

Analysis of a Poem

Author and title

Thesis

First key poetic element: figures of speech

Second key poetic element: diction

No "Ordinary Woman"

Imagine that you are thirty-eight years old. You have raised several children and have always worked hard for your family. When you were younger, you had dreams of being someone important—an astronaut, a doctor, or an artist. However, as you got older those dreams slipped away. You became an "ordinary" person. Now you find yourself wondering, "Is an 'ordinary' life an important life?" Lucille Clifton answers that question in her poem "an ordinary woman." Through figurative language, diction, and sound effects, Clifton tells the story of a woman's discovery that, although she is a simple woman, she has an important identity of her own.

Clifton carefully chooses figures of speech that support the image of an "ordinary" woman. For example, the speaker uses two similes to compare herself to common foods. She says that she is "plain as bread" and "round as cake" (lines 3-4). She also uses metaphors, saying she has "built" daughters who "blossom and promise fruit / like Afrikan trees" (lines 34-35). These metaphors show that the woman has also given the gift of life that promises to grow and develop.

Diction—the choice of words—also contributes to the poem's meaning. Clifton's simple vocabulary (the only difficult word is *countenance* in line 17) highlights the "ordinary" quality of the speaker. A play on the words *whole* and *holy* (lines 51-52) shows the speaker's growing awareness of her identity as she prepares to die. She is no longer lonely

Analysis of a Poem *continued*

Third key poetic element: sound effects

Restatement of thesis

because she knows herself as a “whole” woman. The simple words “an ordinary woman” used four times in the poem indicate that the speaker accepts her identity as an ordinary woman.

The poem has no regular rhythm or rhyme, but there are many sound effects. Repetition is important. The repetition of “not afraid” and “not lonely” (lines 53-54) suggests a new spirit of life. Moreover, the repetition of “into my own. / into my own.” (lines 56-57) shows that the speaker accepts her identity as an African American woman. Assonance (repetition of the long *i* sound in *final, mind, life, shining, my, i*) is also important. Here the speaker emphasizes her growing sense of *I*—her own identity.

The speaker “had not expected to be / an ordinary woman” (lines 59-60), but she has come to realize that being an ordinary woman is a triumph. It is ordinary women, after all, who care for their families and help their children to a more promising future than their own. Throughout the poem, Clifton effectively develops this theme through figures of speech, diction, and sound effects.

Analysis of a Poem

Definition

An **analysis of a poem** is an attempt to gain a better understanding of a poem by examining its parts, or elements. An analysis of a poem usually focuses on two or three literary elements such as diction, figures of speech, and sound effects.

An analysis of a poem will often use the structure illustrated in the framework below. Print this framework and use it as a guide when you write your own analysis of a poem.

Framework

Directions and Explanations

Introduction

- Relate the poem's meaning to a common, human experience.
- Introduce the title and author.
- State your thesis.

Seize your audience's interest Try to draw in your readers with an anecdote, a question, or an observation that relates to your thesis.

Provide your readers with background Always include the name of the author and the full title of the poem. If necessary, give your audience some background information about the author or the poem.

Write a clear thesis statement Clearly state your main idea about the poem, and list the literary elements you intend to analyze.

Body

- Discuss the first key poetic element. Provide support and elaboration.
- Discuss the second key poetic element, and so on.

Discuss the poem's key elements Show how each poetic element relates to your main idea about the poem. Use details or quotations from the poem to support your statements.

Conclusion

- Remind readers of your thesis and summarize.

Close your analysis Restate your main idea and leave your readers with something to consider. Try to answer any questions you posed in the introduction.