Poetry is a compact language that expresses complex feelings. To understand the multiple meanings of a poem, readers must examine its words and phrasing from the perspectives of rhythm, sound, images, obvious meaning, and implied meaning. Readers then need to organize responses to the verse into a logical, point-by-point explanation. A good beginning involves asking questions that apply to most poetry.

Context of the Poem

Clear answers to the following questions can help establish the context of a poem and form the foundation of understanding:

- Who wrote the poem? Does the poet's life suggest any special point of view, such as a political affiliation, religious sect, career interest, musical talent, family or personal problems, travel, or handicap — for example, H. D.'s feminism, Amiri Baraka's radicalism, T. S. Eliot's conversion to Anglicanism, William Carlos Williams' career as a physician, A. R. Ammons' training in chemistry, Amy Lowell's aristocratic background, John Berryman's alcoholism, or Hart Crane's homosexuality?
- When was the poem written and in what country? Knowing something about the poet's life, times, and culture helps readers understand what's in a poem and why.
- Does the poem appear in the original language? If not, readers should consider that translation can alter the language and meaning of a poem.
- Is the poem part of a special collection or series? Examples of such series and collections include Edna St. Vincent Millay's sonnets, Carl Sandburg's Chicago Poems, or Rita Dove's triad, "Adolescence — I, II, and III."
- Does the poem belong to a particular period or literary movement? For example, does the poem relate to imagism, confessional verse, the Beat movement, the Harlem Renaissance, the Civil Rights era, the American Indian renaissance, or feminism?

Style of the Poem

Into what category does the poem fit — for example, Carl Sandburg's imagism in "Fog" or Gwendolyn Brooks' epic "The Anniad"? Readers should apply definitions of the many categories to determine which describes the poem's length and style:

- Is it an epic, a long poem about a great person or national hero?
- Is it a lyric, a short, musical verse?
- Is it a narrative, a poem that tells a story?
- Is it a haiku, an intense, lyrical three-line verse of seventeen syllables?
- Is it confessional? For example, does it examine personal memories and experiences?

Title of the Poem

- Is the title's meaning obvious? For example, does it mention a single setting and action, such as W. S. Merwin's "The Drunk in the Furnace" or James A. Wright's "Autumn Begins in Martins Ferry, Ohio"?
- Does it imply multiple possibilities? For example, Jean Toomer's "Georgia Dusk," which refers to a time of day as well as to dark-skinned people.
- Does it strike a balance, as in Rita Dove's "Beulah and Thomas"?
- Is there an obvious antithesis, as with Robert Frost's "Fire and Ice"?
- Is there historical significance to the title? For example, Robert Lowell's "The Quaker Graveyard in Nantucket."
Repetition in the Poem

Readers should read through a poem several times, at least once aloud. If it is a long poem, such as Allen Ginsberg's Howl or Hart Crane's The Bridge, readers should concentrate on key passages and look for repetition of specific words, phrases, or verses in the poem.

- Why is there a repeated reference to the sea in Robinson Jeffers's poetry?
- Why does the pronoun "we" recur in Gwendolyn Brooks' "We Real Cool"?
- Why does Edgar Lee Masters reprise epitaphs for Spoon River Anthology?

If readers note repetition in the poem, they should decide why certain information seems to deserve the repetition.

Opening and Closing Lines of the Poem

- Does the poet place significant information or emotion in these places? For example, when reading Marianne Moore's "Poetry," readers may question the negative stance in the opening lines.
- Does the poet intend to leave a lasting impression by closing with a particular thought? For example, why does Langston Hughes' "Harlem" lead to the word "explode"?

Passage of Time in the Poem

- Can readers pin down a time frame? What details specify time?
- Does the poet name a particular month or season, as with Amy Lowell's "Patterns"?
- Is there a clear passage of time, as with the decline of the deceased woman in Denise Levertov's "Death in Mexico"?
- How long is the period of time? Are there gaps?

Speaker of the Poem

- Who is the speaker? Is the person male or female?
- Does the voice speak in first person (I, me, my, mine), for example, John Berryman's "Huffy Henry"?
- Does the speaker talk directly to a second person, as with Adrienne Rich's "Diving into the Wreck"?
- Is the voice meant to be universal — for example, applicable to either sex at any time or place?

Names of Characters

- Does the name of a character suggest extra meaning, such as Eben Flood (an alcoholic) in Edwin Arlington Robinson's "Mr. Flood's Party" and T. S. Eliot's prissy protagonist in "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock"?

Basic Details of the Poem

- Is the poet deliberately concealing information from the readers, as with the source of depression in Robert Lowell's "Skunk Hour"?
- Why does the poet leave out significant facts? Are readers supposed to fill in the blanks, for example, the relationship between mother and daughter in Cathy Song's "The White Porch" or the perplexity of a modern tourist in Allen Tate's "Ode to the Union Dead"?
Culture

- Does the poem stress cultural details, such as the behavior, dress, or speech habits of a particular group or a historical period or event — for instance, the death of an airline stewardess in James Dickey's "Falling"?
- Are any sections written in dialect, slang, or foreign words, as with the Deep South patois of Sterling Brown's "Ma Rainey"?

