How to Analyze a Poem

Before You Read:
- Read a short biography; have some knowledge of the author.
- Know the time period the piece was written in.
- Make sure you have a dictionary and a pen nearby!

1st Read-through:
- Read it out loud.
- Get the general idea.
- Identify characters.
- Find a turning point, if possible.
- Look for a theme.

2nd Read-through:
- Look at diction: find individual words that stand out.
  - Words that you are unfamiliar with.
  - Words that are particularly descriptive.
  - Words in the title.
  - Look up words, even if you know their meanings, to see if there are double meanings, plays on words, or if they change the meaning of the poem as a whole.
- Look at syntax: see if the formatting of words stands out.
  - Unusual capitalization.
  - Words that don’t make sense together.
  - Phrases that are unclear.
  - Ideas that seem to be aimlessly separated over two lines.
  - Unusual use of, or absence of punctuation.
  - The author does this to make you notice an idea or phrase or to communicate a voice.
- Look at images:
  - Allusions.
  - Animals, plants, time of day, places, etc.
  - References to other pieces of literature, cultural phrases.
- Make connections:
  - Particularly between the first part and second part, determined by the turning point (if there is a turning point).
  - Find similar words or images in different parts of the poem.

3rd Read-through:
- Think through the ways that the images relate to the theme.
- Read with understanding of a new theme if necessary.
- Find any more details that point to the theme.
- Relate any findings and ideas to a bigger picture of life.
Step back and **look at the poem as a whole**: what is the author trying to communicate about **life** and **how to live it**?

- What observations does the poem call out about the world?

- How is the author trying to get his readers to **change their lifestyles**?

**After You Read and Analyze:**

- **Leave the poem** for a day or so and **come back** to it later, and see if you acquire anything different from the poem.