Mood and Theme in Poetry

Poetry is about **THINKING** and **FEELING**!

Therefore, when we study poetry, we are on a quest to **THINK** about the **THEME** and **FEEL** the **MOOD**!

In poetry, the **mood**, or atmosphere, is the feeling that a poem creates in a reader. For example, a poem’s mood might be imaginative, frightening, reflective, or lonely.

In poetry, the **theme** is the central message, concern, or purpose of the poem. We’ve already discussed themes in works of fiction.

1) What is the **mood** of the following sentence? Underline the words that help you figure it out.

The sun was shining, the birds were chirping, and I bought a big chocolate ice cream cone as I walked through the park.

   a) Negative  
   b) Hungry  
   c) Warm  
   d) Happy

   **Answer - D**

2) What is the **theme** of the following passage?

When you wish upon a star,  
It makes no difference who you are.  
Anything your heart desires  
Will come to you.

   If your heart is in your dreams  
   No request is too extreme  
   When you wish upon a star  
   As dreamers do.

   a) Stars are powerful objects.  
   b) Dreams and stars are the same.  
   c) Dreams make you see stars.  
   d) Dreams can come true if you really want them to.

   **Answer - D**

**Note:** In poetry, the theme is not always a **lesson** as it usually is in short stories. Sometimes, it can be a simple, one-word idea that the poem is about such as: Winter, Loneliness, Separation, Reuniting, etc.
"Winter Eyes" by Douglas Florian

Look at winter
With winter eyes,
As smoke curls from rooftops
To clear cobalt skies.

Breathe in winter
Past winter nose:
The sweet scent of black birch
Where velvet moss grows.

alk through winter
With winter feet
On crackling ice
Or sloshy wet sleet

Listen to winter
With winter ears:
The rustling of oak leaves
As spring slowly nears.

1. In the line, “As smoke curls from rooftops to clear cobalt skies,” we can picture
   a) Fires being made on a clear winter day
   b) Smoke making the sky cloudy as a fire rages on
   c) A beautiful spring day where the sky is clear blue

   Answer - A

2. The diction in this poem:
   a) uses imagery to paint a mental picture of winter in the reader’s mind
   b) uses imagery to help the reader imagine what winter sounds like
   c) uses imagery to show the reader what winter looks, smells, feels, and sounds like

   Answer - C

Now we’re going to look at a poem and break apart some of its diction.

**Some poetry is used to arouse feelings from you – this is to help create the mood of the poem.
**Some poetry is used to form images – what something looks, sounds, feels, tastes, or smells like.
Those Winter Sundays
By Robert Hayden

1
Sundays too my father got up early
and put his clothes on in the blueblack cold,
then with cracked hands that ached
from labor in the weekday weather made
bleak fires blasé. No one ever thanked him.

I’d wake and hear the cold splintering, breaking.
When the rooms were warm, he’d call,
and slowly I would rise and dress
fearing the chronic angers of that house,

10Speaking indifferently to him,
who had driven out the cold
and polished my good shoes as well.
What did I know, what did I know
Of love’s simple and lonely responsibilities?

1) In the line, “then with cracked hands that ached from labor in the weekday weather,” we can picture:
   a) A hand with cuts all over it, being very painful
   b) A father’s tired, dry hands from working them hard
   c) A father’s soft, open, and caring hands comforting a child

Answer - B

2) Looking at the feelings that we get from the poem, what MOOD does this poem create?
   a) Anger
   b) Calm
   c) Inspired
   d) Regretful

Answer - D

Paraphrasing Practice: In order to find the theme, it's best to paraphrase poems so that you make sure you understand what the poet is saying.

Lines 1-5

__________________________________________________________________________

Lines 6-9

__________________________________________________________________________

Lines 10-14

__________________________________________________________________________
THINK about the THEME:

3) Thinking about what the author is saying about his father and himself, what is a possible theme?
   a) You should make your fires early in the morning
   b) You should be grateful for the love a parent gives you
   c) You shouldn’t let your hands get so dry they crack
   d) You should wait until it’s warm before you get dressed

Answer - B

“UNTIL I SAW THE SEA” by Lilian Moore

Until I saw the sea
    I did not know
         that wind
    could wrinkle water so.

    I never knew
         that sun
    could splinter a whole sea of blue.

    Nor
    did I know before,
    a sea breathes in and out
    upon a shore.

1. Which word best describes the mood of the poem, “Until I Saw the Sea?”
   A. gloomy
   B. creative
   C. peaceful
   D. entertained

Answer - C

2. What is most likely the theme of this poem? (Hint: What is the poet most likely trying to say?)
   A. I never realized how destructive the sun could be
   B. The sea is just like a human, breathing in and out
   C. The sea can be a frightening thing if you have never seen it before
   D. I didn’t realize the power and beauty of the sea until I saw it

Answer - D
PERSONIFICATION

In poetry, **personification** is a device that poet’s use to compare an object or an animal to a human by giving the object human characteristics. **Personification can help the reader figure out the mood and theme of the poem.**

Let’s look at an example!

