Close Reading: Poetry

Give yourself a lot of time – up to an hour when you are starting out. Make sure you have paper and a pencil, or better yet have a copy of the poem you can mark upon. Write down everything. Here are elements of form and content to look for:

**Form**

*Rhyme*

1. Does the poem rhyme? Don’t forget partial rhymes, such as assonance or consonance. There may be internal rhymes as well.
2. Is there a particular rhyme scheme? Don’t forget things like sonnets, sestinas, villanelles, and the like.
3. Is the scheme consistent throughout? Where does the rhyme change?
4. Are there particular types of words, or words that are rhymed throughout?
5. Is there alliteration? What are the alliterated sounds like: for example, fluid or harsh?

*Rhythm*

1. Does the poem have an identifiable rhythm? The rhythm may be arranged according to the metric foot such as iambic pentameter, or it may be arranged by syllable count, stress pattern, word number, etc.
2. Does the rhythm change in any particular part of the poem?
3. Does the rhythm make you read faster, read slower, give a sense of chaos, or panic, or calm, or playfulness?

**Topography**

1. How long are the lines? Is the line length consistent?
2. Are the lines end-stopped or enjambed? Do they form complete sentences or ideas?
3. What kinds of word patterns occur on each line? Are there mixes of verbs, nouns, adjectives, and adverbs? Or is there only one kind of word per line?
4. What sort of punctuation and capitalization is used?
5. Is the typeface normal, or does the poem contain bold or italicized letters, for example?
Content

For now, forget about plot summary, “the meaning” of the poem, or “what the poem symbolizes.” Most of the time, a poem does not symbolize anything. Instead, focus on the individual words.

1. What kinds of words are used? Are they mostly nouns, verbs, adjectives, adverbs, or prepositions?
2. How do the words relate to one another? What kinds of words are usually the subject of the sentences? What kinds of words are usually the object of the sentence? Do certain words occur only in the presence of other words?
3. Are there any recurring themes? For example, are there clusters of words about death, light, color, youth, or strength?
4. What is the tone of the poem? Is it happy, frightened, sad, penitent, or joyful?
5. Are there any characters in the poem? Can you identify them and their relationships to one another?
6. Is the speaker a character in the poem? Does the speaker seem to have a personality, or is he or she more like an objective reporter?

If you can answer most of these questions, you will be able to crack most of the tricks in “difficult” or “modernist” poetry. You will then need to examine the form along with the content, and see what comes together for you.