**So You’ve Been Asked to Analyze a Poem…**

Consider the following poems. Look at the format of their stanzas and their lines. How does this formatting affect how you read it and the effect that it creates?

**Summer**

Ramona Wilson

firefly light

the only movement

in trees

dark with summer weighted silence

a lullaby from some bird

long expanse of grass

where it is not hard to lie

moon burned with flame

when the sun goes

we smell for the first time in years

quiet clover, lilac trees

a belief

in small things aware

of our slight and hesitant moves

as we turn

the moon is so bright

the light bursts within me

**Acquainted with the Night**

Robert Frost

I have been one acquainted with the night.

I have walked out in rain—and back in rain.

I have outwalked the furthest city light.

I have looked down the saddest city lane.

I have passed by the watchman on his beat

And dropped my eyes, unwilling to explain.

I have stood still and stopped the sound of feet

When far away an interrupted cry

Came over houses from another street,

But not to call me back or say good-bye;

And further still at an unearthly height,

One luminary clock against the sky

Proclaimed the time was neither wrong nor right.

I have been one acquainted with the night.

**400-Meter Free Style**

Maxine W. Kumin

The gun full swing the swimmer catapults and cracks

s

i

x

feet away onto that perfect glass he catches at

a

n

d

throws behind him scoop after scoop cunningly moving

t

h

e

water back to move him forward. Thrift is his wonderful

s

e

c

ret; he has schooled out all extravagance. No muscle

r

i

p

ples without compensation wrist cock to heel snap to

h

i

s

mobile mouth that siphons in the air that nurtures

h

i

m

at half an inch above sea level so to speak.

T

h

e

astonishing whites of the soles of his feet rise

a

n

d

salute us on the turns. He flips, coverts, and is gone

a

l

l

in one. We watch him for signs. His arms are steady at

t

h

e

catch, his cadent feet tick in the stretch, they know

t

h

e

lesson well. Lungs know, too; he does not list for

a

i

r

he drives along on little sips carefully expended

b

u

t

that plum red heart pumps hard cries hurt how soon

i

t

s

near one more and makes its final surge. Time: 4:25:9

**Sample Analysis:**

**The Swimmer’s Moment**

Margaret Avison

For everyone

The swimmer's moment at the whirlpool comes,

But many at that moment will not say

"This is the whirlpool, then."

By their refusal they are saved

From the black pit, and also from contesting

The deadly rapids, and emerging in

The mysterious, and more ample, further waters.

And so their bland-blank faces turn and turn

Pale and forever on the rim of suction

They will not recognize.

Of those who dare the knowledge

Many are whirled into the ominous centre

That, gaping vertical, seals up

For them an eternal boon of privacy,

So that we turn away from their defeat

With a despair, not for their deaths, but for

Ourselves, who cannot penetrate their secret

Nor even guess at the anonymous breadth

Where one or two have won:

(The silver reaches of the estuary).

1. **Analyzing Content and Subject Matter**
2. First reading:

* Initial feelings, thoughts, and impressions – all personal responses – can be valuable in developing a good and valid interpretation. Poetry must communicate something before it can be understood.

Ex. In the second and third lines, the emphasis of the word “moment” suggests something brief. Overall, I get a sense of danger from this poem. There’s talk about a whirlpool, the black pit, and death which all elicit this response. In the first line, the words “for everyone” almost make it seem like the poem is an open letter addressed to all readers. Some lines puzzle me; I need to look up what “boon” means, for example.

* From your first impressions, you can go on to create a list of questions you have about the poem. This will set up later investigations into theme and purpose.

Ex. What is the “swimmer’s moment?” What happens during it? What are people’s various responses to the whirlpool? Why do some not attempt swimming in it? What’s a “boon” or an “estuary”?

1. Thinking about the title and context

* In many poems, the title indicates the subject/topic, the context/setting, and the symbolism/theme.

Ex. In Avison’s poem, the “swimmer’s moment” is referred to in the title, the second, and the third lines. The poet focuses attention immediately on the context of a swimmer deciding whether or not to “date” or challenge a dangerous whirlpool. She makes the reader aware that a significant life-determining choice is to be made quickly or “spur of the moment”.

The title also suggests that those who swim will have their “moment” or the possibility of success. In that sense, the title refers to both the moment of decision for the reader and the swimmer alike, as well as the triumph of the risk-taker who transcends nature and beats the odds.

1. Look up unfamiliar words and allusions

* Vocabulary is very important in analyzing poetry. Poets often use vocabulary to repeat an image or idea, representing it on two levels: literal and metaphorical.

Ex. In the last line, the word “estuary” is the broad mouth of a river that opens up to a larger body of water such as the seat in this poem. This idea is supported by the word “breadth”, which refers to the widest distance across something. In both cases, the poet is suggesting a figurative broadening of the swimmer’s experience, consciousness, or perspective.

