

# Analyzing a Poem

## Prewriting Activities

*A poem is a statement in words about a human experience, real or imagined, with those words so chosen and so ordered that the emotive effect of the rhythm of their ordering reacts with the cognitive effect of the words to provide a reinforcement of the cognitive affect of the statement. What is the poem about? What is happening in this poem?\*\*\**

Always recognize the poet's name and the title of the poem. Consider also the title when determining the theme of the poem. The following questions should help you as you prepare to complete your poetry explication.

1. Who is the *speaker*, or *voice*? What kind of person is he or she? To whom is he or she speaking? How would you characterize the poem's *tone*? Is the poem ironic?
2. What is the *occasion*?
3. What is the *setting* in time (time of day, season, century, and so forth)? What is the setting in place (indoors or out, city or country, nation, and so forth)?
4. What is the central purpose of the poem, or *theme*? State the central idea or theme of the poem in a sentence.
5. Paraphrase the poem; i.e., rephrase the poem in your own words.
6. Discuss the *diction* in the poem. Point out words that are particularly well chosen and explain why. Look up unfamiliar words in a dictionary. What level of diction is used? Is *dialect* used? How does the word order contribute to your reading of the poem?
7. Discuss the *imagery* of the poem. What kinds of imagery are used?
8. Point out examples of *figures of speech*, such as *metaphor*, *simile*, *personification*, *hyperbole*, *understatement*, *metonymy*, *synecdoche*, and *apostrophe*, and explain their appropriateness.
9. Point out and explain any *symbols*, *allegories*, *allusions*, or *myths*.
10. Point out and explain examples of *paradox*, *overstatement*, and *irony*. What is their function?
11. Discuss the adaptation of sound to *sense*. Does the poem use *alliteration*, *assonance*, and/or *rhyme*? (Poems should make a noise!) Point out significant examples of sound repetition and explain their function.
12. Describe the form or *pattern* of the poem. Is the poem written in closed or open form? Is the poem constructed as a *sonnet*, a *sestina*, a *villanelle*, an *epigram*, or a *haiku*? What is the meter of the poem? Are *rhythm* and *meter* regular or irregular? How do rhythm and meter reinforce the poem's central concerns? Copy the poem and mark its scansion, paying close attention to *rhyme scheme*.
13. Criticize and evaluate the poem.

\*\*\* Terms in italics are meant to be defined. These terms should be used specifically in your responses, and in your poetry explication.

# Explicating a Poem

## A Paragraph Guide: Rough Draft

The first paragraph should present the large issues; it should inform the reader which conflicts are dramatized and should describe the dramatic situation of the speaker. The explication does not require a formal introductory paragraph; the writer should simply start explicating immediately. A foolproof way to begin any explication is with the following sentence: "This poem dramatizes the conflict between ..." or "The poem dramatizes the theme...." Such a beginning ensures that you will introduce the major conflict or theme in the poem and organize your explication accordingly. For your prewriting, this includes points 1-4.

The next paragraphs (2-3) should expand the discussion of the 1<sup>st</sup> paragraph by focusing on details of form, figures of speech, imagery, and diction. In these paragraphs, the writer should explain the poem line by line in terms of these details, and he or she should incorporate important elements of rhyme, rhythm, and meter during this discussion. For your prewriting, this includes points 5-10.

The explication has **no formal concluding paragraph**; do not simply restate the main points of the introduction! The end of the explication should focus on sound effects or visual patterns as the final element of asserting an explanation. For your prewriting, this includes points 11-13.