

# SHOCKEY'S BRAIN 101

## Lesson 3: How to Write a Poetry Commentary

### Step 1: Reading the Poem

- \* Read the poem silently once. Take a mental note or write any impressions, emotions, or confusions the poem may originally stir.
- \* Read the poem once more, try to understand its meaning or the course of events it may describe.
- \* Read the poem aloud if possible. If you're in an exam room you can read the poem under your breath. Take note of the tone and speed of the poem.
- \* Read the poem again and take notes about the literal and figurative context of the poem. This should include its meaning on the literal level and any figurative meanings it may include.

#### **A. Discovering Ideas: Title and Situation**

- What does the title contribute to the reader's understanding?
- What is the situation? What has happened in the past or what is happening in the present, that has brought about the speech?
- What difficult, special, or unusual words does the poem contain? What references need explaining? How does an explanation assist in the understanding of the poem?
- How does the poem develop? Is it a personal statement? Is it a story?
- What is the main idea of the poem? What details make possible the formulation of the main idea?

#### **B. Discovering Ideas: Speaker**

- Who is the speaker? What is he or she doing? What has already occurred? What does he or she say about himself or herself? About others? Where is the speaker when the poem is happening?
- How reliable is the speaker as an observer and reporter? What knowledge enables the speaker to make judgments and opinions?
- What do the speaker's word choices reveal about his or her education and social standing? How does language reveal his or her assumptions?
- What tone of voice is suggested in the speaker's presentation?
- How deeply is the speaker involved with the action of the poem? What connection does he or she make with the other characters? With the poem's actions? With the reader?
- How vividly does the poem describe action, appearance, emotion, responses, and ideas? How strong of a picture do you get?

#### **C. Discovering Character:**

- Is there another character involved in the poem? If so, what is the character trying to do or learn?
- How is the character affected by others, and how do others respond to him or her?
- What degree of control does the character exert and what does his or her effort tell you?
- How does the character speak and behave and what do you learn from these words and actions?
- How is the character revealed by interaction? By circumstance or setting?

#### **D. Discovering Syntax and Diction:**

- How does the speaker's background affect his or her power of observation? How does the background affect his or her level of speech?
- Who is the listener? How does the listener affect what the speaker says?
- Is the level of the diction elevated, neutral or informal, and how does this level affect your perception of the speaker, subject, and main ideas?
- What patterns of diction or syntax do you discover in the poem? Are there words related to situation, action, setting, character, etc? How ordinary or unusual are these words?
- Does the poem contain many loaded or connotative words, specific, abstract and concrete words?
- Does the poem contain dialect, colloquialisms, jargon? If so, how does this special diction shape your response to the poem?
- What is the nature of the poem's syntax? Is there any unusual word order? What seems to be the purpose of the syntactical choice/variation?
- Has the poet used any striking patterns of sentence structure such as parallelism or repetition? To what effect?

#### **E. Discovering Imagery:**

- What type of images prevail in the work? Visual, Auditory, Gustatory, Olfactory, Kinetic, Organic, Tactile
- To what degree do the images reflect the poet's actual observation or the poet's reading and knowledge of fields of science or history?
- How well do the images stand out? How vivid are they? How is this achieved?
- What explanation is needed for the images? (Biblical, historical, war, etc.)
- What effect do the poem's circumstances (bright, dark, warm, cold, etc.) have upon the images and your responses to them?
- How well are the images integrated within the poem's argument or development?
- Do all the images adhere consistently to a particular frame of reference, or a setting?
- What unexpected or new responses do any unusual or unique images produce?
- Do the images assist in making the poet's ideas seem convincing?
- Do the images promote approval or disapproval, cheer or melancholy, excitement or pain? How does the writer achieve these effects?

#### **F. Discovering Rhetorical Figures & Symbols:**

- What figures does the work contain? Where and under what circumstances? How extensive are they?
- How do you recognize them? Are they signaled by a single word or are they more extensively detailed?
- What kind of effort is required to understand them in context?
- Structurally, how are the figures developed? How do they rise out of the situation?
- To what degree are the figures integrated into the poem's development of ideas? How do they relate to other aspects of the poem?

