Poetry Terms

Familiarize yourself with the following terms. Apply them to the Dickinson poems.

Alliteration is the repetition of initial consonant sounds in neighboring words.
Example:
- In clichés: sweet smell of success, a dime a dozen, bigger and better, jump for joy
- Wordsworth: And sings a solitary song / That whistles in the wind.
The matching or repetition of consonants is called alliteration, or the repeating of the same letter (or sound) at the beginning of words following each other immediately or at short intervals. A famous example is to be found in the two lines by W.H. Auden:
  - Round the rampant the rugged rocks
  - Rude and ragged rascals run.

Assonance is the repetition of vowel sounds but not consonant sounds as in consonance.
Example:
- fleet feet sweep by sleeping geeks.

Consonance is the repetition of a final consonant sound or sounds following different vowel sounds in proximate words.
Examples:
- first and last, short and sweet, struts and frets, odds and ends

Internal Rhyme is rhyming within a line.
Example:
- I awoke to black flak.

Metaphor is the comparison of two unlike things using the verb "to be" and not using “like” or “as” as in a simile.
Example:
- He is a pig. Thou art sunshine.

Onomatopoeia is a word that imitates the sound it represents.
Example:
- splash, wow, gush, kerplunk
Such devices bring out the full flavor of words. Comparison and association are sometimes strengthened by syllables which imitate or reproduce the sounds they describe. When this occurs, it is called onomatopoeia (a Greek word meaning name-making”), for the sounds literally make the meaning in such words as “buzz,” “crash,” “whirr,” “clang” “hiss,” “purr,” “squeak,” “mumble,” “hush,” “boom

Personification is giving human qualities to animals or objects.
Example:
- a smiling moon, a jovial sun

Rhyme Scheme is rhymed words at the ends of lines.
Example:
- Lines that rhyme are given the same letter.

Simile is the comparison of two unlike things using like or as. Related to metaphor
Example:
- He eats like a pig. Vines like golden prisons.

Symbol is using an object or action that means something more than its literal meaning.
Example:
- the bird of night (owl is a symbol of death)

Explicating Poetry

When you explicate a poem, you interpret the meaning of the poem and examine how the writer conveys that meaning. In other words, you look at what a poet says and how the poet says it. Therefore, you must pay attention not only to theme but also to literary devices, tone, connotations of words, the form of the poem, and other elements. The following suggestions will help you to focus your attention while reading a poem.

 Meaning (What does the poem say?)
- Briefly summarize the poem.
- Looking at this summary, state the theme (or themes) of the poem.
- What is the poet's apparent intent or purpose?
The Title
- How does the title of the poem communicate the poem's central theme(s)?
- What element(s) of the poem does the title accentuate?

Form
- Look at the poem's structure. How many stanzas does it contain? How many lines per stanza? Do you notice a pattern? How does the pattern contribute to the overall effect of the poem?
- Does the poem have a rhyme scheme? If so, what is it? What effects does it create? If not, what effects does the lack of rhyme create? How does the rhyme scheme (or the lack thereof) contribute to the poem's meaning?
- Notice the line breaks. Where does the poet place these breaks? What effects do they create? What effects are created by pausing at the end of each line, even if a line has no end punctuation? How does the poet accentuate the meaning and/or tone of the poem using line breaks?
- Identify sound devices (alliteration, assonance, consonance, onomatopoeia, internal rhyme, etc.). What effects do these devices create? What does the author gain by using them?

The Speaker
- Who is speaking?
- To whom is he/she speaking?
- Try to identify the age, gender, and values of the speaker
- Under what circumstances is he/she speaking?
- What is the speaker's (not necessarily the author's) intent or purpose?

Diction
- Look up any words you aren't familiar with. Look up words you are familiar with but are used in unusual ways.
- Are any words repeated in the poem? If so, what effects does this repetition create? Why would the author use such repetition?
- Are words combined or arranged in unusual ways? If so, explain how and the effects they create.
- Are the words mostly concrete or mostly abstract? Again, examine the effects of this language.
- Are there any words that strike you as clichéd or inappropriate to the tone and/or subject matter of the poem? What effects do they create? Do they mar the poem? Why would the author use them?

Tone
- Describe the tone of the poem.
- Does the tone change during the course of the poem? If so, what effect does this change create? Why would the author have included such a change?
- What particular words in the poem create, advance, or accentuate the tone?
- What literary devices help create, advance, or accentuate the tone?

Imagery
- What portions of the poem appeal to your sense of 1) sight, 2) hearing, 3) touch, 4) smell, 5) taste?
- Describe the images in the poem.
- How do these images advance the major themes or effects of this poem?
- Do any of the images intensify particular ideas or emotions in the poem? Give examples.

Symbolism
- Identify the symbols in the poem.
- What meanings do these symbols communicate? Identify as many as you can.
- What does the author gain by employing these symbols?

Literary Devices
Locate and explain the effects of the following figures of speech. What does the poet gain by using them? How do these figures of speech fit the tone and/or subject matter of the poem?
- Metaphors
- Similes
- Personification
- Word plays such as puns
- Hyperbole (overstatement)
- Understatement
- Irony
- Oxymorons
- Paradox