

Making a critical appreciation of a poem

Making a critical analysis or appreciation of a poem is not as simple as narrating the story of the poem. The meaning or theme of a poem is not always clear from the denotations (apparent word-meaning) of the words used in it. The connotations (associated or secondary meanings) of the words and expressions used in a poem often constitute to the theme or real message of the poem. So, understanding a poem thoroughly with all possible connotations is crucial.

It is essential to discuss the style of writing and poetic devices the poet used. It is also important to connect the poet's techniques and use of poetic devices (the various literary terms) with the theme of the poem.

Note: *To help the students understand each poetic device explained in these notes and find out more, a list of the commonest poetic devices is appended hereunder. Students may learn them first and then read the poems and notes for easy and better understanding.*

1. A Girl's Garden by Robert Frost

Robert Frost is an American poet and is highly regarded for his realistic visualization of rural life in his poems. The poem, **A Girl's Garden** is a simple narrative telling the story of a girl who is now a grown-up woman and the neighbor of the poet. He makes her tell the tale of her childhood follies - a 'child-like thing' of making a garden. The little girl asks her father for a garden plot which he readily gives her. She has to ready it for cultivation by her own hands. She prepares the plot, fertilizes it with dung, sows a miscellany of seeds and prays the seeds to grow! All these actions now she calls aptly as a 'child-like thing'. By giving her such an unsuitable piece of land the father wants her to learn some basic lessons of life from her experience - noble ideas together with hard work will make life fruitful and pleasant.

The poem is comprised of twelve quatrains (four-line stanzas) with a rhyme-scheme of ABCB. The readers can easily visualize a unique and pleasant rural life. Throughout the poem, the reader envisages a life purely in a village atmosphere. For this purpose, the poet uses different types of **imageries**.

References to 'dung' and 'wheelbarrow' create a **visual image** of farmers' life. 'Not-nice load', referring to dung, points to the not-nice smell of the dung; and thus creates an **olfactory image** (sense of smell). The poet makes the girl 'beg the seeds to grow' and which gives the reader an **auditory image**! And at the same time, begging the seeds can also be seen as an example of the literary device **Apostrophe**.

The usage 'A hill each of potatoes...' is perfectly an example of the **Hyperbole**. This line and the succeeding lines: "A hill each of potatoes, Radishes, lettuce, peas, Tomatoes, beets, beans, pumpkins, corn, And even fruit trees" create **Assonance** as well (with 'ee' and 'o:' sounds).

2. Mother to Son by Langston Hughes

Langston Hughes was an American writer and social activist. He is best known as a leader of the Harlem Renaissance - a period of musical, literary, and cultural proliferation that began in New York's African-American community during the 1920s and early 1930s. The movement was instrumental in developing a new sense of Black identity.

In the poem **Mother to Son**, the mother says to her son that life has never been as smooth and comfortable as a "crystal stair" for her. Her stair has always had splinters and torn boards on it, as well as places without carpet. The stair is bare - a life bare of all luxuries and comforts. However, she still climbs on, reaching landings, turning corners sometimes going through darkness. She advises her son, "So boy, don't you turn back." She instructs him not to go back down the stairs even if he thinks climbing is hard. He should try not to fall because she is still going, still climbing, and her life "ain't been no crystal stair." In the poem, the poet depicts the mother as an epitome of the African-Americans' life during the early 20th century.

The poem is a *dramatic monologue* written in the **Free Verse style** which is an open form of poetry. It does not use consistent meter patterns, rhyme, or any other musical pattern. The tone of the poem is didactic, encouraging, and hopeful.

The poet excellently exploits all the possibilities of the visual imagery by using words like 'tacks' and 'splinters' to portrait the hardships; "boards torn up,/And places with no carpet on the floor—/Bare" to represent miseries and poverty of the mother. The word 'dark' shows hopeless condition of the mother.

The use of the vernacular and dialectic language is adequate enough to portrait an illiterate, poor woman in readers' imagination.

The life is compared to a crystal staircase and maintains it throughout the poem. This is an example the extended **metaphor**.

Crystal is smooth and glamorous, but fragile and slippery. But the mother's life has never been smooth and luxurious; whereas her struggles and efforts have always been strong, steady and sturdy.

Alliteration is sparingly used in the poem such as the "d" and "s" sounds, as in "Don't you set down on the steps." The poet has used the device of **anaphora** in that "And" is used at the beginning of many of the lines.

3. Blowin' in the Wind by Bob Dylan

Bob Dylan is an American singer and song-writer. His writings have political as well as literary influences of his time and incidents – the Civil Rights Movement of 1960s. The poem, 'Blowin' in the Wind' was the anthem of the Movement.

In this poem, the poet asks nine questions to which no specific answers are given or expected. All the answers are known to all and blowing in the wind. People only need open their eyes and ears to catch the answers.

