

Writing Assignments: Introduction to Literary Study by Robin Brown

Adapted from the web page for the Center for Interdisciplinary Studies

What can I do in a Formal Analysis of a Poem?

- All literary analysis begins with *form*.
- *Precise definition* of what's going on in the text and the meanings it presents is the necessary starting point—always.
- Professors (and journal editors) respond well to *compelling accounts of what's there*, on the page. (For a useful breakdown of types of formal analysis and the history of formal methods in English studies, see [A Guide to Literary Criticism and Research](#), Chpt. 1.)

Try these:

1. **Word Choice**, vocabulary, etymology: Look at the words used in the text. What tone do they set? Who talks like this? Can you see interesting connections / relationships between words—patterns of repetition? Look up key or difficult words in the dictionary to find their etymology or history.
2. **Syntax**: Examine the sentence structure of the poem; identify the parts of speech or word classes: nouns, verbs, adjectives and so on. Are words used strangely, against the normal rules of syntax (e.g., in William Stafford's "Traveling Through the Dark," he says "to swerve might make more dead." Normally dead is an adjective (dead body, or it's dead), or it's a mass noun (the Civil War dead). He uses it as a concrete noun, a thing—strange, at least.
3. Examine the text as a mini-drama: Every poem has a **speaker** or *persona*. That speaker talks to someone, an implied hearer. And there may be other characters there as well, explicit or implied. In Frost's "For Once,..." we looked at the "taunters," and Frost's poet-persona. In Hopkins' "Felix Randall," the persona is the priest, and some unnamed others overhear his meditation. In Matthew Arnold's "Dover Beach," the implied hearer is a silent woman. As with real drama, poems have settings; where does it take place and what does that mean?
4. Consider **the rhetoric** of the poem: Poems work on us. Look at how the poet gains our sympathy or gets in our face. What strategy does she use?
5. Examine **figurative language**: Look for similes, metaphors, images or other figures. Often they involve syntactic tricks, but some of these tricks have official, poetic-theory names. Be sure to use the terms correctly. If you're unsure what a metaphor is, look it up.
6. Read for **scansion or prosody**: If the poem is metrical or rhymed, examine how the formal, musical patterns relate to the meanings. Unsure what an iamb is? Check out the good prosody glossary at the back of [The Norton Anthology](#)....
7. Examine **the visual rhetoric**: Most poetry in our tradition is written to be read, so the arrangement of the words on the page form a visual pattern that works with the meaning. Williams' "This is just to say" would never be heard as a poem without the "poetic" line arrangement. Hopkins made his lines fight his syntax (and the sonnet form).

8. Identify **traditional poetic forms or genres**: It matters that a poem is a sonnet, because sonnets have particular themes and rhetorics. Hopkins' "terrible Sonnets" put death, destruction and terror against the usual themes of love and word play.

What's a Synthesis Paper?

Goals:

You've done two projects based on close reading, one focused on attention to formal detail in particular, and one focused on the ways poems interact with our "constructed selves" (excuse the theory-talk).

In both of them, we found ourselves a bit limited by the traditional forms of literary analysis: essays with theses and evidence—and a fairly formal style.

Some of us wanted to try to bring our own experiences into the writing, and to try some **more "experimental" ways to work**.

In this somewhat larger project, I invite you to do that: to select a poem (or poems—broadly conceived) and to try to make a case for a reading that shows us something larger and more complex about the texts and about their relationships to things outside themselves.

Though relatively short (4-6 pages, fewer is better), this is a mini-literary essay (re: [A Guide ...Part 2](#)); its goal is to make a strong case for a reading or for a way of reading.

As I suggest below, this reading need not be what we've called the "standard" reading. In fact, you're invited to read "against the grain" of the poem, showing us things about the text and about our own reading processes that we may not have seen before.

But you are required:

To convince me and yourself.

To convince us that the poem can be read different ways.

To convince us that the poem is politically troubling.

To convince us that the poem is harder than it looks.

To convince us that the poem repeats a writer's one or two themes.

To convince us that the poem has been misread.

To convince us that the poem presents an assimilationist, colonialist and finally racist view of African-Americans (here, we are invoking Langston Hughes' "Theme for English B"). And so on.

