William Shakespeare, "Sonnet 130": What to look for in a poem


William Shakespeare:

My mistress' eyes are nothing like the sun;  
Coral is far more red than her lips' red;  
If snow be white, why then her breasts are dun;  
If hairs be wires, black wires grow on her head.  
I have seen roses damasked, red and white,  
But no such roses see I in her cheeks,  
And in some perfumes is there more delight  
Than in the breath that from my mistress reeks.  
I love to hear her speak, yet well I know  
That music hath a far more pleasing sound;  
I grant I never saw a goddess go —  
My mistress when she walks treads on the ground.  
And yet, by heaven, I think my love as rare  
As any she belied with false compare.

Thomas Campion:

There is a garden in her face  
Where roses and white lilies grow;  
A heavenly paradise is that place  
Wherein all pleasant fruits do flow.  
There cherries grow which none may buy.  
Till 'cherry-ripe' themselves do cry.  
Those cherries fairly do enclose  
Of orient pearl a double row,  
Which when her lovely laughter shows,  
'They look like rosebuds filled with snow.  
Yet them nor peer nor prince can buy.  
Till 'cherry-ripe' themselves do cry.  

Her eyes like angels watch them still,  
Her brows like bended bows do stand,  
Threatening with piercing frowns to kill  
All that attempt, with eye or hand,  
Those sacred cherries to come nigh.  
Till 'cherry-ripe' themselves do cry.

The Fourth Book of Aires, [c. 1637].
Guide to Close Reading (of poetry)

1. **Securing the text**: Make sure your text is from a reliable edition. In everyday life, we tend to 'read around' words and passages we don’t understand. Here, your dictionary is your best friend — even for words you think you know. For historical depth, use the *Oxford English Dictionary* (accessible online on the library's homepage).

2. **Theme and thematic structure**: What is the text’s key idea, key communicative purpose? How are individual thematic units connected to each other (e.g. chronology, logic, association)? Speaking about a text’s thematic structure does NOT mean re-reading it. You are aiming for the text’s main structural characteristics. It is useful to formulate the theme tentatively at first and adjust your hypothesis as you proceed further „into“ the text.

3. **Frames of communication**: What can be said about the speaker? Is there an addressee within the text? What is the relationship between speaker and addressee? Between the speaker and the implied reader? What does the speaker want to achieve? What is the speaker’s/the text’s rhetorical purpose?

4. **Syntax**: Length of sentences? Preferred type of sentences? Are there syntactic structures which are ambiguous, unclear or hard to disentangle? discontinuities in the syntactic pattern? Parallel or chiastic arrangements of syntactic units? Syntactic structures designed to single out or emphasize specific aspects? Relationship between syntax and verse (run-on lines/enjambments)? How can your findings be understood in light of what you’ve established in 2) and 3)?

5. **Words and Images**: **Vocabulary**: What is the text’s stylistic norm, and is it maintained throughout? Is there a tension between theme and choice of words? Irony? Semantic clusters? Lexical ambiguity? Fields of connotation? Ideological implications? **Imagery**: Similes (comparisons with *like*)? Metonymies (one term comes to stand for another on the basis of causal, temporal, spatial, material, etc. contiguity or nearness)? Metaphors (one term comes to stand for another on the basis of an assumed similarity)? Complex images involving multiple substitutions? Images which erase the precise nature of the process of substitution? What does a metaphor’s *vehicle* (i.e. the concrete image used to transport an idea) contribute to the *tenor* (i.e. the idea which is being transported)? How can this add to your findings so far?

6. **Sound Patterns**: Metre and rhyme structure: Noticeable tensions between metre and natural speech rhythms? It makes sense to pay special attention to those moments where an established pattern is not confirmed. Fixed poetic forms (e.g. sonnet, ballad, specific stanza conventions)? Sound patterns like assonance, alliteration, rhyme, onomatopoeic elements? How can your observations contribute to what you have established so far?

7. **Layout**: Note: in pre-20th-century texts, you cannot be sure if the author is responsible for layout or even punctuation. So, only if you are sure that the layout is part of the poem’s conception: what can be said about the visual structure in stanzas and verse lengths? Are there gaps or misaligned lines? Italicized passages? If there is an illustration: how does it relate to the text?

8. **Placing the text in extra-textual frames of reference**: a) **Literary context**: the text’s position within a larger structure, e.g. a poetry collection, poetic cycle, within the author’s œuvre, within the literary conventions of its time, within a tradition of literary motifs and forms? b) **Non-literary context**: Connections between the text and an aspect of an author’s biography, an author’s political, religious, philosophical or artistic environment, an author’s specific socio-cultural positioning? c) **Reception**: How was this text read in different periods? by specific communities of readers? Is there a tradition of established readings?