

BASICS OF ANALYZING POETRY

What is poetry? W.H. Auden called it the “clear expression of mixed feelings.” Rita Dove referred to it as “language at its most powerful.” Just as there is no one right way to define poetry, there is no one right way to analyze a poem. Though this open-endedness can make poetry analysis difficult at first, there are several simple ways to get started.

First, when writing a poetry analysis, it is important to use the correct terminology. Here are some common terms and what they mean:

- **Line** → a single line of text in a given poem
 - When quoting a poem, line breaks are represented with a forward slash
 - Example: In “Funeral Blues,” Auden writes, “Pour away the ocean and sweep up the wood;/For nothing now can ever come to any good.”)
- **Stanza** → a unit of lines grouped together in a poem consisting of two or more lines
- **Speaker** → the voice of the poem (similar to a narrator in prose); even if a poem uses first-person pronouns, the speaker is not necessarily the same as the author of the poem
- **Meter** → the rhythmic structure of a poem, often established by a pattern of stressed and unstressed syllables
- **Enjambment** → occurs when a sentence or phrase is cut off by the end of one line and continues into the next without punctuation
 - Example: “No one had the time & our solution to it/was to buy shinier watches.” (“In the Hospital” by Chen Chen)
- **Volta** → a turning point within the poem (coming from the Italian word for “turn”); this can involve a significant shift in tone, style, or point of view.

Poetry also comes in a variety of forms. Most modern poetry is written in **free verse**, which does not follow a consistent rhyme scheme or meter. **Blank verse** refers to poetry that follows a consistent meter but not a rhyme scheme. Here are some traditional structural forms in poetry and how to identify them:

- **Petrarchan sonnet** → A poem with 14 lines divided into an octave (stanza with eight lines) and a sestet (six lines). Follows an ABBAABBA CDCDCD rhyme scheme. The volta occurs between the two stanzas.
 - Example: “The New Colossus” by Emma Lazarus
- **Shakespearean sonnet** → A poem with 14 lines divided into three quatrains (four lines) and a couplet (two lines). Follows an ABAB CDCD EFEF GG rhyme scheme and, traditionally, iambic pentameter. The volta occurs before the final couplet.
 - Example: “Sonnet 18” by William Shakespeare
- **Villanelle** → A poem with 19 lines divided into five tercets (three lines) and a quatrain. Follows an ABA ABA ABA ABA ABAA rhyme scheme. The first and third lines are repeated throughout the poem.
 - “One Art” by Elizabeth Bishop
- **Sestina** → A poem with 39 lines divided into six sestets and a tercet called an envoi. The six words at the end of each line are repeated throughout the stanzas.
 - “Sestina: Altaforte” by Ezra Pound.
- **Haiku** → A poem with three lines following a 5-7-5 syllable structure. Haikus written in English often forego the syllable structure and instead focus on capturing a fleeting moment or emotion.
 - “The Old Pond” by Matsuo Bashō

Now that we know the basic terminology needed to discuss poetry, let's delve into poetry analysis. The first step, of course, is to read the poem, taking note of your first impressions. Then, read it again, considering the following line of questioning:

1. **Structure:** Take note of the poem's structural elements: how many stanzas? Who is the speaker? Is the poem structured or written in free verse? Are the lines short, long, enjambed? Most importantly, how do these choices influence your interpretation of the poem?
2. **Dynamism:** Poetry is almost always *dynamic*—it doesn't end quite how it begins. Take note of how the poem changes or evolves as it progresses, whether stylistically, structurally, and/or in meaning.
3. **Stabilizing Context/Common Interpretation:** What does the poem seem to be about upon an initial reading? What does it seem to be saying at face value? If the poem is well-known, what are the ways in which it is traditionally interpreted?
4. **Destabilizing Context/Unusual Elements:** Finally, analyze the poem for unusual elements that complicate the stabilizing context, add nuance to it, or call it into question (looking at your observations from steps one and two will help here!).

Tenderness and Rot Kay Ryan

Tenderness and rot
share a border.
And rot is an
aggressive neighbor
whose iridescence
keeps creeping over.

No lessons
can be drawn
from this however.

One is not
two countries.
One is not meat
corrupting.

It is important
to stay sweet
and loving.

Structure: The poem is written in free verse, not following any discernible rhyme scheme or meter. The poem is rife with enjambed lines, and the lines themselves are notably short in length, many as short as just one or two words. The stanzas become shorter as the poem progresses.

Dynamism: The poem begins with an observation about rot, that it is an "aggressive neighbor." However, the speaker goes on to immediately dismiss their own claim, instead offering a new one: what is important is to "stay sweet and loving."

Stable context: Upon an initial reading, the meaning of the poem seems clear: there is no point in dwelling on the nature of rot because all that matters is to "stay sweet and loving."

Destabilizing Context: Though the speaker's words imply that they prioritize tenderness over rot, the structure of the poem does not. The speaker's descriptions of rot are complex (using words like "iridescence" and "corrupting") and comparatively long, physically dominating the poem. In comparison, the speaker's description of tenderness is indirect, short, and overly simplistic. Compared to the poem's beginning, its conclusion feels abrupt, calling the speaker's confidence in their own claim into question.

Sonnet 29 William Shakespeare

When, in disgrace with fortune and men's eyes,
I all alone beweep my outcast state,
And trouble deaf heaven with my bootless cries,
And look upon myself and curse my fate,

Wishing me like to one more rich in hope,
Featured like him, like him with friends possessed,
Desiring this man's art and that man's scope,
With what I most enjoy contented least;

Yet in these thoughts myself almost despising,
Haply I think on thee, and then my state,
(Like to the lark at break of day arising
From sullen earth) sings hymns at heaven's gate;

For thy sweet love remembered such wealth brings
That then I scorn to change my state with kings.

Structure: The poem is a traditional Shakespearean sonnet written in iambic pentameter with a volta after the second stanza.

Dynamism: The poem begins with a self-pitying tone but ends joyous and triumphant.

Stable Context: Though the speaker is dissatisfied with many aspects of their life, remembering their beloved reminds them how fortunate they are.

Destabilizing Context: Though the volta of a Shakespearean sonnet traditionally comes before the final couplet, this poem's transition into the speaker's beloved comes early, as though two lines is not enough to capture the full extent of their love. By "spilling over" into the third stanza, the structure of the poem reinforces its content.