

WHAT IS POETRY?

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Poetry can be thought of as a verbal, written art form that uses a heightened sense of language to convey experience, feeling, or modes of consciousness. There is no concrete definition for poetry. It means many different things to different people.

Poetry is believed to have originated as one of the world's oldest ways of maintaining and remembering history. Ancient storytellers used mnemonic devices to orally pass down the major events of their tribes. **Mnemonic devices** are verbal or mental tricks that help learners remember large amounts of information. In ancient poetry, these devices took the form of word rhythms, rhymes, and imagery. As the written word developed, these historical sagas evolved into the other forms of poetry we know today. Today, writers use poetry to help readers see life from different or deeper perspectives.

HERE'S ONE WAY YOU CAN APPROACH READING POETRY:

- (1) Read the entire poem for general clarity. Approach every poem with an open mind and view it as a new experience.
- (2) Once you achieve a general impression, you can begin to analyze the poem.
 - a. Contemplate the poem's title. Try and make connections between the title of a poem, its content, and the setting or situation it suggests.
 - b. Look for sensory images, different patterns, usage of **literary devices** (see below), and rhythm and meter.
- (3) The "meaning" of poem is not necessarily the most important element. Explore instead the *experience* that the words create. If you do notice one possible interpretation of the poem, don't stop there. There may be other possible interpretations that arise from your experience of the words and images. The author is often more interested in the experience behind the interpretations than in the various interpretations themselves.

LITERARY DEVICES: Knowledge of these devices can help you discuss poetry with others, but it will not necessarily help you experience poetry in a deeper sense.

Imagery: The words themselves are not necessarily the most important aspect of poetry. The words invite you see, hear, feel, smell, or taste the details of life in an unusual or unexpected way.

Example:

The asphalt shrinks into the horizon
He diminishes in my rearview
His body heat dissipating from the passenger seat
His smoke streaming from my ashtray
Cologne lingers
And lingers

Symbolism allows you to attach ideas to things. In the example below, the author appears to be using both a storm and a flower as symbols for life. Life can be seen both ways, and the poem is clearly not just about storms or flowers.

There's a hole in your storm
And the clouds of experience bloom
Like revolving petals they form
And darken into a crumbling gloom

Other examples:

A purple heart can symbolize bravery.
The Virgin Mary can symbolize purity.
A White flag can symbolize surrender.
The act of putting out a cigarette can symbolize murder.

Simile and Metaphor: These two literary devices are almost the same. A **simile** shows one thing as “similar” to something else—as in “kisses as sweet as honey.” A simile usually involves the word “like” or “as.” A **metaphor** presents one thing as though it *actually is* something else—as in “Fix upon me the dark embers of your eyes.” Here the author speaks of eyes as though they *really are* embers.

Other Examples:

Metaphor

Juan is a stubborn mule.
Love is a grueling battle field.
Ah, your faith, an anchor in my storm!
Jason is such a girl when he screams.

Simile

Juan is as stubborn as a mule.
Love is as grueling as a battlefield
Ah, your faith. How like an anchor!
Jason screams like a girl.

Personification: giving human qualities to something not human. “The wind murmured in the trees.”

Irony: the use of opposite meanings to intensify the impression of something. There are 3 types of irony:

Verbal Irony: words used to convey the opposite of their apparent meaning, as in when one says “Way to go!” to someone who has made a mistake

Dramatic Irony: when the reader is aware of something that a character in the story is not aware of. In the movie *The Truman Show*, the main character is unaware, at first, that his life is being broadcast as a popular television show.

Situational Irony: An assassin gets assassinated by his intended victim.

Hyperbole: literary Exaggeration, as in “I waited in line for centuries.”

Juxtaposition: the combination of different or opposite qualities. “The black flames of Hell.” “The chilling lullaby.”

Onomatopoeia: words or phrases that, when they are spoken out loud, sound like what they mean. “Bang!” “Screech!” “The clop, clop, clop of the approaching horseman.”

Alliteration: words that sound alike at their beginnings.

I have stood still and stopped the sound of feet
When far away an interrupted cry
Came over houses from another street

--Robert Frost

Assonance: words that sound alike in their midsections.

“Dead in the middle of little Italy, little did we know that we riddled two middle men
who didn't do diddily.” –Big Pun

Euphony: when a poem or words have a smooth pleasing sound. Usually consist of vowels. i.e. “The Lotus-Eaters” by Alfred, Lord Tennyson: “The mild-eyed melancholy Lotus-eaters came.”

Cacophony: when a poem or words have a harsh unpleasing sound. Usually consist of unpleasant sounding consonance

Jabberwocky
by
Lewis Carroll

'Twas brillig, and the slithy toves
Did gyre and gimble in the wabe;
All mimsy were the borogoves,
And the mome raths outgrabe...

Repetition: shows a sense of urgency or importance, and also gives the option of adding music to the writing. Also, repetition of a particular word, phrase, pattern, sound, or syllable is used to get the attention of readers. Particular forms of repetition are anaphora, refrain, syntactical, and sonic.

Rhythm and Meter: The up and down, the high and low points in a poem comprise its rhythm or its pattern. The repetition of the pattern forms the meter. Combined, these two aspects of a poem create an emotional sensation of stirring or swirling in the gut. In Shakespeare's *McBeth*, the witches chant (note how the rhythm and meter of the words brings about a sensation of stirring a cauldron:

Double, double toil and trouble;
Fire burn, and caldron bubble.
Fillet of a fenny snake,
In the caldron boil and bake;
Eye of newt, and toe of frog,
Wool of bat, and tongue of dog,
Adder's fork, and blind-worm's sting,
Lizard's leg, and owlet's wing,—
For a charm of powerful trouble,
Like a hell-broth boil and bubble.

Rhyme: words sounding alike at their endings. There are, however, different kinds of rhyme besides straight rhyme.

Slant Rhyme: heart/smirk/ fair or suffer/after/ liar

Internal Rhyme: I can't explain it pain has changed me into an untamed beast

Identical Rhyme: dream/ dream, street/ street

Eye Rhyme: wash/cash, cover/over

Homonyms: mine/ mind, peace/ piece

Apocopated Rhymes: when only the first syllable of a word is used in creating a rhyme

Mind Rhyme: A specific rhyme generated by the context of a verse

Example: "I love your style. Every time I see you I can't help but grin." If you read this and thought "smile" instead of "grin," then a mind rhyme has just occurred.

Forced Rhyme: an example from William Blake's *The Tiger*:

What immortal hand or eye
Could frame thy fearful symmetry?

Note: Poetry does not have to rhyme. Many people tend to believe the rhyming poetry is somehow inferior to non-rhyming poetry. This is probably based on the impression that rhymes sometimes come across as merely cute or as lacking in deep significance. This belief about rhyme, however, is questionable. Rhyme can often serve to *intensify* the depth of the emotional impact of a poem by giving it a rhythmic, hypnotic quality. The images presented in a poem run deeper than the imagery described by the words. Often the patterning of the rhyming can produce a more subtle imagery of motion, like swirling or dancing, that involves the reader on a musical level.