

How to Analyze a Poem - A Simple Plan

Step 1- Read the poem one time just to get the overall feel.

Step 2- Make a few structural observations. Annotate (mark up with your pen) the things that stand out.

Questions to ask?

1. Is it long or short? How many lines?
2. Is it in stanzas?
3. Does the author use punctuation? Is it conventional or normal or bizarre?
4. Is there anything going on with the capitalization that I should notice?
5. If there is punctuation, is the poem in sentence form- are there questions, exclamation marks. long and involved sentences, short sentences, compound sentences- or sentence fragments.
6. Is there a rhyme scheme? Is the rhyme internal or at the end of the line? What words are emphasized through rhyme.
7. Is there any obvious pauses (caesuras)? Are they forcing me to stop at any important points? To what are they drawing my attention?

Step 3- Do I need to look up any vocabulary words before I get started? Do those first and write in the definitions.

Step 4- Reread the poem slowly. This time focus on the imagery.

1. Is the imagery literal or is there figurative language?
2. What is the imagery of? What are I supposed to be seeing?
3. Is this poem comparing things or is it just describing them?
4. If there is figurative language, what kind is it: metaphors, similes,

personification, apostrophes, pathetic fallacies, animism, metonymy or synecdoche?

Step 5- What is the tone? What words are most deliberately creating the tone? Look for the words that stand out to you as strange, strong, personal, emotional, evocative in any way? What emotions are they creating? Write those in the margin. Are there are obvious juxtapositions (things that are set up to contrast with each other)?

Step 6- Reread the poem for a third time- what is he trying to say. IF you think the poem is a cliché, think again. Clichés aren't things that will make poems important. The poem should say something unexpected, maybe something most people don't think about. Is the poem ironic in any way? Is there some sort of symbolism in it?

Step 7- Look at the title. How does the title fit with the poem?

Step 8- Make a claim about what your poem means. Then reread the poem to make sure it fits. if it matches part of the poem, but not all of the poem, you've missed something. It should all fit.

Step 9- Go back and look at the title. Does it all work together.

Step 10- Double-check- make sure your claim is about something UNIVERSAL and not just about the specific circumstance or setting of the poem.

BEST STEP- Defend your claim to a partner- with confidence, say what the poem is about and prove it. See if your partner can poke holes in your argument.

Many (although not all) students of language and literature read over and quickly dismiss poetry finding it hard to understand or boring. We have sought to include with each novel (following the *Scarlet Letter*, because we hadn't thought of this yet), a featured poem and/or poet that connects either directly or indirectly to the major work discussed. This is a list of the poems discussed. There are listening guides attached to these podcasts as well as creative writing activities that can supplement not just a classroom experience, but hopefully the enjoyment of literature in general.