Fantasy versus Reality

- Is the poem an obvious fantasy, as is the case with the intense confrontation in Sylvia Plath's "Daddy" and the setting of Rita Dove's "Geometry"?

Mood and Tone of the Poem

- What is the mood of the poem? Is it cheerful or jolly like limericks? Is it mysterious, provocative, zany, ominous, festive, fearful, or brooding, as with Randall Jarrell's "Sad Heart at the Supermarket"? Does the mood change within the body of the work, as with Joy Harjo's "The Woman Hanging from the Thirteenth Floor Window"? Why does the mood shift? Where does the shift begin?
- What is the poet's tone? Is it satiric, serious, mock serious, playful, somber, brash, or teasingly humorous, as with Robert Frost's "Departmental: The End of My Ant Jerry"? Does the poet admire, agree with, ridicule, or condemn the speaker, as in the touch of mock heroic in Richard Wilbur's "The Death of a Toad"? Is there an obvious reason for the poet's attitude, as suggested by the suffering in James Dickey's "Angina"? Does the poet withhold judgment, as is the case with the epitaphs of Edgar Lee Masters' Spoon River Anthology?

Themes of the Poem

Locating and identifying theme is crucial to understanding dominant ideas; theme is the poem's essence.

- Is the subject youth, loss, renewal, patriotism, nature, love? Are there several themes? How do these themes relate to each other?
- Is the poet merely teasing or entertaining or trying to teach a lesson, as do Robinson Jeffers' "Hurt Hawks" and Marianne Moore's "The Mind Is an Enchanted Thing"?
- Does the poet emphasize the theme by means of onomatopoeia, personification, or controlling images?

Rhythm of the Poem

- Is there a dominant rhythm? Does it dance, frolic, meander, slither, or march? Is it conversational, like a scene from a drama? Is it a droning monologue, as found in a journal, diary, or confessional?
- Does the rhythm relate to the prevalent theme of the poem? Or does it seem at odds with the theme?
- Does the rhythm increase or decrease in speed, as does Ezra Pound's Hugh Selwyn Mauberley: Life and Contacts? Why?

Use of the Senses in the Poem

- Does the poem stress sense impressions — for example, taste, touch, smell, sound, or sight? Are these impressions pleasant, unpleasant, or neutral?
• Does the poet concentrate on a single sense or a burst of sensation, as in Wallace Stevens's "Peter Quince at the Clavier" or Elizabeth Bishop's "The Fish"?

Imagery in the Poem

• Are there concrete images or pictures that the poet wants readers to see?
• Are the pictures created by means of comparisons — for instance, metaphor or simile? Do inanimate objects take on human traits (personification)? Does the speaker talk to inanimate objects or to such abstract ideas as freedom?

Language of the Poem

• Does the poet stress certain sounds, such as pleasant sounds (euphony) or harsh letter combinations (cacophony), as demonstrated by Wendy Rose's title "Academic Squaw"?
• Are certain sounds repeated (alliteration, sibilance), as in the insistent a sounds in Amiri Baraka's "A Poem for Willie Best"?
• Are words linked by approximate rhyme, like "seem/freeze," or by real rhyme, such as "least/feast"? Is there a rhyme scheme or sound pattern at the ends of lines, as with the interlocking rhymes of Robert Frost's "Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening"? Does rhyming occur within a line (internal rhyme), as in "black flak" in Randall Jarrell's "The Death of the Ball Turret Gunner"?
• Is there onomatopoeia, or words that make a sound that imitates their meaning, such as swoosh, ping pong, ricochet, clangor, plash, wheeze, clack, boom, tingle, slip, fumble, or clip-clop, as with the verb "soar" in Edna St. Vincent Millay's "On Thought in Harness"?

Supplemental Materials

• Has the editor included any preface, explanatory notes, or concluding comments and questions; for example, T. S. Eliot's dedication of The Waste Land or Wendy Rose's use of epigraphs?
• Are there notes and comments in a biography, poet's letters and essays, critical analyses, Web site, or anthology, such as biographical footnotes to Anne Sexton's "Sylvia's Death" and the many commentaries on Hart Crane's The Bridge?
• Is there an electronic version, such as the poet reading original verse on the Internet? Are there notes on the record jacket, cassette box, or CD booklet, as found on recordings of Adrienne Rich's feminist verse?

Drawing Conclusions

After answering the questions presented in this introduction, readers should paraphrase or restate the poem in everyday words, as though talking to someone on the telephone. A summary of the poem should emphasize a pattern of details, sounds, or rhythm. For example, do various elements of the poem lead readers to believe that the poet is describing an intense experience? Is the poet defining something, such as parenthood, risking a life, curiosity, marriage, religious faith, or aging, as in Denise Levertov's "A Woman Alone"? Is the poet telling a story event by event? Does the poet want to sway the reader's opinion, as Louise Bogan does in "Evening in the Sanitarium"?

Before reaching a conclusion about the meaning of a poem, readers should summarize their personal responses. Are they emotionally moved or touched by the poem? Are they entertained or repulsed, terrified or stirred to agree? Do words and phrases stick in their memory? How has the poet made an impression? And most important, why?