

English 320

Paper #1: Formal Analysis of a Poem

1300 – 1600 words (approximately 4 – 6 pages)

Please refer to the syllabus for the due date!

In a formal analysis of a poem (sometimes called an “explication”), you focus on specific textual details, considering how the formal properties of verse (the sorts of things we’re studying in the first five weeks of class) contribute to what you see as some broader meaning or significance. Usually such an analysis moves through the text sequentially; it discusses how the meaning of the text unfolds as readers make their way through it. And as its name suggests, an explication makes *explicit* what might otherwise remain unobserved. It explains how a poem is built in such a way as to achieve certain effects, and it demonstrates how the poem does this by focusing on the most relevant formal properties. This bears repeating: while your initial examination of the poem will necessarily consider all the formal properties of poetry, your actual paper will focus only on those formal properties most relevant to your text.

A formal analysis is also an argumentative, thesis-driven paper; it’s not just a summary or a paraphrase. And if it examines a text sequentially, it does not do so mechanically. (That is, you should avoid writing a paper sounds like a list: “In line 1, the speaker says _____, and the reader understands _____. In line 2, he goes on to say _____, and the reader understands _____.”)

Again: in *preparing* your formal analysis, you should examine every formal aspect of verse in the poem you’re analyzing: speaker and tone, situation, figurative language, rhetorical strategies, structure, verse form, stanzaic form, meter and rhythm, rhyme and sound effects, etc., etc. In any given poem, some of these formal properties will emerge as more important or more significant than others; in your actual paper, you’ll ultimately ignore those formal elements that are less germane. (If rhyme isn’t an issue in your poem, then don’t address it.) But in drafting your notes and other exploratory writing about your text, you should consider them all; a poem that looks initially as if it doesn’t rhyme may prove to rely on internal rhyme or near rhyme. Don’t be too hasty.

Your formal analysis should lay out a specific thesis about the poem (e.g., “In Gerard Manley Hopkins’s ‘Spring and Fall,’ a young child’s naïve response to a natural event inspires an older companion to reconsider the nature of human loss”), and the body of your paper should move through the poem systematically. For an example, consider Eagleton’s discussion of Robert Frost’s “Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening” (96 – 99). Eagleton focuses preponderantly on what rhyme and meter in the poem contribute to this poem’s tone; he doesn’t devote nearly as much time to “symbols” (even though most people would agree that this poem lends itself to a symbolic reading). Note, too, that Eagleton builds to a thesis about the poem, rather than stating his thesis in the beginning. You may or may not be persuaded by his interpretation, but it’s a good model of close attention to detail and of how an accumulation of observations (especially *focused* observation) can lead to a larger statement about a text’s meaning. You might also consider his reading of Wordsworth’s “Solitary Reaper” (149 – 153), where he moves through the poem one stanza at a time, as the reader herself experiences the poem on a first reading.

Finally: you should also refer to the handout “Lit Crit Papers: What Faculty Know but Don’t Always Articulate.” It covers a variety of missteps that students often take in critical essays. There’s a link to it on the “General Reference” page of the course website.