

Strategies for Writing about Poetry

(From *A Short Guide to Writing about Literature*, Barnet and Cain)

Explication:

A line-by-line or episode-by-episode commentary on what is going on in a text—literally unfolding or spreading out. An explication is a commentary revealing your sense of the meaning of the work. A careful explication will generate further discussion and a final analysis of the work.

Response:

Responding to poetry is dependent upon the reader's emotional response. As you make notes and explicate the text, line-by-line, jot down your initial impressions. What do you think the author is trying to convey? What sort of mood or tone is being used to convey those ideas? What kind of associations does the poem bring to your own mind? Your initial emotional responses will be very useful in drafting a discussion or essay on the poem.

Poetic Elements

~ Who is the speaker? The **speaker** or **voice** or **mask** or **persona** that speaks a poem is not usually identical with the poet who writes it. The author assumes a role, or counterfeits the speech of a person in a particular situation.

~ What is the **Diction** and **Tone**? How is a voice or mask or persona created? From the whole of language, the author selects certain words and grammatical construction; this selection constitutes the persona's **diction**.

Tone on the other hand reveals the speaker's attitudes about

- themselves
- their subjects, and
- their audiences

and, consciously or unconsciously, they choose their words, pitch, and modulation accordingly; all these add up to their tone. In written literature, tone must be detected without the aid of the ear, although it's a good idea to read poetry aloud, trying to find the appropriate tone of voice; that is, the reader must understand by the selection and sequence of words the way the words are meant to be heard—playfully, angrily, confidently, ironically.

~ **Figurative Language**. Robert Frost said, "Poetry provides the one permissible way of saying one thing and meaning another." Figurative language is the means to say one thing in terms of something else. Words have their literal meanings, but they can also be used so that something other than the literal

meaning is implied.

- **Simile:** in a simile, items from different classes are explicitly compared by a connective such as *like*, *as*, or *than*, or by a verb such as *appears* or *seems*. *Float like a butterfly, sting like a bee.* -- Muhammad Ali
- a **metaphor** asserts the identity, without a connective such as *like* or a verb such as *appears*, of terms that are literally incompatible. *Umbrellas clothe the beach in every hue* –Elizabeth Bishop
- **Imagery:** Images are the sensory content of a work, whether literal or figurative. Whatever in a poem appeals to any of our senses (including sensations of heat as well as of sight, smell, taste, touch, sound) is an image.
- **Symbolism:** a **symbol**, is an image so loaded with significance that it is not simply literal, and it does not simply stand for something else; it is both itself and something else that it richly suggests, a kind of manifestation of something too complex or too elusive to be otherwise revealed. For instance, we can attach much significance to the image of a rose: feminine, love, beauty.

A checklist: Getting ideas for Writing about Poetry

~ *First Response*

What was your response to the poem on first reading? Did some parts especially please or displease you or puzzle you? After some study—perhaps checking the meanings of some of the words in a dictionary and reading the poem several times—did you modify your initial response to the parts and to the whole?

~ *Speaker and Tone*

Who is the speaker? (Consider age, sex, personality, frame of mind, and tone of voice.) Is the speaker defined fairly precisely (for instance, an older woman speaking to a child), or is the speaker simply a voice meditating? (jot down your first impressions, then reread the poem and make further jottings, if necessary.)

~ *Audience*

To whom is the speaker speaking? What is the situation, including time and place? (In some poems, a listener is strongly implied, but in others, especially those in which the speaker is meditating, there may be no audience other than the reader, who “overhears” the speaker.)

~ *Center of Interest and Theme*

What is the poem about? Is the interest chiefly in a distinctive character, or in meditation? That is, is the poem chiefly psychological or chiefly philosophical?

Is the theme stated explicitly (directly) or implicitly? How might you state the

theme in a sentence? What is lost by reducing the poem to a statement of a theme?