

Introduction to Poetry: First Essay Assignment

Due Tuesday, October 6, by the beginning of class. Length: approximately five double-spaced pages. Please speak to me, or email, if you have questions about document design (i.e., margins and other format issues), or about how to meet the length requirement without padding.

Assignment Description & Task

Over the past several weeks, we've engaged in the close analysis of individual poems. This assignment asks you to do alone what we did as a group, to analyze and interpret a short poem. Demonstrate that you understand the terms in our textbook and can apply them. By "terms," I mean words such as "irony," "allusion," "connotation," "metaphor," and "apostrophe." More important than terminology, though, is your understanding of the poem and your ability to express that understanding cohesively.

Formulate a thesis whose claim you can demonstrate and elaborate throughout the paper. It should be a complex statement summarizing your overall interpretation of the poem. In the essay, you need to *analyze what the poem means as a whole and describe how its particulars work*. The more of the details you can include in your analysis, the stronger and more interesting your reading will be.

Choose one of the four poems below: "Twenty-year Marriage," "Episode of Hands," "The Outlaw," or ["My mouth hovers across your breasts"]. I've asked particular questions about each poem, in order to help to focus your response. You don't have to use my questions. You may have questions of your own. You may also find it constructive to apply questions I've asked, or suggestions I've made, on another poem.

Always imagine an intelligent reader who may have no knowledge of our class and no special understanding of poetry; in other words, write for a general audience. Think of your goal for this assignment as twofold: to explain a poem to your reader and to offer your own particular insights. You are welcome to elaborate your personal reactions to the poem, but keep in mind that opinions do not replace interpretation.

I would rather that you *not* use outside sources to write this essay because you'll learn more if you do it all by yourself. But if you must consult an outside source—be it a website, a critical article, or something else—you have to document it properly, in order to avoid plagiarism. I have not taught you how to do this; so if you don't know how, you will need to speak with me directly. The following appears in the syllabus: "Plagiarism will result in an F for the course, and I will report the student for academic discipline." Unintentional plagiarism is still plagiarism. Even worse is deliberately substituting someone else's work for your own.

Poems

"Twenty-year Marriage," Ai

You keep me waiting in a truck
with its one good wheel stuck in the ditch,
while you piss against the south side of a tree.
Hurry. I've got nothing on under my skirt tonight.
That still excites you, but this pickup has no windows
and the seat, one fake leather thigh,
pressed close to mine is cold.
I'm the same size, shape, make as twenty years ago,
but get inside me, start the engine;
you'll have the strength, the will to move.
I'll pull, you push, we'll tear each other in half.
Come on, baby, lay me down on my back.
Pretend you don't owe me a thing
and maybe we'll roll out of here,
leaving the past stacked up behind us;
old newspapers nobody's ever got to read again.

What do we know about the speaker? What attitude does the speaker have toward the past? toward the person addressed? Is this a love poem? Why, or why not? Where does this poem surprise us?

"Episode of Hands," Hart Crane

The unexpected interest made him flush.
Suddenly he seemed to forget the pain,—
Consented,—and held out
One finger from the others.

The gash was bleeding, and a shaft of sun
That glittered in and out among the wheels,
Fell lightly, warmly, down into the wound.

And as the fingers of the factory owner's son,
That knew a grip for books and tennis
As well as one for iron and leather,—
As his taut, spare fingers wound the gauze
Around the thick bed of the wound,
His own hands seemed to him
Like wings of butterflies
Flickering in sunlight over summer fields.

The knots and notches,—many in the wide
Deep hand that lay in his,—seemed beautiful.
They were like the marks of wild ponies' play,—
Bunches of new green breaking a hard turf.

And factory sounds and factory thoughts
Were banished from him by that larger, quiet hand
That lay in his with the sun upon it.
And as the bandage knot was tightened
The two men smiled into each other's eyes.

Answering a simple question may help you to realize a reading of this poem: what is it about, beyond the simple narrative it tells? What does the poem say on a literal level; and what, on a figurative? Why do words like "flush" and "Consented" appear in the first stanza? What do you make of the social context of the poem?

