HOW TO ANALYZE A POEM

SAMPLE POEM:

“Composed upon Westminster Bridge, September 3, 1802” by William Wordsworth

Earth has not any thing to show more fair:
Dull would he be of soul who could pass by
A sight so touching in its majesty:
This City now doth, like a garment, wear
The beauty of the morning; silent, bare,
Ships, towers, domes, theatres, and temples lie
Open unto the fields, and to the sky:
All bright and glittering in the smokeless air.
Never did sun more beautifully steep
In his first splendor, valley, rock, or hill;
Ne’er saw I, never felt, a calm so deep!
The river glideth at his own sweet will:
Dear God! The very houses seem asleep;
And all that mighty heart is lying still.

1. Read the poem out loud.
2. Paraphrase the poem. That means restate it as simply as possible. Order the words as if for regular conversation, and translate any figures of speech. Here’s a paraphrase of the first five lines of the sample poem:

There is nothing on earth more beautiful than this. The city is beautiful today because of the morning, which dresses up the city like a special piece of clothing. A person would have to have a dull spirit to ignore such a grand and moving sight.

3. What is the theme of the poem? Once you’ve paraphrased the whole poem, condense the paraphrase into a single sentence, and you’ll have the theme. The theme of the sonnet above is

This morning London is so beautiful that it makes me feel God’s peaceful presence both deep in my spirit and in the city itself.

Notice that the theme is often the least interesting aspect of the poem. How the poet expresses the theme is what makes the poem worth reading (or not).

4. Who is the speaker of the poem and what kind of person is s/he? If the poem offers no other clues, assume that the speaker is the same sex as the poet. Thus, for the sample poem, refer to the speaker as “he.” And we can tell from these first five lines that the speaker has a sensitive, romantic nature.

5. Does the speaker have an identifiable audience? Sometimes the speaker addresses a lover, a nightingale, etc. If not, as with the sample poem, assume the audience is the general reader.

See reverse for more steps in analyzing a poem.
6. **What is the setting?**
   a) **In Time?** If the poem doesn’t say otherwise, assume that the time is roughly contemporary to the time of composition; i.e., even if Wordsworth’s poem didn’t mention a specific date in its title, we’d still assume that it is set at the beginning of the 19th century, because it was published in 1807. The time of day is morning.
   b) **In Place?** The sonnet is set outdoors, on Westminster Bridge, which we know (or can Google to find out) is in the city of London in the country of England.

7. **What kinds of images appear in the poem? Do they form a pattern?** Images are mental pictures; in a poem they include both what the speaker describes as literally in front of her, or in her imagination, and what she evokes through her figures of speech (metaphor, simile, personification, etc.).
   The literal images in “Westminster Bridge” include “Ships, towers,” “fields,” and “river”: the speaker can see all these from the bridge. They also include “valley, rock, or hill,” which the speaker remembers seeing at other times in his life.
   The images conjured by figures of speech include London wearing a special piece of clothing (evoked by the simile “like a garment”), water that chooses to float along (evoked by the personification “The river glideth at his own sweet will”), and a quiet heart perhaps as big as God’s (evoked by the metaphor of “mighty heart” to describe the city).
   Other images in the speaker’s imagination include a person with a dull spirit who ignores the beauty of the morning (see step #2) and air that later in the day, when the smokestacks are firing, will be smoggy (saying “smokeless air,” which reminds us that the air could be smoky). There are at least three sets of images in this poem: of nature, of the manmade landscape, and of spirituality.

8. **What is the tone of the poem?** Tone means the implied attitude of the poet towards the subject of the poem. This may be, but is not necessarily, the kind of voice the speaker uses. In our poem, the speaker is the poet himself, so the voice and tone are similar; the tone is one of affection and wonderment.

9. **How does the poem sound? Is the language formal or informal, ornate or plain? What is the rhyme scheme, if any? What is the meter, if any? Is there any alliteration or assonance? How does the sound contribute to the impact of the poem?**
   The language of the sample poem is formal and traditionally poetic, with inverted syntax (“Dull would be dull” instead of “He would be dull”). The rhyme scheme of the sample poem is ABBAABBA CDCDCD, the meter is generally iambic pentameter (with variation), and one example of alliteration is the S sound in “houses seem asleep.”
   This particular rhyme scheme and meter is that of a sonnet, one of the oldest, most traditional forms in English literature. The S sound in the phrase just quoted softens the words into a whispery sound we associate with sleeping.

10. **Weighing all the elements above, what does the poem mean?** The speaker senses an underlying spirit in the world that unites not just humankind and nature, but the manmade realm as well.

See reverse for more steps in analyzing a poem.