

## ANALYZING POETRY

### What can I do if I don't understand a poem?

1. **Read it a second time.** Read the poem at least twice before beginning to analyze.
2. Consider the **title**. Often, the title will help you focus on the topic or overall meaning of a poem.
3. **Break it down:** stanza by stanza, line by line, even word by word.
4. **Look up words** you don't know or use the words around it to try to figure out their meaning.
5. Look for **important words** - ones that stand out and have strong connotations.
6. What is the overall **mood** of the poem? (sentimental, reflective, playful, sincere, etc.?) The overall **tone**? (regretful, serious, humorous, etc.?)
7. What is the **literal meaning** of the poem? What actually happens on a literal level? What events take place?
8. Now, look for a deeper, **figurative meaning**. What might the poem be suggesting about the topic? Does the author use symbolism, allusions, paradox, irony, contrast, metaphor, etc. to convey this figurative meaning?
9. Look for the **theme**. What is the author saying about life? Identify the topic of the poem. If the poem is about love, then love is the topic. So, the theme would be the author's message *about* love. Remember, theme is a *universal* (can apply to both the text and the world) and *insightful* truth.
10. **Re-read the last few lines** of the poem. Often, the author will get to his or her main point about the topic in the last few lines. This is a good place to look when you are trying to understand the **theme** (the author's message he or she is trying to get through to the reader regarding the topic of the poem).
11. **Re-read** the poem (yes, again).

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12. Look at the **structure** of the poem. How does the form help?

- Does the poet use random capitalization or punctuation?
- Are the line lengths equal?
- How are the stanzas arranged? Are they of equal length?
- How is the poem organized on the page?

13. Look for poetic techniques and devices used.

- symbolism (colours are often symbolic, also, seasons tend to represent the cycle of life, etc.)
- alliteration, assonance, consonance
- similes, metaphors, personification
- imagery, hyperbole, onomatopoeia, rhythm, etc.

Why and how are the poetic devices used in the poem? What purpose do they serve? How do they help us better understand the poem?

14. What **images** does it create in your mind?

15. If you have **questions** to answer for the poem, **read them** to help you focus.

16. Make **connections** to other poems, stories, songs, information (etc.) you know.

17. Is the poem effective?

- What is the **purpose** of the poem? (to entertain, to teach, to describe, to inform?)
- Is the **meaning** clear?
- Are important points appropriately emphasized?
- Has the author served his or her purpose?

*\*\*\*\*\* These are just guidelines to use when analyzing a poem. You do not necessarily need to answer each of these with each poem or answer them in this order. The most important thing to do is to analyze **WHY** in every instance. That is the way to get a deeper meaning of the poem you are analyzing. \*\*\*\*\**