The poet asks first "how many roads must a man walk down before you call him a man?" How much a man should experience in life or how long a man should endure in life before he is recognized as a human being? He asks, how many seas a white dove should sail before it can peacefully rest or sleep finally in the sand. White doves are symbol of peace, and when are they going to get really the symbolized peace? The question, "how many times the cannon balls must fly before they are banned forever" is similar to the second question. White doves and banning of cannon balls are signals of the arrival peace and end of wars and conflicts; but when will they all be realized?

How long a mighty authority as huge and strong as a mountain can exist in front of equally or more powerful ocean of protests of common people who are deprived of their fundamental rights? How long the people of a nation can be kept under slavery? How long can the rulers or common people pretend to be blind, deaf and dumb? How many times a man should look up to see the sky, how many ears he should have to hear the cry of the down-trodden, and how many people should die before he realizes that many have already died? The people in authority should see and hear the reality and the people who are subjected should rise to the occasion to protest against the injustices.

These questions are the best example of the literary device **Rhetorical question**. The poet talks about the answers which are available or known easily to whoever actually wants them. He keeps on asking questions and talks about answers repeating the same lines "the answer, my friend, is blowin' in the wind, the answer is blowin' in the wind" without actually answering, and creating another poetic device namely **Refrain**.

4. The Ballad of Father Gilligan by W. B. Yeats

W B Yeats, an Irish poet and one of the noted figures of the 20th century literature, depicts in this poem the poverty and extreme religiosity of the Irish rural life of his time.

This poem tells the story of an old priest Father Gilligan. Half of his people in the parish were either in sick-bed or already dead due to an epidemic. Day and night Father Gilligan was in service of them and he was very tired and weak. He could not attend one sick-man's last moments, as he fell asleep in his chairs. Realizing that he failed to do his duty, next day morning in great grief Father Gilligan rode on his horse to the man's house. Where, his wife told the priest that her husband had already died and she asked him why he came again. From her question

Father understood that in his absence God had sent an angel to perform his duties. He knelt and cried in repentance and thanked God for His mercy.

This poem is a perfect example of the class of poems or songs called **Ballad**. It is written in multiple stanzas of four lines each, keeping a regular rhyme-scheme of **ABCB**. Though not specifically said, the setting of the poem is a country-side dwelled by poor people. The mentioning of the father's riding a horse "*by rocky lane and fen*" and phrases like "**green sod**" show us more of the settings of the poem.

The poem is rich with imageries. **Visual Imagery**: We see the dusk and the dawn with presence of moths, we see the night sky twinkling with millions of stars and we watch the whole world gets covered in darkness. We can also visualize the image of Father riding his horse by the rocky and grassy country-sides. **Auditory Imagery**: we hear leaves shaking in the wind and sparrows chirping. Also, the cry of repentance from the priest calling "Mavrone", mavrone!"

The two lines, "*For half his flock were in their beds,/ Or under green sods lay*" are **metaphoric** with sick and death respectively, denoting that half of the villagers are either in sick-beds or in graves due to some devastating epidemic. The lines "*... he turned and died /As merry as a bird*" is an example of the literary device **Simile**. The repetition of the line, "*The old priest, Peter Gilligan*", constitutes for the use of **Refrain** in the poem.

5. Poetry by Pablo Neruda

The Chilean poet Neftali Ricardo Reyes Basoalto was a diplomat and politician as well. He wrote using his pen-name Pablo Neruda. In the poem 'Poetry' the poet Pablo Neruda talks about poetry that arrived in search of him. He did not know where it came from, or how or when. He did not hear any voices speaking to him. He says he was summoned away by an invisible force, and the poetry touched him. The theme of the poem in simple words is the ecstatic experience of the poet embraced by the poetic creativity. He had in his mind ideas which he could not express effectively before he was blessed by that creativity.

Something started in his soul, like a fever, and he made his own way, deciphering the "fire of poetry." He wrote his first feeble, faint, substance-free line, and suddenly, the heavens opened up and he could see everything from the planets to the shadows, fire, arrows and flowers, making up the universe. By the arrival of poetic inspiration, his imagination became boundless.

Although he was an infinitesimal being, by the touch of poetry, he was suddenly elevated to a world of ecstasy, felt of himself being pure part of the abyss and was set free to wheel with the stars. He describes the whole experience as his "heart breaking loose on the wind."

Free verse is the style of the poem; passion or ecstasy is the tone. '*The poetry arrived in search of the poet and touched him*'. Assuming poetry as a person, the poetic device **Personification** is very aptly applied here.