Convince doesn't mean "fight" or "argue." You can be very gentle, very personal and very quiet. **But you should lead us to see your point of view.**

Minimally, you need to read and explain one poem. And you can use as traditional a style as you want. Be comfortable. Don't try to be clever just because I mentioned that you may. But you may wish to do more. To compare poems. To explore what has been written about the poem or the writer (maybe from another class). To use theoretical apparatus from this or other courses. To use, god help us, sources. And to experiment with ways of writing: the autobiographical, the creative. Ideally, you can use some or even all of the work you've done on your earlier projects, expanding it, adding insights from class, revising and strengthening it.

Strong Readings: As we discussed in class, every poem and every reader brings a body of beliefs coming from the culture and from the individual writer or reader—we called it “*ideology*”—to the reading act.

Reading is the interesting intersection of these ideologies.

When there’s a bad “fit” between the writer’s ideology (and that of the society she comes from) and the reader’s ideology (and that of the society she comes from), readings may contest or dispute the programmatic intentions of poem and / or writer.

We can read “against the grain,” out of sync and sympathy with the poet.

These readings, which we called “**strong readings**,” reveal the complexity of reading and writing, and show us how powerful literary work can be in transmitting and consolidating our personal and cultural identities (re: “cultural studies,” “feminism” and “Marxism” in Wuthering Heights).

Here, I invite you to read “strongly,” showing how much room for interpretation many poems allow, and how your readings can reveal unseen cultural forces in poetry. In a sense, all readings advance some beliefs; **there’s no neutral reading**. *Feminist, Marxist, postcolonial, or cultural studies readings are explicitly “strong”; they set out to surface and explain ideology.*

An Example: Matthew Arnold’s “Dover Beach” has typically been read as a meditation on the plight of spiritual man when faced with the threats of evolutionary science, physics, astronomy, a global empire, and the threat of technologically-horrible war on all fronts. Arnold’s persona looks out over the ocean from Dover and thinks of the sea as a “sea of faith,” which used to stretch from horizon to horizon, unbroken. Now it’s threatened, and he ponders his place in the universe. His solution is romantic, gendered and personal. He finds an escape from the complex and intellectually troubling issues of philosophy, science, theology and politics in a solid romantic, heterosexual union. Turning to the unnamed and undescribed woman at his side, he beseeches her (and us) to “be true” to one and other. I (middle class, straight Robin) once found, and still find, this an appealing fantasy. But feminist strong readings have taught me to notice that the poem reads very differently if you’re an educated female reader who can’t identify with Arnold’s persona (male) or his sweet little silent companion. (Laurie Anderson does a nice job of reversing / criticizing this view of men-and-women-together in her song “Red Dress” on Strange Angels. She sings “I’ve got a beautiful red dress. And you’d look really good—standing beside it.”) As a model of spiritual / philosophical work, “Dover Beach” is problematic; romantic love, finally, won’t conquer all; we need better ethics, philosophy, government and science. And women can do them. To explore how this poem works to transmit and consolidate ideas about faith, love, empire, science, men and women’s work, and lyric poetry is a strong reading. So is a reading that takes your gendered (and maybe not so pleased) response as its starting point. And such readings could begin with a story—one of yours. Or speak to Mathew (his persona) as if you were his companion. Or..., or..., or.

So what are we "synthesizing"? What should we be able to do so far?

I can:

- Identify the characters active in the poem: its persona, the implied reader and any others invoked
- Identify any unusual words (lexicon) and say how these word choices are unusual or unexpected and how they operate to form the poem's meaning or effect.
- Identify instances of language play, linguistic anomalies and the sorts of figurative language they create.
- Identify allusions or intertextual relations between poem and other works of literature, and say how these work.
- Select appropriate interpretive strategies (paraphrase, plot summary, explanation of formal features and so on), and show why this is the way to approach this poem.
- Describe the evaluative or ideological assumptions in a poem and offer "strong readings" critiquing or opposing them if I wish
- Use my own cultural and personal / psychological position as a way to explain a poem's effect, meaning or political position.

In my writing, I can:

- Describe my voice or persona and say why I'm using it.
- Form clear claims and provide solid support for them with evidence from the texts I'm analyzing.
- Fit my writing to the audience I'm writing for (the class, the teacher, the journal, the group)
- Try an occasional experimental form of writing criticism.

[Good Lord, Robin! ALL of that??, No. Be cool. Just the ones that apply to your work]

Form: Use our usual format (re: "Close Reading") and follow a standard documentation form (MLA, APA, LSA) if you need to cite sources (re: A Guide...). Please turn the completed papers in class on 25 October.