

One strategy to explicate a poem:

1. Consider the title a moment before reading the poem. What expectations, associations implications does it evoke for you?
2. What is *literally* going on in the poem? Is the poem telling a story? (narrative poem) Describing a single occurrence or emotional response to something? (lyric or scenic poem) Who is speaking—the poet in his or her own voice, or a character the poet has created? Summarize or paraphrase the poem for yourself.
3. Is there TENSION in the poem—some kind of contrast or opposition between things? Irony is a type of tension. Is there emotional tension? Tension between the form of the poem and the content of the poem?*
4. Consider the images (descriptions that appeal to any of the senses). What feelings/attitudes are conveyed by the images?
5. Consider the figurative language in the poem (metaphor, similes, personification, etc.). What feelings/attitudes do they convey?
6. Where are the lines of the poem broken? How long are the lines? What tone, rhythm, emphasis is produced because of line lengths and line breaks?
7. Is there any repetition of words or phrases? Does the repetition give a particular emphasis or importance to those words?
8. What sort of sounds do the words produce? Soft sounds, harsh sounds? Sharp sounds? How are these sounds produced?
9. Think about the words the poet has chosen. Do the words have suggestions, implications, additional meanings? Are the words appropriate for the context of the poem? Ask yourself, why **this** word rather than some other word with a similar meaning.
10. Consider the title of the poem again. How has the poem altered your initial response to this title?

* This is a good time to look closely at the formal characteristics of the poem—how the stanzas are grouped, whether it's rhymed, whether it demonstrates strict meter, whether it's in free verse. How does the form of the poem work with the "content" of the poem?

Other questions to consider:

Visual Shape / Form: Flush left Justified / Ragged prose Overall "field" design Etc. —	Content: Political Conservative / Liberal / Radical Urban Pastoral Moral Sexual Religious Spiritual Mystical Philosophical Love Family Ethnic / Racial Nationalistic / Patriotic Mortality Conflict (War) Discontent Stylistic Textures and Poetic Diction: Wackiness quotient Ambiguity Ambivalence Irreverence Sobriety Humor Eloquence Plainness Sincerity Neat (vs. messy)	Compositional Structures (what holds the poem together): Narrative continuity (beginning, middle, and end) Fragmentary / disjunctive / nonlinear Journey Journal / Diary Stream of consciousness / thought process Dream-like / surreal Fast-paced Jerky Kinetic (moves from one thing to another) Static (continuous present) Programmatic / Procedural Stylistic Textures and Poetic Diction (cont.) Pretentiousness Subtlety (vs. bluntness) Indirect (vs. straightforward) Intelligence Visual imagery Dreaminess Detailed (vs. general) Originality Relevance Tastefulness Speech-like Comprehensibility Coherence Spontaneity Exploratory Predictability Abstractness Sensuous Unusual Vocabulary Complexity Repetitiveness Difficulty	Devices: Irony Paradox Exaggeration Understatement Simile Metaphor Personification Symbolism Allegory Allusion Enjambment Metonymy Contexts: Author's date of birth / death Date of poem's composition Place of composition Relevant socio-historical facts Relevant biographical facts Contexts (cont.): Relevant ethnic, gender, national orientation Place / context of original publication and subsequent publications Variant versions, including performances	Point of View: Direct POV of author as speaker Persona Narrator (epic) Multiple POV's — Sound: Dissonance (harsh, noisy) Melodious / Harmonious (pleasing) Assonance Consonance Alliteration Rhyme Off-rhyme Metrical Patterns
--	---	---	---	--

Mood / Tone: (cont.) Sincere / Sarcastic		Compositional Structures (cont.) Modern / Contemporary (vs. old-fashioned)		
---	--	--	--	--

Using these categories to get started on your explication: Pick one poem and rate the given poem for each of these characteristics. Rate the levels of these features on a one to ten scale with one the lowest level and ten the highest level. Give examples to support your assessment (be specific). You might also compare two poems based on these features. Also, compare any group of poems based on their likeness with or difference from one another.

*This is a list of rhetorical features of individual poems as adapted from Charles Bernstein's "Poem Profiler: Check Levels"