



Center for Writing and Speaking

F NO. 13 IN THE CENTER FOR WRITING AND SPEAKING HANDOUT SERIES

Writing About Poetry

Writing about poetry is not very different from writing about other topics. Some techniques exist, however, that can help you analyze and write about poetry. Remember that all standard rules of writing apply for essays on poetry, even though the poets might not have adhered to those rules. There are three basic ways to write about poetry.

- **Explication** unfolds the meaning of a poem; it involves analyzing the formal techniques the poet uses to present an interpretation of the poem.
- **Analysis** deals with a certain part of a poem and relates it to the work as a whole. For example, you can analyze the death imagery of a poem.
- **Comparison & Contrast** involves looking at two different poems that are usually connected in some way—they may share a common theme or technical device.

Pay attention to language.

Look up any words you may not understand. Be sure you grasp the meaning of the words and how they are being used, especially if there are words that may have a meaning specific to the cultural context or time period of the poem.

Relate style and meaning.

Be aware of style, or poetic techniques. Don't ignore the technical aspects of a poem when you focus on the meaning of the poem. At the same time, don't block *out* your interpretation of the poem when discussing the elements of style. Look for connections between the meaning (*what* the poem is saying) to the poetic techniques (*how* the poem says it).

Example: Eliot's replacement of the formal poetic restrictions of rhyme scheme and meter express the fragmentation of values and the breakdown of society that he observed in the aftermath of WWII.

Move from literal to interpretive.

A poem often works on two levels: the literal (what it is saying) and the thematic (what it suggests). Begin with the literal level of the poem, and then move into your thematic interpretation by providing evidence from the poem. Make sure you demonstrate *how* you reached a particular conclusion; take your reader with you whenever you make an interpretation. Show evidence that proves your interpretation *and* also relates it to the literal meaning of the poem. Don't assume what you're out to prove.

Example: The theme of "To His Coy Mistress" is deeper than mere sentimentality and romanticism; Marvell's wit and his use of strong, sometimes astonishing images poignantly illustrate man's mortality and the inexorable press of time.

Quote correctly.

You must quote the text directly as evidence for your argument. When quoting multiple lines of poetry, separate the line breaks with a slash (/). If you're quoting more than four lines, start the quotation on a new line and indent it.

AGNES SCOTT