

# Analyzing the Structure of a Poem

**CCLS**

**RL.6.5:** Analyze how a particular sentence . . . or stanza fits into the overall structure of a text and contributes to the development of the theme. . . .

Theme: *Capturing Memories*

A poem is a little like a photograph. It captures an important moment or expresses a strong feeling. To get the most out of a poem, it helps to know that poems have a special **structure**, or type of organization. Structure can refer to how the lines or ideas of a poem are organized. Each line and stanza has its place. You need to put together the meaning of all of the individual lines to find the **theme**, or message, that the poem is trying to convey.

**Read the the poem below, paying close attention to its meaning and structure.**

A boat beneath a sunny sky,  
Lingering onward dreamily  
In an evening of July—  
  
Children three that nestle near,  
Eager eye and willing ear,  
Pleased a simple tale to hear—  
  
Long has faded that sunny sky:  
Echoes fade and memories die:  
Autumn frosts have slain July.

**How is the poem organized? What is the poem's message?**

The poet organizes the poem into stanzas of three lines. Think about what each stanza means. Then compare your ideas with those in the chart.

Stanza	Main Idea
1	A boat drifts peacefully as night draws near on a warm July day.
2	Children gather happily to enjoy a story.
3	Cold autumn weather has destroyed summer fun.

Each line of a poem contributes to the overall theme of the poem. Look again at the main ideas in the chart. Taken together, they convey the message that the speaker has fond, pleasant memories of summer and misses the fun and peacefulness of July.



Read the poem below in which the speaker talks about things he likes.

Genre: Lyric Poem

## Motto *by Langston Hughes*

I play it cool  
and dig all jive.  
That's the reason  
I stay alive.

My motto,  
As I live and learn,  
is:  
*Dig And Be Dug  
In Return.*



**Explore how to answer this question:** “What do you notice about the structure, or organization, of this poem?”

Poems are often organized into stanzas. A **stanza** is a group of lines that form a unit in a poem. Like a paragraph, each stanza has its own main idea. Taken together, these main ideas develop the poem’s theme.

**Complete the chart below by filling in the main idea for the poem’s second stanza. Then explain a theme of this poem.**

Stanza	Main Idea	Theme
1	Being relaxed and getting along with people is the key to life.	
2		

**With a partner, take turns rereading the poem aloud. Then discuss how the poem’s structure contributes to the poem’s theme.**



## Close Reading

Each stanza conveys a different feeling.

**Underline** at least two details in each stanza that help create those feelings.

## Hint

Reread the first stanza. What message do the first and second lines of the stanza suggest?

Read the poem below. Use the Close Reading and the Hint to help you answer the question.

Genre: Lyric Poem

### The Heart of a Woman *by Georgia Douglas Johnson*

The heart of a woman goes forth with the dawn,  
As a lone bird, soft winging, so restlessly on,  
Afar o'er life's turrets and vales does it roam  
In the wake of those echoes the heart calls home.

The heart of a woman falls back with the night,  
And enters some alien cage in its plight,  
And tries to forget it has dreamed of the stars  
While it breaks, breaks, breaks on the sheltering bars.

Circle the correct answer.

Which of the following best describes a theme, or central message, of the poem?

- A The heart of a woman is strong and can never be broken.
- B The heart of a woman is restless and often feels trapped.
- C The heart of a woman is happy and free to dream of the stars.
- D The heart of a woman is dark and dreary like the night sky.



## Show Your Thinking

Look at the answer you chose above. What words in that answer choice helped you know that it is the correct answer?

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In a small group, list the words and phrases the poet uses to describe “the heart of a woman.” Then discuss how the poem’s structure helps support the theme.





Read the poem below. Use the Study Buddy and the Close Reading to guide your reading.

Genre: Lyric Poem



The speaker mentions the passage of time, which may be a clue about the poem's theme. I'll look for words in each stanza that relate to time and may contribute to the theme.

### Close Reading

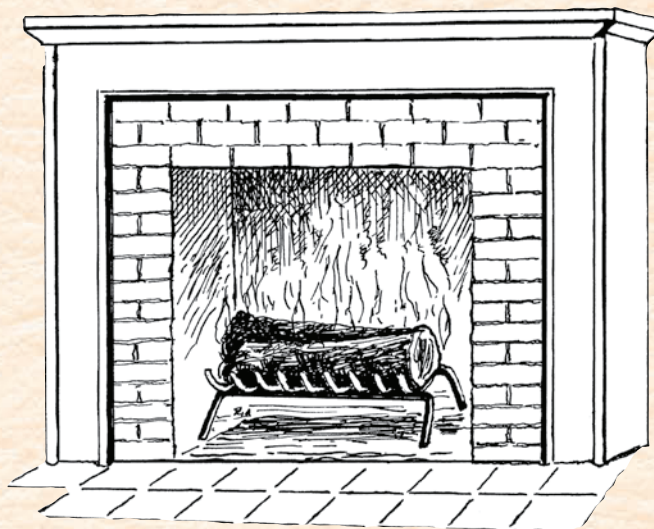
The speaker repeats the phrase "I sit beside the fire and think of" in the first stanza. **Underline** words in the first stanza that explain what time frames the speaker is thinking about.

The speaker begins the second stanza with thoughts about the future. **Circle** the phrase that shows how the speaker feels about the future at the beginning of this stanza.

## I Sit by the Fire and Think *by J. R. R. Tolkien*

I sit beside the fire and think of all that I have seen,  
of meadow-flowers and butterflies in summers that have been;  
Of yellow leaves and gossamer in autumns that there were,  
with morning mist and silver sun and wind upon my hair.  
5 I sit beside the fire and think of how the world will be  
when winter comes without a spring that I shall ever see.

