

TITLE: Language to use when analyzing/ discussing poetry

Context used: IE Seminar on Food Culture (Students were asked to analyze a food-themed poem and apply as many of the poetic terms as possible when discussing it.)

Level: Perhaps better suited to the IE III level

Possible application: Since many of the literary concepts used to analyze and discuss poetry are the same as those used for prose (e.g., perspective, irony, metaphor, motif) it is possible to illustrate them through discussions of poems that correspond to the IE themes. You and your students may find poems at these sites:

<https://www.poetryfoundation.org/collections> [A search box at the top allows you to search for poems by theme or key word.]

<https://poetryinvoice.ca/read> [Use the magnifying glass icon at the top of the page to search for poems on various themes.]

At the end of this document there is a sample poetry assignment that can be adapted for use in Core classes to introduce the literary concepts to students by having them apply the concepts to poems of their choice. Those poems can touch on the IE I, II, and III themes.

Language to use when talking about poetry

alliteration

The repetition of the same or similar sounds at the beginning of words

“What would the world be, once bereft/Of wet and wildness?” (Gerard Manley Hopkins, “Inversnaid”)

anaphora

Often used in political speeches and occasionally in prose and poetry, anaphora is the repetition of a word or words at the beginning of successive phrases, clauses, or lines to create a sonic effect.

Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.’s famous “I Have a Dream” speech, which uses anaphora not only in its oft-quoted “I have a dream” refrain but throughout, as in this passage when he repeats the phrase “go back to”:

Go back to Mississippi, go back to Alabama, **go back to** South Carolina, **go back to** Georgia, go back to Louisiana, **go back to** the slums and ghettos of our northern cities, knowing that somehow this situation can and will be changed.

apostrophe

Words that are spoken to a person who is absent or imaginary, or to an object or abstract idea.

The poem God’s World by Edna St. Vincent Millay begins with an apostrophe: “O World, I cannot hold thee close enough!/Thy winds, thy wide grey skies!/Thy mists that roll and rise!”

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assonance

The repetition or a pattern of similar sounds, especially vowel sounds.

“Thou still unravished bride of quietness,/Thou foster child of silence and slow time” (“Ode to a Grecian Urn,” John Keats).

consonance

The repetition of similar consonant sounds, especially at the ends of words, as in *lost* and *past* or *confess* and *dismiss*.

couplet

In a poem, a pair of lines that are the same length and usually rhyme and form a complete thought. Shakespearean sonnets usually end in a couplet.

examples:

I saw a little hermit crab
His coloring was oh so drab

It's hard to see the butterfly
Because he flies across the sky

Hear the honking of the goose
I think he's angry at the moose

ellipsis

In poetry, the omission of words whose absence does not impede the reader's ability to understand the expression. For example, Shakespeare makes frequent use of the phrase “I will away” in his plays, with the missing verb understood to be “go.” T.S. Eliot employs ellipsis in the following passage from “Preludes”:

You curled the papers from your hair,
Or clasped the yellow soles of feet
In the palms of both soiled hands.

The possessive “your” is left out in the second and third lines, but it can be assumed that the woman addressed by the speaker is clasping the soles of her own feet with her own hands.

epigraph

A quotation from another literary work that is placed beneath the title at the beginning of a poem or section of a poem. For example, Grace Schulman's “American Solitude” opens with a quote from an essay by Marianne Moore. Lines from Phillis Wheatley's “On Being Brought from Africa to America” preface Alfred Corn's “Sugar Cane.”

hyperbole

A figure of speech in which deliberate exaggeration is used for emphasis.

Many everyday expressions are examples of hyperbole: *tons of money*, *waiting for ages*, *a flood of tears*, etc.

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irony

As a literary device, irony implies a distance between what is said and what is meant. Based on the context, the reader is able to see the implied meaning in spite of the contradiction. When William Shakespeare relates in detail how his lover suffers in comparison with the beauty of nature in "My Mistress 'Eyes Are Nothing like the Sun," it is understood that he is elevating her beyond these comparisons; considering her essence as a whole, and what she means to the speaker, she is more beautiful than nature.

litotes

A figure of speech in which a positive is stated by negating its opposite. Some examples of litotes: *no small victory, not a bad idea, not unhappy*. Litotes is the opposite of hyperbole.

metaphor

When two things are compared, usually by saying one thing is another.

Some examples of metaphors: *the world's a stage, he was a lion in battle, drowning in debt, and a sea of troubles*.

meter

The arrangement of a line of poetry by the number of syllables and the rhythm of accented (or stressed) syllables.

metonymy

A figure of speech in which one word is substituted for another word or concept with which it is closely associated.

