

How to Analyze a Poem

Before You Read:

- Read a short biography; have some **knowledge of the author**.
- Know the **time period** the piece was written in.
- Make sure you have a **dictionary and a pen** nearby!

1st Read-through:

- Read it **out loud**.
- Get the **general idea**.
- Identify **characters**.
- Find a **turning point**, if possible.
- Look for a **theme**.

2nd Read-through:

- Look at **diction**: find **individual words** that stand out.
 - o Words that you are **unfamiliar** with.
 - o Words that are particularly **descriptive**.
 - o Words in the **title**.
 - o **Look up words**, even if you know their meanings, to see if there are **double meanings, plays on words**, or if they **change the meaning** of the poem as a whole.
- Look at **syntax**: see if the **formatting of words** stands out.
 - o Unusual **capitalization**.
 - o Words that **don't make sense** together.
 - o Phrases that are **unclear**.
 - o Ideas that seem to be aimlessly **separated** over two lines.
 - o Unusual use of, or absence of **punctuation**.
 - o **The author does this to make you notice an idea or phrase or to communicate a voice.**
- Look at **images**:
 - o **Allusions**.
 - o **Animals, plants, time of day, places, etc.**
 - o References to other pieces of **literature, cultural phrases**.
- Make **connections**:
 - o Particularly between the **first part** and **second part**, determined by the **turning point** (if there is a turning point).
 - o Find **similar words** or **images** in different parts of the poem.

3rd Read-through:

- Think through the ways that the **images** relate to the **theme**.
- Read with understanding of a **new theme** if necessary.
- Find any **more details** that point to the theme.
- Relate any findings and ideas to a **bigger picture** of life.

- Step back and **look at the poem as a whole**: what is the author trying to communicate about **life** and **how to live it**?
- What observations does the poem call out **about the world**?
- How is the author trying to get his readers to **change their lifestyles**?

After You Read and Analyze:

- **Leave the poem** for a day or so and **come back** to it later, and see if you acquire anything different from the poem.