Poetry
How to read and analyse a poem

Reading and analysing a poem helps the reader to appreciate its meaning and the skills of the poet, and to enjoy the poem more thoroughly.

Before analysing a poem, predict what the poem may be about. Ask these questions:

- Does the title of the poem refer to a place, a time, a person, a thing, a feeling etc?
- Does the title of the poem give a clue to the nature of the poem? For example, Ode to a Grecian Urn, Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard
- Is the title symbolic, satiric, humorous, serious or purely descriptive?
- What does the structure of the poem suggest? If it is a long poem, divided into stanzas, it may be telling a story from beginning to end (like a ballad); a five-line poem may be a limerick.
- Do you know of other poems by the same poet? This may be a clue, as the poet may write on similar themes in other poems.
- When was the poem likely to have been written? Are there instances of old-fashioned or newly coined words?

Read the poem aloud (unless it is a shape or concrete poem) right through, several times.

On a third reading, read stanza by stanza, or even line by line, to clarify the meaning of the words in the context of the poem.

Traditional poems may use some archaic usage, eg o’er (over); ‘neath (beneath); thou or thee (you); doth (does); ere (before), lest (for fear that).

When analysing a poem, consider WHAT the poem is about and HOW the poet achieves this.

What is the poem about?

There are often two levels of meaning to consider:

- The literal, surface subject of the poem – often an event, a situation, a person, an experience, an observation, a story, or a description.
- The underlying meaning or theme of the poem, which is usually more abstract – an idea, a feeling or belief.
- What is the poet’s purpose? What is the poet’s message?
- Who is speaking? Whose feelings and points of view are being expressed?
- Who is being addressed? How do you know?
What is the tone or attitude of the poet? What words reveal this feeling?

Is the language of the poem directed squarely at the reader or is it more descriptive, impersonal or philosophical?

Are there any characters that need to be considered? This may be relevant if the poem deals with a story (eg ballad, epic) or a particular person whose motivations need to be recognised in order to understand the poem’s full meaning.

**How has the poet achieved his/her purpose?**

Look at the specific techniques used, and what impact they have on the reader.

- What is the poet doing to gain our attention?
- What holds the poem together?

*Note: Not every poem has every element.*

**Look at the structure of the poem.**

- Does the poem have a conventional structure, such as a sonnet, an ode, or a haiku, or is it free verse?
- Does the poem use stanzas? How are these used?
- Does the poem go through different stages? For example, does it progress from beginning to end, or is it organised around a development of ideas?
- Does the poem use any other interesting features of structural design?
- How does the structure relate to the topic and/or theme of the poem?

For example, a ballad structure uses stanzas like paragraphs in a story. It may include a chorus to remind readers of the main message and add to the rhythm.

**Look at the tone and atmosphere of the poem.**

- The tone of the poem reflects the attitude of the poet towards the subject matter.
  - Brainstorm some words which accurately describe the tone of this poem. Use a thesaurus to find precise words.
- The mood and atmosphere of the poem refer to the general feeling or emotion of the poem which is created by the poet’s tone, and the language, imagery and sound of the poem.
  - What is the atmosphere in this poem?
  - How does the poem appeal to the emotions and senses of the reader?
Look at the language of the poem.

- What sort of words does the poet use to convey the message?
  - Are they vivid, precise and effective or mundane and predictable?
  - Are they formal or colloquial?
  - Are there examples of effective poetic language uses such as paradox, repetition, or puns?
- Is the language appropriate to the type of poem and to the main message of the poem?
- What impact does the poet’s choice of words have on the reader?

Look at the imagery and symbolism in the poem.

- Are there original and striking examples of imagery – symbols, similes, metaphors and/or personification that help build a vivid picture in the reader’s mind?
- Are there symbols which are commonly understood which help to bring meaning to the poem? For example, the dove is a universal symbol for peace. If it is injured in the poem, it may mean that peace has been disrupted.
- How does the poem appeal to the senses – sight, touch, smell, sound, feel?
- Are there key ideas or images that are repeated throughout the poem?
- Describe the effect of the imagery and how it strengthens the theme of the poem.

Look at the movement or rhythm of the poem.

- How would you describe the rhythm of the poem? Is it fast, slow, medium or variable?
- What techniques create this rhythm? Consider metre, rhyme scheme, short or long lines, punctuation.
- How does the rhythm relate to the meaning of the poem?

Look at and listen to the sounds of the poem.

- What significant sound features are there?
- Does the poet use assonance, alliteration, onomatopoeia?
- What effect do these have on the sound of the poem? For example, alliteration of ‘s’ sound suggests speed or smoothness; alliteration of ‘b’ sounds slows the rhythm down and suggests a bluntness.
- Does the poem use rhyme? Is there a regular rhyme pattern? Describe the rhyme scheme by labelling the end of each line with a letter using a new one each time you come across a new rhyme sound (eg abab rhyme scheme). What impact does rhyme have on the overall sound and rhythm, and on the subject of the poem?