**Summarize / paraphrase** the poem:

# The Large Issues

Determine the basic design of the poem by considering the what, who, when, where, and why of the dramatic situation.

## Conflicts

What is being dramatized? What **CONFLICTS** or themes does the poem present, address, or question?

## Speaker

Who is the speaker? What does the speaker say?

## Audience

Who is the audience? Are other characters involved?

## Tone

Define and describe the speaker and his/her voice. What is his/her attitude toward the subject?

## Plot

What happens in the poem? Consider the plot or basic design of the action. How are the dramatized conflicts or themes introduced, sustained, resolved, etc?

## Setting

When does the action occur? What is the date / time of day? Where is the speaker? Describe the physical location of the dramatic moment.

## Occasion

Why does the speaker feel compelled to speak at this moment? What is his/her motivation?

# The Details

To analyze the design of the poem, we must focus on the poem’s parts, namely how the poem dramatizes conflicts or ideas in language. By concentrating on the parts, we develop our understanding of the poem’s structure, and we gather support and evidence for our interpretations. Some of the details we should consider include the following:

## Form

Does the poem represent a particular form (sonnet, lyric, ballad, etc.)? Does the poem present any unique variations from the traditional structure of that form? Different forms or genres have different subjects, aims, conventions and attributes. A love sonnet, for instance, is going to talk about different aspects of human experience in different ways with different emphases than is a political satire and our recognition of these attributes of form or genre is part of the meaning of the poem.

## Diction (Word Choice), Syntax (Word Order), Vocabulary

**Diction:** Look at the language--what kinds of words or is the poet employing? How much and to what ends does the poet rely on connotation, or the associations that words have (“stallion” connotes a certain kind of horse with certain sorts of uses)? Does the poet use puns, double meanings, ambiguities of meaning? How does the word choice affect the meaning of the poem? the tone? How does the speaker make particular statements? Does the rhetoric seem odd in any way? Why?

Consider the effect of the use of diction—paradoxical? Ironical?

**Syntax**: Does the word order impact the reading of or the meaning of the poem?

**Vocabulary**: Why does the poet choose one word over the other in each line? Do any of the words have multiple meanings that add other meanings to the line?

## Theme

* What seems to be the central idea or theme of the poem?
* What ideas are being communicated by the speaker?
* How are the ideas being reinforced by the elements of the poem?

## Structure and Development

There are two basic kinds of structure, **formal** and **thematic**.

***Formal structure*** is the way the poem goes together in terms of its component parts: if there are parts -- stanza's, paragraphs or such -- then there will be a relation between the parts (for instance the first stanza may give the past, the second the present, the third the future).

***Thematic structure***, known in respect to fiction as 'plot', is the way the argument or presentation of the material of the poem is developed. For instance a poem might state a problem in eight lines, an answer to the problem in the next six; of the eight lines stating the problem, four might provide a concrete example, four a reflection on what the example implies. There may well be very close relations between formal and thematic structure. When looking at thematic structure, you might look for conflicts, ambiguities and uncertainties, the tensions in the poem, as these give clear guides to the direction of meanings in the poem, the poem's 'in-tensions'.

As you analyze the design line by line, look for certain PATTERNS to develop which provide insight into the dramatic situation, the speaker’s state of mind or the poet’s use of details Some of the most common patterns include the following:

## Lines / Stanzas

How many and how are the stanzas arranged? the lines? How do the events of the poem unfold?

## Rhyme

Is there a pattern of end rhymes? a syllabic line count? Consider the significance of the end words joined by sound; in a poem with no rhymes, consider the importance of the end words.

## Meter

Meter refers mainly to the recurrence of regular beats in a poetic line. In this way, meter pertains to the structure of the poem as it is written. Consider how rhythm and meter influence our perception of the speaker and his/her language. (see rhythm and meter hndt)

## Imagery / Figurative Language (language that appeals to the senses)

Figures of Speech

What figures of speech are employed by the poet? (simile, metaphor/ extended metaphor, personification, hyperbole, understatement, metonymy, synecdoche, oxymoron, puns)

## Allusion (or intertextuality):

Can you see ways in which the poem refers to, uses or relies on previous writing? U-2’s Bono writes “I was thirsty and you kissed my lips” in “Trip Through Your Wires.” The meaning of the line is vastly extended if you know that this is a reference to Matthew 25:35 in the Bible where Jesus says to the saved in explanation of what they did right, “I was thirsty and you wet my lips.”

