

Poetry

Poetry is one of the oldest genres in literary history. Its earliest examples go back to ancient Greek literature. Poetry is closely related to the term "lyric" which derives etymologically from the Greek musical instrument "lyra" ("lyre" or "harp"). In classical antiquity as well as in the Middle Ages, minstrels recited poetry accompanied by the lyre or other musical instruments. The term "poetry", however, goes back to the Greek word "poieo" ("to make," "to produce"), indicating that the poet is the person who "makes" verse.

I. Reviewing some definitions of poetry:

What is poetry? This is a question that poets, writers, philosophers and critics have over the centuries tried to answer. In fact, there are almost as many 'definitions' of poetry as there are poets. Let us take some of them:

"Poetry is the spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings: it takes its origin from emotion recollected in tranquillity". (*William Wordsworth*)

"Poetry: the best words in the best order". (*Samuel Taylor Coleridge*)

"Poetry is not a turning loose of emotion, but an escape from emotion; it is not the expression of personality, but an escape from personality". (*T.S. Eliot*)

"Poetry is the record of the best and happiest moments of the best and happiest minds". (*Shelley*)

"Poetry is rhythmical, imaginative language expressing the invention, taste, thought, passion, and insight of the human soul". (*EC Siedman*)

*Let us consider this couple of dictionary definitions:

"an arrangement of words, especially a rhythmical composition, sometimes rhymed, in a style more imaginative than ordinary speech".

"a composition, in verse, especially one characterized by a highly developed form and the use of heightened language and rhythm to express an imaginative interpretation of the subject from".

II. General Strategies for Improving your Understanding of Poetry:

It is true that understanding poetry elements can present some challenges to students of English (especially beginners). In this section, we will highlight some of the things you can do to find your way into and through a poem. Here are some general strategies you can apply to improve your understanding of poetry:

- Read extensively to become as familiar as possible with a wide range of poetry.

- Think about how language is used and make a note of any interesting features, lines, images, etc. that you come across in your reading of poetry.
- Think about the ideas contained in the poems you read.

- Read other responses to poetry—not as a substitute for forming your own ideas but as a 'broadening' influence (these responses could be found in study guides, literary journals, reviews or critical works). They might suggest things that have not occurred to you or they might stimulate your own thoughts if you disagree with their view.
- Read poems aloud- either in company or alone. Quite often this helps deepen understanding and it certainly gives you insight into features such as tone and rhythm.
- Listen to poems being read if you can manage to get hold of some recordings. This is possible through web sites.
- Adopt a questioning attitude. Whenever you read a poem ask yourselves questions about it. The three key questions to ask are: 'what is this poem about?', 'how is it written?'; 'why has the poet chosen to write the poem in this particular way?'

III. The Basic Elements of Poetry (Tools for Analyzing Poetry):

You analyze a poem in order to arrive at an intelligent interpretation and understand what you read. As stated before, a poem should be read several times in order to hear it and feel its emotions. The more times you read the poem, the more you can perceive and understand it. Before starting to understand the poem, you should do just a bit of research on the poet: knowing something about the poet is crucial, because a bit of biography can give you a great deal of insight into the preoccupations, themes and thoughts on life.

1- Poetic voice/Speaker:

The created narrative voice of the poem (the person the reader is supposed to imagine is talking). The speaker is **not** necessarily the poet. The poet often invents a speaker for the poem in order to give him/herself more freedom to compose the poem.

When the poet creates another character to be the speaker, that character is called the **persona**.

- **Persona**: a character created by the poet to narrate the poem. When the poet uses one persona to narrate the entire poem, the poem is called a dramatic monologue.
- **Dramatic monologue**: a poem in which the poet uses a persona, or a narrative voice other than his own, to tell the entire poem. This tends to sound like one-sided conversations, like the character is talking to him/ herself.
- **Audience**: the person or people to whom the speaker is speaking. Identifying the audience within a poem helps you to understand the poem better. There are different people the speaker can address in the poem:
 - The speaker can address another character in the poem.
 - The speaker can address a character who is not present or who is dead.

- The speaker can address you, the reader.

You should try to know who the target of the speaker is. Every poet has an intention out of writing his poem and every poem conveys an experience or attempts to rouse certain feelings in the reader.

