

The Nature of Proof in the Interpretation of Poetry
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That a poem may have varying interpretations is a critical commonplace. That all interpretations of a poem are equally valid is a critical heresy, but one which perennially makes its reappearance in the classroom. "Why can't a poem mean anything that a reader sees in it?" asks the student. "Why isn't one person's interpretation of a poem as good as anyone else's?" According to his theory the poem is like an inkblot in a Rorschach personality test. There are no correct or incorrect readings: there are only readings which differ more or less widely from a statistical norm.

This theory is one that poets themselves have sometimes seemed to lend support to. T.S. Eliot, in response to conjectures about the meanings of his poems, has replied, "If it suits you that way, then that is all right with me." Yeats once wrote to a friend: "I shall not trouble to make the meaning clear- a clear, vivid story of a strange sort is enough. The meaning maybe different with everyone." But one is not really quarreling with Eliot or Yeats in challenging this point of view. Eliot, as a critic dealing with the poetry of others, has been constantly concerned with determining precise meanings. No poet, however, likes to be caught in the predicament of having to explain his own poems. He cannot say, "What I *really* meant was..." without admitting failure, or without saying something different (and usually much less) than what his poem said. And in doing so, he gives this diminished reading the stamp of his own authority. "A writer," E. A. Robinson once told an interviewer, "should not be his own interpreter." It is significant that Yeats was quite willing to write, for an anthology, a comment on one of his poems so long as the comment did not appear over his own name. "If an author interprets a poem of his own," he explained to the editor, "he limits its suggestibility." The poet is eager to be understood. But whereas the comments of a critic may raise the curtain on a reader's understanding of a poem, the poet's own comments drop the curtain. We must therefore not mistake the defensive gestures of a poet like Yeats or Eliot for a declaration of his critical theory.

In this paper, accordingly, I wish, not to advance any new proposition, but only to reassert the accepted critical principle that for any given poem there are correct and incorrect readings, and to illustrate the process by which the correctness of a reading may be proved or disproved. For logical proof, though not experimental proof, is at least as possible in the interpretation of poetry as it is, say, in a court of law.

The criteria used for judging any interpretation of a poem are two: (1) A correct interpretation, if the poem is a successful one, must be able to account satisfactorily for any detail it is wrong. Of several interpretations, the best is that which most fully explains the details of the poem without itself being contradicted by any detail. (2) If more than one interpretation satisfactorily accounts for all the details of the poem, the best is that which is most economical, i.e. which relies on the fewest assumptions not grounded in the poem itself. Thomas Huxley illustrates this principle of judgments in a different area in one of his essays. If, he says, on coming downstairs in the morning we find our silverware missing, the window open, the mark of a dirty hand on the window frame, and the impress of a hobnailed boot on the gravel outside, we logically conclude that the silverware has been stolen by a human thief. It is possible, of course, that the silverware was taken by a monkey and that a man with dirty hands and hobnailed boots looked in the window afterwards; but this explanation is far less probable, for, though it too accounts for all the facts, its rests on too many additional assumptions. It is, as we would say, too "farfetched."

These two criteria, I ask you to notice, are not different from those we bring to the judgment of a new scientific hypothesis. Of such we ask (1) that it satisfactorily account for as many as possible of the known facts without being contradicted by any fact. (2) That it be the simplest or most economical of alternative ways of accounting for these facts.

PROBLEMS IN INTERPRETATION

Let me illustrate by presenting two problems in interpretation. The first is an untitled poem by Emily Dickinson:

Where ships of purple gently toss
On seas of daffodil,
Fantastic sailors mingle,
And then- the wharf is still.

The second consists of a pair of poems, one by Walt Whitman, the other by Herman Melville. The poem by Whitman appeared in his volume of Civil War poems, *Drum-Taps*. Melville, who was Whitman's almost exact contemporary, also published a book of war poems (*Battle-Pieces*), though the following poem did not appear in it. I ask you with the Dickinson poem merely to decide what it is about; with the Whitman and Melville poems, to determine the principal difference between them.

An Army Corps on the March
With its clod of skirmishers in advance,
With now the sound of a single shot snapping
 Like a whip, and now an irregular volley,
The swarming ranks press on and on, the dense
 Brigades press on,
Glittering dimly, toiling under the sun- the
 Dust- cover'd men,
In columns rise and falls to the undulations of the
 Ground,
With artillery interspers'd- the wheels rumble,
 The horses sweat,
As the army corps advances
 -Walt Whitman

The Night-March

With banners furled, and clarions mute,
 An army passes in the night;
And beaming spears and helms salute
 The dark with bright.

In silence deep the legions stream,
 With open ranks, in order true;
Over boundless plains they stream and gleam-
 No chief in view!

