Analyzing Poetry

Introduction
We are affected by literature – we love it, hate it, or are indifferent. This is the total effect. "Meaning" is the total effect -- the sum of all of the parts is what it "means" to you. The "meaning" of a work may change as you understand more about it or experience some of what the author has written about. Therefore, "meaning" is how the poem acts on you – what it is that you feel. As you understand more about a work, its meaning will change -- it will have more effect, or there is also the possibility that you will realize that the work did not mean what you thought it did (you feel differently).
FOR EXAMPLE:

The movie Friday the 13th, Part 23 may be an inspiration for the beginning film maker, a triumph of wise investment for the producer, a boring waste of time for the person who has seen the previous 22, and a terrifying experience for the poor spectator who has seen none of the others. For each of them, the experience, the interpretation, and ultimately, the meaning, will be different. Therefore when you analyze or look at a work of art, you are trying to decipher how it achieves its effect or how did it produce meaning.
Analyzing Poetry

1. Be open to liking or disliking a poem. Try to stay away from indifferent. Formulate an opinion and substantiate it for each poem. Be thoughtful, critical and reflective.

2. Some questions for discussion will be opinion and some will have correct answers. Take both seriously.
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3. Read a poem once, **without** reading the question beside or under it. Don’t worry about anything but the poem on that first read. Focus only on reading the poem and thinking about its meaning.

4. On the second read, evaluate the poem with what’s being asked. **ALWAYS HAVE THIS SECOND READ!**
A Hippo is Bounding Around on My Head

A hippo is bounding around on my head. Gorillas are banging on drums. A rhino is charging me full speed ahead while a crocodile's eyeing my thumbs. A rattlesnake's winding his way up my side. A tiger is sniffing my clothes. A grizzly just grabbed me, his mouth open wide. A tarantula's perched on my nose. I'm drowning, surrounded by man-eating sharks. An elephant sits on my chest. Yes, that's how it feels when the teacher remarks, "Grab your pencils. It's time for the test."

—Kenn Nesbitt
Follow the Steps Defined Below To Understand Poetry

- **Step 1**: Paraphrasing
- **Step 2**: Discover the subject (What is the poem about?)
- **Step 3**: Discover the speaker (Who is the speaker?)
- **Step 4**: Main Idea or theme
- **Step 5**: Literary techniques
Step 1

Paraphrasing
What Are They Talking About?

Explain the poem in your own words
Step 2

Discover the Subject

What is the poem about?

Find out what the poem means
Step 3

Discover the Speaker

Who is the speaker?

Look for the speaker’s interests, idea, and feelings
Step 4

Main Idea or Theme

The main idea or message of literary work

Find out what the poem is about
Step 5

Literary Techniques

A.) Make a List of Literary Techniques Used by the Author.

B.) Explain How do the Poem’s Techniques Support the Poem’s Theme?
- **Alliteration** - The repetition of initial consonant sounds.
- **Assonance** - The repetition of vowel sounds in a line of poetry.
- **Allusion** - A reference to a well-known historical person, place, event, literary work or work of art.
- **Analogy** - A comparison of similar objects. An analogy suggests that since the objects are alike in some ways; they will probably be alike in other ways.
- **Consonance** - The repetition of consonant sounds in a line of poetry.
- **Connotation** - It is created when you mean something else, something that might initially be hidden. It is based in implication or a shared emotional response.
- **Denotation** - It is when you mean what you say, literally.
Poetry Terms

- **End Rhyme** - The rhyming of words at the ends of lines of poetry.
- **Figure of Speech** - It is an expression or word used imaginatively, not literally.
- **Hyperbole** - It is an exaggeration to emphasize the truth for effect.
- **Imagery** - These are the mental pictures that are created by the poet. The poet makes use of the five senses (see, touch, taste, smell and hear). Used to create sense impressions of actual experiences.
- **Internal Rhyme** - Rhyme within lines of poetry.
- **Metaphor** - A comparison of two unlike things.
- **Meter** - The rhyme in the lines of a poem. It is created by the regular alteration of stressed and unstressed syllable.
- **Mood** - The atmosphere of feeling that an author creates in a work.
Poetry Terms

- **Onomatopoeia** - The use of a word whose sound makes you think of its meaning, as in *buzz, swish, zing or zip.*
- **Paradox** - Occurs in a statement that at first strikes us as self-contradictory but that on some reflection makes sense.
- **Personification** - this is used by an author to give an object or idea human characteristics or attitudes.
- **Point of View** - The way in which the reader is given the information.
- **Repetition** - The repeating of a word or phrase to add rhythm or to focus an idea, as in the following lines from Poe’s “The Raven.”
- **Rhetorical Question** - A question asked for dramatic reasons and not intended to evoke a response
**Poetry Terms**

- **Rhythm** - The repetition of stresses and pauses. Rhythms affect the poem's meaning and ultimately, affect the reader.
- **Simile** - It is a comparison using like or as.
- **Stanza** - The group of lines in a poem. It could be compared to a paragraph in an essay.
- **Symbol** - An object, person, a place or an experience that represents something else, usually abstract.
- **Theme** - The central thought of the poem.
- **Tone** - A reflection of the author's attitude toward a subject of a poem.
A Poison Tree by William Blake

I was angry with my friend: I told my wrath, my wrath did end.
I was angry with my foe: I told it not, my wrath did grow.

