

### *Questions for the Analysis of Poetry*

The following set of questions is intended as an exploratory tool; it can help to focus your reading and enhance your understanding of the poem. Before working with the numbered questions you may find it helpful to consider just what the poem is “about.” Most poems, after all, are about some element of real life—birth, death, meditations on mortality, the joys and pains of growing up, momentary flashes of insight, moments of wonder and beauty, commentaries on the change of seasons, and so forth. Consider what this poem is “about” in these terms and consider as well what the cliché responses to this event might be. (E.g. if a poem is about the birth of a child, what would the cliché attitude of the speaker be?) Once you feel like you have a grasp on this “aboutness” of the poem, then begin to investigate farther, using the questions as a guide.

1. What is the setting of the poem? Is that setting described at length and with precision or is it merely touched on?
2. What is the dramatic/rhetorical situation of the poem—that is, who is the speaker and who is the addressee? (Remember that in many lyrics the speaker seems to be talking to him or herself and the reader merely "overhears" the poem.) Is the speaker trying to get the addressee to do something? Does the speaker seem like the poet, or is the poet speaking through some sort of fictional voice?
3. Consider the title of the poem. Why would the poet have called the work by this name? Does the title "sum up" some thematic concern developed in the poem? Does it "set the scene"? Does it identify the poem's genre?
4. Compare the poem's opening lines to the closing lines. Has anything changed? If so, try to trace the causes of that change, paying particular attention to the progression of the speaker's emotional state, to problem-resolution structures, to narrative patterns, etc. Why does the poem end where it does?
5. Look through the poem for any "key words": pay attention especially to verbal moods (imperative, indicative, etc.) and to any "logic words" ("therefore," "thus," "if . . . then," etc.). Such grammatical details frequently offer clues to the poem's structure and meaning. Also examine the pronouns in the poem, making sure that you understand what each one refers to.
6. Examine the key images in the poem—especially those images that link one part of the poem with another part. Are these images being used figuratively in any way; do they "stand for" anything beyond their mere descriptive content?
7. Time. Does the poem relate all its information in a single time (i.e. present, past), or does the poem contain some parts which, perhaps, the speaker recalls from the past or imagines for the future? How do the various times depicted in the poem influence one another? Does the poem tell some kind of a story in which one event directly causes another?
8. Can you think of any poems similar to the poem you are reading now? In what way are the poems similar? In what ways are they different?
9. Does the poem comment on any specific historical events or on any real people? If so, make a list of such specific references and try to find out something about them—in other words, take your list to the library and do a little research.
10. Examine the poem's prosody and stanza structure. Does this offer any clues about what the poem might mean?