- f. Is one type of figure used in a particular section while another predominates in another? Why? To what effect?
- g. If you have discovered a number of figures, what relationship exists between them?
- h. How do they broaden, deepen or otherwise assist in making the ideas in the poem forceful?
- i. Does the writer use figures derived from one sense rather than another: sight, hearing, taste, smell, touch, etc. or does he record color, brightness, shadow, shape, depth, height, number, size, speed, emptiness, fullness, richness, etc.
- j. In short, how meaningful are the figures in the poem? What effect do they have on the poem's tone? On your appreciation and understanding of the poem?
- k. CULTURAL SYMBOLS: What symbols that are cultural or universal can you discover in names, objects, places, situations, or actions? How are these symbols used? What do they mean both specifically and universally? What would the poem be like without them?
- l. CONTEXTUAL SYMBOLS: What contextual symbols can you locate? What causes you to conclude that they are truly symbolic? Is the symbolism used systematically throughout or only once? How do the symbols affect the ideas expressed?
- m. ALLUSIONS: Granted your knowledge of literature, science, geography, television, the Bible, film, popular culture, and other fields of knowledge, what kinds of allusion are you likely to recognize immediately? What do these allusions mean in their original context? What do they mean in the context of the poem?

**G. Discovering Tone:**

- a. How do you believe that you are supposed to respond to the speaker's characteristics and voice?
- b. Does the writer ask you to sympathize with those in misfortune, rejoice with those who have found happiness, lament the human condition, become angry at unfairness or inequality, admire examples of noble human behavior or have some other response?
- c. Is any group directly addressed by the speaker? What attitude is expressed?
- d. Do you find any kind of withheld information or irony? How is the situation controlled to shape your response?
- e. How does the work promote respect, admiration, dislike or other feelings about a character or situation?
- f. Are there any ideas advocated, defended or attacked?
- g. How does the author make his attitude clear: directly, indirectly, understatement, overstatement, etc.
- h. Are the views of the speaker common ideas readily acceptable or does the reader have to make a concession?

**H. Discovering Prosody and Scansion:**

- a. Number each line of the passage, regardless of length, beginning with 1, so that you may use these numbers as location references in your commentary.
- b. Determine the formal pattern of feet, using the short acute accent or stress mark (/) for heavily stressed syllables and the breve (u) for unaccented or lightly stressed syllables.
- c. Indicate the number of feet by a diagonal slash or virgule (\). Indicate caesurae and end of line pauses with double virgules (\\).
- d. Use colored pencils to underline, circle, make boxes, or otherwise mark formal and rhetorical discoveries. Underline all the sounds that you find important.
- e. Look at the caesurae. Are the pauses regular or random? Do they lead to important ideas and attitudes? Are all the lines end-stopped or do they lead to enjambment? How do these aid in descriptions and the expression of ideas?
- f. Do the same for alliteration, assonance, onomatopoeia, rhyme, cacophony, euphony, etc. Throughout your discussion, always keep foremost the relationship between content and sound.
- g. Describe the major features of the poem's rhymes, specifically the scheme and variants, the lengths and rhythms of the rhyming words and noteworthy segmental characteristics.
- h. Are the rhymes specific, general, concrete, abstract, eye, ear, half, slant?
- i. Look at line length: are some lines shorter than others? Why?
- j. If the poem has a specific form like a sonnet or a lyric, are important words and syllables successfully placed in the stressed positions to achieve emphasis?
- k. Look for falling and rising meter to match falling or rising emotions.
- l. Generally, you must deal with the relationship between the formal rhythmical pattern and the poet's ideas and attitudes. THIS is IB's focus for you.

**I. Discovering Form:**

- a. CLOSED form: What is the predominate meter, line length, rhyme scheme... and to what extent do these establish and reinforce the form?
- b. What is the form of each stanza or unit? What building blocks does the poet use? How many stanzas or divisions does the poem contain? How does the poem establish a pattern and how is the pattern repeated?
- c. What is the form of the poem and what elements do you need to identify? Does it have any variations?
- d. What topical, logical or thematic progressions can unite the various parts of the poem?
- e. To what extent does the form organize the images of the poem? Are key images developed within single units or stanzas? Do images recur in several units?
- f. To what extent does the form organize and bring out the ideas or emotions of the poem?
- g. OPEN form: What does the poem look like on the page? What is the relationship of the shape to its meaning?
- h. How does the poet use variable line lengths, spaces, punctuation, capitalization and the like to shape the poem? How do these variables contribute to the poem's sense and impact?
- i. What rhythms are built into the poem through language or typography? How are these relevant to the poem's content?
- j. What is the poem's progressions of ideas, images and/or emotions? How is the logic created and what does it contribute?
- k. How does form or typography isolate and group and thus emphasize, various words and phrases? What is the effect?
- l. What patterns do you discover of words and sounds? To what degree do the patterns create order and structure?

