Understanding Poetry

Many times in required literature classes, students are asked to analyze poetry. Analyzing starts with thinking about a poem’s subject. The first thing to do is to break the poem up into little pieces. After reading through a poem a time or two, you will probably have a general idea of what the poem is about. Then, it’s time to start digging deeper and looking for things that lie beneath the surface.

Consider these questions to get started analyzing poetry:

- How can this poem be summarized?
- Who is the speaker in the poem? How would I describe that character?
- What is the speaker’s tone? Make some notes about key words that indicate this tone.
- What words have unusual or significant meanings?
- Is there repetition? Why are the repetitive parts important?
- What images does the speaker use to convey a meaning? Do these images follow a unified pattern (a motif) throughout the poem? Is there a central, controlling image? Take note of any images that veer off from the central theme.
- Are there any symbols? If the poem is vague, do some research. See what other people have to say about the poem. Their thoughts can be a springboard for your ideas.
- What is the setting of the poem? How is it described? Why is it important?
- What is the theme of the poem? What areas help convey the theme?
- How important is the role of metrics, such as rhyme and rhythm? How do they affect the tone and meaning? This is a great way for poets to express emphasis, so look for different patterns in the poem.
- Write down your general thoughts about the poem, no matter how off-topic they may seem. They will be the idea board for you to begin thinking about poetry.

Poetry can be difficult, but by digging deeper to discover the meaning of the poem, you may learn something interesting. You might even find that you like poetry!