Poetry Analysis Practice

Learning Targets: I can determine each poem’s meaning.
I can determine how poetic techniques create or enhance each poem’s meaning or subject matter.

Directions: Read each of the poems in this packet several times. Annotate each poem as you read: note words or phrases that suggest the poem’s theme, note and explain poetic techniques used (use your “Poetry Terms” handout for ideas), note any connections or reactions you have to each poem. Then, answer the questions that follow each poem (either on this paper or on a separate sheet).

Who Burns for the Perfection of Paper
--Martin Espada

At sixteen, I worked after high school hours at a printing plant that manufactured legal pads: Yellow paper stacked seven feet high and leaning as I slipped cardboard between the pages, then brushed red glue up and down the stack. No gloves: fingertips required for the perfection of paper, smoothing the exact rectangle. Sluggish by 9 P.M., the hands would slide along suddenly sharp paper, and gather slits thinner than the crevices of the skin, hidden. Then the glue would sting, hands oozing till both palms burned at the punchclock.

Ten years later, in law school, I know that every legal pad was glued with the sting of hidden cuts, that every open lawbook was a pair of hands upturned and burning.

Analysis Questions

1. Who is the speaker in this poem?
2. What is the speaker talking about (what is the subject of this poem)?
3. Why does Espada split this poem into two sections (stanzas)? What does that split show?
4. What imagery is present in lines 15 -18? To which of the reader’s five senses does this image appeal?
5. Who is the “Who” in the title? How does the title lead the reader to understand the theme of the poem?
6. What is the theme of the poem (what is its meaning)?
I heard a Fly buzz (465) by Emily Dickinson

I heard a Fly buzz – when I died –
The Stillness in the Room
Was like the Stillness in the Air –
Between the Heaves of Storm –

The Eyes around – had wrung them dry –
And Breaths were gathering firm
For that last Onset – when the King
Be witnessed – in the Room –

I willed my Keepsakes – Signed away
What portions of me be
Assignable – and then it was
There interposed* a Fly –

With Blue – uncertain stumbling Buzz –
Between the light – and me –
And then the Windows failed – and then
I could not see to see –

* interposed = interrupted, intervened

Analysis Questions:

1. Mark the meter (scan) the first stanza. What do you predict the rest of the meter of this poem will be? Were you right?
2. Lines 2 and 4 show what type of rhyme?
3. Who is the speaker in this poem?
4. What is happening in lines 1-10? What happens in lines 10-16?
5. What is ironic about what happens to the speaker?
6. What could this poem mean? Write a theme statement.

72 Pounds

Missing you
Eyes of blue
Soft spoken
Sweet, gentle soul
So loving and giving
To those in your world
Unable to see the worth of yourself.

Laughter and tears
Couldn’t heal your heart
Your soul
Your mind.

With each passing year
Pounds shed
Until only a shell
Remained.

A demented process
From tragedies past
To recapture an image
That never existed.

1. What is this poem about?
2. How does the poem’s structure reflect its subject? (Is it a concrete poem?)
3. How does the last line punctuate the poem’s meaning?
4. What does the poem’s title mean? How is the title haunting?
5. Explain the imagery in the title.
6. What is the tone of this poem? What lines best establish the tone?
Poem of the day

Phillip Levine

The gates are chained, the barbed-wire fencing stands,
An iron authority against the snow,
And this grey monument to common sense
Resists the weather. Fears of idle hands,
Of protest, men in league, and of the slow
Corrosion of their minds, still charge this fence.
Beyond, through broken windows one can see
Where the great presses paused between their strokes
And thus remain, in air suspended, caught
In the sure margin of eternity.
The cast-iron wheels have stopped; one counts the spokes
Which movement blurred, the struts inertia fought,
And estimates the loss of human power,
Experienced and slow, the loss of years,
The gradual decay of dignity.
Men lived within these foundries*, hour by hour;
Nothing they forged outlived the rusted gears
Which might have served to grind their eulogy.*

* foundry= metal factory
* eulogy = speech honoring one who has died

Analysis Questions:

1. What is this poem about (its subject)? How do you know—which lines indicate the poem’s subject?

2. What is the tone of this poem? Which words and phrases (diction) best suggests the poem’s tone? Why?

3. Identify the end-stopped lines. How does the use of these end-stopped lines serve to create or enhance the meaning of the poem?

4. Identify examples of personification. How does the use of personification add to the tone and meaning of the poem?

5. Write a theme statement for this poem.
Courage
by Anne Sexton

It is in the small things we see it.
The child's first step,
as awesome as an earthquake.
The first time you rode a bike,
swallowing up the sidewalk.  
The first spanking when your heart
went on a journey all alone.
When they called you crybaby
or poor or fatty or crazy
and made you into an alien,
you drank their acid
and concealed it.

Later,
if you faced the death of bombs and bullets
you did not do it with a banner,
you did it with only a hat to
cover your heart.
You did not fondle the weakness inside you
though it was there.
Your courage was a small coal
that you kept swallowing.
If your buddy saved you
and died himself in so doing,
then his courage was not courage,
it was love; love as simple as shaving soap.

Later,
if you have endured a great despair,
then you did it alone,
getting a transfusion from the fire,
picking the scabs off your heart,
then wringing it out like a sock.
Next, my kinsman, you powdered your sorrow,
you gave it a back rub
and then you covered it with a blanket
and after it had slept a while
it woke to the wings of the roses
and was transformed.

Later,
when you face old age and its natural conclusion
your courage will still be shown in the little ways,
each spring will be a sword you'll sharpen,
those you love will live in a fever of love,
and you'll bargain with the calendar
and at the last moment
when death opens the back door
you'll put on your carpet slippers
and stride out.