

## Guidelines for Analysing Poetry

### A. General Remarks

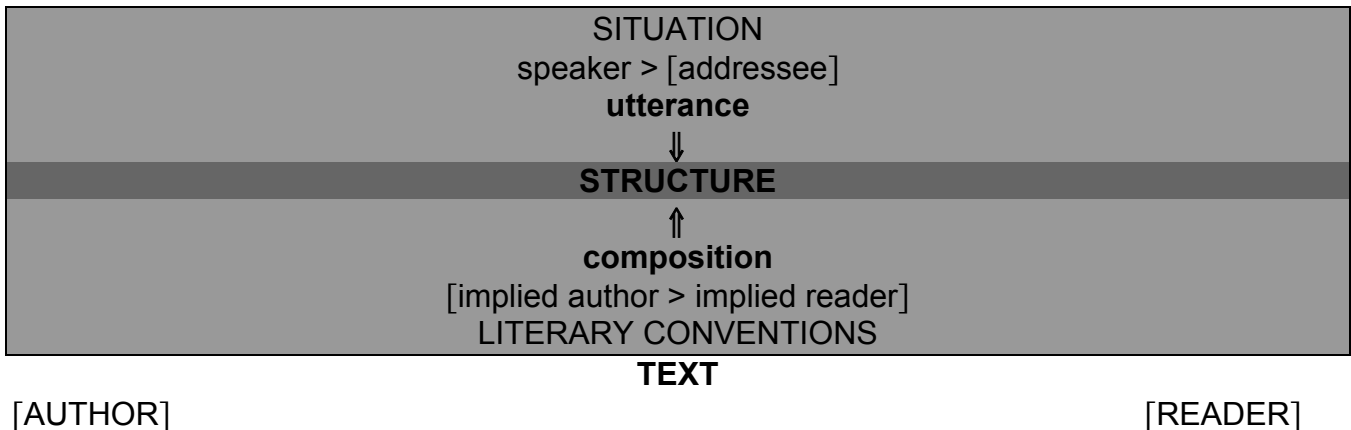
In functional terms poetry can be viewed as a literary medium for recording, forming, controlling and communicating human experience. As the "nature" of human experience is always dependent on historical and socio-cultural circumstances, the analysis of poetry will have to take these into account. From today's vantage point a history of poetry can be constructed in terms of three basic orientations:

- 1) **The traditional position:** poetry should strive to capture the "objective" meaning of experience, i.e. a general truth (cf. Alexander Pope: "What oft was thought, but ne'er so well expressed", *An Essay on Criticism*, 1709/13, l. 298).
- 2) **The Romantic position:** poetry as individual subjective expression (cf. William Wordsworth: "... poetry is the spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings: it takes its origin from emotion recollected in tranquillity", *Preface to Lyrical Ballads*, 1800).
- 3) **The Modernist position:** the poem as a linguistically self-referential (and self-sufficient) entity creating its own "objectivity" (cf. Edgar Allan Poe: "... there neither exists nor *can* exist any work more thoroughly dignified - more supremely noble than this very poem - this poem *per se* - this poem which is a poem and nothing more - this poem written solely for the poem's sake", *The Poetic Principle*, 1848/49).

In modern literature at large (i.e. since the 18th century) these three basic orientations form a continuum of **"objective", subjective and reflexive dimensions of meaning**, and every poem can be interpreted with regard to possibilities of ranking these dimensions.

### B. Starting Points

- lyric poetry vs. narrative poetry  
> experience, impressions, ideas > (fictional) world, plot
- ⇒ subjective form, but literary conventions mediate the author's subjectivity
- ⇒ (implicit or explicit) dramatic or communicative situation:  
speaker/voice/(poetic) persona/lyrical I > (implicit or explicit) addressee
- ⇒ model function of stylized experience
- ⚡                  ⚡
- composition (writing, poetic form) vs. utterance (speaking, rhetorical form)



## C. Analysing Poetry

### 1) Reading the Text

- a) subject matter
- b) semantic structure/development
  - > parts and their relation (contrast, repetition, illustration etc.)
  - > patterns of meaning (oppositions, world fields etc.)
- c) "reference" (general or specific: time/place, names etc.)

### 2) Utterance/Rhetorical Form

- a) dramatic/communicative situation
- b) speaker/voice (implicit vs. explicit subjectivity)
- c) [addressee] (implicit vs. explicit)
- d) mode, mood, tone (narrative, descriptive, reflective, contemplative, celebratory etc.)
- e) rhetorical formal devices
  - phonological:
    - internal rhyme, alliteration, assonance, onomatopoeia
  - syntactic:
    - anaphora, epiphora
    - antithesis, oxymoron
    - ellipsis, chiasmus, inversion, parallelism, repetition
  - semantic:
    - archaism, neologism
    - hyperbole, litotes, euphemism
    - imagery:
      - synaesthesia
      - personification
      - simile, metaphor, metonymy, synecdoche
      - symbol, conceit
    - pragmatic devices:
      - apostrophe, rhetorical question, irony

### 3) Composition/Poetic Form

- a) striking graphic features (indented/isolated lines, typography, visual effects etc.)
- b) type of poem (ballad, dramatic monologue, elegy, epithalamion, folk song, haiku, hymn, ode, sonnet vs. individual forms)
- c) stanza (couplet, triplet, 'terza rima', quatrain, ballad stanza, 'rime royal', Spenserian stanza, 'ottava rima' etc.)
- d) rhyme (end rhyme: continuous, alternate, enclosing; pure vs. impure)
- e) meter (iambic: u/; trochaic: /u; anapestic: uu/; dactylic: /uu;
  - cadence: masculine / vs. feminine /u)
  - anacrusis/upbeat
  - number of stressed syllables per line (regular forms vs. free verse)
    - (e.g. blank verse = iambic pentameter, unrhymed
    - heroic couplet = iambic pentameter, rhyming in pairs)
- f) lines/sentences (enjambement, run-on lines vs. end-stopped lines; caesura)

### 4) Structure

- a) relationship utterance vs. composition
- b) relationship denotative vs. connotative level
- c) coherence, internal necessity vs. contradiction, ambiguity, paradox