

# TO THE STUDENT: WRITING ABOUT POETRY

## 1. INTRODUCTION

- The first time we read a poem we are overwhelmed by problems. We may not understand all the words, we have doubts about the meaning of certain lines and the rhyme doesn't seem to help us. The content is typically felt as something distant -if not completely alien- to our experience, so our interest in reading it declines quickly. After all, what do all these long-dead poets of the X century have to say to me? If we add to this dangerously frustrating mixture the complicated syntax of the lines, the poem becomes undecipherable. To add insult to injury, the poem may be irritatingly short -just a few fourteen lines- what increases our anger and frustration. This ultimately leads to labelling poetry as incomprehensible, the poems as hieroglyphs and the course as a whole as an insurmountable problem.
- But this is actually the result of letting your emotions (anger, frustration) colour the reality. The reality is that by the time you're ready to begin this course, you have read dozens, if not hundreds, of reading comprehensions. And you've answered many difficult questions about them. You're already used to scanning and skimming texts, to looking for synonyms, information and many odds-man-out. Why should reading and understanding a poem be any different? What you need to do is to channel your abilities and project them into the poetry realm. It is not easy. But we have a whole semester to learn. Remember, the most important thing is to have a positive attitude. Let no one say you were defeated by a fourteen-line poem of the 16<sup>th</sup> century ^\_^

## 2. WHAT SHOULD I SAY WHEN COMMENTING A POEM?

### 2.1. BACKGROUND

- ❖ **Who** wrote this poem?
- ❖ What **period** does the writer belong to?
- ❖ Does this poem belong to any of the writer's **main works**?

*In this section you must be **brief and to the point**.*

*No more than **two lines** are needed to identify the writer's context.*

### 2.2. CONTENT

- ❖ What is the **main concern** of the poem? (*Love, time, nature*)
- ❖ Who is the **I voice**? (*A rider, a traveller, a lover, a friend*)

- ❖ Who is the **addressee**? (*A Lady, a young man, we readers...*)
- ❖ Who was the text written for? (*A patron, the Queen*)

*You must identify all these themes briefly. One short paragraph should be enough. You will have time to develop your ideas later on.*

- ❖ **How is the main concern structured?**
- ❖ **How is the text organised?**
- ❖ Does the author follow a **pattern**?
- ❖ Is there a narrative? A description? An argumentation?
- ❖ Has the poem a **title**?
- ❖ Has the poem a **conclusion**?
- ❖ Do the lines reflect the state of mind of the I voice?
- ❖ **What are the most relevant linguistic/rhetorical features used in the poem?**

*This is the body of your commentary. You must discuss how the main ideas are organised **without resorting to any kind of description of the events**. Remember, a critical commentary is **NOT** a description of what happens in the poem. That I already know. What I want to know is your analysis, critical reflection and ideas about it. Again, it is not easy. But practice makes perfect ^\_^*

### **2.3. CRITICAL REFLECTION**

- ❖ Is the author drawing on previous sources for the writing of the poem?
- ❖ Is he drawing on previous **traditions or conventions**?
- ❖ Does he **follow** them?
- ❖ Does he **challenge** them?
- ❖ **Does the poem relate to any others we have seen in this course? In what ways? Is it similar or different?**

*You may not be able to do this section for ALL poems. However, it is important to relate it, when possible, to similar topics we may have discussed in class.*