

WRITING ABOUT POETRY

by Seth DuCharme, '92

Writing about poetry can be difficult. A poem does not affect its reader in quite the same way that a work of prose does. To be able to understand and write about the way a poem works, you need to spend some time thinking analytically about the poem before you start your draft. Then, when you begin to write, you are better able to select appropriate evidence and construct a convincing argument. Professor Ivan Marki of the English Department encourages the four-stage approach explained below. It should help you become comfortable working with a poem.

Get to Know the Poem

Describe the poem: *Before* you begin to organize your essay, read the poem aloud *several* times, noting its structure, meter, recurring images or themes, rhyme scheme--anything and everything which creates an effect.

Paraphrase the poem: Again, *before* you begin to organize your essay, make sure you understand the language of the poem. Poetry, particularly from other time periods, often contains confusing syntax or vocabulary. Put into your own words those lines or phrases which are especially difficult. Resist the temptation to brush over the lines or phrases which seem unintelligible; these can be the most crucial parts of the poem. *The Oxford English Dictionary* is a good resource for defining difficult vocabulary.

How the Poem Works

Analyze the poem: Since your analysis should make up the bulk of your essay, approach it with care. Knowing that you will not be able to address every aspect of the poem, select the elements which work together to create special effects. Look beyond the surface meaning of the words and start to think about how the techniques used in the poem add depth to its meaning. How do the elements work together? Do they complement each other, do they create tension, or both? Think in terms of cause and effect and look for relationships within the poem itself. For example, if you see a pattern of imagery which suggests something about the speaker, look at other areas of the poem for more evidence along the same lines. In poetry, form and content are inseparable, so you must not overlook the relationship between *what* the speaker says and *how* he or she says it.

So What?

Interpret the poem: Using your analysis of how the poem works as your evidence, interpret the poem--answer the question, "So what is this poem all about?" In the interpretation, you bring together your analysis of the elements in the poem and show what they mean to the poem as a whole. You may suggest an interpretation of the speaker's state of mind, the poem's subject, or the nature of the experience which the poem creates. For example, does Poe's "The Raven" describe a dream? A drug-induced hallucination? A recollection? Why do you think so? What evidence, from your analysis, supports your idea? The main argument of your paper should begin to take form as you struggle with this process.

You have great freedom in interpreting a poem, provided that your assertions are solidly linked to your evidence. Interpretation that does *not* align with your analysis will be invalid. In the words of M. H. Abrams, editor of *the Norton Anthology of Poetry*, "There is no one, right interpretation of a poem--but there is one which is *more* right than any of the others."

The multi-faceted nature of poetry demands that you know where you are going before you begin to construct your written argument, which is why the description and paraphrase stages are so important. Your selective analysis emerges from them in the form of an argument that is limited to a manageable set of ideas. After you have thought through these stages and taken good notes, you should be ready to begin writing your essay.

Constructing Your Paper

Thesis: Review your notes. Look for patterns and themes. Formulate a thesis statement that will allow you to explain the relationships and the effects of elements in the poem. If you can, indicate in the thesis the areas or features of the poem important to your argument (a pattern of imagery, for instance, or a series of crucial lines). Remember, your thesis statement must argue a point; instead of simply saying that a poet uses certain poetic devices, you must give some indication in your thesis as to how those devices work and what they do to the poem's meaning. You do not need to go into elaborate detail in your thesis, but do show the relationship between the poem and your argument.

Introduction: Your first paragraph should make your reader comfortable with the poem by identifying the poet, offering a brief, general description of the poem and, most importantly, leading into the thesis and development of the argument by narrowing and limiting the subject. It may be helpful to imagine the introduction as a funnel, initially appealing to your reader from a wide perspective and then swiftly directing him or her into the body of your essay. Avoid sweeping, abstract statements or statements which you cannot concretely link to your thesis. The more quickly you get away from the general and focus on the specific, the sooner you will engage your reader.

