

## AFTER READING POETRY, BEFORE WRITING ABOUT IT: APPROACHING THE "PAPER"

What you are being trained to do in this course is to describe an artwork. This is not unlike describing an animal: your language needs to be precise and full so that the description will be accurate. You could say that a certain animal had two eyes, a voice, ears, a backbone, sexual organs, body hair, and so on, and I still would not know whether you were describing a dog, a chimpanzee, or a human. Similarly, with respect to an artwork, you could say that a picture had a woman, a man, a baby, some animals; or, better, you could say that a picture had Mary, Joseph, the child Jesus, an ox and an ass, shepherds, and the Magi, and yet that description would fit hundreds of medieval and Renaissance paintings. The way we distinguish objects is to refine the taxonomy enough so that, for instance, we can distinguish between the body of a higher primate and a human body. The way we distinguish artworks is by refining what we notice of the manner in which representation has been accomplished. We begin to notice that a Nativity by Giotto looks different, in many ways, from a Nativity by El Greco; and then we try to describe those ways (the range of color used, the definition of forms, the balancing of masses, and so on).

It is impossible to describe anything when it is imagined in isolation. All descriptions are by difference; all are ultimately comparative. It will sharpen your description of a poem if you think how someone else might have said this, how someone else might have arranged the parts of his/her saying. It is useful to substitute a synonym for the crucial words in the poem, to understand the writer's choices, and to see how the poem would change if it used different words at certain junctures. Your own imagination must come into play in imagining the choices the author might have rejected, and the reasons for the choices in the poem.

A paper is like a class; you are showing someone else how you see the poem. You may have to leave out some minor points, but be sure to cover your major points. It's a good idea to do an overview first (a bird's eye view of the terrain of the poem) and then to consider the two or three main parts of the poem to see how they are joined together (by contrast, by parallel, by analogy, etc.).

Your aim is to describe the poem well enough so that someone who had read your paper but had not yet read the poem would recognize the poem when s/he turned to it. The reader should not be able to say, "But I'd never have guessed from this paper that there is a whole speech by Apollo in the middle of this poem," or "But this paper never mentions that all the energy of the poem lies in its verbs," or "I'd be hard put to say, from the paper, whether the poem is entirely despairing or merely wistful." Your language needs to be able to convey the rhetorical force of the poem and its tone, or range of tones.

Your aim is not to say what the poem says--though you may summarize this briefly--but to describe what the poem does. Any competent reader of English can repeat "what the poem says"--i.e. a paraphrase of its sentences. What you are learning here is to make second-order sentences about what the poem does, to formulate the laws it is obeying in its practice.

There are many aspects of this "doing." Your remarks about it may be about its vocabulary: "This poem discusses death in the diction we normally use about marriage"; or about its syntax: "In this poem, one noun governs a whole host of verbs"; or about its world-view: "This poem contrasts a radiant paradise with a venal and mendacious world"; or about its structure: "This poem begins with its climax--the rest is one long decline"; or about its speech-acts: "This poem begins with a warning, and ends with a plea." All of these statements rise to a level of generalization about the procedures of the poem.

Remember that the poet can change his/her mind during the course of a poem: s/he can begin by finding death horrible and end up thinking it peaceful. Such a poem might begin in protest and end in praise; it's your job to trace such changes. Beware of thinking that the first stanza sets the attitude for the whole: first stanzas are not topic sentences. A poem is not a paragraph; it is more like an EKG, a graph that traces a curve of feeling. Usually a poem follows an understandable trajectory from A to B...to X. Otherwise it would be static and uninteresting. You can show the trajectory itself, and the moments that seem to divert it away from its purpose, and moments that return it to its previous motion. Your job is to show how diction, syntax, rhetoric, imagery, etc. contribute to its completion.

The aim of every poem is to shine, to exhibit some sort of radiance, with some sort of intensity (whether sudden or slow). Some poems are memorable for their individuality of language (think of Hopkins or Mallarme), some for surprising worlds they create (think of Blake), some for

adopting an unfamiliar view of experience (think of satires), some for inventive variation (think of all the parts of "In Memoriam"). There are no rules for what can become beautiful or interesting or provocative or memorable. Many "great" last lines would be entirely ordinary out of context, e.g., Herbert's "So I did sit and eat" ("Love III"), or Wordsworth's "With rocks, and stones, and trees" ("A Slumber"), or Frost's "And miles to go before I sleep." Context makes a line take on burnish. Your job is to say what is unusual, distinctive, striking, or memorable about the language, structure, or procedures of the poem.

Poems are most interesting in full context. Every poem has several lives. It lives first by itself (as we may meet it in an anthology, as we may sing a single lied, as we may look at one picture in a museum). It lives secondly in the volume in which it first appeared--as one of the *Songs of Innocence* (Blake) or the *Lyrical Ballads* (Wordsworth and Coleridge), or a part of *Harmonium* (Stevens). Such volumes are landmarks in the history of poetry. Thirdly, the poem lives in the drama of its author's evolution as a poet--as part of his Collected Poems. Fourth, it lives in its century--as part of "Romanticism," or of "Metaphysical Poetry." Fifth, it lives in its genres--as part of the history of pastoral, or elegy, or the sonnet. Sixth, it lives in its larger culture--as part of the history of the language in which it is written, as part of the philosophy of its epoch.