1. Paraphrasing difficult lines and stanzas

* Typically, on first reading, some lines will need to be translated or paraphrased into the reader’s own words. Once you do this, its meaning really starts to open up.

Ex. “Of those who dare the knowledge

Many are whirled into the ominous centre

That, gaping vertical, seals up

For them an eternal boon of privacy”

The “gaping vertical” is a description of the awe-inspiring whirlpool yawning open with all its obvious dangers. Those who enter the whirlpool may die or, at least, are “seal[ed] up”, experiencing the “privacy” of individual death and “knowledge” that none of the onlookers and nonparticipants will ever realize.

1. Looking for key images, patterns of image, and underlying conflicts

* Many poems will have a dual (two-sided) nature to the poem’s conflicts. Typically, conflict is expressed between two opposite or different perspectives

Ex. In this poem, there are the people who refuse the whirlpool (the passive onlookers) and the more active participants (the swimmers). There are references to nature throughout with images like “whirlpool”, ‘rapids”, and “estuary”, many of which deal with danger and death. This is contrasted in the images with a positive connotation suggesting growth, such as “knowledge”, “breadth”, and “won”.

1. Noting Mood and Tone

* In critical reading, it is useful to consider mood (the feeling the poem creates in a reader) and tone (the poet’s attitude toward his/her subject).

Ex. At first glance, the mood this poem creates is one of anxiety. There is a strong sense through the imagery that the whirlpool is dangerous and life-threatening. There is also an air of sadness that, at first, seems to be for the lost swimmers but then ironically is actually for the onlookers who feel sorry for themselves because they cannot know what the swimmers know. The last four lines create a surprisingly positive note of triumph and success as the readers and onlookers alike are awed by the news that some of the swimmers have survived and reached the sea.

1. Understanding theme and purpose

* Finding the essential meaning of the poem and the author’s purpose for writing it. Certainly, you can find this in key images and the title. Another good place to focus is the last line of the poem in the concluding image.

Ex. Everyone will face risk in their lives and the ones who accept it may lead richer lives than the ones who don’t.

The problem with a “safe” conventional life is that a person may deny her/himself opportunities for meaningful personal fulfilment.

1. **Appreciating Form, Technique, and Style**

You can comment on the form of the poem as well as the content, as the form impacts how the content is perceived.

1. Reading for order of subject matter/organization and structure

* How is the subject approached within the poem? Is it addressed near the beginning, constantly, or does the way it is addressed change throughout the poem?

Ex. Structurally, the poem takes the reader from danger (whirlpool) to safety (estuary). This supports Avison’s point that the long-term benefits of risk-taking outweigh the apparent short term doubts and dangers of swimming in a whirlpool. Further, the poet’s choice of long, unpredictable sentences create a sense that the reader is hurled “turn in turn” line by line, much like the swimmers in the whirlpool.

1. Paying attention to diction and images

* Diction, or word choice, plays a significant role in achieving the author’s purpose.

Ex. A key image is the “silver reaches of the estuary” – an image of peace after toil and struggle that is also associated with heaven or continuing life after death through the word “silver”. The successful swimmers have their “moment” and achieve a special private place or condition which only they have “knowledge” of.

1. Examining figures of speech

* These expand the possibilities of language and meaning.

Ex. Avison uses symbols such as the whirlpool already discussed. She also uses metaphors in the quote “faces turn and turn / Pale and forever on the rim of suction”. In this example the passive onlookers are compared ot the whirlpool.

1. Note use of sound and meter

* Does the rhythm of the poem or repetition of sounds create any particular effect within the poem?

Ex. The *d* assonance in words like “deadly”, “defeat”, “despair”, and “deaths” echoes the dead-end positions and figurative deaths of the onlookers.

1. Understanding style

* The style of a poem refers to the overall manner in which a poet writes. This is made of up poem-type, structural choices, diction, imagery, figures of speech, sound effects, tone, and recurring themes.

Ex. “The Swimmers Moment” reveals a keen, thoughtful, and reflective style. The poet sets up a situation for the reader to consider, then leads the reader naturally to the views presented earlier. What at first appears to be a meandering, long-sentenced style is actually quite purposefully constructed. Avison’s style is insistent and provocative.

In summary…

1. **Analyzing Content and Subject Matter**
2. First reading:
3. Thinking about the title and context
4. Look up unfamiliar words and allusions
5. Paraphrasing difficult lines and stanzas
6. Looking for key images, patterns of image, and underlying conflicts
7. Noting Mood and Tone
8. Understanding theme and purpose
9. **Appreciating Form, Technique, and Style**
10. Reading for order of subject matter/organization and structure
11. Paying attention to diction and images
12. Examining figures of speech
13. Note use of sound and meter
14. Understanding style