- *Do words at the end of lines rhyme? Why kind of rhymes are they? Do they form a pattern (a rhyme scheme) that is regular or irregular?*
- *Do the rhyming words have any relationship with each other? Does the rhyme concentrate meaning in any way?*

Speaker

All poems have a voice, which can be called a **speaker** (or in some case speakers, if there is more than one person "speaking" the poem).

- *Who "tells" the poem? Are there things you can say about the speaker's personality, **point of view**, **tone**, society, age, or gender?*
- *Does the speaker assume a persona at any point in the poem, and speak "as" a particular person (e.g., "I am Lazarus, come from the dead . . . I shall tell you all")?*
- *Does the speaker seem attached or detached from what is said?*
- *What effect do the speaker's characteristics have on the poem?*

Likewise, all poems have a silent or implied listener/reader, an **addressee**.

- *Is it possible to figure out to whom the poem is addressed? Is there an ideal listener or reader?*
- *Does the speaker seek anything from the listener/reader (sympathy, support, agreement, etc.)?*

Narrative/Narrator

Poems capture thoughts, ideas, feelings, impressions, experiences, and incidents, but sometimes poems also tell a story. Ask yourself:

- *What is happening in the poem? What action, drama, or **conflict** is present? Is there more than one event in the poem? Does anything change in the poem (is an action completed, does an attempted action fail, or does someone change in an important way)?*
- *Who tells the story, and what relationship does the narrator have to the story?*

Time

- *What is the temporal structure of the poem? Does it take place in one*

time (the present, the past, the future) or does it move back and forth between times?

- *Does it present single actions in time or continuing actions? Does it bring different times together or set them apart (e.g., "then" vs. "now")?*
- *Is there a particular occasion for the poem (an incident, an event, a realization)?*
- *Does it focus on indicative states ("I am, I will be") or conditional states ("I could be, I would be")?*
- *Are different parts of the poem located in different times?*
- *Does time move smoothly? Are different states of being, or different ways of thinking, associated with different times? ("I used to think 'X', but now I think 'Y'")?*

Setting answers the questions "Where?" and "When?" in the poem, though often poems are not set in a specific location or time.

- *Is a sense of place clear (urban, pastoral, forest, desert, beach, etc.), or does the poem seem to occupy an abstract time and place (such as mental or emotional state)?*

For some poems, a difficult but key question may be this:

- *Where are we?*

Symbol

A symbol represents or stands for something other than the image itself. A symbol, then, is often something concrete—a word, a thing, a place, a person (real or fictitious), an action, an event, a creation, etc.—that represents something larger, abstract, or complex—an idea, a value, a belief, an emotion. A river (a thing) can be symbol for life; Gomorrah (a place) can be a symbol of shameless sin; Homer Simpson (a fictitious person) can be a symbol of innocent stupidity; a strawberry (a thing) can be a symbol of sensual love.

- *Does the poem have any clear or central symbols? What meaning do they bring to the poem?*

Form

Poetic form usually refers to the structure that "holds" or gives "shape" to the poem—in a way, what it looks like to you on the page. This will include groupings or sets of lines, called **stanzas**. Another, more interesting way to consider form is to say that it necessarily determines the content of the poem, especially in the case of a particular **genre**, like a **ballad**, **epic**, or **sonnet**; these specific forms (sometimes called "closed forms") often have structures and stylistic conventions that are both structural and that convey units of meaning or conventions of **rhyme**, **meter**, or expression. If the poem you are reading has a particular form or structure determined by genre, learn something about the conventions of that genre, since this can direct your attention to certain expectations of content.

- *Is the poem of a particular genre? What are its conventions?*
- *If it doesn't fit particular genre, how would you describe its form?*
- *What is the relationship between form and meaning in the poem?*
- *Are there clear parts to the poem, and if so, how are they similar/different?*

Poems that do not follow determined, formal conventions or genre have an "**open form**."

Ideas

- *Are the ideas of the poem simple or complex, small or large?*
- *Is there one main problem in the poem? How does the poem think through that problem?*
- *What are the ideas that the poem seeks to embody in images?*
- *What is the poem's process of thinking? Does it change its "mind" as it proceeds?*
- *Does the poem proceed logically or illogically? Can you tell the way it is thinking, or is it unclear, opaque, and confusing?*
- *How do the ideas change from line to line, **stanza** to stanza?*
- *Does the poem offer an argument?*
- *Does the poem reflect a particular experience, feeling, or concept?*

Theme

"Purity" is a subject, not a theme; "purity is vulnerability" is a theme. "Theme" refers to a larger, more general, or universal message—a big idea—as well as to something that you could take away from the work and perhaps apply to life. One way to determine a theme is to

1) *ask yourself what the poem is about;*

2) *come up with some one-word answers to that question (subjects of the poem); and*

3) *ask what general attitude (**tone**) is taken towards those subjects in the poem.*

You might conclude that, for example, "love," "trust," or "loss" are subjects. Now, try to figure out what the attitude in the poem is toward that one-word subject and you have theme—for example, "love is dangerous," "you cannot trust people close to you," "loss makes you stronger." But don't think this is always easy or straightforward: many poems resist reduction to simple themes or even subjects, and such resistance—sometimes in the form of **ambiguity, paradox**, abstraction, or complexity—strengthens our interest in and engagement with the poem. Poems are not necessarily answers, but they may be problems or questions.