

FIRST ASSIGNMENT (due October 4th)

Metaphors (and similes) use the qualities of one thing to discuss the qualities of another or to display them in an unusual way. Poems may be metaphors as well as use them; as in the poem that we read by Sylvia Plath (“Metaphors”), the poem may not explicitly refer to its subject, but one is expected to recognize the real subject (guess the riddle) nonetheless. Or a poem may explicitly refer to its subject but subordinate such references to discussion of or argument about another subject. Let us call the actual subject of a poem (or of a part of a poem, a metaphor or simile, let’s say) the “tenor” and the subject to which it is compared and which is more largely discussed or treated the “vehicle”. In this way, Donne’s talk in certain poems about geographical discoveries, exploration and mapping are a vehicle for discussing features of erotic experience.

The use of the terms “tenor” and “vehicle” point to the possibility that referring to one thing by way of another may be something other than a convenience of exposition through analogy—that there may be something inherently difficult in referring directly to the tenor of a poem. The question seem usually in place—why the detour? What attitude towards the tenor is communicated by choice of vehicle? (We might ask what attitude towards pregnancy is communicated by the poem “Metaphors”? Is the poem an elaborate joke? Is it a complaint? Why give the poem the title “Metaphors” rather than the title “Pregnancy”?) If you describe the poem carefully, you will observe such things as the number of statements, their order, how they are distributed within or between lines, whether the metrical scheme enhances or works against the natural rhythms of emphasis imposed by the meaning of words, the usual associations of component expressions—pleasant, interesting, dull, unpleasant—and all of this in a context of considering the order of statements, how they add up to something—an argument, an exposition, a question, a pattern of thought. Does the end follow the beginning? By continuous progression or abrupt transition? Or does the order turn on itself at some point, quarreling with its own beginning? What are the stages, the division into parts of the whole? Do the stanzas, quatrains, couplets support this division or disturb it, and if the latter, why? (In this context, you might try to account for the position in “Metaphors” of the first line, the fourth, the eighth and the ninth.) You also want to look out for potential oddities—e.g., by asking yourself whether the “I” referred to in the first line the poet or the poem?

In fulfilling this assignment you are not expected to address such questions directly—they are to inform your thinking about the poem or poems that you choose to write about—but some of them may well be worth addressing explicitly in your essay.

The Assignment:

Write an argumentative, analytic essay, running to five pages (use the word-count and figure on 320 words/page) which (1) identifies the subject and mode of discourse (argument, description, discussion—whatever) of either one or two poems by either Shakespeare or Donne, perhaps offering as well an effective paraphrase, and (2) which elucidates the ways in which specific words, images and formal devices in the two poems contribute to understanding the view of the subject proposed by the poem. The title-page should not be part of your page count and should reproduce the poem or poems in question.