NB:

It is often impossible to define a poet's 'true' intention. Your interpretation of a poet's aim is, therefore, largely a personal matter.

2-Content/Theme:

In simple terms, the content of a poem is what it is all about—the ideas, themes and storyline that it contains.

Theme—the central idea, topic, subject, and the statement the poem/poet makes. Theme is often used interchangeably with meaning and idea.

We have two types of meaning, general and detailed:

*General meaning: This is sometimes referred to as the surface meaning of the poem. Establishing this surface meaning will give you a framework on which to build the more detailed and complex ideas that form the detailed meaning.

*Detailed meaning: This should be given stanza by stanza without necessarily paraphrasing the whole poem. The detailed meaning could take the form of a paragraph made up of simple but accurate sentences. You should, for example, show how the poet begins, how he develops his theme, and then how he concludes it.

NB:

What if the poem is not divided into parts—stanzas!

3-Tone and Mood:

The effect that a poem has on the reader is very closely determined by the tone and mood that it creates. As has been mentioned above, a poem contains a 'voice' and like any voice it can project a certain tone that gives the listener (reader) certain messages. Obviously, there are many different kinds of tone. The tone might be angry or reflective, melancholy or joyful, bitter or ironic. Just as the tone of voice in which someone speaks tells us a good deal about the way that person feels, so the tone of the 'speaker' of the poem or 'poetic voice' informs us on how the poet or the narrator of the poem feels.

*Tone: is also the poet's attitude toward the subject of the poem. One of the keys to identifying and describing the tone of a poem is by noting the author's use of diction and rhythm.

*Mood: The mood, on the other hand, although very closely related with tone, is not quite the same thing. When we refer to the mood of a poem, we are really talking about the atmosphere that the poem creates.

Very often tone and mood in a poem are closely linked and a certain tone produces a certain mood. For example, if the poet uses a melancholy tone, it is unlikely that the mood of the poem will be bright and lively. Sometimes, though, the poet may quite deliberately use a tone that does not match the mood the poem creates in order to achieve a particular effect—underlying a certain irony, for example.

NB:

The overall impact of the poem stems not only from the literal meaning of the words but from the tone and mood that they create. One of the most effective ways of recognizing the tone of a poem is to hear the poem read aloud.

3-Diction:

It is the poet's choice of words. The poet chooses each word carefully so that both its meaning and sound contribute to the tone and feeling of the poem. Much of the poem's power comes from the words the poet uses and the images he evokes. The poet must consider a word's:

- Denotation—its definition according to the dictionary (literal or direct meaning).
- Connotation—the emotions, thoughts and ideas associated with and evoked by the word. (It is the figurative, less direct meaning, which is the most important in poetry). The figurative, or connotative, meaning of a word means everything that the word might imply besides its direct, dictionary meaning. Poets tend to make intensive use of denotation and connotation in their poems.

Here is an example of some words and their denotations and connotations:

Word	Denotation	Connotation
home	Place where one lives	Security, love, comfort, family,
childlike	Characteristics pertinent to a child	Meekness, innocence, frequent wondering

4-Imagery:

It has been stated before that the true 'meaning of a poem' lies in the total effect that it produces upon the reader. Imagery plays a central role in creating this response/effect within the reader.

NB:

The concept of imagery has a privileged place in poetic writing but it is found in other kinds of writing too.

An image is language used in such a way as to help us see, hear, taste, feel and think about or generally understand more clearly or vividly what is being said or the impression the writer wishes to convey. Poetry appeals to our senses not only through its music and rhythms but also through words and phrases that create images.

NB:

- 1-An *image* is a representation of a sensory impression, feeling, or idea.
- 2-Imagery refers to a pattern of related images in a poem. It is often symbolic or metaphorical in that it conveys meaning beyond the literal.

There are different types of imagery and each has a specific name:

- Olfactory imagery stimulates the sense of smell.
- Tactile imagery stimulates the sense of touch.
- Visual imagery stimulates the sense of sight.
- Auditory imagery stimulates the sense of hearing.
- Gustatory imagery stimulates the sense of taste.
- Organic is imagery that involves an internal sensation as hunger, thirst, or nausea.

