

FIRST ASSIGNMENT (due October 2nd)

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. The value of poetry derives from the notion that referring to one thing by way of another may be something other than a convenience of exposition through analogy—i.e., that there may be something inherently difficult in referring directly to the subject of a poem. The question seems usually in place—why the detour? (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”? In this context, we 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?

An essay in exposition of a lyric poem should aim at elucidating the text, offering paraphrases of its passages in some detail and a summary of the point made by the whole, as if the poem was an argument, a plea, a prayer—a piece of writing designed to have an effect on the reader. Poetry’s way with words is not straightforward, however; it deploys the figurative resources of language to produce effects that are not duplicated by paraphrase or even approximated by it. Hence paraphrase always has an interpretative component in it; and since interpretation is always arguable—that is, it offers to suit the poem better than other interpretations, possible but (in your view) less plausible—every paraphrase of a poem may be challenged for its adequacy. An exposition of a poem is therefore a species of argument, and it is useful to keep in mind, when possible, alternative views about the meaning of the poem and how it works; this will help give an edge to your exposition.

What follows is a series of points about the features of a poem that should be noted in working out an interpretation of it. There is no requirement to list such features in your exposition, but neither is there any prohibition against doing so.

A theme is a general sort of abbreviated argument, belief or opinion that characterizes the content of any piece of writing. Single phrases, verses, stanzas or a poem as a whole may have a theme. For example, two common poetic themes in the tradition of Western poetry are the theme “ubi sunt” [Latin for “where are”, as in “Where are the flowers of yesteryear?”] and the theme “carpe diem” [Latin for “seize the day”, as in Herrick’s *To the Virgins*]. They are also common motifs. *Motif* (also called a *topos*) is a more general term, which refers not only to themes, but also to parts of themes and also to devices, turns of phrase, or references to persons and agencies (such things as fate, chance, kings and desperate men) either simply repeated or developed through the work. Any *motif* insistently repeated is called a *leitmotif*. While *motif* is more general, theme is more inclusive or “higher” in reference, designating the over-all argument or point that a work is making, but the two terms overlap in usage. Any expository account of a lyric poem will refer to themes and motifs in discussing the poem’s *thematic development*.

Poems, like expository writings, develop in various ways according to the argument or thesis under consideration. They can pass from the general to the specific, from the specific to the general; they can enumerate a rapid series of statements to a conclusion or explore the variety of implication in a presiding metaphor; they can circle around their point or work progressively towards it, by building upon disparate

examples or upon examples increasing in intensity. It would be a question calling for critical decision, for example, whether the quatrains of Donne's *Batter my Heart* call upon progressively more violence to resolve the difficulties of the situation from which the poetic voice speaks; discussion this point would be a likely element in an exposition of the poem.

In expositing a poem, it is often useful to mention the obvious, especially when the obvious may go unnoticed. For instance, the Donne sonnet, *If poisonous minerals*, turns from direct questions in the octet to a rhetorical question at the outset of the sestet, and this is important enough to call for explicit notice in any account of the poem. The example also raises two further issues—in discussing the poem's structure, it is important to note whether or not the poem has a fulcrum, a point of transition that is decisive for exacerbating or resolving the tensions set up by the thematic development up to that point, and whether it has an adequate resolution, that is, a pay-off statement (so to speak), in the form of a statement at or near its conclusion. Shakespeare's final couplets often surprise by providing only a commonplace at the end—the pay-off line comes earlier. It is often a question, too, in short lyrics, whether the fulcrum and the pay-off coincide. [NB: for a variety of reasons, I do not want you to use the short-hand terms "fulcrum" and "pay-off" in your papers. You should not fall back upon a piece of ready-made jargon when dealing with what these terms designate but rather spell out what you mean in the case of each poem.]

Discussion of lyric poetry requires notice of metaphor—how it works, drawn from what domain of experience and applied easily, as a virtual commonplace, or unusually, to the domain of experience that is the subject-matter of the poem. A further question is whether the metaphors "add up"—that is, whether they have behind them an underlying metaphoric conception (one that may be only implied) informing the whole poem or whether the metaphoric conception changes from one part of the poem to another. Such underlying metaphors tend to be familiar, informing commonplace speech; the actual metaphors may be unusual variants. Shakespeare's sonnet 73, for example, employs the commonplace notions (a) that the span of human life is a year and that it can be divided into seasons; (b) that the span of life is a day and can be divided into familiar periods, like, morning, noon, evening or twilight; and (c) that life or vitality is heat or fire (or sometimes illumination). In the equation "Life is fire", the domain represented by "fire" is called the *source domain* or sometimes *the vehicle* (that which is used to talk about something else) and the time of life is called the *target domain* or sometimes *the tenor* (that which is actually the subject under consideration). An analysis of the poem would try to explore the connections among its three commonplaces. Does the poem treat them quite independently? Does one provide easy transition to another? In contrast, the first two-thirds of Donne's *Hymn to God My God, in my Sickness* draws upon the unusual presiding metaphoric conceptions "a human body is a musical instrument" and "a human body is a map". These are variants upon the more commonplace conceptions "the soul is harmony" and "life is a journey" but not identical with them. Moreover, the nature of the relation between the two metaphoric ranges is not immediately clear, and neither is the range of metaphors occupying the last third of the poem.

