

## Explication

Prof. Downes

A good poem is like a puzzle—the most fascinating part is studying the individual pieces carefully and then putting them back together to see how the whole thing fits together. (Though some poems are more like the platypus—lots of parts that don't go together, but still it works.) A poem can have a number of different “pieces” that you need to look at closely in order to complete the poetic “puzzle.” This sheet explains one way to attempt an explication of a poem, by examining each “piece” of the poem separately. (An explication is simply analysis and interpretation combined, an unfolding of how all the elements in a poem work together to achieve the larger meaning and effect.)

### **1) Examine the situation in the poem:**

- a) Does the poem tell a story? Is it a narrative poem? If so, what events occur?
- b) Does the poem express an emotion or describe a mood? Is it a lyric?
- c) Poetic voice: Who is the speaker? Is the poet speaking to the reader directly or is the poem told through a fictional persona? To whom is she speaking? Can you trust the speaker?
- d) Tone: What is the speaker's attitude toward the subject of the poem? What sort of tone of voice seems to be appropriate for reading the poem out loud? What words, images, or ideas give you a clue to the tone?

### **2) Examine the structure of the poem:**

- a) Form: Look at the number of lines, their length, their arrangement on the page. How does the form relate to the content? Is it a traditional form (e.g., sonnet, limerick) or a freer, less structured form? Why do you think the poet chose that form for her poem?
- b) Movement: How does the poem develop? Are the images and ideas developed chronologically, by cause and effect, by free association? Does the poem circle back to where it started, or is the movement from one attitude to a different attitude (e.g., from despair to hope)?
- c) Syntax: How many sentences are in the poem? Are the sentences simple or complicated? Are the verbs in front of the nouns instead of in the usual “noun, verb” order? Why?
- d) Punctuation: What kind of punctuation is in the poem? Does the punctuation always coincide with the end of the poetic line? If so, this is called an end-stopped line. Is there any punctuation in the middle of a line? Why do you think the poet would want you to pause halfway through the line?
- e) Title: What does the title mean? How does it relate to the poem itself?

### **3) Examine the language of the poem:**

- a) Diction or Word Choice: Is the language colloquial, formal, simple, unusual?
- b) Do you know what all the words mean? If not, look them up.
- c) What moods or attitudes are associated with words that stand out for you?
- d) Allusions: Are there any allusions (references) to something outside the poem, such as events or people from history, mythology, religion?
- e) Imagery: Look at the figurative language of the poem — metaphors, similes, analogies, personification. How do these images add to the meaning of the poem or intensify the effect of the poem?

### **4) Examine the musical devices in the poem:**

a) Rhyme scheme: Does the poem rhyme? Does the rhyme occur in a regular pattern, or irregularly? Is the effect formal, satisfying, musical, funny, disconcerting?

b) Rhythm or Meter: In most languages, there is a pattern of stressed and unstressed syllables in a word or words in a sentence. In poetry, the variation of stressed and unstressed syllables and words has a rhythmic effect. What is the effect of the rhythm?

c) Other “sound effects” or musical devices: Alliteration, assonance, consonance, repetition. What effect do they have here?

**5) Examine your response:** Has the poem created a change in mood for you - or a change in attitude? How have the technical elements helped the poet create this effect?

## The Scansion of Traditional English Poetry

Prof. Downes

“Traditional” English lyric poetry is accentual syllabic. The lines of verse are made up of groups of syllables within units called feet; one syllable in each foot receives relatively more stress than the other(s). Scansion is the determination of the metrical norm (and/or verse form) of a poem: the basic foot, line, rhyme, and units of a poem.

The poetic feet are:

- 1) iamb (iambic):        x /
- 2) trochee (trochaic): / x
- 3) anapest (anapestic): x x /
- 4) dactyl (dactylic): / x x
- 5) spondee (spondaic):        / /    (There may not be such a thing as a true spondee in English.)

The poetic lines are:

- 1) monometer: one foot
- 2) dimeter: two feet
- 3) trimeter: three feet
- 4) tetrameter: four feet
- 5) pentameter: five feet
- 6) hexameter (or alexandrine): six feet
- 7) heptameter (or septenary or fourteener): seven feet

Rhyme schemes and units of verse are variously combined, from blank verse (no rhyme, any length) to the sonnet (tight rhyme, 14 lines); the names of the various combinations, however, are not so important as their effect on the poetic matter.

### Steps in scansion:

1. Take a pencil with a sharp point and a good eraser.
2. Read the poem aloud to establish a hypothesis concerning the metrical norm of a poem. (Let us assume you have guessed “iambic pentameter”: five feet made up of two syllables each, the second of which receives relatively more stress than the first.)
3. Take your pencil; count off two syllables and draw a line; count off two more and draw a line, etc. Hopefully, you will have 10 syllables; if you have more, then one or more feet in the

line is not iambic, but an anapest or dactyl substitution - here is where you need an eraser, for you must work backwards and forwards to find the substituted foot.

4. After marking off the feet, to determine the kind of foot each is (i.e., where the relative stress falls), weigh with your ear the relative stress within each foot alone, in isolation from the others in the line, but do not wrench the reading of that foot from the normal flow of the entire line. Then mark the stressed syllables with your pencil.

**Random points:**

iambic verse is most common

trochees are the most often substituted, especially at the beginning of the line

when a two or three syllable word is also a foot, the dictionary will show you how to scan the foot

the syllables of one word can appear in adjacent feet

anapests appear quite often because the first two syllables are so light and nearly elided that the foot provides very little departure from an iambic form

meter does not provide the rhythm of a poem, only its base

rhythm is the total play of the speaking voice over the actual (scanned) meter and involves such things as caesura, balance, antithesis, open and closed couplets, run-on (enjambé) and end-stopped lines, verse paragraphing

Here are some poems to practice on.

Once by the Pacific

The shattered water made a misty din.  
Great waves looked over others coming in,  
And thought of doing something to the shore  
That water never did to land before.  
The clouds were low and hairy in the skies,  
Like locks blown forward in the gleam of eyes.  
You could not tell, and yet it looked as if  
The shore was lucky in being backed by cliff,  
The cliff in being backed by continent;  
It looked as if a night of dark intent  
Was coming, and not only a night, an age.  
Someone had better be prepared for rage.  
There would be more than ocean-water broken  
Before God's last Put out the Light was spoken.

— Robert Frost

Spring and Fall:

*to a young child*

Margaret, are you grieving  
Over Goldengrove unleaving?

Leaves, like the things of man, you  
With your fresh thoughts care for, can you?  
Ah! as the heart grows older  
It will come to such sights colder  
By and by, nor spare a sigh  
Though worlds of wanwood leafmeal lie;  
And yet you *will* weep and know why.  
Now no matter, child, the name:  
Sorrow's springs are the same.  
Nor mouth had, no nor mind, expressed  
What heart heard of, ghost guessed:  
It is the blight man was born for,  
It is Margaret you mourn for.

--Gerard Manley Hopkins