***Figures of Speech:**

These are the poetic devices in which two images or things are compared to make language interesting and meaningful. The poet uses common expressions in original and creative ways by comparing one object to another in order to create an effect (to add beauty or emotional intensity) and make the poem more interesting and meaningful. Thus, the poet does not use ordinary language rather he/she uses figurative language (any language that goes beyond the literal meaning of words in order to furnish new effects or fresh insights into an idea or a subject).

Examples of Figures of Speech:

a*Simile: a comparison of two things (objects or images) using the words "like", "as", or "seems".

Ex: He is as tall as a palm tree.

You eat like a bird / Her smile is like a ray of sunshine.

b*Metaphor: is a brief, compressed comparison that talks about one thing as if it were another. The words *like* or *as* are omitted. The verb *to be* is generally used.

Ex: Her smile is a ray of sunshine / You are the sun in my sky.

He has the courage of a lion.

c*Personification: is a type of metaphor that gives living qualities to inanimate objects or abstract ideas, or human qualities (feelings, thoughts) to animals.

Ex: The moon smiles.

Fires rage.

The wind vexes (annoys) the lake and the waves crash angrily.

d*Metonymy: involves the substitution of one noun for another of which it is an attribute or which is closely associated with it. In other words, we comment on something by naming a separate object, but one that is closely associated with the original subject.

Ex: Queen Elizabeth controlled the crown for years. (The crown=the monarchy).
He drank the cup. (The cup=the water in the cup). He loves the stage. (The stage=the theatre).

e*Allusion: an implicit or indirect reference to a person, event, statement, or theme found in literature, other arts history, mythology, religion or popular culture. Therefore, it is of many types. To simplify, allusion is a figure of speech which that refers to a well-known story, event, person, or object usually indirectly.

Ex₁: The killer wore a mark of Cain as he stalked his brother.

Meaning: 'Mark of Cain' is in reference to the story of Cain and Abel.

Ex₂: I was surprised his nose was not growing like Pinocchio.

Meaning: This refers to the story of Pinocchio, by Carlo Collodi, where his nose grew whenever he told a lie.

Ex₃: Nature's first green is gold

Her hardest hue to hold

Her early leaf's a flower;

But only so an hour.

Then leaf subsides to leaf.

So Eden sank to grief,

So dawn goes down to day.

Nothing gold can stay. ("Nothing Gold Can Stay" by Robert Frost)

Meaning: Frost refers to the paradise of Eden that was lost when Adam and Eve were ordered to quit it to live on earth.

f*Symbolism:

Symbol is something that represents something else.

Symbolism is the use of symbols or symbolic systems in a piece of writing.

Ex:

'white', 'lion' and 'rose' commonly symbolize or represent 'innocence', 'courage', and 'beauty' respectively. Such symbols exist by convention and tradition. A 'serpent' may stand for evil or wisdom according to different conventions.

g*Verbal Irony: is a situation in which one meaning is stated, but another (opposite/opposed) is actually intended. This subtle irony depends for its effect on the author's choice of words.

Ex: Mr. Kandell is a rich man. He is generous and kind to his poor neighbours (but we mean just the opposite).

h*Overstatement (hyperbole): an exaggeration; giving something more or less a quality than it really has.

Ex: There were millions of people at the café.
The statement is not intended to be taken literally. It is used as a means to express exaggeration= the café was very crowded.

i*Understatement (litotes): the opposite of exaggeration. It is saying something with an overtly light tone; the speaker's words convey less emotion than he actually feels.

Ex 1: "I'm really glad that you came to visit," said the spider to the fly. The spider is not simply pleased to have a visitor, but is excited to have his next meal trapped in his web.

Ex 2: "It is sometimes a bit cold in the North pole."
This is an understatement. In fact it is a freezing area on our planet.

j*Paradox: a statement that appears to be absurd, untrue or contradictory, but may actually be true. A paradox occurs when two things that should not be able to exist at the same time are said, in a poem, to exist at the same time. **For example,** it is impossible that both night and day, both spring and autumn, past and present occur at the same time. If, however, one would assume that night and day coexist in a poem, one would be expressing a paradox.

Ex: "More haste, less speed" is a paradox.

k*Oxymoron: a compact form of paradox where two contradictory terms are combined in one phrase. (Two words together that are opposites but together mean something).

Ex: "cold fire", "honest thief", "invisible ink".

