



How to analyse a poem

Poems have many layers to them and to analyse a poem successfully all these layers need to be found, explored and analysed in order to identify the poem's message and depth.

Title

- Is there any significance to the title or is it a flat naming of the poem's subject matter? (Literal/figurative meaning)
- Often, you will only know once you have read the poem
- Are there any figures of speech?
- What connotations do the words carry?
- Is it literal or symbolic?

Structure/form

- Is there a specific shape to the poem?
- Is it broken up into stanzas? Of how many lines?
- Is there a sestet? Is there an octet?
- Has the poet used unusual punctuation?
- Is there repetition?
- Is there enjambment?
- Does the structure create rhythm?
- What is the rhyming pattern/rhyme scheme?

Diction

- ◉ Refers to the poet's choice of words
- ◉ Are there foreign words?
- ◉ What connotations do keywords carry?
- ◉ Has the poet used a dialect, slang or colloquial language?
- ◉ Are there examples of alliteration, assonance, onomatopoeia?

Style

- Refers to how the poem was written
- What type of language has been used?
- What register and tone have been used?
- Is the poem conversational, humourous or serious?
- Is the poem mostly literal or figurative?
- Does the structure add to the style?
- Does a lack of punctuation and enjambment create a pace and flow to the reading of the poem?

Tone

- What is the poet's attitude towards the subject matter of the poem?
- What abstract noun can be used to describe the poem?
- Would you describe the tone as one of anger, despondence, sincerity, joy or hope?

Message

- What point does the poet want me to take away from this poem?

Hidden meaning

- Are there any metaphors or personification? Is there an extended metaphor?
- Are there any similes?
- Has the poet used hyperbole, litotes or bathos?
- Has the poet used satire, humour or implication to hint at meaning?

How to answer test questions

The first step in successfully answering a question is to understand WHAT the question is asking.

Steps to follow when answering test/exam questions

- Read each word of the question
- Underline or highlight the keywords
- Take note of the mark allocation
- Ensure that you have one clear point or substantiation for each mark
- Write an uncomplicated answer

Definitions:

- Litotes → uses a negative and an opposite to understate what is intended. E.g. He is **no Einstein** (He is academically weak) // The gruesome sight was **far from pretty** (it was ugly)
- Bathos (Anti-climax) → a build up of ideas, but the final statement is often flat and unexpected. E.g. The room was luxuriously furnished, beautifully painted, tastefully decorated – **and crawling with cockroaches!**