## Symbol

Other

What is the relationship of the descriptive images to the speaker's state of mind? How do images create sense of time of day? season of year? atmosphere? mood? Do the images progress? (day to night, hot to cold, soft to loud, color to color, etc)

## Sound

Alliteration and assonance create sound effects and often cluster significant words.

**Sound devices**: rhyme, alliteration, assonance, consonance, onomatopoeia Does the poem contain an obvious meter or rhythm (discussed above)?

What sounds are emphasized by the rhyme scheme (discussed above)? Are there sight rhymes, imperfect rhymes, alliteration, assonance, etc?

According to Pope, “the sound must seem an echo to the sense”: both the rhythm and the sound of the words themselves (individually and as they fit together) contribute to the meaning?

## Title

What does the title mean? (take a look at the title and reflect on what it means):

## Shifts

Most poems tell us about a poet’s understanding of an experience so the beginning will be different than the end. The change may be in feelings, language (slang to formal), or connotation (positive to negative).

Explain how these shifts convey the poem’s message.

**Exploring Poetry**

### Questions to consider:

1. Who is the **speaker** (voice--not always the poet)? What does the poem reveal about the speaker's character? In some poems the speaker may be nothing more than a voice meditating on a theme, while in others the speaker takes on a specific personality.
2. Is the **speaker addressing** a particular person? If so, who is that person and why is the speaker interested in him or her? Many poems are addressed to no one in particular and therefore to anyone, any reader. Others, while addressed to a specific person, reveal nothing about the person because the focus of the poem is on the speaker's feelings and attitudes.
3. Does the poem have a **setting**? Is the poem occasioned by a particular event? The answer to these questions will often be no for lyric poems. It will always be yes if the poem is a dramatic monologue or a poem that tells or implies a story.
4. Is the **theme** of the poem stated directly or indirectly? Some poems use language in a fairly straightforward and literal way and state the theme, often in the final lines. Others may conclude with a statement of the theme that is more difficult to apprehend because it is made with figurative language and/or symbols.
5. From what **perspective** (or point of view) is the speaker describing specific events? Is the speaker recounting events of the past or events that are occurring in the present? If the past events are being recalled, what present meaning do they have for the speaker?
6. Does a close examination of the **figurative language** of the poem reveal any patterns?

### What is the **structure** of the poem? Since narrative poems--those that tell stories--reveal a high degree of selectivity, it is useful to ask why the poet has focused on particular details and left out others. Analyzing the structure of a non-narrative or lyric poem can be more difficult because it does not contain an obvious series of chronologically related events.

1. What do **sound** and **meter** contribute to the poem? Alexander Pope said that in good poetry, "The sound must seem an echo to the sense"--a statement that is sometimes easier to agree with than to demonstrate.
2. What was **your response** to the poem on the first reading? Did your response change after study of the poem or class discussions about it?

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**To appreciate the sounds and meaning of a poem, it is best to start by reading it aloud**. Once you've listened to the poem, pay attention to the words that make up the poem. *Where* a poem takes the reader is inseparable from *how* it takes the reader. Poets pay close attention to **diction** or word choice (words have connotative (associative) and denotative (dictionary) meanings); every word in a poem counts.

### **Figurative language**, or devices of language--i.e. imagery, metaphor, simile, personification, allusion, and symbol--allow us to speak non-literally in order to achieve a special affect. Figurative language makes a comparison between the thing being written about and something else that allows the reader to better picture or understand it.

**The music of poetry**, or the sound patterns found in poetry, is created by various uses of language, such as alphabetical letter sounds; rhyme; alliteration; assonance; onomatopoeia; rhythm created by stressed and unstressed syllables (often most easily recognized in the poet's use of metrical feet); variations of line; tone; etc.