And I watered it in fears, Night & morning with my tears; And I sunned it with smiles, And with soft deceitful wiles.

And it grew both day and night, Till it bore an apple bright. And my foe beheld it shine, And he knew that it was mine,

And into my garden stole, When the night had veiled the pole; In the morning glad I see My foe outstretched beneath the tree
Summary of “The Poison Tree”

This meditation on the nature of wrath offers two ways of dealing with an offence. When the speaker is angry with his friend, he told the friend of it and his “wrath did end.” However, when he was angry with his enemy, he kept the anger hidden, allowing it to grow.
His wrath, which is watered “in fears” and sunned ‘with smiles, And with soft deceitful wiles,” grows into the poison tree of the title. The tree bears “an apple bright” that the speaker’s enemy desires; the greedy enemy takes the fruit, even though he knows it belongs to the speaker, and eats it. The next morning the speaker is glad to see his “foe outstretched’d beneath the tree.”
Analyzing “A Poison Tree”

"The Poison Tree" consists of four sets of rhyming couplets. Each stanza continues into the next, giving the poem a hurried, almost furtive tone that matches the secretive deeds done in darkness of the poem's content.
The obvious moral of this poem is that hidden wrath becomes more dangerous behind the deceit that hides it from its object. Possibly, the “Friend” mentioned in the first stanza is a friend simply because the speaker respects him enough to voice his anger face to face, whereas the “enemy” may be a potential friend who remains an enemy because the speaker keeps his wrath secret and nurtures it.
There is a touch of irony, however, in that the poem ends with the speaker’s gladness over his foe’s death by poison. No final line refutes the secret nurturing of wrath, and in fact, the poem may be read as a guide for taking vengeance upon one’s enemies.
Some critics suggest that the apple symbolizes Blake’s creative work, which another of his contemporaries may have stolen and used as his own. If so, it appears the theft of Blake’s intellectual property ended badly for the thief (or at least Blake hopes it will).
Analyzing Poetry takes patience.

- The analyst needs to:
  - Observe
  - Interpret
  - Infer
  - Analyze
  - Evaluate
Step 1: **Title**

Goal - Attempt to predict what the poem will be about

- Ponder the title before reading the poem.

- Questions to ask yourself:
  - What predictions can I make about the poem?
  - What feelings can I connect to the poem’s title?

Write your response in a complete sentence.
Step 2: Paraphrase

Goal: Translate the poem, line by line, into your own words.

- Paraphrase the literary meaning/plot of the poem. A true understanding of the poem must evolve from comprehension or what’s going on in the poem.
Step 3: Connotation
Goal: Contemplate the poem for meaning beyond the literal meaning.

- In poetry, connotation indicates that analyst should examine any and all poetic devices, focusing on how such devices contribute to the meaning, the effect, or both of a poem.
- Consider imagery, figurative language, symbolism, diction, point of view, and sound devices
- You will link these considerations to the overall meaning.
Step 4: Attitude

Goal: Observe both the speaker’s and the poet’s attitude

- Having examined the poem’s devices and clues closely, now explore the multiple attitudes that may be present in the poem.
- Here you will describe the tone of the author and/or speaker.

Recall how this is done…
Step 5: Shifts
Goal-Note shifts in the speaker’s attitudes or emotions.

- Rarely does a poet begin and end the poetic experience in the same place. Discovery of a poet’s understanding of an experience is critical to the understanding of the poem. Trace the feelings of the speaker from the beginning to the end, paying particular attention to the conclusion.
Look for the following to find shifts:

1. Key words (but, yet, however, although)
2. Punctuation (dashes, periods, colons, ellipsis)
   3. Stanza division
4. Changes in line or stanza length or both
5. Irony (sometimes irony hides shifts)
6. Effect of structure on meaning
7. Changes in sound (rhyme) may indicate changes in meaning
8. Changes in diction (slang to formal language)
Step 6: Title

Goal: Examine the title again, this time on an interpretive level

Questions to ask yourself:
- Why is the title “_____?”
- What does this mean?
Step 7: **Theme**

**Goal:** Determine what the author is saying and wants me to learn and feel after reading the poem.

- Identify the theme by recognizing the human experience, motivation, or condition suggested by the poem.

