Questions for Analyzing Poetry
(from The Elements of Writing About Literature and Film by Elizabeth Mc Mahan, Robert Funk and Susan Day. Longman Publishing, 1998)

Can you paraphrase the poem?

Who is the speaker (persona) in the poem? How would you describe this persona?

What is the speaker’s tone? Which words reveal this tone? Is the poem ironic?

What heavily connotative words are used? What words have unusual or special meanings? Are any words or phrases repeated? If so, why? Which words do you need to look up?

What images does the poet use? How do the images relate to one another? Do these images form a unified pattern (a motif) throughout the poem?

What figures of speech are used? How do they contribute to the tone and meaning of the poem?

Are there any symbols? What do they mean? Are they universal symbols or do they arise from the context of this poem?

What is the theme (the central idea) of this poem? Can you state it in a single sentence?

How important is the role of sound effects, such as rhyme and rhythm? How do they affect tone and meaning?

How important is the contribution of form, such as rhyme scheme and line arrangement? How does form influence the overall effect of the poem?