Afar, in twinkling distance lost,
 (So legends tell) he lonely wends
And back through all the shining host
 His mandate sends.
 -Herman Melville

Several years ago I presented the Emily Dickinson poem to a number of students and colleagues and discovered that not one of them interpreted the poem as I did. Almost universally they read the poem as being descriptive of a scene in a garden or meadow. A consensus of their interpretations runs as follows:

Tall purple flowers (iris?) stand above the daffodils and are tossed in the breeze. Bees and butterflies (“fantastic sailors”) mingle with the flowers. The wind stops, and then the garden is still.

Beside this let me place the interpretation which I hope to prove the correct one:

The poem is a description of a sunset. The “ships of purple” are clouds. The “seas of daffodil” are skies colored golden by the setting sun. The “fantastic sailors” are the shifting colors of the sunset, like old-fashioned seamen dressed in gorgeous garments of many colors brought from exotic lands. The sun sinks and the wharf (the earth where the sun set- the scene of this colorful activity) is still.

How do we demonstrate the “sunset” reading to be correct and the “garden” reading to be incorrect? By some such argument as this:

“Ships of purple” is a more apt metaphor for clouds than for flowers, both as to size and to motion (we often speak of clouds as “sailing”). “Daffodil” would normally be in the plural if it referred to flowers rather than to color: why would not the poet say “On a sea if daffodils”? “Mingle” fits better than the intertwining colors of the sunset than it does the behavior of bees, which mingle with flowers perhaps but not, except in the hive, with each other (and the flowers here are “seas”). The “garden” reading provides no literal meaning for “wharf.” The “garden” reading, to explain why the wharf becomes “still,” demands the additional assumption that the wind stops (why should it? And would the bees and butterflies stop their activity if it did?); the disappearance of the sun, in contrast, is inevitable and implicit in the sunset image. Finally, the luxuriance of imagination manifested in the poem is the more natural consequence of looking at clouds and sunset sky than at flowers. We look at clouds and see all sorts of things- ships, castles, animals, landscape- but it takes some straining to conjure up a scene such as this one from a garden.

The “garden” reading is therefore incorrect because it fails to account for some details in the poem (the wharf), because it is contradicted by some details (the singular use of “daffodil”). Because it explains some details less satisfactorily than the “sunset” reading (“ships of purple,” “mingle”), and finally because it rests on assumptions not grounded in the poem itself (the wind stops). The “sunset” reading explains all these details satisfactorily.

Ordinarily we have only the internal evidence of the poem itself on which to rest an interpretation. In this instance, as I discovered some time after the incident related, there is external proof also of the “sunset” reading. The poem was first published in 1891 under the title “Sunset.”

Though this title was editorially supplied by T. W. Higginson after Emily’s death, its correctness is established by two other poems in which the poet uses substantially the same imagery (yellow and purple, sea and ships). One poem itself contains the word “sunset”; the other was entitled “Sunset” by the poet in a letter to a friend

The Whitman-Melville problem I presented more recently as a theme assignment to an Honor section in freshman English. Again I received not a single correct solution. I should confess at the outset, however that I am guilty of having planted a false clue. The false clue lies in the information that Melville wrote a book of poems

about the Civil War- perfectly true, of course, but totally irrelevant. This poem is not about the Civil War, as is manifest from “spears and helms”- items not stocked by civil War quartermasters. More important, this poem is not about war at all. The main difference between this poem and Whitman’s is that Whitman’s is about an army corps on the march; Melville’s is about the stars.

My freshmen immediately identified this subject matter when I wrote the Melville poem on the board and circled five words: “beaming,” “bright,” “gleam,” “twinkling,” “shining.” The five words together form a constellation whose reference, once the pattern is recognized, is almost immediately clear. That “twinkling” modifies “distance” and that “shining” modifies “host” provides additional confirmation. The phrase “host of heaven” is used extensively for stars in the Bible.

From this starting point the proof proceeds with logical rigor: (1) The close repetition of “beaming,” “bright,” “gleam,” “twinkling,” and “shining,” immediately suggests stars. (2) The setting is night. (3) The poem emphasizes the silence of the procession, which moves “in silence deep” and “with clarions mute.” (NO actual army, of course, no matter how secret its movements, is ever quite so stealthy. In Whitman’s poem “the wheels rumble,” as indeed wheels do.) (4) The poem also emphasizes the idea of infinite space: the army marches “over boundless plains”; its leader is “Afar, in twinkling distance lost.” (5) The army marches “With open ranks in order true”- a formation more star like than military. No actual legions ever “stream” in perfect order: but the stars keep an eternally fixed but open relation to each other. (6) Finally, no commander of this army is in view- a situation especially unusual in an army proceeding in perfect order. Indeed, the “army” interpretations cannot explain this detail without assumptions grounded *outside* the poem.

