Analyzing a Poem

In order to answer the first set of questions below, pay extremely close attention to details. Take time to look up any words that you do not understand; ponder why certain metaphors or figures of speech were chosen. Remember also that the English language has changed over the centuries and that words we use today may have had slightly different meanings in earlier times. And remember, not all of these questions need to be answered; they are just ideas to help you think about the poem.

1. Who is the speaker? What kind of person is the speaker?
2. Is there an identifiable audience for the speaker? What can you know about this audience?
3. What is the setting in time (hour, season, century, etc.), in place (indoors or out, city or country, land or sea, region, country, etc.)?
4. How is the poem constructed? What are its units of organization (quatrains, paragraphs, couplets, etc.)? How are these units linked together (continued metaphor, pro and con, linked sound patterns, logical syllogism, train of thought, etc.)?
5. What is the meter of the poem? Copy the poem and mark each syllable as accented (stressed) or unaccented (unstressed). Then, identify the pattern of accented and unaccented syllables and the pattern of the rhymes, and note any significant variations from those patterns.
6. Read the poem out loud. Determine if any sounds in the poem relate to topics discussed within the poem (for example, short, choppy syllables with repeated "e" sounds could relate to a chirping bird discussed in the poem).
7. What is the central purpose of the poem?
8. What is the tone of the poem? How is it achieved?
9. What kind of poem is it (ode, sonnet, dramatic monologue, lyric poem, etc.)? Is this type of poem an appropriate means to communicate the author's theme? Why?
10. Summarize the events of the poem.
11. Discuss the diction (the word choice) of the poem. Point out words that are particularly well chosen and explain why.
12. What kinds of imagery are used? Is there any structure to the imagery?
13. Point out and explain any symbols. If the poem is allegorical, explain the allegory.
14. Point out examples of metaphor, simile, conceit, personification, sound repetitions, or any other literary device and explain their significance and/or appropriateness.
15. Point out and explain any examples of paradox, overstatement, understatement, and/or irony. What is their function? Why are they used?
16. Point out and explain any allusions. What is their function? Why are they used?
17. Evaluate the poem. How well did it achieve its purpose? How well did it communicate its central idea or theme?

The previous questions lead to being able to convincingly answer larger analytical questions. Use this information to construct a convincing and persuasive reading of the piece as a whole and to suggest the significance of the piece in increasing the reader's understanding of a particular issue, literary process, etc. Here are some questions to help you organize your thoughts:

1. How do all of the poem's parts (structure, organization, language use, meter, literary devices, etc.) contribute to the effect of the piece of a whole?
2. What does the poem do (convert the reader, create shock, nostalgia, or fear, evoke a mood, etc.)?