

## THE FIVE-STEP P.O.E.M.S. METHOD FOR CLOSE READING

**P - Place in Context(s)**

**O - Observe Words & Language**

**E - Experience Impressions**

**M - Mark Meter**

**S - Survey Structure**

### Place in Context(s)

Placing a poem in context involves exploring the inside of a text from outside. This sometimes means research. There are six important kinds of contexts that I've listed below. Placing a poem in context can help readers understand how the poem fits into larger human concerns. Those concerns might be held individually by the poet or collectively by the poet's society.

- Historical: When was the poem written? Whom does the poem address? Does the poem speak to, allude to, or address a specific moment in history?
- Biographical: Who was the poet? What was going on in the poet's life when this was written? Who is the narrator or speaker of the poem—is it the poet him/herself or is it a persona?
- Political: What was going on in the poet's community when this poem was written? Does the poem convey social or political concerns?
- Religious: How might religion or assumed beliefs affect the meaning and language of the poem? Does the poem use any words charged with religious significance?
- Literary: What is the literary context of this poem? What kind of poem is it (i.g., a sonnet, a song, an epic poem, verses from a play, etc.)? Does the poem operate within or against a larger literary tradition or movement (i.g., Romanticism, the Beat Generation, etc.)?
- Publication: What is the publication context of the poem? Was it first published within an anthology of poems? Was it originally circulated among friends? Was it part of a larger collection of poems? If so, what poems come before and after this poem in the collection? How significant is the placement of this poem within the larger collection?

Although context can help us ground a poem within human concerns, it can be taken too far. We never want the contextual information to become more important than the poem itself. Poetry is a verbal art, not *merely* a reflection of the society in which it was made. Placing a poem in context is done for the sake of better understanding the poem on its own terms.

## Observe Words

Observing words within a poem is the heart and soul of close reading. In fact, it's the most important step of all. (This should be the *first* step on the list, but O.P.E.M.S. doesn't really work.)

Observing words falls under two categories: Diction and Devices. Diction simply means "word choice," so this step invites us to consider the poem's use of individual words. Devices are schemes and tropes that often combine words to make. Observing diction concerns *individual* words. Observing devices concerns *multiple* words and how they function together.

- Diction: What words stood out to you as you read the poem? What words do you need to look up in the dictionary? Do some words carry multiple meanings? What words *sound* beautiful? What words capture your imagination? Is it an old fashioned or archaic word; What are its multiple meanings? Are the words short, Anglo-Saxon words or do they have many syllables like Latinate words? Is the word slang, or is it polite? General or specific? Abstract or concrete? Questions like these are essential for close reading and close observation of stylistic features of poetry.
- Devices: How do groups of words sound in a given line? When imagery do they convey on their own; and what significance do they have together? Is the effect of the words emotional, functional, or descriptive? Is there any repetition in the sounds—any parallels in the expressions? Are the words employing schemes or tropes?

## Experience Impressions

An impression can be an idea, feeling, image, or an association that resonates with your experience or entertains your imagination. In his *Lives of the English Poets*, Samuel Johnson often considers the impressions that poetry leaves upon the mind and memory. Such impressions are essentially the experience of the beauty of language, the power of metaphors and similes, of those secret relations between objects that poets like to discover—all of this makes up the experience of poetry.

Reading well requires close attention to both the language of the poem and its effect upon us as a whole. This step supplements the more objective, formalist approach to close reading poetry as a science, by introducing a vocabulary by which to analyze the *experience* of a poem.

As Charles Osgood wrote: “Latter-day critics [i.e. formalist and historicist] are likely to judge a work of art—a poem or a picture—statically and intrinsically, by characteristics within the work itself. Is it technically “good” or “unusual”? they ask. Is it conscientious? Is it what the poet set out to make? What department of life, what tendency, what period, what influence does it exemplify? Is it individual and out of orbit? What new “approach” does it exhibit? Experts from the past from Plato to Sidney were more likely to judge a work of art operatively, dynamically, according to its effects upon the listener or beholder. What are the emotions which the work excites? What action or praxis which springs from those emotions?” (*Poetry as a Means of Grace*, p.4).

