

Notes on Poetry

Analyzing (not merely interpreting or explicating) a poem

Poetry is different from prose. At this point, it would not serve our purposes to try to define exactly *what* poetry is or *why* poets choose this form to express themselves. It is sufficient to know that poetry is different. Students, teachers, critics, and so on tend to read poetry in three ways. Often they confuse the methods and think they are reading one way, when they are actually reading another.

Interpretation is probably the most common type of reading and may very well be the only type you've ever performed. It is the process of figuring out what the poem means, especially on a deeper level than comprehending the surface text. IN an interpretation essay, you usually provide quotations from the poem to support your claims about what it means. You may even have to discuss the meanings of individual words or the syntax of individual phrases clauses, and sentences to support your interpretation.

Many people confuse this examination of such small parts of the poem as analysis, but it is not.

Explication is a line-by-line retelling of the poem. It is a useful activity in the processes of surface understanding and theme interpretation.

Because this process examines the poem line by line, many people believe this is analysis, but it is not.

Analysis is an examination of how the poem works—not *what* it means, but *how it means* what it means. Analysis does not ask you only to identify the tone or mood, but it asks you to figure out how the poet conveyed the tone or mood. You know that Dr. Seuss is fun to read. Analysis is the process by which you examine how Seuss's rhythm and rhyme schemes contribute to that fun. You know that limericks are humorous. Analysis is the process by which you figure out how structure, and, again, rhythm and rhyme add to the humor. Analysis does not ask you merely to identify the rhythm or rhyme scheme or point out the use of devices like onomatopoeia, alliteration, metaphor, and so on; analysis asks you to show what those conventions or devices are doing, how they are working, what their role is in the poem's overall effect.

Remember that your Advanced Placement exam will hardly ever ask you merely to interpret a piece of literature. It will almost never ask you to explicate a poem. *It will, however, ask you to perform analysis, in both the multiple-choice questions and the free-responses.*

Emily Dickinson wrote nearly eighteen hundred poems, though fewer than a dozen were published during her lifetime. Dickinson's friends and relatives [were] astonished to discover the full extent of her works. The body of work did not adhere to the common poetic conventions of Dickinson's day, and as a result, it was widely criticized when it was finally published after her death.

The last night that she lived

EMILY DICKINSON (1830 – 1886)

The last night that she lived,
It was a common night,
Except the dying; this to us
Made nature different.

We noticed smallest things,—
Things overlooked before,
By this great light upon our minds
Italicized, as 'twere.

That others could exist
While she must finish quite,
A jealousy for her arose
So nearly infinite.

We waited while she passed;
It was a narrow time,
Too jostled were our souls to speak,
At length the notice came.

She mentioned, and forgot;
Then lightly as a reed
Bent to the water, shivered scarce,
Consented, and was dead.

And we, we placed the hair,
And drew the head erect;
And then an awful leisure was,
Our faith to regulate.

Sample Multiple Choice Questions:

- 1. Dickinson uses the word *italicized* (stanza 2) to mean**
 - A. clarified.
 - B. mad visible.
 - C. discerned.
 - D. emphasized.
 - E. set apart.

- 2. What effect does the repetition of *we* in the final stanza achieve?**
 - A. distance the speaker from her grief
 - B. transition from the dead to the living
 - C. emphasize the role of the speaker
 - D. draw the reader into the scene
 - E. deemphasize the uniqueness of the event

- 3. What about the metrical pattern of this poem alters the rhythm of the last two lines of each stanza?**
 - A. the uniformity of all lines
 - B. the end punctuation of each line
 - C. the shorter fourth line
 - D. the change of metric feet
 - E. the longer third line

- 4. A significant contrast explored by this poem is that between**
 - A. the ordinary and the profound.
 - B. faith and unbelief.
 - C. companionship and aloneness.
 - D. living and dying.
 - E. acceptance and grief.

- 5. The wording of the first line of the poem is an example of**
 - A. tragic irony.
 - B. situational irony.
 - C. verbal irony.
 - D. dramatic irony.
 - E. poetic justice.