Good day,

So, I have given you a poem. What do you do?

Try to enjoy it, but also try to enjoy *understanding* the poem through analysis. Remember, poems tend to be complex, compact, layered, sometimes playful, emotional, meaningful, and designed to evoke a response. They work in the realms of content, context, sound, emotion, and thematic meaning. Here are some steps to analyzing a poem:

1. Get familiar and comfortable with the poem.
2. What’s the poem about? Understand the poem on a basic, content level.
3. Note the word choices.
4. Decipher and note the images of the poem.
5. Note the structure of the poem.
6. Note the mood, emotions and atmosphere of the poem, and how the writer achieves these.
7. Note devices and figures (figures of speech) used by the poet. Note ideas that are evoked, suggested, compared, or alluded to with these devices? Rethink the poem if necessary, if you can.
8. Theme. What’s the poem *really* about? Find a theme, idea or lesson of the poem revealed, developed (deepened) or highlighted by the author’s word choices, imagery, used of figures—the whole works, that goes beyond the basic story of the poem—what is it?
9. And last, only if you can honestly say you have done the above work, honored the poem, the poet, yourself, this class, and usually only if you have been called upon to do so, evaluate the poem.

Notice I have left the issue of *context* off the above list. I have done so because you often have to work with the poem, and the author often expects the poem to work, without you knowing more than is on the page. Sometime context is provided (maybe within the poem, or in a note above or below the poem). I have also left context off the list for purposes of this class. I want you to have a “literary” and “aesthetic” response to the poems we read for this class first, and not a historical, psychological, or sociological one, at least not until later.

1. Get familiar and comfortable with the poem.
   * Read poem once or twice.
   * You might not like the poem or the subject, but enjoy or be shocked by the poem’s surprises the first time or two you read it, then, as an AP Lit student, we get to work.
2. Content. What’s the poem about? Understand the poem on a basic, content level.
   * Now put a pen in your hand and read it again, marking anything that stands out to you, and especially identify words or images that are unclear that you need to think about some more, or look up. (In class, I might just help you with these.)
   * What is the “story” of the poem? What is happening on the surface?
   * Be able to tell the story of the poem in your own words.
   * (From what point of view is the story of the poem being told or seen?) Who is speaking? Are there other persons in the poem? Who are they? What was said?
   * Dramatic irony. Does the speaker in the poem see everything the reader sees. (At least one poem we read this year will depend for meaning on this difference between what he speaker sees and what he reader sees.)
   * The beginning to understanding comes from this simple question: What is this poem about? (See “Themes” below.) This deals with translation into your own words and with summary. (What do you need to figure out about the simple plot of the piece to start figuring it out, or what words are keeping you from understanding the poem?)
   * What words do you need to look up to better understand this poem?
3. Note the word choices—
   * Ask yourself what other words might have worked, but why did the author make these particular word choices?
   * What are the different meanings of the words?
   * Are the words from a particular class of words, environment, profession, etc.
4. Decipher and note the images of the poem.

* Are they clear and harsh? Are they fuzzy, dreamlike, etc.?
* Are they clear or ambiguous in meaning. For instance, if the image in a poem is of a father “drumming” on his child’s head, is he beating his child, or playing with his child?

1. Note the structure of the poem.

* Is it a formal or informal structure? Is a “named” type of structure? Are there patterns in the poem that are predictable? Is there a part or element that breaks a pattern?

We, at the café, met one-

Day like we have always,

At a table for two,

Coffee and bowl of fruit, full

Of pear slices, between us,

To discuss how to live, without

the things of our house,

Which things yours, mine,

Each cares enough about to keep

To ourselves into divorce.

* What does the first stanza above lead us to believe, if only for a second?
* What hints are seeded in the first stanza to foreshadow what is to come?
* What do we imagine is the history of the two persons in the poem, from the first stanza?
* From the second?
* Is the poem sadder, with the first stanza separated from the second? If so, why?
* What do some of the words at the line ends seem to emphasize? What do these words mean to a couple or to an individual?
* Which other first and last words seem meaningful.
* Key places to look for emphasis include:
* Beginnings of the poem, lines, stanzas, sections,
* Endings of the poem, lines, stanzas, and sections.
* Beginnings and ending of sentence or grammatical units.
* Do the parts, or stanzas of the poem seem to hold separate ideas? Do some of the breaks create confusion or double meanings by breaking a sentence or image in a way that the parts stand alone with their own meanings, but when grouped the parts combine to create a different meaning.
* Look at the example in the box:

1. Note the mood, emotions and atmosphere of the poem, and how the writer achieves these.

* Note your own emotional response to the poem. Your emotional response can affect your understanding. How do you feel about what was is in the poem, and does it help or hinder your understanding? (How do you feel about this work, or how do you feel about poetry in general—the point is to acknowledge their emotion as a possible barrier or tool for understanding, and then to move boldly beyond, if you can, to the task of analyzing the poem.)
* Writer’s use of emotion. What feelings does the writer hope to evoke? (Mood) How does the writer achieve this?
* Word choice affects mood. What is the relationship between the word choices and the mood of the piece?
* Imagery affects mood. What is the relationship between the imagery and the mood of the piece?

