Poetry Analysis

What is a poetry analysis?

A poetry analysis examines how different factors affect an interpretation of a poem. This form of analysis is similar to a literary analysis, but there are a few differences that can make the analysis of poetry more challenging than that of prose. One of these differences is that prose has the tendency to be longer than poetry; a poem and a work of prose can communicate the same message, but a poem does so in a few lines rather than a few pages. Because of this, there is often an element of expansion involved in poetry analysis. A good poetry analysis "unpacks" the poem by defining the poet's message and explaining how the poem communicates it. Because one poem can have a number of different interpretations, an interpretation is correct if it has evidence to support it; Shakespeare's "Sonnet 18" could be about Queen Elizabeth, but is probably not about internet censorship.

Some things to consider

- What is the context of the poem? Examples of context include the author's background and the period in which they are writing. You may need to do some research to explore the context of a poem.
- Are there any literary allusions or other references in the poem? How do they relate to the rest of the poem's content? For example, Ginsberg's "Kaddish," titled after a Jewish prayer of mourning, was written in remembrance of his mother[1].
- Examine the words of the poem: for example, does the writer use formal language or casual language?
- If all or part of the poem needed to be translated, does anything get lost in translation? The meaning of some words, phrases, and idioms are difficult to translate; for example, "L'esprit de l'escalier" literally translates to "staircase wit," but means "to have the perfect, witty response too late." You may even want to compare different translations.
- What is the style of poem? Is it a haiku, a sonnet, free form? Some styles of poetry are tied to other cultures more strongly than others, and different styles can place focus on different things. Different forms of poetry are also more difficult to write and can show how skilled a poet is.
- How is the poem structured? Is it long or short? Are there certain phrases repeated throughout? Is there a rhyme scheme, and if so, how might this affect the words the poet uses?
- Compare and contrast this poem to the author's other works; it a sonnet by a poet who traditionally writes free form? A collection of poems by a writer better known for their novels? A three line poem by a poet who typically writes three pages? Or is it one of the poet's many works of narrative poetry?
- What do other people, particularly scholars, think of this poem? Is it regarded as one of the poet's best works? One of the worst? Is it a good example of the poet's use of onomatopoeia? This is another opportunity for research.

[1] "Kaddish Summary." *Masterpieces of American Literature*. Ed. Steven G. Kellman. eNotes.com, Inc. 2006. Web. 26 Feb, 2015.

- What made the poem stand out to you? This can be as deep or as shallow as you would like; maybe you able to connect with a theme of loss, but maybe you just like that the poet used the word “kummerspeck” a lot.

Note that this is a non-exhaustive list; you may find yourself being able to use all these ideas, none of them, or even come up with new concepts to explore. Keep in mind that the most important thing is not to identify what the author is doing, but rather how it affects the poem; rather than a laundry list of devices, focus on how they combine to show a particular point.

Contact

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