‘Winter’ and ‘river’ represent a ‘frozen’ but ‘flowing’ state which makes a contrast. In the same way, expressions like ‘not voices’, ‘not words’, ‘not silence’, ‘pure nonsense’, ‘pure wisdom’ are example of subtle application of the literary device **Contrast**. The poet has not used the end-rhyme, but instances of **assonance** in the line “*I don't know how or when*” (internal rhyme) are there to add to the rhythm. Application of **Alliteration** can be seen in lines, “*and something started in my soul, / fever or forgotten wings*” and “*planets, / palpitating plantations,*”.

By the touch of the poetry, a world of ecstasy is opened in the mind of the poet. References to *flowers, violent fires, the branches of night, the heavens, wings, planets, plantations, part of abyss* etc. create beautiful and perfect **visual images** of the universe in the imaginations of the readers.

6. The School Boy by William Blake.

William Blake is an English poet and painter. He is considered as the most influential literary figure of the Romantic Age of the English literature.

In this poem, the poet critically points out the meaninglessness of the modern class-room education system. Through the perspective of a school boy, the poet asks some questions to parents who are representatives of our society. How can a bird that is born for joy sing songs when it is caged? In the same way, how can a boy, who wants to be in the company of a skylark and huntsman when they sing in a summer morning, sit in a classroom under the cruel eyes of teachers and forget his youthful spring?

In the poem there are a lot of visual and auditory imageries. The skylark, birds, cruel-eyed teacher, caged bird, nipped buds, stripped plants, blossoms, huntsman’s horn are **visual images**. Birds’ songs, skylark’s singing, the sound of the huntsman’s horn and sighs of the school-children are examples of **auditory images**.

The poet compares the children to caged birds, asking, "How can the bird that is born for joy / Sit in a cage and sing?" In the next stanza, the children are compared to “nipped flower buds” and “tender plants stripped / Of their joy in the springing day”. These comparisons constitute well for the use of the poetic device **metaphor**.

SOME COMMON FIGURES OF SPEECH

1. ALLITERATION:

The alliteration is the repetition of an initial consonant sound in successive words, as in "a *peck* of *pickled peppers*".

*Here is an example of alliteration from a poem by Wordsworth:
And sings a solitary song*

That whistles in the wind.

Note: The repetition of similar consonant **sounds** makes the alliteration, not merely the letters.

E.g. A *cute child*. (Here, the letter C is repeated, but the sound is different. So, it is not an example of the Alliteration.)

A *clever king*. (Here, the letters are different, but sounds are same and repeated. So, it is an example of the Alliteration.)

2. ANAPHORA:

The repetition of the same word or phrase at the beginning of successive clauses or verses is called **anaphora**.

("But *one hundred years later*, the Negro still is not free. *One hundred years later*, the life of the Negro is still sadly crippled by the manacles of segregation and the chains of discrimination. *One hundred years later*, the Negro lives on a lonely island of poverty in the midst of a vast ocean of material prosperity. *One hundred years later*, the Negro is still languishing in the corners of American society and finds himself an exile in his own land.")—"I Have A Dream" by Martin Luther King Jr.

"**Strike** as I struck the foe!
Strike as I would
Have struck those tyrants!
Strike deep as my curse!
Strike!—and but once!" (Byron, *Marino Faliero*)

3. ANTITHESIS:

Antithesis is the usage of contrasting ideas in the same sentence within a parallel grammatical structure.

To err is human, to forgive divine.
Man proposes; God disposes.
Speech is silver, but silence is gold.
Not that I loved Caesar less, but that I loved Rome more.

4. APOSTROPHE:

Addressing directly to a dead or imaginary person or to a personified object or an abstract idea as if having life.

"O, pardon me, thou bleeding piece of earth,
That I am meek and gentle with these butchers!
Thou art the ruins of the noblest man
That ever lived in the tide of times." (Shakespeare, *Julius Caesar*)

"Hello darkness, my old friend
I've come to talk with you again." (Paul Simon, *The Sounds of Silence*).

5. ASSONANCE:

Assonance is the repetition of identical or similar vowel sounds in neighboring words in a line or verse. (Letters does not matter, only the sound)

"A host of golden daffodils" (repetition of long O sound) (William Wordsworth, 'Daffodils'.)

"Tyger, Tyger burning bright in the forest of the night" (repetition 'ai' sound) (William Blake's "Tyger")

6. EPISTROPHE

This literary device is contrasted with Anaphora. In Epistrophe, a sequence of words or phrases are repeated at the end of neighbouring clauses.

"There is no Negro **problem**. There is no Southern **problem**. There is no Northern **problem**. There is only an American **problem**". -Lyndon B. Johnson in *We Shall Overcome*.

"... this nation, under God, shall have a new birth of freedom — and that government of **the people**, by **the people**, for **the people**, shall not perish from the earth".- Abraham Lincoln in *the Gettysburg Address*.

7. EUPHEMISM:

Usage of inoffensive or mild words/phrases instead of offensive or harsh and hard words.

