
ANALYZING A POEM (TFC TASTI)



Following the process outlined below will allow you to confidently and accurately understand and explain even the most challenging poetry. The best results will come from taking careful and detailed notes for each step, following the order outlined below.

1. TITLE

Before reading the poem, take a careful look at the title. Make educated predictions about the subject matter, setting, themes, mood, etc. of the poem.

2. FACTS

In many ways, this is the key step in the whole process, because not being clear about the factual (literal) meaning of a poem will almost always lead to confusion and/or error in understanding the abstract (figurative) ideas and feelings that the poem is communicating. Therefore, be very careful and thorough in taking notes and finding evidence at this stage. The questions you should try to answer are:

a) Who? - Who is the narrator (speaker) of the poem?

Who are the other characters in the poem?

What do you know about these people? Evidence?

b) Where? and When? (setting)

What are the implications of setting the poem at this place and this time?

c) What happens? (plot)

Exactly what events happen or have happened in the poem?

Translate the poem into your own words. Focus on one syntactical unit at a time, not necessarily on one line at a time. Or write a sentence or two for each stanza of the poem.

3. CONNOTATION

Contemplate the poem for meaning beyond the literal. What do the words mean beyond the obvious? What are the implications, the hints, the suggestions of these particular word choices?

4. TECHNIQUES

Examine any and all poetic devices, focusing on how such devices contribute to the meaning, the effect, or both, of a poem. **(What is important is not that you can identify poetic devices, so much as that you can explain how the devices enhance meaning and effect.)** Especially note anything that is repeated, either individual words or complete phrases. Anything said more than once may be crucial to interpretation. Look for techniques such as:

- imagery and image patterns - sight, sound, smell, taste, touch.
 - motifs - recurring ideas or word patterns
 - figurative language - simile, metaphor, personification, allusion, etc.
 - sound techniques - rhyme, alliteration, onomatopoeia, etc
 - other language techniques - diction, syntax, connotation, etc.
-

5. ATTITUDE

Identify and explain the attitude(s) (TONE) of the narrator and/or the writer toward the characters, events, etc. in the poem. As much as possible, provide direct evidence from the text (words, phrases) to support your explanation of the attitudes you identify. Diction, images, and details suggest the speaker's attitude and contribute to understanding.

6. SHIFTS

Rarely does a poet begin and end the poetic experience in the same place. As is true of most of us, the poet's understanding of an experience is a gradual realization, and the poem is a reflection of that epiphany. Trace the changing feelings of the speaker from the beginning to end, paying particular attention to the conclusion. To discover shifts, watch for the following: key words: but, yet, however, although; punctuation: dashes, periods, colons, ellipsis; stanza and/or line divisions: change in line or stanza length or both; irony: sometimes irony hides shifts; effect of structure on meaning, how the poem is "built"; changes in sound that may indicate changes in meaning; and changes in diction: slang to formal language, for instance, or positive connotation to negative; the crux, the one crucial part of the work that stands out, perhaps presenting the complete idea all by itself. Identify and explain significant shifts or changes in the poem.

Specifically, look for shifts in:

- narrative voice (change to a new speaker)
- stanzas (Why change to a new stanza here?)
- image patterns, diction, syntax
- setting, action
- logical organization (Key Words- but, however, yet, although, etc)
- verb tense
- line lengths
- punctuation (dashes, periods, ellipsis, etc.)

7. TITLE

Return to the title and make further notes about its significance and implications, especially at the level of figurative meaning, in light of the analysis done so far.

8. IDEA

In identifying theme, recognize the human experience, motivation, or condition suggested by the poem. Remember that theme is "a general truth about life". The theme of the poem must be expressed in general terms, but then you must explain how this general theme specifically relates to the poem you are analyzing. In one or two complete sentences, summarise the primary idea(s) and/or feeling(s) that the poet is communicating in the poem. In other words, what is the poet saying about people and/or life in the poem? This summary statement should be the result of and consistent with the details of your analysis in the preceding categories.