

HELP! I'M ANALYZING A POEM!

Below are some questions and exercises to help you begin analyzing a poem. Your analysis should NOT contain comments on every question and exercise below. Conceivably, you should select a few items as the basis of the ideas which will lead to a detailed and interesting analysis of the poem.

In order to answer the first set of questions, you must pay close attention to details. You must take the time to look up any words that you do not understand and to ponder why certain metaphors or figures of speech were chosen to be used at that position in the poem. Remember also that the English language has changed over the centuries and that words we use today may have had a slightly different meaning in earlier times.

1. Who is the speaker? What kind of person is the speaker?
2. Is there an identifiable audience for the speaker? What can you know about the audience?
3. What is the occasion?
4. What is the setting in time (hour, season, century, etc.)?
5. What is the setting in place (indoors or out, city or country, land or sea, region, country, etc.)?
6. What is the central purpose of the poem?
7. What is the poem about? State the central idea or theme of the poem in a single sentence.
8. What is the tone of the poem? How is it achieved?
9. Outline the poem so as to show its structure and development. What kind of poem is it (ode, sonnet, dramatic monologue, lyric poem, etc.)? Why is this type of poem an appropriate means to communicate the author's theme?
10. Summarize the events of the poem.
11. Paraphrase the poem.
12. Discuss the diction (the word choice) of the poem. Point out words that are particularly well chosen and explain why.
13. Discuss the imagery of the poem. What kinds of imagery are used? Is there any structure to imagery?
14. Point out and explain any symbols. If the poem is allegorical, explain the allegory.

15. Point out examples of metaphor, simile, conceit, personification, metonymy, or any other literary device and explain their significance and/or appropriateness.
16. Point out and explain any examples of paradox, overstatement, understatement, and/or irony. What is their function? Why are they used?
17. Point out and explain any allusions. What is their function? Why are they used?
18. Point out significant examples of sound repetition and explain their function.
19. How is the poem constructed? What are its units of organization (quatrains, paragraphs, couplets, etc.)? How are these units linked together (continued metaphor, pro and con, linked sound patterns, logical syllogism, train of thought, etc.)?
20. What is the meter of the poem? Copy the poem and mark each syllable as accented (stressed) or unaccented (unstressed), divide the lines into feet (two syllable units). Then, identify the pattern of the rhymes, and note any significant variations from those patterns.
21. Read the poem out loud. Determine if any sounds in the poem relate to topics discussed within the poem (for example, short, choppy syllables with repeated “ee” sounds could relate to a chirping bird discussed in the poem).
22. State the form or pattern of the poem (line length, stanza length, number of stanzas, etc.)
23. Evaluate the poem. How well did it achieve its purpose? How well did it communicate its central idea or theme?

All of the previous questions lead to your being able to answer convincingly larger analytical questions. In order to answer those questions, you must analyze the information from the above questions. Use this information to construct a convincing and persuasive reading of the piece as a whole and to suggest the significance of the piece in increasing the reader’s understanding of a particular issue, literary process, etc.

1. How do all of the poem’s parts (structure, organization, language use, meter, literary devices, etc.) contribute to the effect of the piece of a whole?
2. What does the poem do (convert the reader, seduce a woman, create shock, nostalgia. Or fear, evoke a mood, etc.)?
3. If you taught this poem in class, what might you use to introduce and to illustrate it (how a metaphysical conceit works, portrait of the ideal lover, etc.)?