The real difficulty of interpreting the Melville poem is not simply descriptive, as Whitman is, but philosophical. As I read it, the poem poses the question of the existence of God. No God is observable in the heavens (which are silent), yet the stars follow an “order true,” and legends (e.g. the Bible) tell us that God orders them. These stories however, are indeed “legends,” i.e. they are of doubtful authenticity; and even if they be true, the God they speak of is “afar, in twinkling distance lost,” not in daily confrontation of man or nature. One hundred years earlier a poet writing on this theme would have declared without hesitation that “The heavens declare the glory of God, the firmament showeth his handiwork”; Melville ends his poem with a question of a doubt. In the nineteenth century the argument from design had been shattered.

If a poem, then, does have a determinable meaning- if, in the interpretation of poetry, we can’t say that “anything goes”- why does the opposite theory so often arise? Is it because of some false analogy drawn with music or abstract art? Perhaps. But, first of all, it arises because, within limits, there is truth in it. A poem- in fact, any pattern of words- *defines an area of meaning*, no more. Any interpretation is acceptable which lies within that area. The word “horse” may be justifiably call up in reader’s mind the image of a black, a roan, or a white horse; a stallion, a mare, or a gelding; even a wooden sawhorse, a human “workhorse,” or a female “clotheshorse.” But as soon as the word is combined with another, say, “roan,” the area of meaning is drastically reduced. It can still be stallion, mare, or gelding; but it cannot be a white or black horse, a “sawhorse,” or “clotheshorse.” Further expansions of the context limit the meanings still further. But *even without context* the word cannot mean cow.

In poetry, context may function to expand meaning as well as to limit it. Words in poetry thus have richer meanings than in prose- they may exhibit purposeful ambiguities- but the meanings are still confined to a certain area. With a poem like Whitman’s that area is fairly narrowly circumscribed. The reader may legitimately see a Northern or Southern army (if he knows nothing of Whitman’s life): in fact, if the poem is removed from its context in *Drum-Taps* he may legitimately see a Revolutionary War army: but in no case may he interpret the poem as being about stars.

THE PROBLEM OF SYMBOLS

The areas of greatest meaning are created by symbolical poems. "A symbol," writes John Ciardi, "is like a rock dropped into a pool: it sends out ripple in all directions, and the ripples are in motion. Who can say where the last ripple disappears?" True. But even a symbol does not have unlimited meaning. The pool in which the rock is dropped has borders. A symbol in literature is made up of words which, by the way they are used, have acquired a sometimes tremendously increased area of meaning. To switch from Ciardi's figure, we may envision such a symbol as a powerful beam of light flashed out into the darkness by a searchlight from point on earth. The cone of light is the area of meaning. Its point is precise and easily located. But its base fades out into the atmosphere. Its meanings are therefore almost infinite. But they are not unlimited. They must be found. At whatever distance from the apex, within the circumference of the cone.

By the very nature of the case the process of proof or demonstration with symbolic literature is more difficult than with nonsymbolic, just as complex logical problems are more difficult than the simple ones by which logicians demonstrate their principles. Scholars will continue to debate the meanings of the "white whale" in *Moby-Dick* for years to come. Their argument, however, has meaning. Some interpretations do make more sense than others. More than one meaning may be valid, but not just *any* meaning can be. The white whale is not an ink blot, not even a white ink blot.

Let me illustrate with a poem by William Blake:

The Sick Rose

O Rose, thou art sick:
The invisible worm
That flies in the night,
In the howling storm.

Has found out thy bed
Of crimson joy,
And his dark secret love
Does thy life destroy.

The essential difference between a metaphor and a literary symbol is that a metaphor means something else than what it is, a literary symbol means something more than what it is. In the words of Robert Penn Warren, a symbol "partakes of the reality which it renders intelligible": in the words of E. E. Stoll, a symbol "means what it says and another thing besides." If we use I. A. Richards' terms: vehicle and tenor for the two things equated by a metaphor, we must say that with a symbol the vehicle is part of the tenor. The vehicle in this case is not like one of those long trucks we see on the highways carrying automobiles from manufacturer to dealer; it is more like a new automobile filled with presents at Christmas time in which the automobile is part of the gift. Melville's "Night-March" is not really about an army at all: Blake's poem is about a rose and a cankerworm.

But Blake's poem is so richly organized that the rose and the worm refuse to remain a rose and a worm. The phrase "dark secret love" is too strong to be confined to the feeding of the worm on the rose; "thy bed of crimson joy" suggests much more than the rose bed which it literally denotes. The powerful connotations of these phrases added to those of "sick," "invisible," "night," and "howling storm," and combined with the capitalization of

“Rose” and the personification of the flower, force the reader to seek for additional meanings. Almost immediately the Rose suggests a maiden and the worm her secret lover; but these meanings in turn suggest still broader meanings as the cone of light broadens. The poem has been read by different readers as referring to the destruction of joyous physical love by jealousy, deceit, concealment, or the possessive instinct; of innocence by experience; of humanity by Satan; of imagination and joy by analytic reason; of life by death. Some of these meanings are suggested entirely by the poem itself, some by a knowledge also of Blake’s other writings.

