Back, Back, Back It Up: Interpreting and Analyzing Poetry
Activity Two: Important to Know & Do

Note
One of the most important competencies within the high school English curriculum concerns the student’s ability to understand and analyze a literary text. Whether the student is in ninth grade studying literature via a genre or thematic approach, in the tenth grade studying world literature, in the eleventh grade studying American literature, or in the twelfth grade studying British literature, each grade level stresses the importance of analyzing literature.

Essential Question
How does a poet employ poetic devices to create meaning in a text?

North Carolina Standard Course of Study
Goal 4: The learner will critically analyze text to gain meaning, develop thematic connections, and synthesize ideas.
Goal 5: The learner will interpret and evaluate representative texts to deepen understanding of literature of the United States.

Objectives
The student should be able to:
1. Identify various poetic devices within a poem.
2. Compare pieces of literature, noting the extent to which they are similar and different.
3. Hypothesize why poets use different conventions to express different ideas.
4. Critique a poem, evaluating its literary merit.
5. Analyze a poem, using specific textual references to defend his or her position.

Materials
  - “On Being Brought from Africa to America” (“To the University of Cambridge, in New England” would work as well)
• Copy of Theodore Roethke’s “My Papa’s Waltz”, published 1948
• Poetic devices on board, transparency, or LCD projector for review (connotation, denotation, imagery, tone, mood, diction, syntax, metrical forms—iambic, trochaic, spondaic, dactylic, etc.)
• Highlighters or colored pencils for student use
• Chart paper and markers to synthesize student ideas and contributions

Time Required
90 minutes

Procedures
1. After a brief review of the major poetic devices, distribute copies of Wheatley’s “On Being Brought from Africa to America” and Roethke’s “My Papa’s Waltz.” Without
giving students unnecessary information, have them first read through the Wheatley poem with the following instructions:

Read the poem three times. First, read the poem to get a sense of its sounds. On the second reading, emphasize the literal meaning of the poem. Finally, on the third reading, “interact with the text” by using a highlighter to mark unusual words and write questions and comments in the margin. By the end of this activity, students should answer the following three questions:

- What is this poem really about?
- What is the tone of the poem?
- How does the author use various poetic devices to convey the tone and themes of the poem?

At the bottom of their paper, tell them to summarize the poem’s meaning in one sentence and to be prepared to defend their reading. Give approximately fifteen to twenty minutes for this exercise.

2. Break students up into groups of four. Have students share their interpretations with their peers. One person within the group should serve as the recorder, writing down the ideas of the members within the group. Any disparities within group members should be pointed out on the chart paper and discussed within the group.

3. After the groups have had about 10-15 minutes to collaborate and jot down their ideas, come together as a class and disseminate the information from the various groups. Point out the varied interpretations within the class, and encourage students to cite textual evidence to substantiate their claims.

4. After students have shared their group’s information to the class, repeat the process. This time, however, students will read a poem by contemporary author Theodore Roethke. Remind students that Roethke is from a different literary era than Wheatley. Have students repeat the above process.

5. For the remainder of the class period, discuss with students why there were different interpretations of the poems. Focus on the following questions for discussion:

- How is it possible for everyone to receive the same poems but interpret them in completely different ways?
  - Response: Different people approach texts with different eyes, different experiences; therefore, they interpret things differently. What is most important in evaluating and analyzing a literary text is that you substantiate your claims through textual support. If you have ample textual support, and it logically follows the claim you are making, then, you have an argument. It’s all about backing up your claims via textual evidence.
Why do authors choose to use literary/poetic devices? What do these devices add to the overall work?
- They do this for different reasons, all of which is a part of some design or purpose. Take, Wheatley, for example. In her poem she uses alliteration—“diabolic die”—that emphasizes these words. She is forcing her readers to pay attention to the fact that she (and her people) is black, yet they, too, can be a part of the “angelic train.” In the Roethke poem—he uses iambic trimester. This mirrors the tempo of an actual waltz.

How does Wheatley use poetic devices to convey her ideas? How does Roethke?
- Answers will vary. This item is related to the one which precedes it.

How do we know which interpretation is the best?
- How do we? All interpretations are valid, provided they possess logical support from the text. Of course, you cannot say that Wheatley’s “On Being Brought from Africa to America” is a poem that chronicles the horrors of the Holocaust. Not only would that be anachronistic, but there is not anything to suggest anything of that sort within the poem. If one were to say that the poem possesses elements of satire, then, that would be acceptable. This can be substantiated by citing lines from the text for support.

What do Wheatley and Roethke have in common?
- Again, answers will vary. They both, however, effectively utilize poetic devices to achieve their desired purposes.

**Homework**

Using a poem that was not discussed in class, have students to write a brief analysis of Wheatley’s work that interprets her use of literary devices. Students should provide their personal opinion of Wheatley’s purpose, but support their argument with evidence from the text. Emphasis should be placed on her strategic use of literary devices to shape her text and establish purpose.