

How to Swallow a Poem

Swallowing a poem takes a different perspective than *analyzing* a poem. When you analyze a poem, you divide it into parts and look at the parts right away. When you swallow a poem, you take in the whole, and begin with your own experience.

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To swallow a poem, try following these steps:

Listen to the poem. Read the poem once, out loud.

1. Write down your first impressions. What thoughts or images come to mind? What words or phrases stand out? Do you make any word associations—do other words come to mind that aren't in the poem? Do you feel connected to the poem? If yes, what is the connection about? If no, where is the disconnect for you?
2. Focus on the mood that you feel in the poem. (Look up words for mood—do any of these seem to fit as you read the poem?) Write down the mood words that fit for you.
3. Look up any words you need to define, and write the definitions here.
4. Read the poem again, out loud.
5. Look at the structure of the poem. What do you notice about its shape? How would you describe its shape, the line breaks, the length of lines, the length of stanzas? Is this a structure you recognize? What do you think the structure says about this poem?
6. What are the images in this poem? Write these down, and note your thoughts about them. Are there any symbols? In other words, are there any objects or animals that the poet seems to be translating the qualities from to something else? Note any objects or images that have conventional significance.

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Is there a picture the poet is trying to create?

7. Does the title of the poem add any meaning to it? What is the relationship between the content of the poem and title? Is there anything to “read between the lines”?

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8. What is the sum of the thoughts, feelings, and substance in this poem? What is the poet saying?

9. Read the poem again, and enjoy.

The first step in the handout is to read the poem once, out loud. This is a good first step if you're on your own. But it's nice to be able to focus on listening when you first experience a poem. Try having someone read you the poem.