**Sponge Bob Square Pants**

Wears clothes
Talks
Eats

Just like a human, but he’s a sponge!

**Read the poem below and follow the directions to identify personification.**

The dark **clouds** threatened to cry any second

I waited-

The **thunder** began shouting out loud at the **world**.

A **fight** broke out in the middle of the **sky**

I watched-

And **rain** soon slapped the **ground** for sitting.

1. Underline all non-human objects in this poem.

2. List any and all actions these objects perform that are usually only done by humans.

Clouds – threatened; Thunder – shouting; Sky – fight; Rain – slapped; Ground - sitting

**The Winter Sun**
**By Douglas Florian**

The winter sun’s a grumpy guy.
He scarcely gets to see the sky.
He doesn’t speak. His rays are weak.
His disposition’s grim and bleak.
He hovers near the naked trees,
His blanket from the sky’s big freeze,
And barely dares to lift his head
Before he’s ordered back to bed.
What statement is the poet making about the subject of the poem?
A. The sun can actually speak.
B. Winter is a terrible season.
C. Nature can sometimes seem unhappy.
D. The sun decides when it sets each day.

Answer - C

What overall mood does this create?
A. disgusting
B. violent
C. gloomy
D. eager

Answer - C

April Rain Song

By Langston Hughes

Let the rain kiss you.
Let the rain beat upon your head with silver liquid drops.
Let the rain sing you a lullaby.

The rain makes still pools on the sidewalk.
The rain makes running pools in the gutter.
The rain plays a little sleep-song on our roof at night –

And I love the rain.

What statement is the poet making about the subject of the poem?
A. The rain makes you sad.
B. The rain is wet, cold, and uncomfortable.
C. The rain is fun to play around in.
D. The rain is soothing and relaxing.

Answer - D

What overall mood does this create in the poem?
A. calm
B. unhappy
C. excited
D. uncomfortable

Answer - A
“Monday Morning”

The alarm clock bellows-
Five o’clock is too early for any human to be stirring.
The warm sheets wrap-
My tired body does not want releasing.
The mirror screams-
I see a zit and a wild hair that needs plucking.
Monday mornings prod-
The bed crawls near and into it I am falling.

What statement is the poet making about Monday mornings?
A. They are comforting and cozy
B. They can be very annoying and chaotic
C. They are sad and lonely
D. They are her favorite time of the week

Answer - B

What is the mood of the poem?
A. Sad
B. Victorious
C. Exhausted
D. Angry

Answer - C
SIMILE AND METAPHOR

In poetry, **similes** compare two **unlike** things using **like** or **as**.

Example: “She’s like the wind.”

It’s hard to imagine how someone could be similar to the wind, so you’d have to think about what you know about the wind, and see how it could compare to a human trait. Here, the wind is described as moving in the night and disappearing in the day. Also, the wind is part of nature and has no need for company (“Just a fool to believe she got anything I need”). When thinking about a person, this would explain how someone can be unpredictable, and unreliable (there one minute, gone the next). It also can show how a person is distant – not needing companionship.

In poetry, **metaphors** compare two unlike things by stating that one this **is** another.

Example: “Some say love, it is a river, that drowns the tender reed. Some say love, it is a razor, that leaves your soul to bleed.”

Here the author is making a very strong statement about love. By saying it **IS** a river and **IS** a razor instead of “like,” he/she is trying to get across how strongly they are alike. In both cases, the author is making a point of how hurtful, painful, and destructive love is.

> “You’re on my heart just like a tattoo.”

What does this simile say about the person it’s comparing to a tattoo? How are they similar?

**The person will stay on their heart for life. He or she has made an impact on the speaker. Simile** - like

> “You’re my sunshine on a cloudy day.”

What does this metaphor say about the person it’s comparing to sunshine? How are they similar?

**The person is able to cheer up the speaker even on a bad day. Metaphor**

> **“The River” by Garth Brooks**
> You know a dream is like a river, ever changing as it flows
> And the dreamer’s just a vessel that must follow where it goes
> Trying to learn from what’s behind you, and never knowing what’s in store
> Makes each day a constant battle, just to stay between the shores.

> And I will sail my vessel, ‘til the river runs dry
> Like a bird upon the wind, these waters are my sky
> I’ll never reach my destination, if I never try
> So I will sail my vessel, ‘til the river runs dry.

> Too many times we stand aside and let the waters slip away
> ‘Til what we put off ‘til tomorrow, has now become today
> So don’t you sit upon the shoreline and say you’re satisfied,
> Choose to chance the rapids and dare to dance the tide.

What is being compared in this poem? A dream and **river**

Why does the author compare a river to dreams?
A. to show that he dreams of being a sailor some day
B. to show that dreams can be scary and dangerous, and you’re better to watch from a distance
C. to show that dreams can be scary and dangerous, but you should never give up on them
D. to show that everyone can dream of being something normal, but a sailor is exciting

**Answer - C**
What is the mood of this poem?
A. inspirational
B. angry
C. heartbroken
D. satisfied

Answer - A

What is the theme of this poem? (What is the author saying about the subject: rivers and dreams?)

