

Interpreting and Analyzing Poetry

1. Begin with your own response to the poem? Is there a specific image, line, word, sound or section of the poem that particularly strikes you? Why? What is literally happening in the poem? Is there a story, a scene, a picture?
2. What is the plot or story? What is the setting or mood? Who are the characters, including and especially the speaker? What is the point of view of the speaker? What is the speaker's tone? What is the theme or main idea of the poem?
3. Does the poem belong to a particular genre?
4. Analyze the diction. Look for double-meanings and puns. Look at denotation (literal meaning) and a connotation (what the word implies beyond its literal meaning). Word choice contributes to tone and mood as well as timbre and rhythm. Look at these contributions and list your observations.
5. Look for imagery. Descriptive imagery appeals to the senses (sight, sound, smell and touch); and figurative imagery extends the meanings of the words beyond the literal meaning by using metaphors or other tropes. Also, look for symbols, but be aware that an object may not be necessarily acting as a symbol.
5. Consider rhythm and its relationship to meaning. What is the poet trying to sound like? Also, consider how the sound relates to meaning: rhyme, alliteration, assonance, consonance, and onomatopoeia as examples. There are many more schemes to look for.
7. Look at the structure of the poem, pauses, stanzas, line breaks. Why does the poem begin and end the way that it does? Look at anything that gives form to the poem.
8. Pay special attention to any contrasts or conflicts in the poem. Does the poem set one thing against another? Why?
9. How does the title comment or extend the poem's meanings? Are there any additional features: epigraph or footnotes. Why are they there?
10. What does the poem mean? There is no singular meaning but notice that many meanings may emerge that can help you to interpret the poem or you can then find a central thesis statement to write about the poem.