ENG 1121, Prof. Scanlan

**Reading and Analyzing Poetry: A General Guideline**

Poetry is written in lines and stanzas instead of sentences and paragraphs. But sometimes poets write using sentences, and sometimes stanzas can look like paragraphs. Still, poetry has unique forms and uses compact, concise language. Very often, a poem comes loaded with emotion and images. Sometimes, however, a poem is abstract and hard to understand. Poetry takes time and attention; and the more time and attention you can spend on a poem, the more rewarding the experience.

**Here is a general guide for reading a poem.**

1. Slowly read the poem with an open mind. Try to get a general sense of the poem’s meaning. Don’t worry about nailing down every possible meaning and nuance.

2. Visualize the poem’s primary images.

3. Follow the poem’s punctuation as a guide to comprehension. Sometimes poets do not use punctuation, and the meaning flows from line to line. Sometimes, poets use punctuation to break up lines and reinforce certain words or ideas.

4. Read the poem several more times. The meaning of the poem will become clearer with each reading. Think about the “snowplow” reading/writing method.

5. Look up unfamiliar references and words. Poets use a wide variety of figurative language such as allusions, symbols, and metaphors, and a poem’s meaning might hinge upon some word or phrase that you don’t know. Spend a few minutes defining and understanding unknown words or phrases.

**General guide for analyzing poetry.**

After reading the poem several times and looking up unknown words, you are ready to ask specific questions for analyzing poetry. I suggest writing down the answers to these questions and marking up the poem as a way to remember important ideas and to engage with it on a deeper level.

1. How does the poem make you feel? Shocked, saddened, angered, annoyed, happy, romantic? (feelings/emotion)

2. Who is the speaker? What do you know about him or her? What tone do they use? (speaker)

3. What is the setting? (setting/situation/context)

4. What happens in the poem? Some poems are lyrics, while others are narrative. A lyric poem suggests a mood or emotion, while narrative poems tell a story. (plot)

5. How does the poet use language? Metaphors, symbols, and personification are key terms for poetry; these three terms are types of figurative language. (figurative language)

6. Does the poem rhyme? Does it have interesting sounds? Is it musical or fragmented? (sound/rhythm)

7. What is the form or structure of the poem? How does it use couplets, line length, stanzas, etc? (form/structure)

8. What themes or subjects are present in the poem? For example, does the poem include references to death or love or nature? (themes/subjects)

\*\* Remember: there is no hidden meaning in any poem. All possible ways to understand, analyze, and appreciate a poem are available to you—with work, time, and energy.