"The Outlaw," Seamus Heaney

Kelly's kept an unlicensed bull, well away
From the road: you risked fine but had to pay

The normal fee if cows were serviced there.
Once I dragged a nervous Friesian on a tether

Down a lane of alder, shaggy with catkin,
Down to the shed the bull was kept in.

I gave Old Kelly the clammy silver, though why
I could not guess. He grunted a curt 'Go by

Get up on that gate.' And from my lofty station
I watched the business-like conception.

The door, unbolted, whacked back against the wall.
The illegal sire fumbled from his stall

Unhurried as an old steam engine shunting,
He circled, snored and nosed. No hectic panting,

Just the unfussy ease of a good tradesman;
Then an awkward, unexpected jump, and

His knobbed forelegs straddling her flank,
He slammed life home, impassive as a tank,

Dropping off like a tipped-up load of sand.
'She'll do,' said Kelly and tapped his ash-plant

Across her hindquarters. 'If not, bring her back.'
I walked ahead of her, the rope now slack

While Kelly whooped and prodded his outlaw
Who, in his own time, resumed the dark, the straw.

What sort of reaction does this poem elicit? Are you puzzled, disgusted, intrigued? Do you find its subject proper to poetic writing? Why, or why not? What statement does the poem make about its speaker? Why is business an important theme in the poem?

[My mouth hovers across your breasts], Adrienne Rich

My mouth hovers across your breasts
 in the short grey winter afternoon
 in this bed we are delicate
 and tough so hot with joy we amaze ourselves
 tough and delicate we play rings
 around each other our daylight candle burns
 with its peculiar light and if the snow
 begins to fall outside filling the branches
 and if the night falls without announcement
 these are the pleasures of winter
 sudden, wild and delicate your fingers
 exact my tongue exact at the same moment
 stopping to laugh at a joke
 my love hot on your scent on the cusp of winter

What do you make of the way Rich breaks up many of this poem's lines? Why does the poem employ this technique? How does it use winter imagery to convey an emotional tone? Do you find this love poem usual, or unusual? What do you make of "my tongue exact" in line 12?

Note: The title is in brackets because this is an extract from a long series of short poems, but please treat it as a poem in itself.

Tips for This Assignment

- Although you should cite all or most of the poem within your essay, huge blocks of poetry do not lend themselves to close analysis. Thus, it almost always works better to cite a stanza, or a few lines, at a time. If your citation covers less than four lines, you can cite it within your writing, always using slash marks to indicate line breaks. Here is an example: Heaney writes, “on a tether / Down a lane of alder” (4-5). Notice that line numbers always appear after the quotation, in parenthesis. If the citation has more than three lines, you must indent it,

so that it looks something like
this. The words indented in this way
should look exactly like they do
in the printed poem, as you must always let
the reader know where the line
breaks are.

It is expected that you will closely analyze all the words you cite. Thus, after a block quotation, like the one above, there should be several sentences setting out a reading of the lines you’ve cited, paying close attention to the individual words, images, line breaks, rhymes, and anything else you see in them.

- It is your job to organize your reading of the poem: the poem cannot serve to organize your argument. Thus, you always need to introduce and contextualize the words of the poem that you cite. This is true even if you read the poem in sequential order. You must forge the connections between the different parts of the poem that you analyze. Remember that I have asked you to write for a reader who perhaps has never read the poem and doesn’t necessarily have a copy of it at hand.
- While it is possible to put your thesis at the end of the essay, usually it is easier and works better in a short essay to put the thesis in the opening paragraphs. Whether they contain the thesis or not, the opening paragraphs should serve to introduce your reading of the poem. It is not a good idea to engage in close reading in the first paragraph: save that for the body of the essay.
- The conclusion of your essay *is not* a place just to rephrase what you’ve already said. Use your conclusion to spell out the implications of your findings, to raise further questions, or to bring in a new interpretive angle to the poem. Don’t bore the reader by repeating yourself.
- These tips will apply to all of the assignments in this course.
- Ask me any and all questions you have. I’m happy to look at parts or all of your rough draft.