

How to respond to a poem

Go through these steps
when trying to
understand a poem.



What is the poem about?

- ✓ What is the title? How/why is this significant?
- ✓ What happens in the poem?
- ✓ What is it about? Is this literal or is this a metaphor for something else?
- ✓ What is the **story** of the poem?
- ✓ Who is the poem about?
- ✓ What has influenced the poet?
- ✓ Where is it set? Are there multiple settings? What do these represent?
- ✓ What is the tone/mood? Does this change? How/why?
- ✓ What emotions or feelings are conveyed in the poem? How? Why?
- ✓ How does the context help you to further understand and interpret the poem?



What are the themes?

- ✓ What are the different ideas expressed in the poem?
- ✓ Think about how the themes link to what the poem is about and what the poet is trying to show you.
- ✓ What are the main issues being explored?



What is the message?

- ✓ What does the poet want you to understand?
- ✓ Why did they write the poem?
- ✓ What are their concerns/ideas?
- ✓ Is there a moral/religious/philosophical lesson?
- ✓ Is this a universal message? A personal message? A societal message?
- ✓ Why does the poet want to leave you with this message?
- ✓ Can you use your contextual knowledge to develop your interpretation of the meaning/message?



Whose perspective are you given?

- ✓ Whose voice do we hear; who is the speaker? How do you know?
- ✓ What situation are they in?
- ✓ What is their significance to the story being told?
- ✓ Why does the poet choose this voice?
- ✓ What do we learn about the persona created?
- ✓ What is their attitude?
- ✓ How do we learn this?
- ✓ How do they feel? How is this conveyed?
- ✓ Are there any other characters in the poem? What is their role?



TOP TIP!

Always ask yourself WHY & HOW.

Why has this technique been used? How has it been used? Why has this particular form been used?

Link everything back to what the poem is about; the themes; the message; and context if relevant.

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Now you understand the poem, you can start to identify the methods used by the poet.



Looking at the methods used and analysing their effect The methods are like the poet's toolbox.

You will need to be able to identify the methods used by the poet and comment on their effect. You should not merely technique spot, but should instead consider why these methods have been used, how they reinforce the message and what effect they have on the reader. You can use all of the notes you made for step 1 to help you with this.



□ Language

- What kinds of words have been used?
- Try and identify word classes. What are the connotations of these words? Why have they been used? What do they suggest about the speaker, the characters or the topic of the poem? How do these words enhance a technique or vice versa?
- Can you identify any patterns?

□ Poetic Techniques

- Identify the different techniques used.
- Why have they been used? What is the effect?
- How do they reinforce the message/meaning?
- How do they help to create a tone/mood?
- How can you interpret meaning?
- What do these techniques reveal about character/action/events/setting/relationships?
- How do the techniques reflect the themes?



□ Structure and Form

- What can you say about the structure of the poem?
- Is the poem organised in stages?
- How do ideas progress throughout the stanzas?
- How are ideas organised?
- Does the tone change or is it consistent?
- Does the setting change?
- Is there a shift in the direction of the poem? At what point?
- How does the poem begin and end?
- How does it look on the page? What is the effect?
- What can you say about stanzas and line length?
- What is the tense?
- What person is it written in?
- Is there a rhyme scheme?
- Is there a rhythm? How is it created? Why?



Use the acronym MASSTT as a way of helping you to understand, interpret and analyse a poem.



Meaning / message
Analysis (of methods)
Summary / story
Speaker
Themes
Tone



What, How, Why



What - this indicates when you are providing a personal response (What do you see? What is presented?)

How - this often refers to method and techniques (How is this shown?)

Why - this often refers to poet intention or message (Why has this been used?)

WHAT

- What do you see?
- What do you think?
- What is your impression?
- What is your view?
- What do you learn?
- What do you understand?
- What is being presented?
- What is the poet showing you?
- What can you say about the speaker / message / themes / poet's methods?

How

- How do you know this?
- How is it shown to you?
- How is it presented?
- How are you affected?



Why

- Why does the poet do this?
- Why does the poet present it in this way?
- Why does the poet want you to feel this way?
- Why has this word / technique been used?

See if you can take your ideas further by using these questions regularly.