It is not my purpose here to make a detailed examination of these interpretations in the light of my two criteria. My belief is that a case can be made for all of them: that the symbols allow them all: that we are not forced to choose between them, as we are forced to choose between the two interpretations of the Dickinson poem or the one by Melville. But if the rose can mean love, innocence, humanity, imagination, and life; and if the worm can mean the flesh, jealousy, deceit, concealment, possessiveness, experience, Satan, rationalism, death (and more), can the two symbols therefore mean just anything. The answer is No. The rose must always represent something beautiful or desirable or good. The worm must always be some kind of corrupting agent. Both symbols define an area of meaning, and a viable interpretation must fall within that area. Blake’s poem is not about the elimination of social injustice by an enlightened society; it is not about the eradication of sin by God; it is not about the triumph of freedom over tyranny. Any correct interpretation must satisfactorily explain the details of the poem without being contradicted by any detail; the best interpretations will rely on the fewest assumptions not grounded in the poem itself.

A rose is a rose is a rose, and is more than a rose. But a rose is not an ink blot. Nor is a poem.

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Questions for Poetry Discussion

1. Who is the *speaker* of this poem? What kind of person is he or she?
2. To whom is he or she speaking? In other words, describe the speaker's *audience*.
3. What is the *situation* and *setting* in time (era) and place?
4. What is the purpose of this poem?
5. State the poem's *central idea* or *theme* in a single sentence.
6. Indicate and explain (if you can) any *allusions*. Do the allusions share a common idea?
7. Describe the *structure* of the poem. What is the *meter* and *form*? (Scan it)
8. How do the structure of the poem and its content relate?
9. What is the *tone* (speaker's attitude toward the subject) of the poem? How is it achieved?
10. Notice the poem's *diction*. Discuss any words that seem especially well chosen.
11. What are the predominant *images* in the poem?
12. Note *metaphors*, *similes*, and *personification*, and discuss their effect.
13. Recognize and discuss examples of *paradox*, *overstatement*, and *understatement*.
14. Explain any *symbols*. Is the poem *allegorical*?
15. Explain the significance of any *sound repetition* (*alliteration*, etc.)
16. Discuss whether or not you think the poem is successful.

How Should We Read Poems? (the most basic rules of the game)

1. In early literature, at least, poems are composed of sentences. Do not let the line breaks distract you from your first duty, to read the sentences and to understand what the poet is saying. However, that's usually not easy for several reasons.
2. Poets often invert normal English Subject-Verb-Object word order. Straighten out the sentence's syntax if you can't understand it. Then look at the inversion--does it contain additional meaning or was it just necessary for metrical or rhyming effects?
3. Does the poem presume a dramatic situation in which there is a speaking persona and an implied audience, someone (not you!) spoken to? If so, figure out that situation and decide what we are to think about the speaker's message to the poem's implied audience.
4. Poets use figurative language, especially metaphors and similes, to populate the sentences with comparisons between many things and the subject of the sentence, or the verb, or its object. Unpack those comparisons and decide what the poet means in a literal sense. Then look at the kinds of things used in the comparisons and decide if they convey some additional, parallel meaning.
5. After you have ignored the poem's line construction to understand its sentences' literal sense and its figurative sense, take another look at those lines to see how they affect the rhythm of the poem. What is their meter and of what kinds of "feet" [metrical units] is that meter composed? In Elizabethan poetry, tetrameter (four-foot) lines often are used in songs, sometimes to lend an ironic or comic quickness to the line, whereas pentameter and hexameter (and etc.) longer lines often seem more grave and thoughtful. Do the lines have end-stops indicating they contain complete clauses (ending in . or ; or :)? Or are some enjambéd, running over the line break into the next line or even into the line after that? What is being said in the enjambéd lines? Does it involve some kind of "overflow" or "excess"?
6. Do the poem's lines break into stanzas, groups of lines, and if so, what is their pattern? Does the dramatic situation (above) have a turning point in the stanza structure, heading for some kind of climax, or is the poem's overall structure circular or repeating?
7. Having scanned the lines for their formal contribution to meaning, look at the poem's rhyme, both internal (within the lines) and at line ends. What is the rhyme scheme (unless it is "blank verse," unrhymed iambic pentameter)? Does the rhyme scheme coincide with any of the figurative language or literal sense of the poem's meaning which you discovered in your sentence-level reading? How does the rhyme contribute to the poem's meaning? You also may see some words that nearly rhyme (making allowances for Early Modern English's vowels!), and that is called "assonance."
8. Rhymes depend on vowel sounds, but an equally important part of the poem's formal "music" is its use of consonants. Look at the lines' initial consonants. If initial consonants are the same for two or more words in a line, you are looking at "alliteration," the formal tactic used instead of rhyme by poets in Old English, and by some Middle English poets. What do the alliterating words emphasize and how does that contribute to the poem's meaning?
9. Now that you have read and re-read the poem analytically, you are prepared to say something about how it works and what the poet meant to create. Discuss your evidence with others, read the poem aloud to each other, and thank the poet for her/his labors in the only way you now can. These poets all are dead, but their works live on in your performances of them.

