

How to Read a Poem

Poems can sometimes be difficult to get to grips with. But remember that the poet has tried hard to say much using few words. Part of the enjoyment of a poem is the work needed to engage with it and find out what the poet is saying. Don't always expect to be able to 'translate' a poem – many poems have 'meanings' that are hard to define precisely, but which still seem to strike a powerful chord in our consciousness.

Remember that poets try hard to "make it new" – to allow their reader to appreciate in a different way some aspect of life that might have previously been taken for granted. Certainly, poems are unique in their ability to say much more than is printed on the page.

Here is a list of questions that could be applied to any poem. Answer them for your poem(s). Your answers will help you build up an idea of how and why the poem works.

1. Look up any unfamiliar words and work out what the poem is about
 - *Write this down in a couple of sentences.*
2. Work out the correct "voice" with which to read the poem.
 - *Work out and describe the kind of person who is 'telling' the poem.*
3. What is this speaker's tone of voice?
 - *Does it change?*
 - *What tells you this?*
4. Which words have indirect, associated, unusual or special meanings?
5. Are any words repeated?
 - *Why is this done?*
6. What images does the poet create?
 - *Is each image related to the last in any kind of pattern?*
 - *What is the effect of this?*
7. Does the poet rely on non-literal uses of language such as metaphors, similes, and personification?
 - *How does this add to the tone and meaning of the poem?*
8. What is the setting for the poem?
9. Work out the central idea or theme behind the poem.
 - *Write this down as a single sentence.*
10. What effect do sound effects within the poem have?
 - *Notice rhyme and rhythm, soft vowel sounds, harsh consonant sounds, onomatopoeia, etc.).*
 - *How does this affect tone and meaning?*
11. Notice line endings and where lines break.
 - *What effect does this add to the poem's meaning?*