

POETRY EXPLICATION CHECKLIST

Below are a number of factors you should consider as you read and write about poetry. Please note that it is not enough simply to identify these linguistic and poetic effects in the poems you are writing about—you must also clearly explain *how* these effects are related to the text and its themes and ideas, and most important, to your own argument about it. Ultimately, you need to explain how these qualities affect the poem's meaning or meanings. This list is not comprehensive. Feel free to add categories that reflect your own interests (e.g., religious themes, feminism, historicism).

- Structure:** How is the poem (or a passage from a longer poem) organized? Can you identify two or three (or more) parts of the poem? What is the relationship between these parts? Does the poet follow a logical sequence of thought, or is the progression random and contemplative?
- Imagery:** Is there a unifying idea or theme behind the images the poet uses? Does the poet choose images that are predominately related to nature, mythology, war, religion, or a particular social or cultural environment? What is the relationship between the poem's imagery and its theme or tone? (Note: "The poem's imagery helps the reader visualize the poet's idea" is not an adequate analysis of the poetic effect of imagery.)
- Diction:** Why does the poet choose the words s/he uses? Has the poet deliberately chosen words that are archaic, foreign, Latinate, or Anglo-Saxon? What are the connotations (associations beyond the literal meaning of word) of the words that are used? Is the etymology of a word related to some point, however oblique, that the poet is making? Does the poet use long words or short words? Use the *Oxford English Dictionary* to identify obsolete unusual definitions of particular words. Compare the poet's use of the word to the historical examples documented in the *OED*.
- Syntax:** Does the poet place verbs or adjectives in unconventional places? Are ideas organized using dependent or subordinate clauses (hypotaxis), or are clauses and phrases arranged independently and linked by commas (parataxis)? Does the poet use connecting particles (and, or) between clauses, or not?
- Ambiguity:** Do the words, metaphors, and images in the poem carry multiple meanings? Can some of these meanings be effectively linked in an effort to explain the work's meaning or purpose?
- Sound and meter:** Has the poet chosen words that are onomatopoeic? Does the poet use alliteration or assonance? Does the poem's language sound hurried and rushed, or slow and calm? If a poem rhymes, what is its rhyme scheme? What the poem's meter? Are there any irregularities?
- Figurative language:** What kinds of similes and metaphors does the poet use? Can you identify a controlling metaphor that extends a comparison or a series of comparisons throughout the entire work? Does the poet use personification to bring objects or ideas to life? Are particular ideas or images exaggerated (hyperbole)? Are apparently contradictory words placed next to each other (oxymoron)?
- Tone:** What is the poet's attitude toward his subject? How are you able to identify this? Does the poem's tone change?
- Symbolism and irony:** Does the poet describe objects, people, or actions in a way that suggests a meaning that more than literal? Does the poet explore the discrepancy between how things appear to be and how they really are?
- Allusion:** Does the poet allude to mythological or historical figures or events? Does the poet allude to other works of literature? Find the sources of these allusions and try to explain why the poet feels it is important to use them.
- Rhetorical figures:** Can you identify any rhetorical figures in the poem? Can you explain how those figures reflect prominent themes or problems in the poem? For a list of common rhetorical figures, go to: <http://www.longwoodshakespeare.net/handouts/figures.html>