Mnemonic Reminders (and some other stuff)

TP-CASTT Analysis

- Title: Ponder the title before reading the poem
- Paraphrase: Translate the poem into your own words
- Connotation: Contemplate the poem for meaning beyond the literal
- Attitude: Observe both the speaker's and the poet's attitude (tone)
- Shifts: Note shifts in speakers and in attitudes
- Title: Examine the title again, this time on an interpretive level
- Theme: Determine what the poet is saying

Shift (Progression)

Devices that help readers discover shift:

- Key words (but, yet, however, although)
- Punctuation (dashes, periods, colons, ellipsis)
- Stanza or paragraph divisions
- Changes in line or stanza length, or both
- Irony (sometimes irony hides shifts)
- Structure (how the work is written can affect its meaning)
- Changes in sound (may indicate changes in meaning)
- Changes in diction (ex: slang to formal language)

Elements of Tone (DIDLS)

- Diction: the connotation of the word choice
- Images: vivid appeals to understanding through the senses
- Details: facts that are included or omitted
- Language: the overall use of language, such as formal, clinical, jargon
- Sentence Structure: how structure affects the reader's attitude

Diction : Consider the following when discussing diction (word choice)
• monosyllabic/polysyllabic • colloquial / informal / formal • denotative/ connotative
• concrete / abstract • euphonious/cacophonous

SATTT

(Especially useful when first considering a narrative work) - Ask yourself these questions about what you've read.

- Setting: when and where is the event occurring? Could there be any symbolic significance to the author's choice of setting?
- Action: What is occurring in the passage? Why did the author choose those particular actions?
- Time: How much time elapses? How is the passage of time (if any) depicted? How is it significant to the text?
- Tone: What is the author's attitude toward the subject? What does that suggest about the author? the topic?
- Theme: What message is the author trying to convey? What lesson is being taught?

SOAPS

(A general mnemonic for any type of writing: what you should address immediately)

•Subject •Occasion •Audience •Purpose •Speaker

SQUIDS

(A reminder of the steps in the process of analysis and commentary)

- S = Select
- Q = Quotation: a specific line (or passage)from the text
- U = Understand
- I = Identify (explain, hold forth, etch)
- D = Define/Describe/Deconstruct its
- S = Significance

Figurative Language (a START!)

