

ANALYZING POETRY

One way to better understand poetry is by analyzing the elements that make up a good poem. Poems are written in either closed or open form. Closed form poems are written in specific patterns, using meter, line length, and line groupings called stanzas. Open form poems, often still referred to as “free verse” poems, do not use regular rhythmic patterns (i.e., metric feet), are usually unrhymed, have varying line lengths, and have no set line groupings. Remember that you are looking for relationships between the formal devices of poetry, like word choice, metric pattern, and metaphor and the poem’s subject. A thorough investigation of the elements of a poem helps the reader to better understand the poem.

The following list is a guide providing characteristics to look for when analyzing poetry.

1. DETERMINE THE SUBJECT OF THE POEM

- Paraphrase/summarize the poem; what is it about?
- Does the poem address a social, psychological, historical, or mythical phenomenon?

2. IDENTIFY THE POEM’S NARRATOR

- Who is speaking?
- To whom?
- Under what circumstances? Identify the setting.

3. NOTE THE DICTION (WORD CHOICE) OF THE POET

- Be sure to look up all unfamiliar words in a dictionary.
- What are the words’ denotations and connotations?
- Is the poem free of clichés?
- How does the diction contribute to or detract from the poem?

4. DETERMINE THE TONE OF THE POEM

- Is the poem serious? Ironic? Satiric? Contemplative? Ambiguous?
- Point out words that set the tone.
- Determine whether the tone changes within the poem.

5. DETERMINE THE RHYTHMICAL DEVICES USED BY THE POET

- What is the basic metrical pattern? Line length?
- What is the length of the stanza?
- What is the rhyme scheme? End rhyme? Internal rhyme?
- Does the poet employ any other metrical device?
- What form does the poem take? Open or closed?

6. NOTE THE USE OF OTHER LITERACY DEVICES

- What allusions does the poem contain?
- Listen to the sounds in the poem. Make note of assonance, alliteration, and onomatopoeia.
- Does the poet use figurative language, such as metaphor, simile, symbolism, imagery, irony, personification, antithesis, hyperbole, metonymy, synecdoche, allegory, paradox, understatement, or overstatement?
- Are there any examples of synecdoche or metonymy?
- Note the use, or absence, of punctuation.
- Titles are important. Is the title the best the writer could have chosen? What would be a better title for the work? Why?

7. DETERMINE THE VALUES OF THE POEM

- Does the poet succeed in recreating his experiences within the reader? How?
- Is the experience intensely felt by the reader?
- Does the poem succeed in sharpening the reader's awareness of something significant?

Lines in poetry are generally made up of **metrical feet**. Metrical feet (the combination of accented and unaccented syllables) are usually one of the following:

1. TWO –SYLLABLE FEET

- **Iamb**: consists of light stress followed by a heavy stress. **Example: the winds**
- **Trochee**: a heavy stress followed by a light stress. **Example: flower**
- **Spondee**: Two successive, equally heavy stresses. **Example: men's eyes**
- **Pyrric**: two successive unstressed syllables. **Example: the soft**
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2. THREE-SYLLABLE FEET

- **Anapest**: Two light stresses followed by a heavy stress: **Example: early light**
- **Dactyl**: A heavy stress followed by two lights. **Example: this is the**

The combination of metrical feet determines a poem's **meter**. The types of meter are:

- A. **Dimeter**: a line of two two-syllable feet
- B. **Trimeter**: a line of three feet
- C. **Tetrameter**: a four-foot line
- D. **Pentameter**: a line of five feet
- E. **Hexameter**: a six-foot line
- F. **Heptameter**: a seven-foot line
- G. **Octameter**: eight feet.

An example of a closed form poem is this sonnet by William Shakespeare, which, like all sonnets, is written in iambic pentameter with varying rhyme schemes.

MY MISTRESS' EYES ARE NOTHING LIKE THE SUN

My mistress' eyes are nothing like the sun; (A)
Coral is far more red than her lips' red; (B)
If snow be white, why then her breasts are dun; (A)
If hairs be wires, black wires grow from her head. (B)
I have seen roses damasked, red and white, (C)
But no such roses see I in her cheeks; (D)
And in some perfumes is there more delight (C)
Than in the breath that from my mistress reeks. (D)
I love to hear her speak, yet well I know (E)
That music hath a far more pleasing sound; (F)
I grant I never saw a goddess go; (E)
My mistress, when she walks, treads on the ground. (F)
 And yet, by heaven, I think my love as rare (G)
 As any she belied with false compare. (G)

The following is an example of an open form poem by Langston Hughes:

HARLEM

What happens to a dream deferred?

Does it dry up?
like a raisin in the sun?
Or fester like a sore—
And then run?
Does it stink like rotten meat?
Or crust and sugar over—
like a syrupy sweet?

Maybe it just sags
like a heavy load.

Or does it explode?
(1951)