



## HOW TO READ AND EXPLICATE A POEM

Revised March 2007

**Preliminaries:** If the poem is in a text you shouldn't or don't want to mark up, make a photocopy of it. Then, as you proceed, underline key words and phrases, write down thoughts and observations in the margins, make notes of definitions, test scan the poem by marking the meter of selected lines, mark off major structural parts of the poem, draw lines indicating connections, and keep a record of the useful discoveries you make as you explore the poem.

1. **Notice the title** — what subject does it designate? Does it suggest an attitude or atmosphere? Does it suggest a perspective on the subject (e.g., respectful, ironical, questioning, provocative)? Is it simple or pretentious, straightforward or roundabout?
2. **Discover who the speaker is and what is the dramatic situation** (or the context) for speaking? Keep in mind the poet does not typically speak in his or her own voice but invents a speaker, called a persona, who fits the dramatic situation of the poem. Try to identify characteristics of the speaker as far as you can without stretching or twisting the evidence—i.e., young or old, male or female, someone intensely involved in the dramatic situation or just an onlooker, emotionally engaged or distantly reflective?
3. **Determine the structure** — Is the poem free verse (i.e., has no fixed pattern and usually does not rhyme), or does it have a rhyme scheme (e.g., abba cddc, etc.)? Consider the length of the poem and the length of the stanzas. Also keep in mind any relationship between structure and meaning in a poem. In addition to rhyme scheme and length, the visual layout of the poem may have meaning.
4. **Find the poem's voice** — Read the complete poem through out loud—for the best results, actually sound it out on your tongue. Get used to the sound and sounds of the poem. When you are not satisfied with how a line, phrase, or word sounds, let the poem guide you to finding the right way to make it sound. You are looking for the emotion, or feeling, in the poem's language. Is the voice of the poem highly emotional or more reflective? Consider the degrees of thought and emotion suggested by the poem's language.
5. **Look more closely at the poem's language and its particular choice of words** — Do any words get special emphasis because they are unusual? Do they jar the meter? Are they repeated? Are they set in opposition or contrast with each other? Or do they in some other way call attention to themselves? Be sure to look up all unfamiliar words. If questions form in your mind regarding any words in the poem, look them up to find not only their current meanings but also their etymological derivations — i.e., where they came from. Often, looking up even familiar words can uncover surprising resonances of meanings in words and connections with other words.
6. **Make yourself aware of the poem's imagery** — Focus on that which appeals to sight (the visual sense), but also imagery that may appeal to the other senses of sound, smell, taste, touch, and movement. Try to see, hear, taste, smell, and feel the images. In the context, do these images form obvious connections, or is their juxtaposition surprising, shocking, troubling, and/or thought-provoking?
7. **Find the possible meanings of all allusions** — Does the word, phrase, description reference another work, image, etc., as, for instance, those to Helen, Aphrodite, "a bandy-legged smith," the Horn of Plenty, etc.?
8. **Determine the poem's "argument"** — Does it propose, defend, or favor any particular interpretation of an aspect of human experience? Can a logical argument be found in the poem?—i.e., something like "because this and this is so, then that follows." If you were to try to divide the poem into larger structural units, how would you do it? Does it have three, four, five, seven, nine major stages, parts (or steps) to its argument? Does the poem work primarily by rational argument or by the power of associations it makes?
9. **Continue to find the poem's tone** (i.e., "tone of voice") — Question the poem insistently: Why this here? Why this repetition, that parallelism of structure, this odd word choice, that allusion? Trust and follow hunches that come to you as you question the poem. Play with the poem imaginatively—allow your imagination to be stretched—but test your hunches, ideas, theories by always referring them back to the actual language of the poem. If an idea you are fond of simply doesn't "relate" to its context in the poem, put it on the back burner for a while, prepared to either toss it out or bring it forward again as you become more certain of what you are seeing.