5-Sound devices:

The use of specific vowels, consonants, stress pattern and the combination of these three make up the sound of a poem. Most poetry is composed to be read aloud. Sound

devices create the "music" of the poem and influence the reader/listener's perception of the poem both intellectually and emotionally.

a*Rhyme: matching sounds at the end of lines of verse which create audible sense of pattern. Rhyme is one of the most striking and obvious differences between verse and prose.

NB:

Rhyme might have many effects on a poem. It can, for instance, make a poem sound pleasing to ear and can do just the opposite.

***Rhyme scheme:** the pattern established by the arrangement of rhymes in a stanza or poem, generally described by using letters of the alphabet to denote the recurrence of rhyming lines.

°The rhyme scheme of a poem is written in small letters, with "a" indicating the first end rhyme sound, "b" the second and so on. The same sounds receive the same letter.

b*Alliteration: It is the repetition of the same consonant sounds at the beginning of words that are near each other in a poem.

Ex 1: of "p" sound, /p/, as in "Peter Piper picked a peck of pickled peppers".

"The poor people of Paris".

Ex 2: of "w" sound, /w/, as in "There lived a wife at Usher's Well,

And a wealthy wife was she..."

c*Assonance: the repetition of the same vowel sound within words in a line of a poem in order to achieve a particular effect.

Ex: of "u" sound, /u/, as in "cool blue lewd dupe".

d*Rhythm: The metrical flow of sound determined by the placement of stressed and unstressed syllables in a line of verse (pattern of sound created by stressed and unstressed syllables in a line of poetry). Rhythm is part of the features that set a poem apart from other forms of writing.

***Meter:** It is the pattern of stressed (accented, long) and unstressed (unaccented, short) syllables in a line of poetry.

In every word of more than one syllable, one syllable is **accented** (stressed), that is, given more prominence in pronunciation than the rest.

Ex: inter, enter, intervene, enterprise.

These accents are indicated in the dictionary, and only rarely are words in poems accented differently. The only difference between prose and verse is that in prose

these accents occur haphazardly, in verse the poet has arranged them to occur at regular intervals.

The word *meter* comes from a word meaning "measure". To measure something, we must have a unit of measurement. For measuring length, we use centimeter, meter, for measuring time, we use the second, the minute and the hour. For measuring verse, we use the **foot**, the **line** and (sometimes) the **stanza**.

* **Foot**: the basic metrical unit. It consists normally of one accented syllable plus one or two unaccented syllables. A foot is defined by the number of syllables and stresses it contains. A stressed syllable is generally louder in volume, higher in pitch, and longer in duration than an unstressed syllable.

For diagramming verse, various systems of visual symbols have been invented to indicate the stress pattern. We use:

- A short curved line (U) to indicate an unaccented syllable,
- A short straight line (—) to indicate an accented syllable,
- A vertical line (|) to indicate the division between feet.

The basic kinds of feet are thus as follows:

Two-syllable feet:

* **Iamb** (U —): an unstressed syllable followed by a stressed syllable. Most English verse uses the iamb as the base foot.

Ex: And tell | of all | I felt | and all | I saw | (iambic pentameter)
U — | U — | U — | U — | U — |

* **Trochee** (— U): a stressed syllable followed by an unstressed syllable.

Ex: Tell me | not in | mournful | numbers | (trochaic tetrameter)
— U | — U | — U | — U |

* **Spondee** (— —): contains two stressed syllables, as in "break, break".

Three-syllable feet:

* **Anapaest/ Anapest** (U U —): two unstressed syllables followed by a stressed syllable.

Ex: "And the sound | of a voice | that is still" (anapaestic trimeter)

* **Dactyl** (— U U): a stressed syllable followed by two unstressed syllables (dactylic).
Ex: "This is the | forest prim | eval, the | murmuring | pine and the | hemlocks"

* Line:

The secondary unit of measurement, the **line**, is measured by naming the number of feet in it. The following names are used:

Monometer: a line of poetry with only one foot.

Dimeter: a line with two feet.

Trimeter: line with three feet.

Tetrameter: a line with four feet.

Pentameter: a line with five feet.

Hexameter: a line with six feet.

Heptameter: a line with seven feet.

Octameter: a line with eight feet.

* **Scansion**: the process of identifying meter is called **scansion**.