In dealing with this poem, we labor under an added difficulty: the pay-off line is a paradox that would be accepted by Donne's contemporary readers as a commonplace—they might have trouble explaining it, but it would not have seemed to them an unexpected thing to say about God. Any account of this poem would have to elucidate this last line, and to do so in such a manner that what precedes the last line will fall into place behind it. Mention of paradox at this point may remind us of one more feature that should be noticed in analyzing a poem—its capacity to offer puzzles, sometimes not obviously. The last couplet of Shakespeare's first sonnet offers an obvious puzzle in sorting out the grammar. Donne's sonnet 14 offers a subtle puzzle in line 11 with the word "again"—when had the knot been broken before? And why "broken"; why not "untied"? Sometimes an odd word in a poem is just a convenience of speech, to fit out the rhythm or the meter, but sometimes the puzzle it poses is important. Part of the job of an elucidation is to note puzzles and tie their resolution to the general run of exposition.

Once again: In fulfilling this assignment you are not expected to address such questions directly—they are offered here in order 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 way to get started is to write a paraphrase of the meaning of each clause in the poem (i.e., subject, verb, modifiers), using the most direct language possible. The completion of this task ought to bring to your notice a good deal about the poem that you cannot get into paraphrase without complicating its sentences enormously; it should also draw your attention to lines that are difficult to make out. Such a paraphrase should adopt the voice of the poet, that is to say, it should not begin, *In this poem, Shakespeare says that . . .*

To take by way of illustration a simple case, consider Sonnet 18. We begin to paraphrase:

Perhaps I should compare you to a summer's day. But the comparison would not do you enough credit. You are lovely and pleasant, where the outset of summer holds rough weather . . . And here I pause. The first line has already raised an issue—why is it put as a question? The answer might be that the poet is wondering what metaphors to choose in writing of his beloved, but other answers are possible, which do not involve writing. Whatever the answer, it raises further questions—why a summer's day? especially as the poem goes on to deny the validity of the comparison? The answer here is easy, once again; the point of asking the question is to make some of the assumptions of the poem explicit, so that they are kept overtly in mind while reading it. Still more of a stretch, the attempt to paraphrase in simple, direct language makes me note that the “darling buds” are a metonym (a substitution of an aspect or feature for the whole, suggesting a context in which that aspect or feature is characteristic of the whole), and something is signified by choosing to have them stand for early summer. I note as well that follows does not continue the thought of *lovely* as the *rough winds* took up *temperate*. A chiasmus [lovely/temperate: rough/ugly] has been interrupted; the comparison has been changed. We are no longer comparing the beloved to a day but to a season. Not illogical: we are searching for the right day, the best day; the “darling buds” are promise of beauty to come, and the search for their fulfillment in the right day prompts recognition that summer is short and whatever good it holds will be brief in existence. Continuing to worry at the paraphrase in this way leads me to notice that the second quatrain echoes a pattern introduced not by the first quatrain but by its last two lines, the first of which thematizes *intemperate*, the second *brevity*. Just so, the first two lines of Q2 have to do with *intemperate*, the second two with *brevity*, and is developed into *decline*—a new thought, which suggests the idea not just of time passing, but of its emblems dying. *Summer's beauty ages quickly*.

One should note in looking at what I have written that one's paraphrase can use metaphor, if metaphor is the best way to reproduce the thought; making exposition “simple and direct” usually involves more words than the original but it often requires metaphor; the use of metaphor runs too deep [NB a metaphor] into language to avoid entirely. The point is that the metaphors used in expositing a poem should not themselves require exposition. A paraphrase of a text may be only one sentence long and still count as a paraphrase; a clause-by-clause paraphrase of a poem will be longer than the original, but not remarkably so.

I shall not continue with the paraphrase, but rather turn to THE ASSIGNMENT:

Write an expository, analytic essay, running to five pages (use the character-count and figure on something ranging about 8,500 characters, not counting the material on the title page). The essay is to be prefaced by a paraphrase—no analysis, just a paraphrase—of the poetry that the ensuing essay analyses. This should not be easy and may call for revision when you have finished the body of the paper. The essay should be a presentation of either one or two poems chosen from among the texts that we have read by Shakespeare, Donne, Jonson or Herrick, and it should manage during the course of its length to (1) identify the subject and mode of discourse (argument, description, discussion—whatever), and (2) to elucidate 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 pages of the essay should be numbered. The title page should include your name and a statement of the character-count.