

# Finding the Theme of a Poem

*It is normal to feel a great deal of anxiety about trying to understand the meaning of a poem because they often feel mysterious and confusing. If you know how to read a poem and where to search for themes and meaning reading poetry and writing about it will be less scary.*



## **1. Examine the Title**

The title can point you in the right direction when you're trying to understand the meaning of a text. What does the title make you think the poem is about? Does it contain any key words that signal theme or meaning? Make note of them as you make your way through the poem.

## **2. Read Slowly and Read Aloud**

Rushing through a poem just to get the meaning is one of the worst ways to read poetry. Often, poetry is not about primarily one main point; the meaning can be contained in the word choice, sounds and rhythm of a poem. Read your poem aloud several times and make note of your own experience. Does the poem seem to be harsh or soft? Elegant or rough? Are there any dominant words or sounds throughout the poem? Make note of your reactions as you read. This can help you to identify the important aspects of the poem.

## **3. Identify the Speaker**

One important key to understanding a poem is to find out who is speaking. Is the narrator using "I," "you" or the third person? Does the speaker seem to be an individual person or a collective, such as a town, state, country or gender? If you can't identify the narrator specifically, at least notice whether the speaker seems to be directly addressing the audience versus telling a story about somebody else.

#### 4. Determine the Subjects

Read through the poem and notice your first reaction. What seems to be the primary subject matter of the poem? What types of scenes does it depict, and what actions, events or emotions are discussed? Make note of every individual scene or description.

#### 5. Find the Figurative Language

Poems often contain imagery, which refers to concrete descriptions. Metaphor and simile, which refer to comparisons, are also common and are often used in conjunction with imagery. Both of these elements can help you to understand the meaning of the poem. For example, a poem that includes imagery of dying or decaying fruit versus a poem full of imagery of ripe, healthy fruit might indicate a theme of death and dying rather than a theme of life and happiness. In addition, in terms of metaphor and simile, a relationship compared to a freshly picked apple is very different from a relationship compared to a cut of bloody meat! Pay careful attention to what the author chooses to compare and the imagery used throughout the poem.

#### 6. Now it's time to think about theme

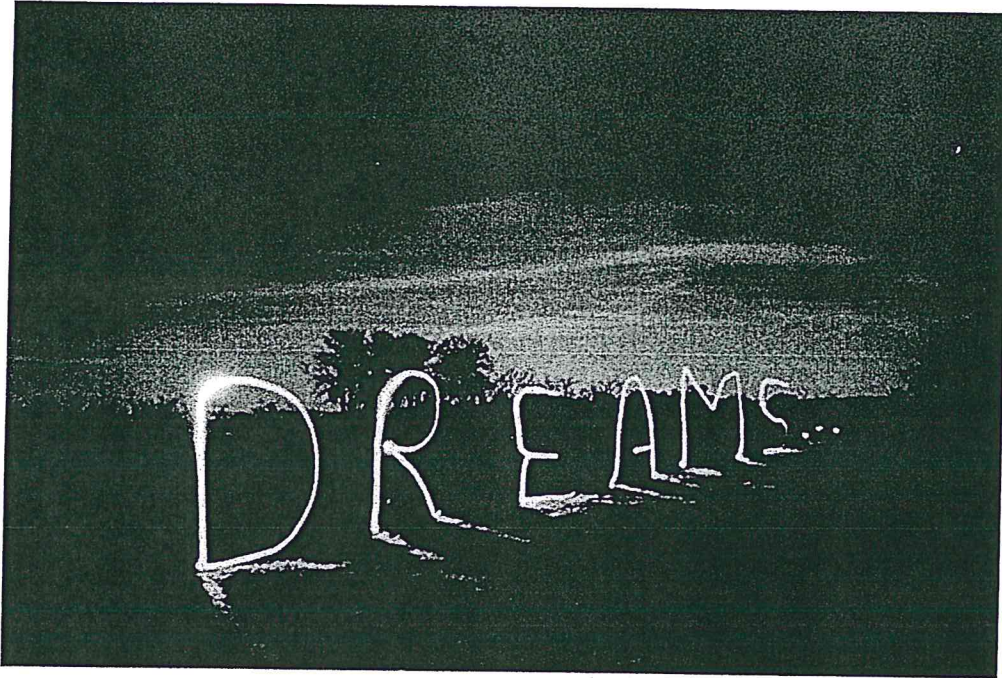
Now that you have considered some of the key elements of the poem, it is time to step back and decide **what the poem means as a whole**. To do this, you need to **synthesize** (combine) the separate parts of your analysis into **one main idea**--your idea about what the poet is trying to say in this poem. Ask yourself the following questions to help with this synthesis.

- ✓ *What is the poet trying to say?*
- ✓ *How forcefully does he or she say it and with what feeling?*
- ✓ *Which lines bring out the meaning of the poem?*
- ✓ *Does the poet gradually lead up to the meaning of the poem or does he or she state it right at the beginning?*
- ✓ *The last lines of a poem are usually important as they either emphasize or change the meaning of the poem. Is this so in the poem that you are analyzing?*



# Dreams

By Langston Hughes



Hold fast to dreams  
For if dreams die  
Life is a broken-winged bird  
That cannot fly.  
Hold fast to dreams  
For when dreams go  
Life is a barren field  
Frozen with snow.

