Guidelines for Poetry Analysis

**SUBJECT**
What event, situation, or experience does the poem describe?
Who is the speaker? To whom is the speaking talking?
What is the time setting - hour of day, season, era, place?

**S.M.I.L.E. - TECHNIQUE**
- Structure,
- Meaning,
- Imagery,
- Language
- Effect

**Structure**
How is the poem structured? Does it have a conventional structure such as a sonnet, or an ode? Does it have stanzas with a regular number of lines, or any other interesting features of structural design? Can you identify the type of poem - sonnet, free verse, ballad, etc.? Is the poem lyric, dramatic, narrative, or a combination? How can you tell?

**Meaning, issue, theme or message explored by the poet...**
What seems to be the poet's purpose in writing this - what message, ideas, issues, themes are communicated?

**Imagery**
Are there any striking examples of figurative language used? What things are compared (similes, metaphors, personifications or symbols) in the poem? Are their analogies or conceits? What is their effect?

**Language**
How would you describe the poet's use of words - vivid, striking, effective or colourless and predictable?
What visual images are brought to mind?
What sensations does the poem evoke: sound, touch, smell, taste, movement, etc.? What words are used in surprising or imaginative ways? Look for puns.
Are there any inverted word orders or sentences? What would be the usual order? What purpose is served by the inversion?

**Effects of tone, mood, emotions, expressed...**
What is the poet's tone? Watch for shifts in tone especially toward the end of the poem. What is the poet's attitude toward the subject? What is the predominant emotion, or mood, of the poem? Does the mood change during the poem? What emotions or feelings does the poet seek to evoke in the reader/listener?

**EVALUATE**
Having analysed the poem, it is important to synthesise (pull all the information together) into a summary. What is the impact of the whole poem for you? How successful is it as a work of art? Does it successfully achieve the poet's purpose or is it flawed in some serious way? Is the language appropriate to subject and/or theme? What effect does the language have on the poem's achievement?
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Analysing Poetry

This diagram is a useful way to analyse a poem. Always ask yourself:
WHAT is the poet saying?
HOW does the poet say it?

The ‘WHAT’ of the poem

Subject Matter, Theme

What is the poem about?
What ideas is the poet expressing?
What images/words, symbols, does the poet use to convey
and reinforce his/her ideas?

The ‘HOW’ of the poem

Technique

How does the poet communicate his/her ideas?

Structure

No. of stanzas

Mood

feeling and atmosphere
created; e.g. thoughtful,
peaceful, eerie

Tone

the voice or sound of
the poem; e.g. serious,
mocking, humorous

Imagery

metaphors
imagery
symbols
personification

Language

Rhythm

The ‘beat’ of the line
emphasis of words
alliteration (repetition of
the first consonants in a phrase)
assonance (repetition of
vowels in a phrase)

Rhyme

sound of the words
what sounds repeat?