- This step, within itself, has a system:
  1) Summarize the plot
  2) List the subject (s) of the poem (moving from literal subjects to abstract concepts such as war, death, discovery)
  3) Determine what the poet is saying about each subject. Write a complete sentence, making a statement and point about the subject (s).
Janet Walking

Beautifully Janet slept
Till it was deeply morning. She woke then
And thought about her dainty-feathered hen,
To see how it had kept.

One kiss she gave her mother,
Only a small one gave she to her daddy
Who would have kissed each curl of his
shining baby;
No kiss at all for her brother.

“Old Chucky, Old Chucky!” she cried,
Running on little pink feet upon the grass
To Chucky’s house, and listening. But alas,
Her Chucky had died.

And weeping fast as she had breath
Janet implored us, “Wake her from her sleep!”
And would not be instructed in how deep
Was the forgetful kingdom of death.

It was a transmogrifying bee
Came droning down on Chucky’s old bald head
And sat and put the poison. It scarcely bled,
But how exceedingly

And purply did the knot
Swell with the venom and communicate
Its rigour! Now the poor comb stood up straight
But Chucky did not.

So there was Janet
Kneeling on the wet grass, crying her brown hen
(Translated far beyond the daughters of men)
To rise and walk upon it.
Example of theme explication using the poem “Janet Walking”

Plot: In “Janet Walking” Janet awakens one morning and runs to greet her pet chicken only to discover that a bee had stung and killed the bird. The discovery desolates Janet to such a degree that her father cannot comfort her.

Subjects:
1. A child’s first experience of death
2. Loss of a pet
3. Innocence

Themes:
1. Children become aware of the inevitability of death and are transformed by the knowledge.
2. The death of innocence is inevitable
"You Can't Write a Poem About McDonald's"  
Ronald Wallace

Noon. Hunger the only thing
singing in my belly.
I walk through the blossoming cherry
trees
on the library mall,
past the young couples coupling,
by the crazy fanatic
screaming doom and salvation
at a sensation-hungry crowd,
to the Lake Street McDonald's.
It is crowded, the lines long and sluggish.
I wait in the greasy air.
All around me people are eating—
the sizzle of conversation,
the salty odor of sweat,
the warm flesh pressing out of
hip huggers and halter tops.
When I finally reach the cash register,
the counter girl is crisp as a pickle,
her fingers thin as french fries,
her face brown as a bun.
Suddenly I understand cannibalism.
As I reach for her,
she breaks into pieces
wrapped neat and packaged for take-out.
I'm thinking, how amazing it is
to live in this country, how easy
it is to be filled.
We leave together, her warm aroma
close at my side.
I walk back through the cherry trees
blossoming up into pies,
the young couples frying in
the hot, oily sun,
the crowd eating up the fanatic,
singing, my ear, eye, and tongue
fat with the wonder
of this hungry world.

1) Where are the images that the reader can see, think, taste, feel, and smell?
2) What comparisons did the author make?
What literary technique did he employ?
3) What is the mood of the poem?
"I'm Nobody"  Emily Dickinson

I'm nobody! Who are you?
   Are you nobody, too?
Then there's a pair of us - don't tell!
   They'd banish us, you know.

How dreary to be somebody!
   How public like a frog
To tell your name the livelong day
   To an admiring bog!

1. What do you think Dickinson means by “I’m nobody”?
2. Based on the poem, what can you infer that the poet feels about being a “nobody”?
3. Why does Dickinson say she doesn’t want “to be somebody”?
   a. She’s not a realistic person.
   b. She doesn’t get along with others.
   c. She’s afraid to make friends.
   d. She doesn’t want everyone to know her name.
4. Based on the passage, what might the word, “banish” mean?
   a. kill
   b. celebrate
   c. shun
   d. welcome
“Daybreak” by Ted Kooser

On the tidal mud, just before sunset
Dozens of starfishes were creeping. It was
as though the mud were a sky
and enormous, imperfect stars moved across it slowly
as the actual stars cross heaven.
All at once they stopped,
and as if they had simply increased their receptivity
to gravity they sank down
into the mud; they faded down into it and lay still; by the time pink of sunset broke across them they were as invisible
As the true stars at daybreak.

1) What do you think the author’s purpose was for writing this poem?
   a. to tell a story
   b. to express a feeling
   c. to make the reader laugh
   d. to praise its subject

2) What is the simile in this poem? What is being compared? Why do you think the author chose to use this literary device?