

CRITICAL APPRECIATION OF A POEM

WHAT EXACTLY IS A “CRITICAL APPRECIATION”?

It is not:

- an opportunity to let your emotions spill out;
- asking you to judge the poem as good or bad;
- a hunt for scattered “poeticisms” like similes or alliterations;
- a hunt for a single ‘message’ which the poet has cunningly hidden, or which your lecturer already ‘knows’.

The critical appreciation (or analysis) is:

- your reasoned response to the poem’s invitation to use both imagination and logical argument to join in a kind of conversation about the poem’s subject;
- an attempt to explain what a poem is ‘about’, and why it is written the way it is;
- an attempt to elucidate, as far as possible, the poet’s view of the poem’s subject;
- a description of how poetic techniques help to enhance the feelings evoked by the words themselves, ie. how form reflects content;
- organised into clear, cohesive paragraphs [see the “Good argument, good paragraphs” section under “Students’ Course Support” on this website]

TO WRITE A GOOD CRITICAL APPRECIATION

You need to:

- PREPARE by looking up obscure vocabulary; reading the poem aloud sentence by sentence; writing down paraphrases where necessary. (Full paraphrases should NOT be included in the essay itself.)
- cover the WHOLE poem, not leaving ‘difficult’ bits out, or wandering around aimlessly;
- ORGANISE your approach. There are two main ways:
- part by part from beginning to end (stanza by stanza, or section by section); this means you have to decide what parts ‘hold together’ by virtue of their focus or pattern. Then write a paragraph clearly focussed on that part only.

The advantage: you show how form and content correlate; you show how poetic techniques work together to form a complete, complex effect.

- by themes, or ideas (one paragraph per idea). This can be more interesting than (a), but is also more tricky to control; it's more difficult to be complete in your discussion; and it means you have to be much better prepared before you begin writing. The advantage: it allows you to prioritise ideas from the start, instead of leaving them for your conclusion.
- INTEGRATE quotations (your evidence) seamlessly into your own sentences; don't just tag them onto the end, or stick them ungrammatically in the middle. Use short quotations, even single words, which are directly relevant to or supportive of the overall point you are making, rather than long ones.
- INTRODUCE the poem clearly. Briefly spark interest with a quote or other intriguing start (NEVER write, "This essay is going to discuss..." boring!!). Contextualise the poem and poet in its period and place, as far as is necessary to an understanding of the poem. Briefly describe its subject, speaker/hearer set-up, physical setting, occasion or event, and overall form, as necessary and relevant. In one sentence 'map out' your approach – part by part, thematically, or whatever, using key words as 'signposts'. (Then pick up these signposts, in the same order, at the beginnings of the relevant paragraphs.) CONCLUDE strongly. Sum up your claims about the deepest themes and broadest ideas contained in the poem, and their implications. [See 'Introductions and conclusions' in the "Students' Course Support" on this website.]

SOME USEFUL HINTS

- Start shallow, work deeper. Describe first, then interpret. First outline the subject (literal matter or situation), end with the theme or themes (underlying, broad, abstract ideas).
- Be selective in your choice of supportive detail; you may not have the space to unpack absolutely everything in the poem.
- Don't confuse paraphrase (saying the same thing in your own words) with interpretation (arguing, with evidence from the poem, for a certain reading of the unstated implications of what is on the page).
- what seems to escape paraphrase is exactly what is poetically interesting; don't back away from that 'difficulty'. Pursue the questions that arise.

- As a rough rule of thumb: 80% interpretation (your claims about the poem's implications, and explanations of how it works on ideas and feelings), 20% 'technical' stuff (use of specific techniques; just enough of this to convince your reader that you know what the techniques are and how they function).
 - Do NOT write a single paragraph devoted to 'metaphors', or 'sound effects': this is a sure way to destroy the poem. Don't 'pull the poem apart'; explain how it is an integrated whole.
 - Except for introductory summary sentences, try to make every sentence a balance of evidence, technique and interpretation. Some examples:
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- X The fourth line describes the tiger in its cage as "bilious". {Evidence, but no techniques, no interpretation}
 - X In the fourth line, the tiger is either ill or makes the speaker feel ill {Interpretation, but no evidence or technique}
 - ! In the fourth line, the tiger appears to the speaker as "bilious", which might mean it is literally ill, or metaphorically makes the speaker ill, or even further implies that the whole situation is "sick" or misguided. {Evidence – the quote – technique – 'metaphorically' – and interpretation, all working together}
 - [Constructing an argument in this way will ensure that you do not go wildly wrong in your interpretation (and it is possible to be simply wrong). It is not, however, about agreeing with your lecturer or tutor, or x or y critic. Your marker may well disagree with your interpretation, but if it is well laid out and solidly argued, you will be marked accordingly.]
 - - Watch your grammar. This course is not just about appreciating good writing; it is also about creating good academic writing.
 - depersonalise. The appreciation is not (just) about your feelings, opinions and responses; it is not about you. You are making certain claims about the poem, which must be supported by evidence from the poem itself, possibly amplified by material from the poet's known situation and background (not your own life). In short: READ OUT OF THE POEM, NOT INTO THE POEM.

REFERENCING

Use critical material by all means (though it is not demanded at first-year level, where we would rather you work first and foremost with your own resources) – but

use it sparingly and critically. DO NOT USE INTERNET SOURCES SUCH AS “SPARK NOTES” – THEY ARE GENERALLY WEAK AND OFTEN MISLEADING. Ask your lecturer who the best critics are.

If you do use a critic, ask these questions first: Who is this person? What are his/her qualifications? Is he or she well-regarded in the academic community? If you cannot quickly find the answers to these questions, the person is likely not worth reading.

In ANY case, give your OWN evidence from the poem or text either to support or refute the critic’s point of view.

Refer to the handbook for further referencing details. Just remember the following:

- Full collections (books of poems) are in italics (eg. Seamus Heaney’s collection *North*).

- Individual poems take inverted commas (eg. Seamus Heaney’s poem “North”).

- Try to be clear enough that you do not have to use line references after every single quotation. Rule of thumb: can my reader find this quote easily if she needs to?

ALWAYS include a full bibliography: see your handbook for the right format.