Never give up on your dreams. Pursue your dreams now because if you wait, it may be too late. Even if you fail on a dream, don’t give up.

**You’ll Be There** by George Strait

Hope is an anchor and love is a ship
Time is the ocean and life is a trip
You don’t know where you’re going ‘til you know where you’re at
And if you can’t read the stars, well you better have a map,
A compass, and a conscience so you don’t get lost at sea
Or on some old lonely island where no one wants to be.

Does this poem use a simile or a metaphor? **Metaphor**

Who or what is being compared? Life and **trip**

What is the theme of this poem (what is the message we get about life)?

Have a plan (map) or you may get lost. (One of my sayings – Failing to plan is a plan to fail).

What is the mood of this poem?

A. confident
B. joyful
C. untrusting
D. reflective

Answer - D

**No Difference**

*By Shel Silverstein*

Small as a peanut, Red, black, or orange
Big as a giant, Yellow or white,
We’re all the same size We all look the same
When we turn off the light When we turn off the light.

Rich as a king, So maybe the way
Poor as a mite, To make everything right
We’re all worth the same Is for God to just reach out
When we turn off the light And turn off the light!

Does this poem use similes or metaphors? **Similes**

What does the author compare being big to? **A Giant**
Why does the author compare being big to this?
A. to show how big someone can be
B. to allow the reader to see what a giant looks like
C. to show what a peanut could be if it grew
D. to indicate the size of the character in the poem
Answer - D

What does the author compare being rich to? A king
Why does the author compare being rich to this?
A. to show how rich someone can be
B. to allow the reader to understand the life of a king
C. to give the reader an idea of what poor might be like
D. to show that not just kings can be rich
Answer - D

**The Toaster** By William Jay Smith

A silver-scaled Dragon with jaws flaming red
Sits at my elbow and toasts my bread.
I hand him fat slices, and then one by one,
He hands them back when he sees they are done.

Does this poem use a simile or a metaphor? Metaphor

What does the author compare the toaster to? A silver-scaled Dragon

Why does the author compare the toaster to this?
A. to help the reader understand how a toaster toasts bread
B. to show the reader when to check on toast
C. to show what toast looks like when it is finished
D. to demonstrate how to toast bread
Answer - A

**SOUND DEVICES**

**In poetry, Alliteration is the repetition of sounds at the beginning of words.**

Example:

Sally sells seashells by the seashore.

Peter Piper picked a peck of pickled peppers.

Here is a longer example of alliteration:
Sarah Cynthia Sylvia Stout
Would not take the garbage out!
She'd scour the pots and scrape the pans,
Candy the yams and spice the hams.
And though her daddy would scream and shout,
She simply would not take the garbage out.
And so it piled up to the ceilings:
Coffee grounds, potato peelings,
Brown bananas, rotten peas,
Chunks of sour cottage cheese.
It filled the can, it covered the floor,
It cracked the window and blocked the door
With bacon rinds and chicken bones,
Drippy ends of ice cream cones,
Prune pits, peach pits, orange peel,
Gloppy glumps of cold oatmeal,
Pizza crusts and withered greens,
Soggy beans and tangerines,
Crusts of black burned buttered toast,
Gristly bits of beefy roasts... The garbage rolled on down the hall,
It raised the roof, it broke the wall... Greasy napkins, cookie crumbs,
Globs of gooey bubble gum,
Cellophane from green baloney,
Rubbery blubbery macaroni,
Peanut butter, caked and dry,
Curdled milk and crusts of pie,
Moldy melons, dried-up mustard,
Eggshells mixed with lemon custard,
Cold french fries and rancid meat,
Yellow lumps of Cream of Wheat.
At last the garbage reached so high
That it finally touched the sky.
And all the neighbors moved away,
And none of her friends would come to play.
And finally Sarah Cynthia Stout said,
"OK, I'll take the garbage out!"
But then, of course, it was too late... The garbage reached across the state,
From New York to the Golden Gate.
And there, in the garbage she did hate,
Poor Sarah met an awful fate,
That I cannot now relate
Because the hour is much too late.
But children, remember Sarah Stout
And always take the garbage out!

**In poetry, **Onomatopoeia** is the use of words that imitate sounds.

Onomatopoeia is used to give the poem actual “sound effects” as in a movie or song.

Example:
1 “Boom! shake-shake-shake the room
   Boom! shake-shake-shake the room
   Boom! shake-shake-shake the room
   Tic-tic-tic-tic boom!

5 Yo back up now and give a brother room
   The fuse is lit and I’m about to go boom!”

   In this song, the “Boom” emphasizes an explosion while the “tick” describes the countdown and anticipation for the explosion. It can also help you visualize in a poem: **What do you see when you read line 6?**

   The fuse is lit and burning and there is about to be an explosion.