

# *How to Read Poems*

Poems can be read many ways; the following steps describe one approach. Of course, not all poems require close study and all should be read first for pleasure.

- Look at the poem's title: What might this poem be about?
- Read the poem straight through without stopping to analyze it (aloud, if possible). This will help you get a sense of how it sounds, how it works, what it might be about.
- Start with what you know. If the poem is difficult, distinguish between what you do and do not understand. If permissible, underline the parts you do not immediately understand.
- Check for understanding: Write a quick "first-impression" of the poem by answering the questions, "What do you notice about this poem so far?" and "What is this poem about?"
- Look for patterns. Watch for repeated, interesting, or even unfamiliar use of language, imagery, sound, color, or arrangement. Ask, "What is the poet trying to show through his pattern?"
- Look for changes in tone, focus, speaker, structure, voice, patterns. Ask: "What has changed and what does the change mean?"
- Identify the speaker. Ask: Who is speaking in the poem? What do you know about them and how? Is the poem polyvocal (more than one speaker or voice)?
- Check for new understanding. Re-read the poem (aloud, if you can) from start to finish, underlining (again) those portions you do not yet understand. Explain the poem to yourself or someone else.
- Find the crucial moments. The pivotal moment might be as small as the word but or yet. Such words often act like hinges within a poem to swing the poem in a whole new direction. Also, pay attention to breaks between stanzas or between lines.
- Consider form and function. Now is a good time to look at some of the poet's more crucial choices. Did the poet use a specific form, such as the sonnet? How did this particular form - e.g. a sonnet - allow them to express their ideas? Did the poet use other specific poetic devices which you should learn so you can better understand the poem? Examples might include: enjambment, assonance, alliteration, symbols, metaphors, or allusions. Other examples might include unusual use of capitalization, punctuation (or lack of any), or typography. Ask, "How is the poet using punctuation in the poem?"
- Check for improved understanding. Read the poem through again, aloud if possible. Return to the title and ask yourself what the poem is about and how the poem relates to the title.