For example, in the expression *The pen is mightier than the sword*, the word *pen* is used for "the written word," and *sword* is used for "military power."

motif

A central or recurring image or action in a literary work that is shared by other works and may serve an overall theme. For example, the repeated questions of an *ubi sunt* poem compose a motif of the fleeting nature of life. Jonathan Swift's *Gulliver's Travels* and John Bunyan's *A Pilgrim's Progress* both feature the motif of a long journey. Motifs are sometimes described as expressions of a collective unconsciousness.

neologism

A newly coined word. Lewis Carroll's "Jabberwocky" is filled with them, including "slithy" and "gimble."

ode

A formal, often ceremonious lyric poem that addresses and often celebrates a person, place, thing, or idea.

onomatopoeia

A figure of speech in which the sound of a word imitates its sense (for example, "choo-choo," "hiss," or "buzz").

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paradox

As a figure of speech, it is a seemingly self-contradictory phrase or concept that illuminates a truth. For instance, Wallace Stevens, in "The Snow Man," describes the "Nothing that is not there and the nothing that is." Alexander Pope, in "An Essay on Man: Epistle II," describes Man as "Great lord of all things, yet a prey to all."

persona

A dramatic character, distinguished from the poet, who is the speaker of a poem. The identity of the speaker is not always clear.

personification

the attribution of human nature or character to animals, inanimate objects, or abstract notions, especially as a rhetorical figure.

Examples:

The stars danced playfully in the moonlit sky.

The run down house appeared depressed.

The first rays of morning tiptoed through the meadow.

She did not realize that opportunity was knocking at her door.

Time creeps up on you.

perspective / point of view

a particular attitude toward or way of regarding something; a point of view. It is important to remember that a narrative or poem does not necessarily reflect the writer's own perspective, beliefs, or values.

refrain

A line or group of lines that is repeated throughout a poem, usually after every stanza.

rhyme

The occurrence of the same or similar sounds at the end of two or more words. When the rhyme occurs in a final stressed syllable, it is said to be masculine: *cat/hat, desire/fire, observe/deserve*. When the rhyme occurs in a final unstressed syllable, it is said to be feminine: *longing/yearning*.

simile

A figure of speech in which two things are compared using the word "like" or "as."

An example of a simile using *like* occurs in Langston Hughes's poem "Harlem": "What happens to a dream deferred?/ Does it dry up/ like a raisin in the sun?"

stanza

Two or more lines of poetry that together form one of the divisions of a poem. The stanzas of a poem are usually of the same length and follow the same pattern of meter and rhyme.

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synecdoche

A figure of speech in which a part is used to designate the whole or the whole is used to designate a part.

For example, the phrase “all hands on deck” means “all men on deck,” not just their hands. The reverse situation, in which the whole is used for a part, occurs in the sentence “The U.S. beat Russia in the final game,” where the U.S. and Russia stand for “the U.S. team” and “the Russian team,” respectively.

EXAMPLE OF AN ASSIGNMENT THAT HAS STUDENTS ANALYZE AND PRESENT ON POEMS OF THEIR CHOICE

This is an example of a poetry assignment. This particular one was used in an IE Seminar A on Food Culture, so the poems were food-related, but the same sort of assignment can be used for poems of any sort.

Poetry presentations

Recite the poem in a way that you think it should be recited. Capture the feeling and the atmosphere of the poem. You do not have to memorize it entirely, but practice reading it enough so that you can read it smoothly. Use the “read and look up” method.

Look up the poet and try to find out as much as you can about him or her. Tell us the poet’s background and whether any aspects of their identity or ethnic affiliation have some connections to the content of the poem.

A week before your presentation, contribute challenging vocabulary that appear in your assigned poem to the flashcard set in Quizlet named “Vocabulary from Poems about Food.”

Create some tasks that help your classmates understand the context of the poem. Your tasks may involve some visual supports: images shown as a slideshow using PPT or a film that you make that is inspired by the poem. If the poem has a narrative structure you might create a timeline of the events described in it, which you will jumble and have your classmates reassemble.

Your presentation must elicit some discussion about the poem among your classmates.

By the end of your presentation, be sure that your classmates understand the...

- * theme of the poem
- * cultural context in which it is set
- * atmosphere or overall feel of the poem (i.e., tone)
- * literal and symbolic meanings of the language used
- * metaphors and any other relevant literary concepts that come through in the poem

You will have 7-10 minutes for your presentation. They will be staggered throughout the semester.