

## Analyzing Poems – Some General Guidelines

Some students have trouble reading poetry because they don't know where to start. They see the word "death" in the first line and "tomb" in the third, and then they jump to the sudden conclusion that the poem must be about mortality (when, in fact, it may be a sentimental lover's pitch to a woman who has turned him down). Then they spend the next ten minutes trying to make the poem fit their speculation about what the poem means.

To avoid such premature (and erroneous) conclusions, and to prepare yourself for the kind of questions the AP Literature exam asks you, it may help you to ask the following questions about a poem in something like this order.

### 1. What is the dramatic situation?

That is, who is the *speaker* (or who are the speakers)? *Where* is the speaker? What is the *occasion* or the *circumstances* in which this poem takes place?

Sometimes you'll be able to answer all the questions. Other times, you'll be able to answer only a few, and sometimes only vaguely.

### 2. What is the structure of the poem?

That is, what are the parts of the poem, and how are they related to each other? In which places does the poem shift, and what are the structural divisions of the poem? Is there a "volta" or a clear "turning point" in the poem? (Usually a *volta* appears near the end of a lyric poem.)

Think about the logic of the poem and about what gives the poem its coherence. Does it ask *questions* and then *answer* them? Or develop an *argument*? Or use *a series of analogies* to prove a point? Understanding the structure isn't just a matter of mechanics. It will help you to understand the meaning of the poem as a whole and to perceive some of the formal techniques that the poet has used.

In analyzing the structure, your best aid is the punctuation. Look first for the complete sentences indicated by periods, semicolons, question marks, or exclamation points. Then ask how the poem gets from the first sentence to the second and from the second to the third. Are there repetitions such as parallel syntax or the use of one simile in each sentence? Answer these questions in accordance with the sense of the poem, not by where a line ends or a rhyme falls.

### 3. Is the syntax clear?

Make sure that you understand the syntax (or grammar) of the poem. The word order of poetry is often skewed because poets frequently *invert the syntax* of their sentences (especially in poems written before the Modern period). Moreover, while most poems from *before* the Modern period use the sentence as the fundamental unit of thought, many modernist and contemporary poets use the line as the fundamental unit of thought. Make sure that you understand how the poem's fundamental units of thought are expressed.

**4. What are the important images and figures of speech?**

What are the important concrete images, the sensory language that creates an experience (which you can see, hear, feel, etc.) in your imagination? Moreover, are there similes and/or metaphors in the poem? If so, in each, exactly what is compared to what? Is there a pattern in the images and figures of speech? Whatever the case, be sure that you have distinguished between the literal and the figurative.

**5. What are the most important single words used in the poem?**

This is another way of focusing on diction. Some of the most significant words in a poem aren't figurative or images but still determine the effect of the poem. A good reader usually recognizes which words—usually nouns and verbs, adjectives and adverbs—are the keys to the poem.

**6. What is the tone of the poem?**

Tone is the attitude of an author that readers must infer by reading the work. Of course, it is often very hard to define tone in only one or two words, because an author's tone in a piece may be complex, or it may even shift throughout the piece.

**7. Which other literary devices does the poem employ?**

The list of devices that an author may use is enormous. The terms you should worry about are, above all, **diction**, **imagery**, **metaphor**, and **simile**.

diction	imagery	metaphor	simile	personification
allusion	irony	apostrophe	paradox	hyperbole
parallelism	understatement	anaphora	repetition	contrast
oxymoron	rhetorical question	symbol	metonymy/synecdoche	

**8. What sound devices (or prosody) play a role in the poem's effects and meaning?**

It can be especially helpful to consider how the author's use of sound elements contributes to the poem's tone and mood. Does the language create euphonious sounds? Or does it create cacophonous sounds? How do the poem's sounds and "music" contribute to its tone, mood, and meaning?

**9. What are the themes of the poem?**

If possible, define what "main thought" the poem seems to express and how it does so. However, since poems often have multiple meanings too complex to be reduced to single sentences, be open to more than one single theme or meaning.