How to Read a Poem

Read the poem carefully SEVERAL times. Read the poem ALOUD at least once.

Look up DEFINITIONS of any words that you do not know. Pay special attention the allusions, proper names, archaic words, regional terms, etc.

How to Annotate a Poem

1. Pay attention to the title—at some point, make a connection between the title and the meaning.

2. Pay attention to beginnings, endings and breaks. They will point you toward meaning.

3. Rule of Three: trace the patterns of ideas and words. Circle and connect words that explore similar topics or that convey similar feelings.

4. Look for devices. Don’t just identify a device (ex: “I Spy a Simile”); talk about why the device is important. What feeling does it create?

5. Visualize and use images to help you determine the meaning.

6. Pay attention to form: is it a sonnet? A narrative poem?

7. Pay attention to the speaker. Does it matter who’s talking?

8. Look for transition words to notice CHANGES or SHIFTS.

9. Sum up each section.

10. At the end of reading, sum up the poem’s meaning in a sentence or two. Use everything you know about the poet and the text itself to draw conclusions.

(for an example, see the next page →)
FOR EXAMPLE

Harlem (Dream Deferred)
Langston Hughes

What happens to a dream deferred?

Does it **dry up**
like a raisin in the sun?

Or **fester** like a sore—
And then run?

Does it **stink** like rotten meat?

Or **crust** and **sugar** over—
like a syrupy sweet?

Maybe it just **sags**
like a heavy load.

Or does it **explode**?

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Rule of 3 Chart:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Negative ideas</th>
<th>Lifeless</th>
<th>Violence</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>dry up</td>
<td>dry up</td>
<td>explode</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>sore</td>
<td>rotten</td>
<td>heavy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>fester</td>
<td>sag</td>
<td>sore</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>stink</td>
<td></td>
<td>run</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>rotten</td>
<td>sag</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>sag</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>heavy</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>explode</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>syrupy sweet (sounds nice but it suggests that it is too sweet and, therefore, not enjoyable)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Since I know Langston Hughes is an African American poet from the 1930s (the time of To Kill a Mockingbird), I think this poem is about the anger and frustration people feel when they can’t fulfill their dreams, sometimes because of racism. It’s showing that people will end up angry (exploding), which is exactly what happened in the 1960’s civil rights movement.