Reading Poetry Study Sheet

Goals for this Sheet
This study sheet was prepared so that you might be able to more easily recognize and interpret poetry through an overview of the basics.

What is Poetry?
Poetry is a literary form that goes back thousands of years, existing in various forms like epics, songs, and practices of oral tradition. Some of the earliest forms of literature were written in poetic verse, such as the epic of Gilgamesh which dates back to 18th century B.C.E. and is known to be the first recorded poem. Poetry can be difficult to quantify as it differs immensely, depending on the age, region, language, and culture.

A lot of people tend to overthink poetry—it doesn’t have to be extremely complex or refined to be deemed poetry. Practice is truly the best way to know more about structure and the deconstruction of poetry; it helps you understand the nuances of the medium. In that, yes, there are many ways to write it, but to recognize it when you read it is a very universal knowledge.

Things to Remember about Poetry

1. Stanzas
Stanzas are an important piece of the poetic structure – though, in many forms of modern poetry they are deconstructed. They are a series of lines grouped together. It’s the poetic version of a paper’s paragraph. Keep in mind that many different countries can have complex variants on this component due to poetry’s long-standing history as an art form. For instance, the sonnet began in Italy, but was appropriated by Shakespeare. For example, the old Persian poetic form ghazal is being re-interpreted in English by many poets in an attempt to explore an old form.
2. Form

Form is basically another word for style. A lyric poem (incredibly popular, most often in song form) is any poem with one speaker (not necessarily the poet) who expresses strong thoughts and feelings. A narrative poem is a poem that tells a story; its structure resembles the plot line of a story (i.e. the introduction of conflict and characters, rising action, climax and the denouement). A descriptive poem is a poem that describes the world that surrounds the speaker. It uses elaborate imagery and adjectives. While emotional, it is more "outward-focused" than lyric poetry, which is more personal and introspective. Keep in mind, that in the information age and poetic expression becoming much more visual, many poets do away with traditionally structured form altogether, engaging with free verse, spoken word, or blank verse.

3. Sound Patterns

Rhyme is the repetition of similar sounds. It is usually identified with lower case letters, and a new letter is used to identify each new end sound. Internal rhyme occurs in the middle of a line. Cadence is interaction between the flow of the lines and the internal rhyme. There is a lot of focus on the stress and unstressed syllables due to English being iambic and generally a hard-consonant language. Many poets now use spacing to create a more complex rhythm within the poem through the incorporation of emphasized pauses.
4. Figurative Devices

Simile is the rhetorical term used to designate the most elementary form of resemblances. Most similes are introduced by "like" or "as."

However, a metaphor leaves out "like" or "as" and implies an indirect or direct association between objects or situations. For example: “I am an open wound.” Naturally, a person cannot be an open wound, but the idea implies a hurt, prolonged all-encompassing pain, and the potential for recovery.

A symbol is like a simile or metaphor with the first term left out. "My love is like a red, red rose" is a simile.

Personification occurs when you treat abstractions or inanimate objects as human, that is, giving them human attributes, powers, or feelings (e.g., "nature wept" or "the wind whispered many truths to me").

A Note on Interpreting Poetry

Interpreting poetry seems like an overwhelming task. Where do you begin? Poetry is such an all-encompassing form of literature. Many might say the title - interestingly though, the title is (by many) considered the last line of the poem, nowadays. By the end, the reader or the poet could tie everything back in with the first words, so creating a cyclical narrative. Another aspect of interpretation to consider is word choice, or diction, and how that impacts each line and the stanza as a whole. In poetry, a word change can have a much greater effect on the words before it, after it, above it, or below it. Each word lends an idea to the whole of the poem, thus engaging the reader in an image or memory to evoke a feeling.

Phonetics are an important component. Does the poet rely on a regional dialect? Does the poet switch dialects? How does each word, as it is written, sound? Is there a beat? Do certain words rhyme? Do they rhyme within the word, at the beginning, or the end?
There are many ways to deconstruct this, as well. Take the poem apart stanza by stanza. What happens in this sequence of events? Is there a full event, or is it like a flash of memory? How are these words acting on each other? How does the flow sound? Is it cohesive or dissonant? Line by line, ask yourself these questions.

Take care to remember that the “Speaker” in the poem is not always the poet and may (in some cases) be a projection on the reader, or persona that the poet adopted for a particular poem or set of poems. When interpreting and internalizing, do not always rely on the background of the poet to bring answers. The speaker in the poem may be telling another person’s story, or act as a witness. Another thing to keep in mind is that the poem you are reading may not be a standalone piece. There are, at times a greater sequence that it could be a part of - Anne Carson’s work comes to mind. Poetry may also be referential to a poet’s previous work - perhaps even another poet’s work altogether. Rap (rhythm and Poetry) has often employed this technique, so creating a cohesive narrative that exists within a song, then an album, then in interactions indirectly between different artists.