

Elements of Poetry Analysis



Poetry has many of the same elements as fiction: theme, narrator, characters, and setting, although it concentrates its elements in fewer words. Poets choose the words that they use very carefully, delighting in using figurative language, and vocabulary that has more than one meaning.

Before focusing on specific poetic elements, here are a few steps to help acquaint you with the poem:

1. **Look at the poem** – are there anything striking about the way it is set up? Do the lines have a pattern?
2. **Read the poem out loud** – take note of the way it sounds. Does it have a certain rhythm to it?
3. After reading the poem and obtaining a general idea of what it is about, **look at the title**. How does the title relate to the poem?

Next, analyze the five different components of the poem, *the speaker, the structure, the meaning, the imagery and the rhythm, meter and rhyme scheme*.

Speaker: Understanding the Speaker is an essential component of poetry analysis:

1. Who is the speaker? Is it a male or female? An object? An historical figure?
2. To whom or what is he/she speaking? About what? Someone else? About the past, present or future?
3. What is the speaker's tone? What is the speaker's mood? Is the poet reflective? Happy? Angry?

Structure: Examine the way the poem looks and is presented on the page:

1. How is the poem set up? Is it separated in to stanzas? Does it follow the pattern of one of the closed forms, such as sonnet, limerick, or haiku?
2. Is the poem in free verse? How are the lines set up? Is there one word per line or is it one long sentence?
3. How does the structure of the poem contribute to meaning?

Meaning: Read the poem for meaning.

1. As you're reading, note any words that you do not know. After you've finished reading, look these words up. Poets choose each word on purpose, not only for its sound, but for the nuance or multiplicity of meaning.
2. After you've looked up unfamiliar words, read the poem again as a whole. Try to determine the main idea of the poem - feel free to paraphrase in your own words.
3. Treat the poem as a puzzle: Figure out the meaning of the first line in the first stanza, then the meaning of the second and so on. At the end of the stanza, figure out how the lines work together to create meaning. Then put the summaries for each stanza together to determine the meaning of the poem as a whole.

Imagery: Not only do the words in a poem create a physical image on the page, but in their meaning and connection, they convey images to the reader.

1. The easiest images to pick out are similes and metaphors.
2. Look for words that reflect the five senses, phrases that create a picture, sound, taste, feeling or smell in your mind? Are words used such as *buzz* or *cuckoo* (*onomatopoeia*) which imitate what they name?
3. Look for the repetition of colors, sounds, images, or specific sensory words. Repetition of certain words creates meaning and puts importance on those words that are repeated.

Rhythm, Meter and Rhyme Scheme: Read the poem out loud.

1. Rhythm is the recurrence of stressed and unstressed sounds, which can sound melodic or discordant, fast or slow, etc. Rhythm's what gives some poems their "sing-song" quality.
2. Meter is a recurring pattern of rhythm.

3. The rhyme scheme of a poem describes the pattern of end rhymes. Rhyme schemes are mapped out by noting patterns of rhyme with small letters: the first rhyme sound is designated a, the second b, the third c, and so on.