In AP English, we mostly see poems in their first life, though I hope you will also get a sense of some individual authors

The best way to continue to describe poetry to yourself is to read individual volumes and collected volumes, and get to know the authors you like best, so that you can describe a poem not merely in itself, but in the context of its brothers and sisters, so to speak, and in the context of its father the muse, and its mother the author:

The fine delight that fathers thought, the strong  
Spur, live and lancing like the blowpipe flame,  
Breathes once, and quenched faster than it came,  
Leaves yet the mind the mother of immortal song.  
Nine months she then, nay, years, nine years she long  
Within her wears, bears, cares, and combs the same;  
The widow of an insight lost she lives, with aim  
Now known, and hand at work now never wrong.

(Hopkins)

Most poems propose a perplexity, or a concern, which the poet must resolve, or come to conclusions about, by the end of the poem. Sometimes these concerns are ethical (what is the right way to live) and sometimes they are metaphysical (what is true and what is false). On the other hand, some poems are chiefly descriptive: the poet asks how accurately s/he can convey both what s/he is seeing and the responses the sight (or sound, or experience) evokes in him/herself: such poems aim at a more precise delineation of a given experience. Try to explain to your reader how the poet solves or resolves the strains the poem brings to light--in short, how s/he succeeds in bringing his poem to an end.

Your papers will be judged on clarity and economy of exposition, on grace of style, and, principally, on your degree of insight into the poems.

I hope your favorite assignment of the year will be your extended, intimate acquaintance with a poet of your choice, involving the reading of at least twenty of his/her poems!

When you write a commentary on a poem, you can assume that you are addressing a reader who has also read the poem: you don't have to "retell the story" of the poem. Instead, try to tell your reader what you feel the poem is centrally about, first of all. Then go on to explain how the poem proceeds--what sections it naturally falls into, and why each section is necessary to the unfolding of the poem. You will find yourself explaining how the poet's tone of voice changes (how it is ironic, stoic, wistful, resigned, dry, or whatever) and why it changes in that way: has the poet reversed his/her way of thinking, has s/he seen a new facet of the topic, has s/he remembered a drawback to a former response, etc.

You will also find yourself puzzling about the choice of words in certain sections, either where a certain word seems unexpected or surprising, or where a new metaphor or comparison changes your view of what is being described. Account as well as you can, while you are discussing a given section of the poem, for the poet's language and choice of images. When a poet creates a simile, or a metaphor, ask why s/he compares X to Y; or if you notice the cacophony of a number of harsh, alliterative "b" sounds, ask why the poet created such an effect, and what the cacophony contributes to the meaning (sense) of the poem. You are now in AP English, and you have by now learned the definitions of most of the major literary terms; aim this year in your writings at getting good at explaining how the literary terms work, and in saying why a poet uses a term to achieve a purpose or to reinforce a theme/idea.

Here are some useful ways to think about poems, ways that often help explore a poet's choices:

1. Prosodically: what is the rhyme scheme? the stanza form? the total form? the metrical pattern?
2. Grammatically: What parts of speech get the most use? are they clustered in notable ways? does usage change over time (e.g. a passage from the definite to the indefinite article, or from concrete nouns to abstract nouns)?
3. Syntactically: What sort of sentences appear in the poem? (interrogatives, exclamations, apostrophes, etc.) What sort of phrases? voice? mood? tense? logical articulations?

4. Lexically: What sort of diction (mythological, allegorical, naturalistic, speculative, scientific, discursive)?
5. Imagistically: What sorts of imagery? consistent? coherent? developmental? drawn from nature? from culture? from literature?
6. Generically: What subgenre does the poem belong to? In what way does it conform to the expectations of that subgenre? In what way does it deviate from them, reformulate them, overthrow them? (some subgenres: ode, elegy, eulogy, panegyric, confession, definition, boast, farewell, etc.)
7. Culturally: Is the poem orthodox or heterodox with respect to the received ideas of its culture? (blasphemy, paradox, revolutionary ideas, etc.).
8. Allusively: References to other literary works, predecessors, poetic tradition, mythology, history, Bible?
9. Aesthetically: What particular type of beauty is being aimed at? A "terrible beauty"?--or a "touching" or "pathetic" or "invigorating" or "sublime" or "humorous" or "fanciful" or "whimsical" beauty, etc. And, how is that effect brought about?
10. Imaginatively: What is the founding imaginative act of the poem? (imagining the conjunction of Leda and Zeus; imagining models of human life; imagining that there are mental seasons paralleling the natural seasons; etc. The attraction of this act of imagination?)
11. Tonally: What tone (or tones) is taken up by the poet toward his/her material? (the same content can be treated ironically, humorously, sublimely, parodically, etc.).

Well, there are more, but this is a start. When you have considered the poem in each of these ways, you are more in possession of it than when you have just read it through. When you see how these questions interact in a formal dynamic to make the poem happen on the page, you are on the way to a reading of the poem. After that, you can begin to connect this one poem to others by the same poet, then to others by other poets, then to tradition as a whole....