

Terms to Know **How to Read a Poem**

Poems can be read many ways. The following steps describe one approach. Of course, not all poems require close study and all should be read first for pleasure.

- **Look at the poem's title:** What *might* this poem be about? Jot ideas that come to mind.
- **Read the poem straight through** without stopping to analyze it (aloud, if possible). This will help you get a sense of how it sounds, how it works, what it might be about.
- **Start at the beginning:** Work from the first stanza down as you begin to construct your understanding. A stanza is similar to a paragraph in that each has its own idea to add. Confused? Make a note and come back to that place later. Often confusion can be cleared up by parts that come later in the text. Jot notes in the margins that reflect your thinking as you move through the text.
- **Notice Craft:** With poetry, every word choice, every detail, is intentional. Study it. Watch for repeated, interesting, or even unfamiliar use of language, imagery, sound, color, or arrangement. Ask, "What is the poet trying to show through this detail?

This pattern? This word choice? How does it suggest or add to meaning?"
- **Look for changes** in tone, ideas, narrator, structure, patterns.
Ask: "What has changed and what does the change mean?"
- **Identify the narrator.** Who is speaking in the poem? What do you know about him/her? or • her?
- **Check for new understanding.** Re-read the poem (aloud, if you can) from start to finish, adding new insights as they are revealed. Return to those places where you were confused to see if you can clear up those confusions.
- **Find the crucial moments.** The pivotal moment or "turning point" might be as small as the word *but* or *yet*. Such words often act like hinges within a poem to swing the poem in a whole new direction. Also pay attention to breaks between stanzas or between lines. HINT: This moment (along with the title) is often the place where the author is communicating his message or theme.
- **Check for improved understanding.** Read the poem through again, aloud if

possible. Return to the title and ask yourself what the poem is about and how the poem relates to the title. Write a theme statement that reflects the point or message that the poem suggests. Be prepared to defend your theme with evidence.