1. Alliteration is the practice of beginning several consecutive or neighboring words with the same sound, e.g., The twisting trout twinkled below.
2. Assonance is the repetition of vowel sounds in a series of words, e.g., the words "cry" and "side" have the same vowel sound and so are said to be in assonance.
3. Consonance is the repetition of a consonant sound within a series of words to produce a harmonious effect, e.g., And each slow dusk a drawing-down on blinds. The "d" sound is in consonance. as well, the "s" sound is also in consonance.
4. Simile is a comparison of two different things or ideas through the use of the words like or as. It is definitely stated comparison, where the poet says one thing is like another, e.g., The warrior fought like a lion.
5. Metaphor is a comparison without the use of like or as. The poet states that one thing is another. It is usually a comparison between something that is real or concrete and something that is abstract, e.g., Life is but a dream.
6. Personification is a kind of metaphor which gives inanimate objects or abstract ideas human characteristics, e.g., The wind cried in the dark.
7. Onomatopoeia (Imitative Harmony) is the use of words in which the sounds seem to resemble the sounds they describe, e.g., hiss, buzz, bang. when onomatopoeia is used on an extended scale in a poem, it is called imitative harmony.
8. Hyperbole is a deliberate, extravagant, and often outrageous exaggeration. It may be used either for serious or comic effect; e.g., The shot that was heard 'round the world.
9. Understatement (Meiosis) is the opposite of hyperbole. It is a kind of irony which deliberately represents something as much less than it really is, e.g., I could probably manage to survive on a salary of two million dollars per year.
10. Paradox is a statement which contradicts itself. It may seem almost absurd. Although it may seem to be at odds with ordinary experience, it usually turns out to have a coherent meaning, and reveals a truth which is normally hidden, e.g., The more you know, the more you know you don't know (Socrates).
11. Oxymoron is a form of paradox which combines a pair of contrary terms into a single expression. This combination usually serves the purpose of shocking the reader into awareness, e.g., sweet sorrow, wooden nickel.
12. Pun is a play on words which are identical or similar in sound but which have sharply diverse meanings. Puns may have serious as well as humorous uses, e.g., When Mercutio is bleeding to death in *Romeo and Juliet*, he says to his friends, "Ask for me tomorrow, and you shall find me a grave man."
13. Irony is the result of a statement saying one thing while meaning the opposite. Its purpose is usually to criticize, e.g., It is simple to stop smoking. I've done it many times.
14. Sarcasm is a type of irony in which a person appears to be praising something while he is actually insulting the thing. Its purpose is to injure or hurt, e.g., As I fell down the stairs headfirst, I heard her say "Look at that coordination."
15. Antithesis - involves a direct contrast of structurally parallel word groupings generally for the purpose of contrast, e.g., Sink or swim.
16. Apostrophe is a form of personification in which the absent or dead are spoken to as if present, and the inanimate as if animate. These are all addressed directly, e.g., The answer, my friend, is blowing in the wind.
17. Allusion is a reference to a mythological, literary, historical, or Biblical person, place, or thing e.g., He met his Waterloo.
18. Synecdoche (Metonymy) is a form of metaphor. In synecdoche, a part of something is used to signify the whole, e.g., All hands on deck. Also, the reverse, whereby the whole can represent a part, is synecdoche, e.g., Canada played the United States in the Olympic hockey finals. Another form of synecdoche involves the container representing the thing being contained, e.g., The pot is boiling. One last form of synecdoche involves the material from which an object is made standing for the object itself, e.g., The quarterback tossed the pigskin. In metonymy, the name of one thing is applied to another thing with which it is closely associated, e.g. I love Shakespeare.

Tone Words

A list of tone words is one practical solution for providing a basic tone vocabulary. An enriched vocabulary enables you to use more specific and subtle descriptions of an attitude you discover in a text. Include such words as:

angry	sad	sentimental
sharp	cold	fanciful
upset	urgent	complimentary
silly	joking	condescending
boring	poignant	sympathetic
afraid	detached	contemptuous
happy	confused	apologetic
hollow	childish	humorous
joyful	peaceful	horrific
allusive	mocking	sarcastic
sweet	objective	nostalgic
vexed	vibrant	zealous
tired	frivolous	irreverent
bitter	audacious	benevolent
dreamy	shocking	seductive
restrained	somber	candid
proud	giddy	pitiful
dramatic	provocative	didactic

Use dictionaries for definitions of the above tone words. You need explicit dictionary meanings to establish subtle differences between tone words. Keeping a list of precise tone words, and adding to it, sharpens your articulation in stating tone

Words That Describe Language

Different from tone, these words describe the force or quality of the diction, images, and details. These words qualify how the work is written, not the attitude or tone.

jargon	pedantic	poetic
vulgar	euphemistic	moralistic
scholarly	pretentious	slang
insipid	sensuous	idiomatic
precise	exact	concrete
esoteric	learned	cultured
connotative	symbolic	picturesque
plain	simple	homespun
literal	figurative	provincial
colloquial	bombastic	trite
artificial	abstruse	obscure
detached	grotesque	precise
emotional	concrete	exact

What is a Sonnet?

A sonnet is a poem of fourteen iambic pentameter lines. It follows one of several set rhyme schemes. The two basic types are

- the Italian or Petrarchan: generally an octave + a sestet (abbaabba + cdecde, cdcdcd or cdedce). The octave presents a narrative, raises a question or states a proposition to which the sestet then responds.
- the English or Shakespearean: uses four divisions: three quatrains + rhymed couplet for a conclusion. The quatrains can have different rhyme schemes, but the typical pattern is abab cdcd efef gg.

But there is a third type:

- the Spenserian: quite rare, this style complicates the Shakespearean form by linking rhymes in the quatrains: abab bcbc cdcd ee.

What are Petrarchan Conceits?

A "conceit" is a fanciful notion, generally expressed through an elaborate analogy or metaphor. The sonnet tradition carried its own peculiar conceits which have made their way into our social consciousness.

From Petrarch, the sonneteers of the Renaissance took not only a conventional form but also conventional sentiments. The relation between the poet and his beloved is presented in terms of an idealized courtly love: the persona is a "humble servant" tossed by a tempest on the sea of despair, the beloved can wound with a glance, and her beauty is described in stereotypical fashion. Her cheeks are like roses, her eyes sparkle, and her lips are ruby red.

Shakespeare pokes great fun at such conventions with his "Sonnet 130: My Mistress' Eyes Are Nothing Like the Sun."

