

How to Unpack a Poem



FOUR EASY STEPS

Poetry Analysis



- Definition: The process by which we look at the language of a poem without attaching personal feelings in an attempt to develop a critical interpretation of a poem.

Four Steps:



1. Read a poem twice.
2. Find out what is literally happening in the poem.
3. Locate any patterns in the poem and pay attention to word choice.
4. Come up with “The Big Picture.” Put it all together and create your meaning.

Read A Poem Twice



- It is difficult to “get” a poem in one reading.
- Try to understand the feelings of the poem in your first reading.
- Then, try to understand what the poet is trying to say.

What Is Literally Happening



- What is the poem about?
- Write what is happening.

Locate Patterns/Word Choice



- This is the most important and involved step.
- Take notice of anything that is important to the success of the poem, including form/structure, repetition, figurative language, literary devices, diction, patterns, etc.

The Big Picture



- Now you are ready to put all of this together and say, “I think the poem means...”

Credits



- This information was adapted from a presentation made by the Atlantic Poetry Guild, entitled “Elements of Poetry.”

Practice



Now it is your turn to practice!

- “Unpack” the following poem by Billy Collins

“Introduction to Poetry” by Billy Collins



- I ask them to take a poem
- and hold it up to the light
- like a color slide
-
- or press an ear against its hive.
-
- I say drop a mouse into a poem
- and watch him probe his way out,
-
- or walk inside the poem's room
- and feel the walls for a light switch.
-
- I want them to waterski
- across the surface of a poem
- waving at the author's name on the shore.
-
- But all they want to do
- is tie the poem to a chair with rope
- and torture a confession out of it.
-
- They begin beating it with a hose
- to find out what it really means.