

Exploring Poetry

Questions to consider:

1. Who is the **speaker** (voice--not always the poet)? What does the poem reveal about the speaker's character? In some poems the speaker may be nothing more than a voice meditating on a theme, while in others the speaker takes on a specific personality.
2. Is the **speaker addressing** a particular person? If so, who is that person and why is the speaker interested in him or her? Many poems are addressed to no one in particular and therefore to anyone, any reader. Others, while addressed to a specific person, reveal nothing about the person because the focus of the poem is on the speaker's feelings and attitudes.
3. Does the poem have a **setting**? Is the poem occasioned by a particular event? The answer to these questions will often be no for lyric poems. It will always be yes if the poem is a dramatic monologue or a poem that tells or implies a story.
4. Is the **theme** of the poem stated directly or indirectly? Some poems use language in a fairly straightforward and literal way and state the theme, often in the final lines. Others may conclude with a statement of the theme that is more difficult to apprehend because it is made with figurative language and/or symbols.
5. From what **perspective** (or point of view) is the speaker describing specific events? Is the speaker recounting events of the past or events that are occurring in the present? If the past events are being recalled, what present meaning do they have for the speaker?
6. Does a close examination of the **figurative language** of the poem reveal any patterns?
7. What is the **structure** of the poem? Since narrative poems--those that tell stories--reveal a high degree of selectivity, it is useful to ask why the poet has focused on particular details and left out others. Analyzing the structure of a non-narrative or lyric poem can be more difficult because it does not contain an obvious series of chronologically related events.
8. What do **sound** and **meter** contribute to the poem? Alexander Pope said that in good poetry, "The sound must seem an echo to the sense"--a statement that is sometimes easier to agree with than to demonstrate.
9. What was **your response** to the poem on the first reading? Did your response change after study of the poem or class discussions about it?

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To appreciate the sounds and meaning of a poem, it is best to start by reading it aloud.

Once you've listened to the poem, pay attention to the words that make up the poem. *Where* a poem takes the reader is inseparable from *how* it takes the reader. Poets pay close attention to **diction** or word choice (words have connotative (associative) and denotative (dictionary) meanings); every word in a poem counts.

Figurative language, or devices of language--i.e. imagery, metaphor, simile, personification, allusion, and symbol--allow us to speak non-literally in order to achieve a special affect.

Figurative language makes a comparison between the thing being written about and something else that allows the reader to better picture or understand it.

The music of poetry, or the sound patterns found in poetry, is created by various uses of language, such as alphabetical letter sounds; rhyme; alliteration; assonance; onomatopoeia; rhythm created by stressed and unstressed syllables (often most easily recognized in the poet's use of metrical feet); variations of line; tone; etc.