

A Simple Guide to Analyzing Poetry

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TPCASTT

T - Title

P - Paraphrase

C - Connotation

A - Attitude

S - Shifts

T - Title (yes, again)

T - Theme (the most important part! aren't you excited?)

English teacher after crappy English teacher gave me those guidelines and expected me to actually learn something just by knowing what those letters stood for. That doesn't help you at all. What helps is knowing what to really look for when identifying different parts of the poem, and to know that, I'll break each letter down and offer tips to find the deepest meaning -- as quickly as possible.

T - Title

First, you have to look at the title. Just look at it. Don't try to be all artistic and read into it, simply write down what your initial impression is. What immediately pops into your head? What does it make you feel? Any guesses as to what the poem's about? This step is important, as your initial impression of the title versus your final impression can reveal a lot about the poem itself.

P - Paraphrase

This is pretty self-explanatory. However, don't try to interpret the poem-- not just yet. Simply "translate" the poem into simpler language which won't get in the way of analysis later on. Don't skip any lines, or even words... make sure the phrasing of the poem makes complete sense to you before moving on to the next step.

At this point, most teachers will tell you to move on to "connotation." However, there is an extremely important step that is left out-- addressing the speaker of the poem. The speaker is seldom just "a man" or "a young child." They may be either of those, but more important than who they are is what they are going through. In short, what is the situation of the speaker? Is the man mourning the loss of his wife? Is the child watching the ocean waves slowly erode his sandcastle? Knowing the speaker and their situation in life is the key to understanding a poem-- once you identify these, the remaining analysis is much simpler.

...moving on!

C - Connotation

Connotation is "an idea or feeling that a word evokes in addition to its literal or primary meaning." Establishing the connotation of significant words in the poem is extremely helpful in analysis. Look for words which:

- Cause an emotional or strong reaction in the reader (you!)
- "Stand out" because of unusual usage
- Appear to be related to the title or subject of the poem

Identify these words, and then determine their significance by examining the type of feelings they evoke, how they reflect the subject, and why the speaker is using that specific word instead of another.

A - Attitude

Our previous letter, C, most likely revealed the attitude of the speaker. Remember that the poet and speaker are not necessarily one in the same -- they could, in fact, have complete opposite attitudes toward the subject at hand. However, poets often write what they've experienced and what they know, so knowing a bit about the poet's background may help when determining the speaker's attitude.

Reflect on the connotation of the words. Let's say you're reading a poem about dogs, since so many poets pick this as their topic of choice. If words and phrases such as "wagging tail," "eager," "loyal," and "man's best friend" are used, you'd probably assume that the speaker has a positive attitude toward the subject. They like dogs. Imagine, however, that none of those words are in the poem-- instead, it contains "slobbering," "noisy," "smelly," and "obnoxious barking." In that case, it would be a better guess that the speaker is not so fond of dogs.

S - Shifts

Identifying the shifts in a poem can reveal multiple attitudes, themes or even speakers. A "shift" is characterized most often by a change in mood or tone, but here are some things to look for when searching for shifts:

- A new stanza
- Transition words (but, yet, however)
- Changes in diction
- Change in speaker
- Unusual punctuation

Often the first section of a poem prepares the reader for the theme, and after a shift the true theme and message of the poem is revealed.

T - Title

Now that you're almost done analyzing your poem, it's time to re-examine the title. Before, it was only a surface-level interpretation; now, you can apply all of your analysis of the poem to a new and more in-depth interpretation of the title. Think about the following:

-Look over your original guess/interpretation and see if you still agree. If not, what are the differences in the surface meaning and deeper meaning? Is there use of an extended metaphor?

-Does the title utilize any kind of poetic devices (ex. alliteration, allusion, metaphor) which add to the meaning of the poem?

-In the context of the poem, does the title suggest a possible theme?

T - Theme

Finally, the last step of analyzing poetry! It's time to get to the heart of the poem and identify the theme. The theme of a poem usually relates to a universal truth, issue, or conflict.

A theme is best stated in sentence form-- "love" can be a theme but it is not specific at all. Instead, "love conquers all" would be a more detailed and acceptable theme.

To identify the theme, look over all of your analysis and find the connecting threads:

-What's the subject?

-Who is the speaker, what situation are they in, and how do they feel about the subject?

-Is there more than one speaker or attitude toward the subject? Why?

-How does the poet's use of diction (word choice) and other poetic devices help the reader better understand the poem?

Once you identify the theme of a poem, you have, at the very least, an interpretation which you can back up with supporting details. It may or may not be what the poet was attempting to express, but poetry is open to many different interpretations.