

HOW TO ANALYSE A POEM

When analysing a poem, you must ask yourself two main questions:

- 1 What is the poem trying to say?
- 2 How does the poet try to say it?

Read the poem more than once. Read it out loud to get a sense of the way the sounds of the poem affect its meaning. Then consider the following aspects more in detail:

CONTENT

Look at the title and reflect on what it may mean. Consider the role of the speaking voice. Do you think the speaker is the poet or a specific person? How is he/she involved in the poem?

Many poems are built around a tension or conflict. Is this conflict internal or external? Is it a spiritual, moral or social conflict? Finally, consider the context. When was the poem written? What were the historical, political, and social issues of that time? Do they affect the meaning of the poem? The author's history and culture may have influenced the content of the poem too.

LANGUAGE

Analyse how language and rhythm contribute to the meaning of the poem. First look at the poet's word choice. Is the language formal or informal, literary or colloquial? Then focus on meaning. Words have denotations (literal meanings) and connotations (figurative meanings). The connotative, or figurative, meaning of a word means everything that the word might imply besides its direct meaning. Poetic language is highly connotative.

Finally look at the rhythm. Does the poem have an identifiable rhythm arranged in meter? How many syllables are in each line? How does alliteration

(the repetition of initial consonant sounds in two or more neighbouring words), assonance (the repetition of similar vowels in the stressed syllables of successive words), and consonance (the repetition of a consonant sound) enhance the rhythm and musicality of the poem?

IMAGERY

Images are very concrete 'word pictures' that have to do with the five senses – sight, hearing, touch, smell, and taste. Every poem contains images. Look for images in the poem. Is there a central image? Are images literal or figurative? What sensory experiences are evoked by those images? Does the poet use similes or metaphors to express images? Remember that a simile is an explicit comparison between two things/people, using the words 'as' or 'like' ("She is as thin as a rail"), while a metaphor is an implied comparison between two unlike things/people that have something in common ("He was a lion in battle"). Personification (giving human qualities to nonhuman things) is another common poetic device. Are certain objects or actions symbolic of an abstract idea?

FORM

Look at the structure of the poem. Does the poem follow a formal poetic structure such a sonnet, ballad, haiku, etc? Are stanzas and lines the same length? Do they follow a particular pattern? Does the poem follow an identifiable rhyme scheme?

SYNTAX

Consider how the poet's syntactical choices reinforce the ideas expressed in the poem. How are lines broken? Are they broken before a grammatical or logical completion of a thought to create an enjambment? Look at the sentence structure. Does the poet use complete sentences, fragments, or a combination of both? How is punctuation used? Does it affect the rhythm?