Ex (1): Iamb: "When I | have fears | that I | may cease | to be" (Keats)
1 2 3 4 5

This line consists of five feet. Each foot consists of an unstressed syllable and a stressed syllable or an iamb. It is an iambic pentameter.

Ex (2): Trochee:

Peter |, Peter | pumpkin | -eater |
1 2 3 4

Had a | wife and | couldn't | keep her |

This line consists of four feet. It has a pattern of a stressed syllable followed by an unstressed syllable; it is a

Ex (3): Dactyl: It consists of a stressed syllable followed by two unstressed syllables.

"Take her up | tenderly"

Ex (4): Spondee: consists of two stressed syllables.

"Wait, wait"
 "Smart lad"

6-Form (Organization of a Poem):

It is also called the *external arrangement* or *stanza form*. Every poem has a form. The poet can arrange his/her poem so that you will read it as s/he wants you to read it. There are two broad kinds of form into which a poem may be cast: a **patterned form** or a **non-patterned form**.

A* Patterned/ Stanzaic Form:

A series of stanzas or repeated units having the same number of lines, usually the same metrical pattern and often an identical rhyme scheme. The stanza could either be:

a 1 **Fixed**: any set of regularly rhyming and metrically patterned verse.

Examples:

o The Sonnet:

The sonnet is a very popular form in English poetry. It is a *fourteen line* poem (iambic pentameter) which can be arranged in two conventional ways. First, there is the Petrarchan or **Italian sonnet** which derives its name from the medieval Italian writer Petrarch. The other form is the **Shakespearean Sonnet** or **English sonnet**.

*Other forms of stanzas include:

- o **Couplet**: two-line stanza (aa)
- o **Triplet**: three-line stanza (aaa)
- o **Quatrain**: four-line stanza (aaaa, abab, abba, aabb, abac)
- o **Sestet**: six-line stanza
- o **Septet**: seven-line stanza
- o **Octave**: eight-line stanza

a 2 **Non-fixed**: arranged to one form or another, which could be achieved sometimes by building upon any of the fixed ones, sometimes depending on the poet's whim.

B* Non-patterned Form (continuous): the lines follow one another without any stanzaic arrangement; the only breaks being dictated by units of meaning as paragraphs are in prose.

b₁- **Blank verse**: unrhymed iambic pentameter lines. Most drama written in the Renaissance in England was composed in blank verse, especially Shakespeare's plays.

b₂- **Free verse**: Twentieth century poetry or modern poetry does not adhere strictly to a pattern of rhyme or meter as we have seen so far. Free verse which has become predominant means that this form of verse does not have lines that are equal in length or that have a regular meter.

NB:

It is argued that this flexibility allows poets the freedom to create their own forms to suit their own purposes and to create the effect that they want in their poetry.

7-The Poetry of Thematic Form:

Poetry can be classified not only according to the *external* form but according to the *internal* form (ideas, themes) as well. Certain forms of poetry have been used to express themes which can be broadly grouped together. For example, the Ode, the Ballad, the Elegy, the Pastoral, the Lyric, the Epicetc.

- o **Lyric**: was originally a song performed and accompanied by a lyre (a musical instrument) but has now come to mean a songlike poem or a short poem expressing personal feeling.
- o **Ode**: A verse form similar to a lyric but often more lengthy and containing more serious and elevated thoughts.
- o **Ballad**: A narrative poem that tells a story (traditional ballads were songs) usually in a straightforward way. The theme is often tragic or containing a supernatural or fantastical element.
- o **Elegy**: A meditative poem usually sad and reflective in nature. Sometimes, not always it is concerned with death.
- o **Pastoral**: Poems that are concerned with rural life presented in an idealized way.

- **Epic:** A long narrative poem written in an elevated style and which is usually dealing with a heroic theme or story.
- **Satire:** Verse meant to correct abuses in morals and manners through ridicule. It also censures folly or wickedness of people.
- **Dramatic Monologue:** A poem where the speaker addresses someone who does not reply.
- **Epistle:** A letter in verse, usually in pentameter lines.

Examples:

“**The Ship of State**” (Odes I, 14) By Quintus Horatius Flaccus (Horace) (65-8 B.C.):

On Ship! New billows sweep thee out
Seaward. What wilt thou? Hold the port, be stout
See'st not thy mast
How rent by stiff Southwestern blast?