Enjoying Impressions asks readers to consider how a poem works “operatively” and “dynamically” upon us as readers.

There are three major kinds of impressions given by poetry: emotional, imagistic, and moral.

- **Emotional impressions.** The tone of the poem and its mood often informs our own impressions of the emotive energy of the words. You might ask: What state of mind do the words convey (i.g., peace, anxiety, confidence, grief, resolution)? What state of mind do the words put you in, as a reader?
- **Sensual Impressions.** Sensual impressions are those visual, auditory, or generally sensual impressions left behind on the canvas of our minds by a poem. What images are striking? How do words depict and suggest the feeling or idea of a thing? The poet might supply us with something new for which we have no comparable experience and that still remains fresh.
- **Moral impressions.** Moral impressions are those left behind by the rhetorical force of the poem. How do the words, actions, and descriptions inspire us toward virtue or repel us from vice? Do we have a sense of right and wrong that is shared with the poem and its characters, tone, symbols, etc.? Are we encouraged to think a certain way about something?

## Mark Meter

Marking the meter of a poem involves finding the basic rhythmic structure of a poem. Meter is the pattern of units of stressed and unstressed syllables that govern a poem. The critic John Hollander describes meter as an invisible border that distinguishes the language of poetry from the everyday language of prose. Meter, in this sense, distinguishes poetic language as an art form.

But how do we discover meter?

When we talk, we naturally stress some syllables but not others. Take the word “Belong.” It has two syllables: “Be” and “long.” Now which one is emphasized? We don’t say BE-long, with the first syllable accented. We say be-LONG, with the accent on the second syllable. Metrically speaking, the word “belong” is an iamb, composed of two syllables: an unstressed syllable “be” followed by a stressed syllable “long.” In poetry, we group these patterns of stresses into basic units of measurement called feet.

A foot is a patterned unit of stressed and/or unstressed syllables. Feet in a line are the number of repetitions of the determined pattern. One iamb, for example, is one “foot.”

To mark the meter of a poem, begin by finding those syllables. Mark them as stressed (˘) or unstressed (˜).

Iambic ˜ ˘ (unless)

Trochee ˘ ˘ (breaking)

Dactyl ˘ ˜ ˜ (merrily)

Anapest ˜ ˜ ˘ (in the moon)

Spondee ˘ ˘ (earthquake; rainstorm; stop that)

Pyrrhic ˜ ˜ (from Lord Byron's *Don Juan*: “My way | is to |  
begin | with the | beginning.”)

Line length is determined by how many metric feet one line of verse contains. Lines are classified by how many feet are in each line.

Monometer – one foot

Dimeter – two feet

Trimeter – three feet

Tetrameter – four feet

Pentameter – five feet

Hexameter – six feet

## Survey Structure

Whether you know it or not, surveying the structure is the first thing you do when encountering a written poem. It involves looking at the poem on the page as a visual object. Over time as poetry became more of a written than an oral tradition, the visual aspect of poetry became as important as its sound structures, such as rhyme and meter. But the structure of a poem is not always visual. Elegies, odes, and other lyric meditations often organize their content with patterns (odes, for example, have three “movements,” a strophe, an antistrophe, and an epode).

There are several ways of thinking about poetic structure:

- Visual Structure: How the poem appears upon the page. Think about Mary Sidney Herbert’s Psalm translations, George Herbert’s shape poems, and the Spenserian stanza.
- Audible Structure: How is the poem organized by rhyme, alliteration, assonance, or consonance?
- Logical Structure: Are there any logical, thematic, or rhetorical turns?
- Emotional Structure: Where does the poem shift in tone or feeling? Is the poem trying to move us from one feeling to another, such as an elegy might?
- Enjambment: Are some lines enjambed—that is, do they end without punctuation? What is the effect of enjambment upon the line?

Surveying structure also involves identifying form. The form of a poem is often closely associated with its genre as well as its organizing patterns and principles. We don’t just determine the structure by how a poem appears visually on the page, but we have to see how it is organized by rhyme, meter, word order, as well as visual design. Understanding the structure can help locate a poem within a larger literary tradition or genre and can provide insight into what the poem expresses in its words.