For still there are so many things that I have never seen:  
in every wood in every spring there is a different green.  
I sit beside the fire and think of people long ago,  
10 and people who will see a world that I shall never know.  
But all the while I sit and think of times there were before,  
I listen for returning feet and voices at the door.





## Hints

Which choice describes the speaker's thoughts in the opening and closing lines of the first stanza?

Which sentence in the second stanza best describes the speaker's thought process from the start of the poem to the end?

What does the speaker think about in the last two lines of the poem?

Use the Hints on this page to help you answer the questions.

- 1 Which best describes the first stanza?
  - A The speaker looks back on past events with sadness and deep regret.
  - B The speaker looks ahead to future events with excitement.
  - C The speaker thinks about the past and wonders about the future.
  - D The speaker thinks about all he has to do in the months ahead.
- 2 How does the idea of time contribute to the poem's structure?
  - A The speaker thinks about the past and then the future, and at the end he returns to the present.
  - B The speaker first thinks about what will happen in the future, wonders about the present, and then the past.
  - C The speaker thinks about the present autumn, then wonders what winter without spring would be like.
  - D The speaker recalls sitting by the fire during his youth, and remembers the sound of feet and voices.
- 3 State the theme of the poem. Give at least one example of a sentence from the poem that develops the poem's theme.

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Read the ballad. Then answer the questions that follow.

## Brennan on the Moor

*a traditional Irish ballad*

It's of a famous highwayman a story I will tell;  
His name was Willy Brennan, in Ireland he did dwell;  
And on the Kilworth mountains he commenced his wild career,  
Where many a wealthy gentleman before him shook with fear.

5        Brennan on the Moor, Brennan on the Moor,  
          Bold and undaunted stood young Brennan on the Moor. . . .

One day, on the highway, as Willy he sat down,  
He met the Mayor of Cashel a mile outside the town;  
The Mayor, he knew his features—"I think, young man," said he,  
10        "Your name is Willy Brennan—you must come along with me."

          Brennan on the Moor, Brennan on the Moor,  
          Bold and undaunted stood young Brennan on the Moor.

As Brennan's wife had gone to town provisions for to buy,  
When she saw her Willy, she began to weep and cry;  
15        He says, "Give me that tenpenny." As soon as Willy spoke,  
          She handed him a blunderbuss, from underneath her cloak.

          Brennan on the Moor, Brennan on the Moor,  
          Bold and undaunted stood young Brennan on the Moor.

Then with his loaded blunderbuss—the truth I will unfold—  
20        He made the Mayor tremble, and robbed him of his gold;  
          One hundred pounds were offered for his apprehension there,  
          And he, with his horse and saddle, to the mountain did repair.

          Brennan on the Moor, Brennan on the Moor,  
          Bold and undaunted stood young Brennan on the Moor.

25        Then Brennan being an outlaw, upon the mountain high,  
          With cavalry and infantry to take him they did try;  
          He laughed at them with scorn, until at length, it's said;  
          By a false-hearted woman he basely was betrayed.

          Brennan on the Moor. Brennan on the Moor.  
30        Bold and undaunted stood young Brennan on the Moor. . . .



So they were taken prisoners, in irons they were bound,  
And conveyed to Clonmel Jail, strong walls did them surround;  
They were tried and found guilty—the Judge made this reply:  
“For robbing on the king’s highway, you’re both condemned to die.”

35        Brennan on the Moor, Brennan on the Moor,  
             Bold and undaunted stood young Brennan on the Moor.

When Brennan heard his sentence, he made this reply;  
“I own that I did rob the rich, and did the poor supply;  
In all the deeds that I have done I took no life away;

40        The Lord have mercy on my soul against the judgment day.”

             Brennan on the Moor, Brennan on the Moor,  
             Bold and undaunted stood young Brennan on the Moor. . . .

Answer the questions. Mark your answers to questions 1–3 on the Answer Form to the right.

**Answer Form**

1 (A) (B) (C) (D)

2 (A) (B) (C) (D)

3 (A) (B) (C) (D)

**Number  
Correct**

3

**1**

Which **best** describes the poem’s organization?

- A** stanzas of two lines in which the end words of each line rhyme
- B** stanzas of four lines throughout with every other end word rhyming
- C** a pattern of two-, four-, and six-line stanzas with a changing rhyme scheme
- D** alternating stanzas of four lines and two lines with a consistent rhyme scheme

**2**

Which **best** describes a purpose of the four-line stanzas in the poem?

- A** Each adds a new theme to the poem’s meaning.
- B** Each describes an episode that advances the story.
- C** Each marks a new time and place in the chronology.
- D** Each repeats the same phrase about the main character.



3

The structure of the poem uses lines of consistently similar length. Which **best** describes a reason this text feature is used in the poem?

- A It shows all events in the poem are equally important.
- B It makes it easier for the poet to find rhyming end words.
- C It allows the poet to create a steady rhythm throughout.
- D It makes the sometimes difficult phrasing easier to read.

4

Explain what effect the repetition of the lines “Brennan on the Moor, Brennan on the Moor, / Bold and undaunted stood young Brennan on the Moor” has on the meaning of the poem. Use at least **two** details from the text to support your answer.

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5

The poet organizes the poem into stanzas that have four lines or only two lines. Explain why the poet structured the poem in this way by comparing the content presented in the four-line and two-line stanzas. Support your answer with at least **two** details from the poem.

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**Self Check**

*Go back and see what you can check off on the Self Check on page 127.*