Please note: This poem retains original wording, spelling, and punctuation. In this poem, "gay" means "happy"; "dress" means "clothing"; and "peddler" is spelled "pedlar."

Analyzing Poetry

Introduction

Analyzing poetry sounds difficult, but it isn't hard if you take it one piece at a time. We're going to break it down step by step and see what we can discover about our poem. We'll do this with two goals in mind. Our first goal is just to enjoy the poem. Remember that most of the time, poets wrote poems so people would enjoy them. Don't get so stressed about figuring them out that you forget to enjoy them. Our second goal is to analyze them so we can discover what the poet is trying to say to us and learn about how he or she communicated those ideas. That will help us enjoy the poem even more and learn how to write poems that communicate our ideas to others.

Step One:

Read the poem thoughtfully and carefully out loud. Then read it silently to yourself. Are there any words of which you aren't sure of the meaning? Write them down.

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Step Two:

What do you think the words mean from their context in the poem? Write down your thoughts and then look them up in a dictionary. Revise or expand their definitions based on what you learn.

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Step Three:

What is the title of the poem? Is it obvious how it relates to what the poem is about? If not, what do you think the title might be referring to?

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Step Four:

What is the setting? Where does the poem take place? What details do you notice about the setting?

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Step Five:

What perspective or point of view is the poem written from? Is it something the speaker experienced? Is it something that happened in the past? Is it happening now or is it something that might happen in the future?

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Step Six:

What words or phrases are repeated?

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Why do you think the poet did this?

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The Foolish Fir-Tree

by Henry Van Dyke

A tale that the poet Rückert told
To German children, in days of old;
Disguised in a random, rollicking rhyme
Like a merry mummer of ancient time,
And sent, in its English dress, to please
The little folk of the Christmas trees.

A little fir grew in the midst of the wood
Contented and happy, as young trees should.
His body was straight and his boughs were clean;
And summer and winter the bountiful sheen
Of his needles bedecked him, from top to root,
In a beautiful, all-the-year, evergreen suit.

But a trouble came into his heart one day,
When he saw that the other trees were gay
In the wonderful raiment that summer weaves
Of manifold shapes and kinds of leaves:
He looked at his needles so stiff and small,
And thought that his dress was the poorest of all.
Then jealousy clouded the little tree's mind,
And he said to himself, "It was not very kind
"To give such an ugly old dress to a tree!
"If the fays of the forest would only ask me,
"I'd tell them how I should like to be dressed,—
"In a garment of gold, to bedazzle the rest!"
So he fell asleep, but his dreams were bad.
When he woke in the morning, his heart was glad;
For every leaf that his boughs could hold
Was made of the brightest beaten gold.
I tell you, children, the tree was proud;
He was something above the common crowd;
And he tinkled his leaves, as if he would say
To a pedlar who happened to pass that way,

"Just look at me! don't you think I am fine?
"And wouldn't you like such a dress as mine?"
"Oh, yes!" said the man, "and I really guess
I must fill my pack with your beautiful dress."
So he picked the golden leaves with care,
And left the little tree shivering there.

"Oh, why did I wish for golden leaves?"
The fir-tree said, "I forgot that thieves
"Would be sure to rob me in passing by.
"If the fairies would give me another try,
"I'd wish for something that cost much less,
"And be satisfied with glass for my dress!"
Then he fell asleep; and, just as before,
The fairies granted his wish once more.
When the night was gone, and the sun rose clear,
The tree was a crystal chandelier;
And it seemed, as he stood in the morning light,
That his branches were covered with jewels bright.
"Aha!" said the tree. "This is something great!"
And he held himself up, very proud and straight;
But a rude young wind through the forest dashed,
In a reckless temper, and quickly smashed
The delicate leaves. With a clashing sound
They broke into pieces and fell on the ground,
Like a silvery, shimmering shower of hail,
And the tree stood naked and bare to the gale.

Then his heart was sad; and he cried, "Alas
"For my beautiful leaves of shining glass!
"Perhaps I have made another mistake
"In choosing a dress so easy to break.
"If the fairies only would hear me again
"I'd ask them for something both pretty and plain:
"It wouldn't cost much to grant my request,—
"In leaves of green lettuce I'd like to be dressed!"
By this time the fairies were laughing, I know;

But they gave him his wish in a second; and so
With leaves of green lettuce, all tender and sweet,
The tree was arrayed, from his head to his feet.
"I knew it!" he cried, "I was sure I could find
"The sort of a suit that would be to my mind.
"There's none of the trees has a prettier dress,
"And none as attractive as I am, I guess."
But a goat, who was taking an afternoon walk,
By chance overheard the fir-tree's talk.
So he came up close for a nearer view;—
"My salad!" he bleated, "I think so too!
"You're the most attractive kind of a tree,
"And I want your leaves for my five-o'clock tea."
So he ate them all without saying grace,
And walked away with a grin on his face;
While the little tree stood in the twilight dim,
With never a leaf on a single limb.

Then he sighed and groaned; but his voice was weak—
He was so ashamed that he could not speak.
He knew at last that he had been a fool,
To think of breaking the forest rule,
And choosing a dress himself to please,
Because he envied the other trees.
But it couldn't be helped, it was now too late,
He must make up his mind to a leafless fate!
So he let himself sink in a slumber deep,
But he moaned and he tossed in his troubled sleep,
Till the morning touched him with joyful beam,
And he woke to find it was all a dream.
For there in his evergreen dress he stood,
A pointed fir in the midst of the wood!
His branches were sweet with the balsam smell,
His needles were green when the white snow fell.
And always contented and happy was he,—
The very best kind of a Christmas tree.

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