

Introduction to Poetry: Second Essay Assignment

Due Thursday, November 20. Length: five double-spaced pages. Longer is always cool. 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

In the past several weeks, we've added meter to our study of poetic devices. This assignment asks you to do the same kind of interpretation that you performed with the First Essay Assignment, but it also requires that you scan the poem and discuss how its metrical form contributes to its meaning.

You should 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 both to *analyze what the poem means as a whole* and *describe how its particulars work, including the meter*. The more of the details you can include in your analysis, and the more you can say about meter, the stronger and more interesting your reading will be.

Choose one of the four poems below: "O What Is That Sound," "The Definition of Love," "Herald," or "November Cotton Flower."

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 own reactions to the poem, but keep in mind that personal opinions do not replace interpretation.

Again, 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. (Of course, you should consult the dictionary.) But if you must consult an outside source—be it a website, a critical article, or something else—you must 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 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.

O What Is That Sound, W.H. Auden

O what is that sound which so thrills the ear
Down in the valley drumming, drumming?
Only the scarlet soldiers, dear,
The soldiers coming.

O what is that light I see flashing so clear
Over the distance brightly, brightly ?
Only the sun on their weapons, dear,
As they step lightly.

O what are they doing with all that gear
What are they doing this morning, this morning?
Only the usual manoeuvres, dear,
Or perhaps a warning.

O why have they left the road down there
Why are they suddenly wheeling, wheeling?
Perhaps a change in the orders, dear,
Why are you kneeling ?

O haven't they stopped for the doctor's care
Haven't they reined their horses, their horses ?
Why, they are none of them wounded, dear,
None of these forces.

O is it the parson they want with white hair;
Is it the parson, is it, is it ?
No, they are passing his gateway, dear,
Without a visit.

O it must be the farmer who lives so near
It must be the farmer so cunning, so cunning?
They have passed the farm already, dear,
And now they are running.

O where are you going? stay with me here!
Were the vows you swore me deceiving, deceiving?
No, I promised to love you, dear,
But I must be leaving.

O it's broken the lock and splintered the door,
O it's the gate where they're turning, turning
Their feet are heavy on the floor
And their eyes are burning.

The Definition of Love, Andrew Marvell

My love is of a birth as rare
As 'tis for object strange and high;
It was begotten by Despair
Upon Impossibility.

Magnanimous Despair alone
Could show me so divine a thing
Where feeble Hope could ne'er have flown,
But vainly flapp'd its tinsel wing.

And yet I quickly might arrive
Where my extended soul is fixt,
But Fate does iron wedges drive,
And always crowds itself betwixt.

For Fate with jealous eye does see
Two perfect loves, nor lets them close;
Their union would her ruin be,
And her tyrannic pow'r depose.

And therefore her decrees of steel
Us as the distant poles have plac'd,
(Though love's whole world on us doth wheel)
Not by themselves to be embrac'd;

Unless the giddy heaven fall,
And earth some new convulsion tear;
And, us to join, the world should all
Be cramp'd into a planisphere.

As lines, so loves oblique may well
Themselves in every angle greet;
But ours so truly parallel,
Though infinite, can never meet.

Therefore the love which us doth bind,
But Fate so enviously debars,
Is the conjunction of the mind,
And opposition of the stars.

Herald, Josephine Miles

Delivers papers to the doors of sleep,
Tosses up news upon the shores of sleep
In the day's damp, in the street's swamp wades deep
And is himself the boy drowned, drowned in sleep.

Crosses to the corner with the lamp
Already dark, even asleep with the lamp,
Treads in the wet grass, wades, leaps as in a swamp
The gutters dark with darkening of the lamp.

Hears only the thud and thud against the doors
Of the news falling asleep against the doors,
The slip and drip of mist on the two shores,
Sees without light or sight the coasts of doors.

Sees at a door a light, Herald, Sir?
Wakes to the whistle and light, Herald, Sir?
To the latch lifted and the face's blur
Wakes; wakes coin, day, greeting, Herald, Sir.

November Cotton Flower, Jean Toomer

Boll-weevil's coming, and the winter's cold,
Made cotton-stalks look rusty, seasons old,
And cotton, scarce as any southern snow,
Was vanishing; the branch, so pinched and slow,
Failed in its function as the autumn rake;
Drouth fighting soil had caused the soil to take
All water from the streams; dead birds were found
In wells a hundred feet below the ground—
Such was the season when the flower bloomed.
Old folks were startled, and it soon assumed
Significance. Superstition saw
Something it had never seen before:
Brown eyes that loved without a trace of fear,
Beauty so sudden for that time of year.