

Unpacking a Poem

After reading a poem aloud several times, consider the following questions. Examining the inner mechanics of a poem should help you “unpack” its meaning.

1. How many stanzas are there? Do they vary in size and shape on the page?
2. How many lines make up each stanza? In a shorter poem, how many total lines appear?
3. Are the lines enjambed or end-stopped?
4. Do you distinguish any pattern of rhyme (full rhyme or slant rhyme)?
5. How long are the lines? Do you find a pattern of syllables or metrical constructions? Is the poem written in blank verse? Free verse?
6. Do you detect the use of alliteration, assonance, consonance, onomatopoeia? How do the sounds in the poem impact its rhythm? Does it slow down or speed up parts of the poem?
7. How does the poet use syntax? Is the syntax straightforward, inverted, difficult to follow?
8. How does the poet use punctuation? Are the sentences declarative, interrogative, imperative?
9. Is the poem written in the first, second, or third person point of view?
10. Who is the poem’s audience? To whom is the narrator speaking?
11. Is the poem a narrative poem, dramatic poem, or lyric poem?
12. Tone is the emotional attitude in the voice we hear when reading. Is the tone angry, sad, elated, frightened, respectful, adoring, playful? Does it have more than just one emotional attitude? Does the attitude fit the subject? Do you detect any irony in the poem?
13. Is the language (or diction) fresh or trite? Is it high, formal diction, or low and slangy? Is it monosyllabic, polysyllabic? Is it consistent?
14. Does the poem appeal to your senses (sight, sound, touch, taste, smell)? To which senses does it appeal?
15. Do the images work for the poem, contributing to it a sense of completeness? Do the images connect with the other elements of the poem (structure, music, tone, etc.)?
16. Do you detect any symbols or metaphors in the poem? If so, what are some possible functions of these elements?

After examining and recognizing various formal aspects of a poem, you might turn to the following questions:

1. What is the poem asking us (its audience) to do?
2. What is the poem telling us about poetry?
3. What is the poem telling us about language?
4. What is the relationship between the subject/theme of the poem and its form?
5. How would you describe the poet's style?
6. What techniques might have been employed in the process of writing the poem?
7. What literary, historical, or political influences/allusions do you detect in the poem?
8. Why is this poem valuable? What aspects of the poem (if any) make you want to reread it?
9. What strains are there on the poem? What are its limitations?

-Pound: "The proper method for studying poetry and good letters is the method of contemporary biologists, that is, careful first-hand examination of the matter, and continual *comparison* of one 'slide' or specimen with another."