What is a Villanelle?

This French syllabic form has no set number of syllables per line; common choices seem to be between eight and eleven. (English versions of the villanelle sometimes appear in accentual syllabics, featuring a perennial favorite, iambic pentameter.) The villanelle carries a pattern of only two rhymes, and is marked most distinctively by its alternating refrain, which appears initially in the first and third lines of the opening tercet. In all, it comprises five tercets and a concluding quatrain. Before the villanelle was made literary by the French in the late 1500s, it existed as a villanella, "an old Italian folk song with an accompanying dance."--from Handbook of Poetic Forms, ed. by Ron Padgett.

"The word villanelle, or villenesque, was used toward the end of the sixteenth century to describe literary imitations of rustic songs. Such villanelles were alike in exhibiting a refrain which testified to their ultimate popular origin. The villanelle was, in a sense, invented by Jean Passerat (1534-1602)."

Passerat's poem about a turtledove is said to be the singular originator of the scheme described by Turco.

"Passerat had written other villanelles, so-called, that did not conform to this model at all. The great Hellenist was undoubtedly aware of the innovation that he had introduced, but the form caught the attention of his contemporaries and became fixed in his lifetime. Pierre Richelet and other writers on the theory of poetry designated as villanelles only those poems that conformed to Passerat's classic example."

--from Lyric Forms from France, by Helen Louise Cohen.

"It is useful to describe the villanelle as a form in which power resides in the interplay of constant (repeating) and variable

elements....a major challenge of the villanelle: packing the second through fifth tercets with appropriately varied and dense material that 'balances' and justifies the repeated material."

Author Philip K. Jason sees the villanelle as presenting a three-part structure of meaning: "introduction, development, and conclusion....this tendency for the material to split into three sections gives the villanelle form an affinity with basic cognitive and expository processes. Technically, the three parts derive from the relative weight and position of the repeating lines." Also in this vein, he discusses the idea that the villanelle lends itself nicely to "duality, dichotomy, and debate." We can imagine why.

Jason recognizes ways in which the form may be made more flexible. Regarding the refrain, he notes that altering punctuation between the lines of identical words can produce different effects. He also notes the possibilities of enjambing perhaps just the A2 tercets, and leaving those ending with A1 as stopped lines, or vice versa.

On the relation of form to function, Jason asserts that "the villanelle is often used, and properly used, to deal with one or another degree of obsession." He takes this interpretation rather seriously, saying that "There is even the potential for the two repeating lines to form a paradigm for schizophrenia....The mind may not fully know itself or its subject, may not be in full control, and yet it still tries, still festers and broods in a closed room towards a resolution that is at least pretended by the final couplet linking of the refrain lines." Wow.

--from "Modern Versions of the Villanelle," by Philip K. Jason. *College Literature*, 1980.

Definition of the Sestina

--from the *Encyclopedia Britannica* (Britannica.com):

An elaborate verse form employed by medieval Provençal and Italian, and occasional modern, poets. It consists, in its pure medieval form, of six stanzas of blank verse, each of six lines--hence the name. The final words of the first stanza appear in varied order in the other five, the order used by the Provençals being: *abcdef, faebdc, cfdabe, ecbfad, deacfb, bdfeca*. Following these was a stanza of three lines, in which the six key words were repeated in the middle and at the end of the lines, summarizing the poem or dedicating it to some person. The sestina was invented by the Provençal troubadour Arnaut Daniel and was used in Italy by Dante and Petrarch, after which it fell into disuse until revived by the 16th-century French Pléiade, particularly Pontus de Tyard. In the 19th century, Ferdinand, comte de Gramont, wrote a large number of sestinas, and Algernon Charles Swinburne's "Complaint of Lisa" is an astonishing tour de force--a double sestina of 12 stanzas of 12 lines each. In the 20th century, Ezra Pound, T.S. Eliot, and W.H. Auden wrote noteworthy sestinas.

The Form of the Sestina

--(from Turco, *The New Book of Forms*)

The sestina is a French form, syllabic originally but often adapted to accentual-syllabic lines in English verse. It consists of 39 lines divided into 6 sestets and one triplet, called the *envoi*. It is normally unrhymed--instead, the six end-words of the first stanza are picked up and reused as the end-words of the following stanzas in a specific order. In the *envoi*, one end-word is buried in each line, and one is at the end of each line. Lines can be of any single length.

Each stanza repeats the end-words in the order 615243. The easiest way to describe the repetition is through a list; the actual reason or meaning of the repetition has been lost. The end words repeat as follows (numbers are the lines of the poem, and capital letters stand for the six end-words).

