

## Paper 1 Assignment

*How does a particular choice or set of choices affect a poem's meaning?*

Drawing on what you've learned in class and from the textbook about what a poem is and does, develop a 2 – 3-page essay in which you argue for your interpretation of one of the poems below. Your essay should include a focused, original thesis; specific, supporting evidence; and a brief discussion of the poetic element or principle your interpretation helps illustrate.

**Poem Choices** (all in Kennedy and Gioia textbook):

- Sharon Olds, "Rites of Passage" (465)
- Claude McKay, "America" (677)
- Shirley Geok-lin Lim, "Learning to Love America" (685)
- Elizabeth Bishop, "Sestina" (621)
- Walt Whitman, "To a Locomotive in Winter" (452)
- Mary Sidney Wroth, "In this Strange Labyrinth" (860)
- William Carlos Williams, "To Waken an Old Lady" (858)
- Seamus Heaney, "Digging" (804)
- Gwendolyn Brooks, "The Preacher Ruminates: Behind the Sermon" (782)

**Length:** 2–3 pages

**Due:** Friday, September 15, at the beginning of class

**Format:** MLA format, double spaced, standard 12 point font, with a title and a works cited page

### Suggestions for Getting Started

The tips and questions below are meant as starting points—ways to begin analyzing the poems and identifying possible directions your essay will take. Sketch out tentative answers to the ones that seem most useful or most promising and then develop or narrow down from there.

1. Who is the speaker? Define and describe the speaker and his/her voice. What does the speaker say? Who is the audience? Are other characters involved?
2. Where is the speaker? Describe the physical location of the dramatic moment. Why does the speaker feel compelled to speak at this moment? What is his/her motivation?
3. What happens in the poem? When does the action occur? What is the date and/or time of day/year? Consider the plot or basic design of the action. How are the dramatized conflicts or themes introduced, sustained, or resolved?
4. What is being dramatized? What conflicts or themes does the poem present, address, or question?
5. What is the movement or trajectory of the poem? For example, does the poem describe an incident as it progresses in time, the rise and fall of an emotion, a movement from a closely described scene or object to a larger and more transcendent vision of reality, or a moment of confusion to a moment of recognition or insight?
6. Form: Does the poem represent a particular form (sonnet, sestina, etc.)? If the poet uses a particular form, in what ways does that form enhance the meaning of the poem? Does the poem present any unique variations from the traditional structure of that form?

7. Syntax: Consider the subjects, verbs, and objects of each statement and what these elements reveal about the speaker. Do any statements have convoluted or vague syntax? If so, what is the speaker trying to convey—or trying to hide—by using this method?

8. Vocabulary: What are the denotations and connotations of the words in the poem? Did you note any unusual words or words used in an unusual way? For example, if much of the poem is in plain English, is there a word notable for its Latinate roots or multiple syllables (e.g., “liquefaction”)? Do any of the words have multiple or archaic meanings that add other meanings to the line? Are certain words repeated? Do the repeated words take on a different meaning (for example, an ironic or symbolic meaning) as the poem progresses?

9. Tone and argument. What is the speaker’s tone? What overall strategies does the speaker use to make his or her points (Pleading? Demanding? Cajoling?)? If the speaker uses an argument form, what kinds of rhetorical strategies does he or she use?

As you analyze the design line by line, look for certain patterns that provide insight into the dramatic situation, the speaker’s state of mind, or the poet’s use of details. Some of the most common patterns include:

1. Repetition: Look for statements that follow the same format and other kinds of repetition.

2. Rhyme: Consider the significance of the end words joined by sound; in a poem with no rhymes, consider the importance of the end words. Does the poem lack a rhyme where one might be expected? What point or idea is conveyed by this deliberate absence? What kinds of rhyme does the poet use—true rhyme, slant rhyme, eye rhyme? What effect do these rhymes have on the reader?

3. Patterns of Sound: Alliteration and assonance create sound effects and often cluster significant words. What sounds do you hear as you read the poem aloud, and what is their effect on the reader?

4. Visual Patterns: How does the poem look on the page? Are any lines set off from the rest of the poem? Does the poet use typographical elements such as parentheses, boldface type, italics, and other features to make a point? Where are the lines broken?

5. Rhythm and Meter: Consider how rhythm and meter influence our perception of the speaker and his or her language. Think especially about the places in which the rhythm is broken or uneven, such as irregular feet within a line of verse, or a caesura in the line. What sections use enjambment or end-stopped lines?

*Remember:* You do not need to address all of these issues directly in the paper. These are simply possibilities, ways to get started developing ideas and identifying your focus. Refer to the section on “Explicating” in chapter 38 of the Kennedy and Gioia textbook for further guidance (page 1442).

Some guidelines adapted from <http://www.unc.edu/depts/wcweb/handouts/poetry-explication.html>