Annotating a Poem

Ten Easy Lessons in how to read poetry
... and get something out of it

(borrowed and adapted from Dixie Dellinger)

1. Notice the title. Make notes about your initial reactions at the top of the poem. Return to the title later to reevaluate its significance.
2. Find the independent clauses in the poem, and read them individually. (They will often not end at the ends of the lines.) Notice any that are questions. For each independent clause, underline the subject once, predicate twice, and complement three times. (Clauses may not come in "natural" order, so turn them around first if necessary.)
3. Locate the prepositions. Put a check mark over them and bracket the prepositional phrases.
4. Detect the "turning" words (but, so, yet, however) or the shifts if no word is used to mark them. Make an asterisk beside these.
5. Look up significant words, maintaining awareness of both denotative and connotative meanings. Underline these words, and write synonyms above the words in the poem. Consider how diction affects tone.
6. Note the structure of the poem: the meter, the rhyme scheme, the breaks between lines, the length of stanzas. Think about how these aspects help to organize the poem's ideas and to identify the "turns."
7. Look for words that may be used figuratively (first similes, then metaphors). Circle them and draw an arrow to the comparison. Then, consider possible symbols—elements that might represent something more than just themselves.
8. Explore for allusions—elements that refer to something outside the poem. Look them up if you need to. Take notes about these references in the margin.
9. Think about point of view in this poem. Consider the speaker not in terms of a name but in terms of character traits. Is this person speaking to someone or something in particular? (Check the title again for clues.) Make some notes about your ideas.
10. Examine the tone of the poem. What is the attitude that the speaker and author each express? Are these attitudes similar or different?

Theme statement: Complete this sentence at the bottom of the page:

The poem "_____" by _____ is about
[title] [author]

_____, *and it reveals* _____.
[abstract concept] [message about humanity]