

Ten Easy Lessons in How to Read Poetry... and Get Something Out of It

0. *Notice the title.*
1. *Find the sentences in the poem.* (They will not end at the ends of the lines.) Read them one at a time as sentences. Notice any that are questions.
2. *Underline the subject, verb, and object/complement* of each sentence. They may not come in “natural” order, so turn them around first.
3. *Locate the prepositions.* Put a check mark over them and bracket the prepositional phrases.
4. *Notice the “turning” words* (“but,” “so,” “yet”...) or the “turns” (or “shifts”). If no word is used to mark them. Mark an asterisk beside these.
5. *Look up words that you do not know*, keeping aware of both denotative and connotative meanings. Write a synonym above the word in the poem.
6. *Observe the shape of the poem*; the breaks between lines, the length of lines, the presence or absence of rhyme. Think about how these aspects help you notice the “sense” and the “turns.”
7. *Think about who is speaking this poem.* Is it spoken to someone in particular? (Check the title again.) Make some notes about your ideas.
8. *Look for words that may be used figuratively* (first similes, then metaphors). Circle them.
9. *Consider possible symbols*—things that might represent something more than just themselves. Make notes about your ideas.
10. *Explore for allusions*—things that refer to something outside the poem (Start with the Bible, myth and fairy tales, Shakespeare, history). Look them up if you need to. Take notes.

READ THE POEM AGAIN. It helps to read it aloud, but that is not allowed on the exam.
Now: Complete this sentence:

The poem, “___(title)___” by ___(poet)___ is about ___(topic)___, and it says **that** ___(theme)___.

Mikhail Lermontov
“The Sail” (1832)

A lone white sail shows for an instant
Where gleams the sea, an azure streak.
What left it in its homeland distant?
In alien parts what does it seek?
The billow play, the mast bends creaking,
The wind, impatient, moans and sighs...

It is not joy that it is seeking.
Nor is it happiness it flies.
The blue waves dance, they dance and tremble,
The sun’s bright rays caress the seas.
And yet for storm it begs, the revel,
As if in storm lurked calm and peace!