The Development of Your Argument: The approach you undertake in your thesis determines the organization of the rest of the essay. Some arguments lend themselves to a linear presentation. For example, if you choose to trace the development of the speaker according to the recurrence of an image throughout the poem, you might want to go through the poem chronologically to show how that image changes in significance from line to line or stanza to stanza. You need not limit yourself to such a presentation, however. Many poems are difficult to explain chronologically; some poems are better suited to a non-linear argument which reflects cycles or other patterns in the poem. If you organize your argument according to the patterns you choose to address, your argument might move through the poem several times, according to the instances of the images and their contextual significance. For example, one word may have a formal relationship to numerous other words in the poem. The word "snow" has a relationship to the word "flow" in that they rhyme, and to the word "ice" in that they are both associated with winter. To discuss the significance of these relationships, you may find yourself jumping around the poem. That's fine, as long as you make your argument clear and keep your thesis in sight.

Paragraphs: Each paragraph should consist of a point which is credible, relevant to your thesis, and analytical. Remember that you are arguing for a certain position and need to convince your reader of that position. At the beginning of each paragraph, tell your reader the focus of your argument in that paragraph by starting with a topic sentence. The rest of the paragraph should address the assertion with convincing evidence. The effectiveness of your argument depends heavily on how well you incorporate evidence into your paragraphs.

Using Evidence: You cannot create a compelling argument without evidence to back it up, but you must present that evidence in the context of your own argument. Merely including a line or a passage in your paper without linking it to your argument will not be convincing. Try incorporating your evidence into a "sandwich" of information which will allow your reader to receive the full impact of the lines. Before the quotation, describe the evidence in terms of the poem. Where is it located in the poem? Is it part of a pattern? Let your reader know what he or she should be looking for. After the quotation, if the passage is particularly difficult to understand, you should explain problematic syntax or vocabulary. Then, you must analyze the quote and show how that quote supports the claims you are making in your thesis. This is the most important part of your paper; it is where you make your interpretation clear to the reader and where you prove your thesis. Don't assume that the quotation will speak for itself—it is your job to explain it.

Citation: Be sure to cite your evidence properly. Citing from a poem is different from citing from a prose text. Because the line form of poetry is so important, you must indicate where lines end by separating them with a slash mark "/". If you are quoting more than three lines, single space the passage, indent, and present the passage as it appears in the poem. Follow the quotation with the appropriate line numbers enclosed in parentheses (see English Department handout on use of quotations and citations, available from the Department office and the Writing Center).

The Conclusion: Conclusions take many forms. In your conclusion you can emphasize crucial ideas, raise questions about the poem, or connect the poem to other literary works or experiences. This is where you can offer your interpretation of the poem, which by now should be convincing to your reader since you have presented your evidence in the body of the paper. You may raise new ideas in a conclusion, provided that they are solidly linked to the development of your argument. Remember, you have flexibility, but your conclusion should flow naturally from the body of your paper.

Final Thoughts

- 1) If you have the choice of which poem to write about, pick one you like.
- 2) Read the poem aloud. Your ear will notice things your eyes miss.
- 3) Notice the way the poem looks on the page. The form of the poem may reveal something about the way it works.
- 4) Be careful to make a clear distinction between the poet and the speaker. Even in poems that are written in the first person, you should be careful not to assume anything about the speaker that the poem itself does not suggest.
- 5) Let your interpretation follow your analysis--avoid making unsupported assertions.
- 6) Be selective with your evidence. Limit the length of your quotations to a workable size. Passages longer than a few lines will be impossible to explain in a single paragraph.

Enjoy the Poem!

Poems are artistic expressions that demand that you appreciate them before you begin to reduce them to something explainable. Often, the most brilliant elements in a poem are very subtle and will be felt before they are understood. Remember, you are not just explaining what a poem does, you are explaining what it does to you. You are the medium in which the poem comes to life. Writing about poetry offers you a special opportunity to interact with a work of art.