**Step 2: Looking for Detail** *Now that you've found the poem's literal and figurative meanings, its form, and its literary devices - and your paper looks incredible- it's time to get to work on putting it together into a meaningful commentary!*

Your general explication demonstrates your ability to follow the essential details of the poem, to understand the issues and the meaning the poem reveals, to explain some of the relationships of content to technique, to note and discuss especially important or unique aspects of the poem.

In your intro, use your central idea to express a general view of the poem, which your commentary will support. In the body of the commentary, explain the poem's content- not a paraphrase- but a description of the poem's major organizing elements. Describe the poem in your own words, with whatever brief introductory phrases you find necessary. Then, in the next paragraph, explicate the poem in relationship to your central idea. You CHOOSE YOUR OWN ORDER OF DISCUSSION. IB will never expect you to follow one certain manner of writing. Each poem suggests its own avenues of exploration, directing your thought and organization.

You may want to follow your own description by discussing the poem's meaning or even by presenting possible interpretations. You can refer to significant techniques, topics or theme, setting, character & relationship, time, format of the poem, punctuation, style, figures of speech, tone, mood and areas of note. You will not talk about every single line, but you should talk about every single stanza. 😊

It is possible to devote an entire commentary just to sound, rhythm, punctuation, meter and form. You do not want to do that, though. Treat sounds and structure together in a paragraph and central ideas for the rest.

For your conclusion, you may want to explain what might be gained from an exhaustive discussion of various parts of the poem. Look at the last lines of the poem and make some predictions about what the author is trying to communicate. Consider that poetry is not only supposed to stimulate emotions but to provide information and transfer attitudes, to what degree do the details and techniques that you discussed contribute to these goals? Consider what the value of your study of this poem has added to your understanding and appreciation of the poem and any new awareness of the poet's craft. IB will kiss you! 😊

### **Step 3: Structuring your Commentary**

1. There is no definitive structure to a poetry commentary, this isn't like writing a history commentary. However, structure is an important aspect in writing a poem and you can prepare yourself in advance by having some notion of the order in which you will write. Here is an example of a possible commentary structure.
2. Note: Everyone is different, if you want to write your poetry commentary in a different form, by all means do- this is merely a suggestion aimed at guiding your writing.

#### **Introduction**

- \* State the poem's title, author, and a small introduction to the poem's overall literal meaning.
- \* State the poem's form, and any important literary devices which appear through out it.
- \* Write about an important aspect of the poem which you will further discuss in your wildcard paragraph and eventually conclude in your last paragraph.

#### **Focus One: Structure and Narration**

- \* Briefly mention the poem's structure, movement. Make note of the use of enjambment or the juxtaposition of words.
- \* Write about the poem's meter and its speed.
- \* Examine punctuation, paragraph breaks, form.
- \* Make note of the poem's narrator and his tone/voice.

#### **Focus Two: Meaning**

- \* State the poem's literal meaning. Argue HOW you know and WHERE this can be seen.
- \* State the poem's figurative meaning. Argue HOW you know and WHERE this can be seen.

#### **Focus Three: Devices**

- \* Write about the poem's literary devices. WHY are they important or what EFFECT do they have?
- \* Write about important themes present in the poem. WHY does the author make these themes stand out?
- \* Look at musical devices: rhyme scheme, rhythm, meter, alliteration, assonance, consonance, repetition, tonal effect.

#### **Focus Four: Combine**

- \* Write how literary devices and meaning interconnect.
- \* This paragraph should begin to bring things together.

#### **Focus Five: The Wild Card**

- \* Introduce an important theme or aspect of the poem in great detail. This could be a refrain, an extended figure or an apostrophe.

#### **Conclusion**

\* The conclusion should combine the Wild Card with the above paragraphs. How literary devices or the poem's structure aid in supporting an extended figure for example. Do not just restate your thesis. The conclusion is meant to make statements, reveal questions, close off the commentary in a meaningful way.