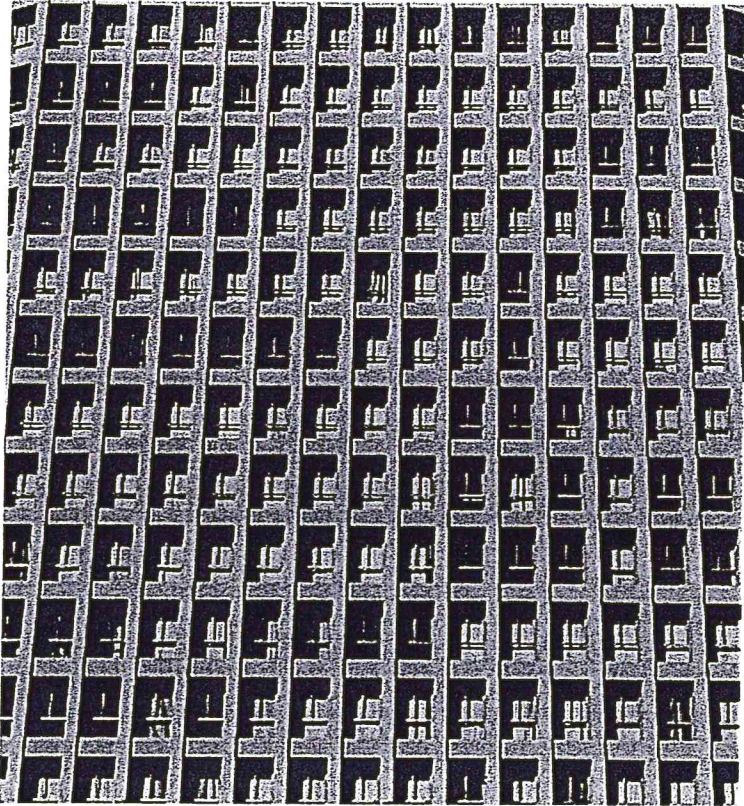
## Questions:

1. Life is compared with two things. Why has the poet chosen these two images to describe life without dreams?
2. Which do you think is the more rich and revealing comparison?
3. Find an example of assonance, rhyme and alliteration. Explain the effect of each.
4. What is the underlying tone of the poem? And what is the theme?

# Apartment House

By Gerald Raftery

A filling-cabinet of human lives  
Where people swarm like bees in tunnelled hive,  
Each to his own cell in the towered comb,  
Identical and cramped--we call it home.

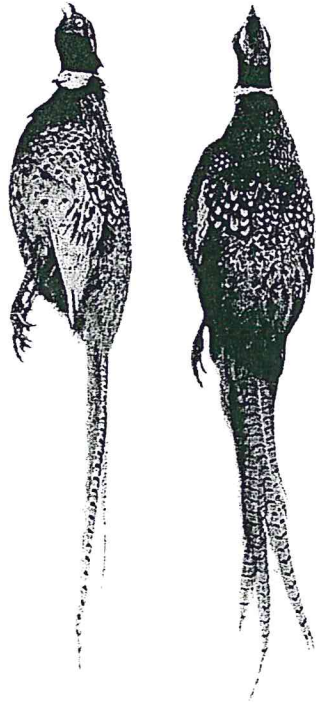


## Questions:

1. What is the extended metaphor?
2. How does figurative language make you react? Discuss your feelings towards the poem with specific examples.
3. What is the underlying tone of the poem and what is the theme of the poem?

# November Day

By Eleanor Averitt



Old Haggard winds has  
plucked the trees  
Like pheasants, held  
between her knees.  
In rows she hangs them,  
bare and neat,  
Their plumage at  
her feet.

## Questions:

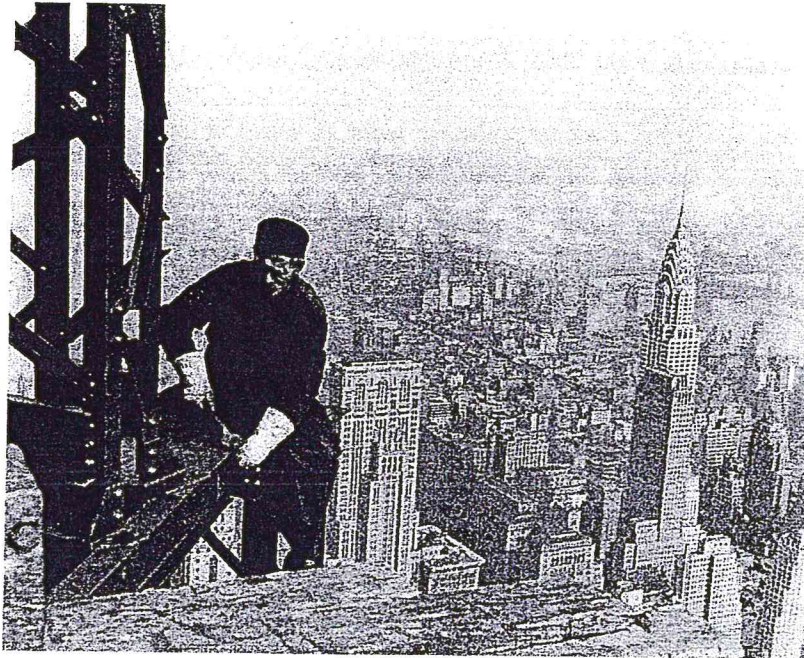
1. What is the extended metaphor?
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3. What is the underlying tone of the poem and what is theme of the poem?



# On Watching the Construction of a Skyscraper

*By Burton Raffel*

Nothing sings from these orange trees,  
Rindless steel as smooth as sapling skin,  
Except a crane's brief wheeze  
And all the muffled, clanking din  
Of rivets nosing in like bees.



## Questions:

1. Poems are full of images that appeal to the senses of sight, sound, taste, touch and smell. To what senses do the images in this poem appeal?
2. Read the first line aloud stressing “orange” instead of “trees.” Then stress “tress” instead of “orange.” This image supports something natural, an orange tree, and unnatural, a steel framework coated with rust coating. What other words support these images?
3. What is the significance of the “crane’s brief wheeze.”
4. What is the underlying tone of the poem? And what is the theme?