How to Read a Poem

If you really don’t have a natural feel for poetry and language, then you can try a more formulaic approach to understanding what is going on.

First of all read the poem as if it was just a regular piece of writing. Sometimes trying to read the poem in sentences, where natural breaks occur can help. Look for subjects and verbs to figure out what is going on. Try to figure out what you think the poet is trying to say. Look at the title. Look at what the poem focusses on. If you can figure out what the poet is talking about it will help you understand the deeper meaning of the poem later.

Always read a poem more than once. The first time, come to grips with rhythm and pacing. Sometimes sentences wrap around and don’t come to a full stop for several lines. Sometimes rhymes will guide you, other times there may be other sounds – onomatopoeia, or alliteration, for example. On the second reading, use stanza breaks or punctuation to “chunk” the poem into smaller bits you can deal with more easily. Also, often poets switch words around from how we would normally say them in order to make them fit with rhymes, or patterns of rhythm.

Try to identify the speaker. This is the voice of the poem. Sometimes it may be the poet, but often it is an assumed character created by the poet.

If you can, read the poem aloud. This allows you to hear its sound more effectively. Some words have long, slow sounds with lots of vowels and soft sibilants like “s” and “f”; some are short and abrupt, and use hard consonants like “p”, “d” and “t”.

Other aspects of sound are rhyme and rhythm. Is there a noticeable pattern? Sometimes they can be cleverly hidden and not noticeable just by looking.

Spend time on the images created – light, colour, texture, shape, sound, taste. Is the poet trying to create a mood for the reader that relates to the theme of their poem like sadness, happiness, anger, fear, love etc.

Look for figurative language; how is metaphor being used? Are comparisons straightforward or subtle? Simile? Hyperbole? Personification? Are there any things the poet mentions that could refer to something else? Are there words or phrases that could have alternate meanings?

Not every poem will have all of these elements. Mostly, you want to achieve a sense of the emotion or idea that the poet was trying to elicit. You don’t have to agree with the poet’s interpretation of life, but can you see what the poet was trying to get at?

If you use these techniques it can help you understand poems more easily.