15 Questions to Ask and Answer when Dissecting a Poem

1. Who is the author?
2. Who is the speaker?
3. To whom is the speaker speaking?
4. What is the occasion?
5. What happens during the poem?
6. What is the speaker’s purpose – what is he or she setting out to accomplish and why? (Remember, the speaker is not necessarily the author. A 40 year-old woman can write a poem from the perspective of a six year-old boy. The speaker’s purpose, then, is distinct from the author’s purpose.)
8. What is the poem’s form? Is it an ode, a ballad, a villanelle, a sonnet, free verse, a rap, etc?
9. What is the poem’s rhythm or meter? Does it have an official meter, like iambic pentameter or anapestic tetrameter?
11. What effect does the author’s diction have? What are some individual words that stand out, and how do they impact the tone of the piece? How does the diction impact the imagery? Do certain words evoke a certain sensory response?
12. What do you believe the central theme (central message) of the poem is? What are some additional themes or messages? What evidence do you have to back up your claims?
13. Are there recurring motifs – symbols, images or themes (topics)?
14. What literary devices are present, and how do they function? What is their effect or effects?
15. What is your response to the poem? How does it make you feel, and what does it make you think about?