1. Note devices and figures (figures of speech) used by the poet. Engage in a rhetorical response the poem:

* Examine techniques and strategies used by the poet. Note ideas that are evoked, suggested, compared, or alluded to with these devices? Rethink the poem if necessary, if you can.
* Word choice—reconsider this as a device.
* Imagery—reconsider this as a device.
* Figures of speech (metaphors, similes, personification, etc.).
* Devices of sound (rhyme, alliteration, consonance, assonance, meter, rhythm)

1. What’s the poem *really* about? Find a theme, idea or lesson of the poem revealed, developed (deepened) or highlighted by the author’s word choices, imagery, used of figures—the whole works, that goes beyond the basic story of the poem—what is it?

In a well crafted poem, all the above considerations should reveal choices made by the author that support the themes derived from, or ascribed to, the poem.

Basic theme questions:

* What does this poem say about the human condition?
* Does it help you to understand the human condition better in some way?
* Does this poem give hope or fear? Make you glad to be human or despair at being human?
* How does this poem suggest you deal with the human experience?
* Is laughing an option?

1. And last, if you can honestly say you have done the above work, honored the poem, the poet, yourself, this class, you might offer an evaluation the poem.

Possible questions for poetry discussion:

1. What is your initial response to this poem? Why?
2. What thoughts, feelings, memories does the poem evoke as you read it?
3. Put what you see happening in the poem into your own words.
4. What is the most important word or phrase in the poem? Why do you think it is?
5. Does the poem call to mind any other literary or artistic work? Explain.
6. The device the poet uses is metaphor. How many metaphors are used. What “rule” about metaphors is the poet breaking? How do the metaphors work in this poem?
7. What devices or techniques does the poet use in this poem to make it work?
8. What images are used the poem and to what effect?
9. Do the two metaphors compliment each other or clash?
10. What do you imagine about the speaker or the daughter from this poem?
11. What would you want to know about the author or the subject of this poem to better understand it Why? How would you find out more about the other or subject? What could you figure out without being able to find out more?
12. What is this piece about?
13. What is this piece really about?
14. What does this poem say about the human condition?
15. In this poem, the daughter’s life journey is compared to what? In what ways does this metaphor work?
16. What impact does this piece have on you?
17. Did you like this poem or story?
18. Did this make you happy or sad? Or did it cause any other emotion?
19. What kind of person do we **imagine** the author to be? Is the writer like us or not?
20. What words do you not know? What do you image them to mean? Now look them up. How does your understanding the poem change knowing the meaning of these words?
21. Would you have liked to have written this piece?
22. What was your favorite image, or part of the piece?
23. Do some of these words have more than one meaning?
24. What is happening outside (around) of the piece in our lives or in the life and time of the author that affect our understanding of the piece? Explain.
25. What information, feelings, ideas and/or beliefs do we (or other audiences) bring to reading this poem? How might those ideas effect our understanding of the piece?
26. Who was the author’s intended audience? How would/do they respond to this? What would it mean to them?
27. Is the vocabulary predominately of one type, tone or mood?
28. Why does the author choose the words chosen? Pick a few specific examples to write about.
29. Tone in a literary sense means attitude. What is the writer’s attitude toward his subject?
30. Mood in the literary sense means atmosphere or emotion. What is the mood of the piece?
31. What is the structure of the piece? How does this structure work?
32. Do you think the author intended these double meanings? Why?
33. How do character, setting, plot, mood, tone, conflict, resolution, etc, work together? What meaning is suggested by the synthesis of these parts?
34. What about this piece transcends time and place?
35. In what ways does this piece help us to understand, or in what ways does it effect our understanding of life, the universe, reality?
36. Go back and re-read the first lines of the poem. What were you thinking was going to happen by the end of the poem when you first read those lines? Were your expectations changed? Why?
37. How was your understanding of the poem affected by your reading and re-reading of the poem? Did your understanding deepen as you read the poem over? What new things did you realize as you re-read?
38. What words do you/ did you need to figure out or look up to better understand the poem? What word meanings were you able to figure out by considering how they were used?
39. What is the controlling idea in this piece? What evidence supports your idea that this idea you notice is the controlling idea?