Thy side, of rowers how forlorn?
Thine hull, with groaning yards, with rigging torn,
Can ill sustain
The fierce, and ever fiercer main;

Thy gods, no more than sails entire,
From whom yet once they need might aid require,
Oh Pontic Pine,
The first of woodland stocks is thine.

Yet race and name are but as dust,
Not painted stems gave storm-tost seamen trust;
Unless thou dare
To be the sport of storms, beware.

O fold at best a weary weight,
A yearning care and constant strain of late,
O shun the seas
That girt those glittering Cyclades

“**Ballad of the Gibbet**” By Francois Villon (1431-1489)

Brothers and men that shall after us be,
Let not your hearts be hard to us:
For pitying this our misery
Ye shall find God the more pitous.
Look on us six that are hanging thus,
And for the flesh that so much we cherished

How it is eaten of birds and perished,
And ashes and dust fill our bones' place,
Mock not at us that so feeble be,
But pray God pardon us out of his grace.

Listen we pray you, and look not in scorn,
Though justly, in sooth, we are cast to die;
Ye wot no man so wise is born
That keeps his wisdom constantly.
Be ye then merciful, and cry
To Mary's Son that is piteous,
That his mercy take no stain from us,
Saving us out of the fiery place.
We are but dead, let no soul deny
To pray God succor us of His grace.

The rain out of heaven has washed us clean,
The sun has scorched us black and bare,
Ravens and rocks have pecked at our eyne,
And feathered their nests with our beards
And hair.

Round are we tossed, and here and there,
This way and that, at the wild wind's will,
Never a moment my body is still;
Birds they are busy about my face.
Live not as we, not fare as we fare;
Pray God pardon us out of His grace.

L'envoy

Prince Jesus, Master of all, to thee
We pray Hell gain no mastery,
That we come never anear that place,
And ye men, make no mockery,
Pray God, pardon us out of His grace.

“**The Dead of Night**” (Elegy) By Joseph Sergi

It was the dead of night the cold moon gave a faint light.
It's melancholy glance covered the trees they were bare and barren of leaves.
A scream of terror pierced the night my blood ran cold with fright.
Suddenly I awake from this dream knowing what I have seen.
For you were taken from my side so I hang my head and cry.
I pray to God in peace you will be and I pray the same for me.

“**Shine On Me**” (Pastoral) By Celestine Ikwuamaesi

Shine on my heart, Oh Morning Star!
Keep my thought from wandering far.
Shine on my way, Oh Light of God!
Stay my steps lest I plod.

In my dark hour, send the light,

The pillar of fire that lights my night,
When doubts swarm my heart like bees,
Cause the wind to sweep the fleas.

When death roars, rocking my peace,
Shine on the Throne, my centerpiece;
Where your crown waits for me,
As you burnish and make me glee.

Oh, what grace to see that Day!
When You come to lead the way.
On grace I'll stand, a tiny star,
Beside th' bright Morning Star.

"An Epistle To Our Daughter" By Ronald Bingham

Billie, there is not one person alive who has not sinned or made mistakes.
And everyone in life sooner or later experiences heartaches.

No one is without fault, and it's next to impossible to be perfect.
We all have our little quirks, we each have our own little defect.

Being perfect is not what God is looking for, but to turn from sin and turn to Him.
Learn to walk in His light, that is what will make you proper and prim.
You must follow Gods commandments and do not stray.

And when you feel yourself slipping turn to Jesus and pray.
Let Him know what's going on, and that you need His help again.

Tell Him you are trying to turn your life around, one that's free from sin.
Learn to put your trust in our Savior for that is what He is, Our Savior.

When we know it's wrong and we go right on ahead, there is a good chance
this could be unforgivable behavior.

I personally cannot understand why someone would intentionally do wrong.
Listen to your conscience, pray, and God will make you strong.

Bill, mom and dad have never stopped loving or caring about you, never will!
This poem I wrote just for you to let you know just how we feel.
GOD LOVES YOU AND SO DO WE MOM & DAD

NB:

Comparison between prose and poetry:

PROSE

words
sentences
paragraphs
chapters

POETRY

words
lines
stanzas
cantos