Examples: Use of the phrase *passed away* instead of saying *died*.
You are telling me a *fairy tale* = You are telling me a *lie*.

8. HYPERBOLE:

Usage of exaggerated statements for emphasis or special effect.

Here is the smell of blood still; all the perfumes of Arabia will not sweeten this little hand.
I will swim seven seas to see you, dear!
I am so hungry that I can eat an elephant.

9. IMAGERY:

Imagery is the use of figurative language to create a visual representation of ideas in our mind. Though it is normally associated with visual images, it is also connected with other physical senses like sense of hearing (**auditory**), sense of smell (**olfactory**), sense of touch (**tactile**), sense of taste (**gustatory**).

- *It was dark and dim in the forest.*
The words “dark” and “dim” are visual images.
- *The children were screaming and shouting in the fields.*
“Screaming” and “shouting” appeal to our sense of hearing, or auditory sense.
- *He whiffed the aroma of brewed coffee.*
“Whiff” and “aroma” evoke our sense of smell, or olfactory sense.
- *The girl ran her hands on a soft satin fabric.*
The idea of “soft” in this example appeals to our sense of touch, or tactile sense.
- The fresh and juicy orange is very cold and sweet.
“Juicy” and “sweet” – when associated with oranges – have an effect on our sense of taste, or gustatory sense.

10. IRONY:

1-Verbal Irony: The use of words to convey the opposite of their literal meaning. *2-Situational Irony:* A situation that ends up in quite a different way than what is generally expected. *3- Dramatic Irony:* This is commonly found in plays, movies and sometimes in poetry. Writers use this device for creating situations in which the audience or reader knows more about the situations and events than the characters are aware of them. The dramatic irony happens when the character’s thoughts and the audience’s knowledge become contradictory.

**“Water, water, everywhere,
And all the boards did shrink;
Water, water, everywhere,
Nor any drop to drink.”** (*The Rime of the Ancient Mariner*, Samuel Coleridge)

10. LITOTES:

Expressing an affirmative idea by negating its opposite.

I am not a fool to believe that. (I am intelligent enough not to believe that)
We are citizens of India, not a mean country. (India is a great country)

11. METAPHOR:

A metaphor is an implied simile in which two unlike things are compared as they are one and the same, without using ‘as’ or ‘like’.

He was a lion in the fight.
All the world is a stage; All the men and women merely players.

12. METONYMY:

In metonymy one word or phrase is substituted for another with which it's closely associated, such as "Crown" for "Royal power", "the Bench" for "the judges".

Pen (writer or written word) *is mightier than sword* (military power).

13. ONOMATOPOEIA:

Onomatopoeia is the use of words (such as *hiss* or *murmur*) that imitate the sounds associated with the objects or actions they refer to. (A word's pronunciation imitates its sound.)

A **cuckoo** bird.

When the door of the cage was opened with a **bang**, the tiger jumped out with a **roar**.

14. OXYMORON:

Use of seemingly contradictory words or expressions to talk about something.

random order, original copy, criminal justice, old news, student teacher, deafening silence, ill health, small crowd, working vacation, clearly misunderstood etc.

She accepted it as the *kind cruelty* of the surgeon's knife.

15. PARADOX:

In *paradox* a statement appears to be self-contradictory or silly but may include a latent truth.

Your enemy's friend is your enemy.

"I must be cruel to be kind." (Shakespeare, Hamlet)

"Child is father of the man" (William Wordsworth)

16. PERSONIFICATION:

In personification, inanimate objects, ideas or animals are given human qualities and spoken of as living and intelligent persons.

Death lays **his** icy hand on Kings.

"When all at once I saw a crowd,
A host, of golden daffodils;

Beside the lake, beneath the trees,
Fluttering and dancing in the breeze.” (William Wordsworth)

17. PUN:

A pun is a play on words, either on different senses of the same word or on the similar sense or sound of different words.

Life depends upon the *liver*.

An ambassador is an honest man who *lies* abroad for the good of his country.

18. REFRAIN:

Refrain is a poetic device that repeats some lines or parts of a poem at regular intervals in different stanzas.

"The answer, my friend, is blowin' in the wind,
The answer is blowin' in the wind." - (*Blowin' in the Wind* by Bob Dylan)

19. RHETORICAL QUESTION:

A *rhetorical question* is asked when the questioner himself already knows the answer or an answer is not actually demanded. Such a question is used to emphasize a point or draw the audience's attention.

“How many roads must a man walk down
Before you call him a man?
How many seas must a white dove sail
Before she sleeps in the sand?” - (*Blowin' in the Wind* by Bob Dylan)

20. SIMILE:

In a simile two different kinds of objects are compared using *like*, *as*, or *so*.

He was like a lion in the fight.

“**I wandered lonely as a cloud**
That floats on high o'er vales and hills”, (William Wordsworth)
