

One Page Concept Review: Calming Poem Anxiety

Most poems on the AP test are narrative poems, or they can be analyzed as narrative poems.

- That means you can apply the same sorts of analyses that you would a story. Even better, because College Board usually picks complete, shorter poems (as opposed to excerpts from longer works), you have the entire data set (beginning, middle, and end) from which to draw conclusions (not true in most prose cuttings on the test).
- This means you can start with character and conflict and use these to draw conclusions about theme. What is the speaker like? How does s/he change? What (usually) internal struggle does s/he face? How am I supposed to feel about the resolution to this struggle? Answering these questions lead you to the point of the poem: what is the poem's point of view about life and/or what it means to be human?
- Have you done the irony check? Is there exaggeration, understatement, absurdities, or situational ironies? You'll reach the exact opposite conclusions that you need to reach if (for example) you read a satiric poem at face value.
- Even if you never progress in your understanding beyond the character and conflict point, you can still write four paragraph essays that lead the reader to understand how an attitude changes or the way that the poet frames a conflict. It would be nice if that led you to an understanding of theme, but you thankfully don't have to reach a complete understanding of the text in order to write essays that reach the acceptable grade threshold.

You don't have to understand everything.

- Most of the time when students become frustrated with the fact that they don't "get it," they haven't bothered to actually submit the poem to analysis. In their view, either a cartoon light bulb goes off over their head or it doesn't -- concluding that either they're stupid or the task is stupid (because it's always a lot easier to blame something else for your failures).
- However, if you trust the process, there is virtually no way you can fail to not glean *something* from the text. Have you treated the poem as a story? Have you looked for words and images that have a similar connotation? Does the type of words and images change at some point in the text (indicating a tone shift)? Are there comparisons and/or substitutions in the poem? I know this is shocking to you, but there was a purpose to you sitting in class and completing assignments all year. These were the tools and methods of analysis that you are now expected to use on your own. Why in the world would you expect to "get it" before you even bother to do these things?
- If you don't feel like you have a complete understanding of the text, that's okay. You don't need to spend twenty minutes figuring it out in order to begin writing your essay (unless your goal is not to finish the test). If you've spent five minutes struggling with the text and still have unresolved issues, it's time to move on and narrow your focus to what you *do* know. In some ways it's even better if you don't understand everything so you won't be tempted to try to *do* everything and run out of time because you didn't narrow your approach.
- Choose one of the big stick analytical tools (characterization, conflict, diction/imagery, tone/mood, metaphor/metonym, irony/paradox) and use it to figure out what you do know. If

you can't figure out *anything* doing this, you're screwed, but how likely is it that you are able to figure out nothing? It's not as if the poem is going to be written in a different language.

- It's okay if your conclusions are tentative. Oftentimes the text is not so much trying to convince you of something as frame the nature of a struggle. Even if this is not true, you can still write an essay that analyzes the *nature* of a problem.
- Consider writing an ambiguity essay if you aren't completing "getting" it. In other words, use your own confusions as an organization tool in which one body paragraph is about something that seems to be true, and the other body paragraph is about something that seems to contradict the ideas in the first body paragraph. Frame the conclusion as "here's the nature of the problem" as part of our collective struggle to understand the world around us.
- What's not okay, is using an incomplete understanding as an excuse for giving up on the test or just writing "whatever" and hoping it's okay (spoilers: it won't be).
- Seriously, you have to pretty clueless indeed to be able to figure out *nothing* about the poem – unless, of course, you panic and don't use the tools you've learned over the course of this class to break the problems down. You can do this.

Even if it's not a narrative poem, there's still a lot you can do.

- If the poem is about an abstract idea, or it is simply descriptive (lyrical), you have less options, but there's still a lot you can do.
- The focus should be on attitude of the speaker if at all possible. This means you have to be able to recognize tone at any given point in the poem, even if you don't actually choose to analyze it explicitly.
- Thus, look for the way ideas are framed. The words and images used to develop the idea color the perception of the idea through their connotation.
- Most of the time you can cheat a bit and treat abstract and/or descriptive poems like narratives if you focus on the speaker as a character with an implied conflict.

You should never organize essays by literary element, *unless* you're writing an essay about a single literary element. The poem essay is the most viable portion of the test to do this.

- You should always narrow your approach, and one way to do this is by looking at the way a single literary element informs meaning.
- It still needs to be specific to an idea, however. For example, an essay explaining how "contradictory connotations in a pattern of diction and imagery usage reveals ambiguity" sounds like a great idea. An essay that just repeats the language of the prompt and features one body paragraph about diction and one body paragraph about imagery is a terrible idea (it isn't really dividing or narrowing the topic in any meaningful way).
- Extended metaphor essays are also a great idea if there's an obvious one in the poem. If the poem is organized around a multi-point comparison, why not use that as your structure? Since the explanations in metaphor analysis are built around explaining how concepts are alike, this is actually a good way of generating a lot of analysis at speed (since it's pretty easy to do).
- Essays of this type work best if still engage the big picture explicitly in the conclusion. In other words, make it clear in the conclusion that even though you're only dealing with a sub-set of what's going on in the poem, this was a deliberate choice and you still understand how this kind of narrow analysis fits into the larger whole.