AP Testing - Test Reminders

- ✓ Multiple Choice - if you don't know the answer but can
- ✓ eliminate one or more answers, guess.
- ✓ If you really don't know an answer, skip that question
- ✓ and come back if there's time. But be careful your numbers match up on your answer sheet. Take a second and check each number as you go along.
- ✓ Analytical Essays - Show respect for the authors.
- ✓ Don't say they're stupid or don't know what they're talking about. Chances are it's not Virginia Woolf who doesn't know what she's talking about.
- ✓ Don't refer to the authors by their first names. In
- ✓ the intro, refer to the author by both names, then henceforth use the last name. The only time you might refer to the author by the first name is when the author writes about a childhood experience (like the Eudora Welty and Gary Soto essays).
- ✓ Spell out words like and, with, and because (not &, w/,
- ✓ and b/c). This is an important international exam, not a note to a pal. You wouldn't wear jeans to the prom.
- ✓ Avoid cliches - "You can't judge a book by its
- ✓ cover," "A picture's worth a thousand words," etc.
- ✓ Too many students use them, and they set the reader's teeth on edge.
- ✓ Avoid the words "paints a picture in the reader's
- ✓ mind." Too many students use it, and it doesn't say anything. Identify and explain the effect or tone the author is creating.
- ✓ Notice I said and explain - identifying isn't enough.
- ✓ Stick to an analysis of the essay. Don't wander off
- ✓ into your personal experiences.
- ✓ Annotate and write a brief outline before you begin
- ✓ writing.
- ✓ Don't define terms. The readers are experienced AP
- ✓ teachers and English professors. We don't need to be told a simile is a comparison using like or as.
- ✓ Don't waste time on a long or fancy intro. Throw away
- ✓ the bread and get to the meat.
- ✓ Referring to line numbers is a waste of time. We don't
- ✓ look at them.
- ✓ Students often think the words states and quotes are
- ✓ interchangeable. They're not. Charles Dickens states, "It was the best of times..." not quotes. To quote is to repeat what someone else said.
- ✓ It's okay to use an ellipsis in a quote as long as the
- ✓ quote still makes sense. If you write, "Allusions to Sophocles...to a more general argument" (line 12) means you want me to go look it up. I've got a thousand essays to grade and you want me to look it up??!. Homey don't play dat.
- ✓ Persuasive essay - It doesn't matter if you defend,
- ✓ challenge, or qualify as long as you do it well.
- ✓ Think of the prompt as a springboard for creating your
- ✓ own argument. You don't need to discuss Susan Sontag or Neil Postman or Milan Kundera, and, for heaven's sake, don't try to analyze their argument. Your purpose here is to persuade the reader that your argument is sound and reasonable.
- ✓ The reader wants "specific evidence" - two important
- ✓ words, often overlooked. The courtroom does not want the hypothetical or the theoretical. Use your own experience, incidents you know about, or what you have read about (or, in Sontag's case, the pictures you have seen).
- ✓ Plan a brief outline
- ✓ If you give me 3 examples of specific evidence, make
- ✓ sure they illustrate 3 different points, not 3 examples to illustrate the same point.
- ✓ When thinking of specific evidence, if it's the first
- ✓ thing that pops to mind, chances are it's the first thing that comes to everyone else's mind. (OJ Simpson and Bill Clinton are recent examples.) Go with your second or third idea. Your reader will thank you.

MULTIPLE CHOICE QUESTIONS

- Read passage carefully to make sure that you understand the meaning behind the excerpt/poem
- Do the easiest questions first
- If you find yourself spending too much time on a particular question, circle it in your test booklet, skip it, and come back to it later if you have the time
- Always watch for key words such as: EXCEPT, all of the following are true EXCEPT, which of the following are FALSE, pick the BEST answer choice, etc. . .
- Do not randomly guess, as each wrong answer will deduct a quarter point off your total multiple choice score
- Try to eliminate wrong answer choices on difficult questions. If you are able to eliminate at least two choices (three is better) then you may try to make an educated guess, as you have a better possibility of guessing correctly
- Pace yourself by working quickly but carefully because time is a factor
- Don't panic if you do not understand a passage. Try reading the passage again and looking at the questions to see if they will help give you a clue about what the passage may be about
- Always try your best!

ESSAY QUESTIONS

- Remember that the questions do not have to be answered in order. Answer the questions in the order that you wish to answer them
- Remember to pace yourself, giving each question about 40 minutes
- DO NOT SUMMARIZE THE PLOT
- Support with EXamples (S.E.X.)
- In the question, underline exactly what the question is asking (the what and the how)
- Remember to answer both the "what" and the "how" in your essay
- Cluster your ideas on the passage itself before writing your essay
- Think TP-CASTT(Title, Paraphrase, Connotation, Attitude, Shift, Title, Theme)
- On the open ended literature question, remember that you do not have to choose from the list of books listed - they are just suggestions (but you should know that these books are listed because they definitely apply to the question)

