

### Understanding Poetry: An Introduction

Poetry is the study of poems. Poem, according to William Wordsworth in *Lyrical Ballads*, is “the spontaneous overflow of powerful feeling [that] takes its origin from emotion recollected in tranquility”<sup>1</sup>. Poem is also a “piece of writing in verse form, or a piece of writing in an elevated style, especially one expressing deep feelings or noble thoughts in beautiful language, composed with the desire to communicate an experience”. It is also the creation of intellectual pleasure by means of imaginative and passionate language that is it is built upon an attested system of versification and, as a consequence, it displays a special kind of rhetoric organization and metric formalization of discourse that distinguishes it from prose and everyday speech.

Oni (1982) sees poetry as a “form of artistic literature in which the writer knowingly expresses his thoughts and feelings in a series of calculated or measured lines”. Poetry is generally written in lines. The smallest unit of expression in poetry is the line, and a group of lines is called stanza. In essence, poetry is a condensed form of writing that uses figures of speech, allusions, symbols, imagery to educate the readers. It can be deduced from the above that poem, like other art forms, is a kind of communication; it is written with the hope of sharing one’s experience. In it deep feelings and thoughts are expressed; its language is concise and it is composed in verse form and elevated style. Poetry can also be explained as a type literature in which the sound and meaning of language are combined to create ideas and feelings.

A great poem, however, should have the power to enrich and expand the readers’ horizons, slake their thirst for knowledge, purge them of negative emotion, capture imagery vividly and weave together different literary devices to convey messages clearly and succinctly. It is important to note that every word in a poem counts. Every combination of metre with rhythm, every modulation and nuance of tone should be regarded with importance while appreciating a poetic composition. It should be noted that a poet who wrote a poem is conscious of many literary effects he has put in his composition.

While poetry abounds everywhere, it is important to note that all over the world “people are thinking and feeling their own poetry, even though they cannot express it. The poet, however, succeeds in communicating his poetry in words; everyone can share his experience. Your poetry and the poet’s poetry are both an essential part of life” (Parker & Teskey, 1969:9).

Equally of importance in poetry is the audience factor. The poet depends upon a careful audience who will read and interpret the poem. A poem looks lifeless on paper and only the right audience can bring it back to life<sup>2</sup>. When a reader goes through a poem and understands it, he does a creative job of reawakening the poem.

#### NOTES:

1. Pay adequate attention to the following phraseologies in Wordsworth’s definition: “the spontaneous overflow”, “powerful feelings”, “origin”, “emotion”, “recollected in tranquility”. What qualifies a poem as a spontaneous overflow? What makes the feeling[s] powerful? What is the role of emotion in poetic composition, and why should emotion be recollected in tranquility?
2. What does it mean to say that a poem looks lifeless on paper, and that only creative interpretation can bring it back to life?

## Language of Poetry

The language of poetry is condensed or compressed, because the language is intended to carry the load of aesthetics in order to reach the minds of readers as quickly as possible. Besides, it is intended to express feelings and emotions in a tight and condensed manner, unlike the language of prose that is used to convey expansive narratives.

It is also important to note that poetic discourse differs from plain discourse not only because of its musical or metrical organization. The language used for poetic texts is often characterized by a special register that is beyond ordinary speech, because it uses special linguistic features, such as: special morphology, special syntax, special lexicon, and special stylistic features.

## Features of Poetry

**Mood:** This is sometimes called atmosphere or ambience. It is the emotional tone pervading a section or the whole of a literary work, which fosters in the reader expectations as to the course of events, whether happy or terrifying or disastrous. When a reader goes through a poem, s/he develops some feelings or emotions on what he has read. The feelings or emotion which a poem arouses or generates in a reader is the mood of the poem. While some poems arouse positive moods in the reader, others may evoke negative responses. Consequently, a poem may arouse in the reader a feeling of sadness or joy.

**The Theme:** This represents the general concept or doctrine, whether implicit or asserted, which an imaginative work is designed to involve and make persuasive to the reader. In other words, it is the main idea which the poet or any creative writer attempts to put across to the reader. To discover the theme of any poem, it is important to read the poem thoroughly and identify the essence of writing the poem or what it stands for. It is also pertinent to consider the different words contained in the poem and their overall meanings in the poem.

**The Subject-Matter:** This refers to an explanatory extension of the theme. The subject-matter is the explanation of story employed or story employed by the writer to inform the reader about his/her theme.

**The Structure:** The structure of a poem has to do with the lines, line length, shape, line breaks, arrangement of lines and stanzas. In other words, the structure of a poem refers to the physical appearance of the poem. This, in turn, will help to indicate whether the poem is a praise poem, dirge, sonnet, epic or ballad. It is important to note that lines that finish at ends of sentences or at natural stopping points (for example, at comma) are called *end-stopped* lines<sup>3</sup>, while lines that stop in the middle of the natural flow of a sentence are called *run-on* lines or enjambment<sup>4</sup>.

## Forms/Genre of Poetry

By genre, we mean a mode of writing that follows certain literary rules or conventions that have come down to writers (poets) through custom and use.

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3. Check [www.creative-writing-now.com/poem-structure.html](http://www.creative-writing-now.com/poem-structure.html)

4. As in 3.

When we say a poem belongs to a particular genre, we are relating the poem to others of its kind, irrespective of who the author is or when the poem was written; we are cutting across the boundaries of personalities, time and nationality.

Attempting to place a poem in a particular genre may bring us closer to the meaning or effect a meaning or meanings intended by the poet.

Using the term genre broadly, one can say there are three genres of poetic discourse, including narrative poetry, dramatic poetry and lyric poetry. Each of these broad categories includes certain specific types of poems that are also referred to as genres.

In narrative poetry, types of poems such as epic and ballad are included because they tell a story. Within the category of dramatic poetry, types such as soliloquies, monologues, dialogues can be found, because they represent or emphasise characters other than the poet in conflict. Lyric, which is the most inclusive of the three genres, contain poems such as hymns, songs, elegies, odes, sonnets, because they tend to have a strongly subjective core and are devoted primarily to the expression of an emotion or thought or a reflection of experience.

It is important to note that poems do not always fit neatly into one category or another. A narrative poem, for example, may have dramatic or lyric elements; dramatic poems usually do have some narrative thrust; lyric poems, too, may have narrative or dramatic aspects.

### **Narrative Poetry**

A narrative poem tells or narrates a story or stories or recounts series of events in verse form. It uses prosodic features, such as meter and rhyme structure that makes it easier to memorise and deliver orally to crowd.

Being one of the oldest forms of poetry, it has its origin in orature and uses some of the narrative techniques that novelists or dramatists use in short stories and plays. They include: narrator, setting, plot, characters, conflict and resolution.

A narrative poem may be very long, running to many thousands of lines in epics such as Homer's *Odyssey* or John Milton's *Paradise Lost*. A narrative poem may also be compressed to the brevity of a single quatrain:

Jack and Jill went up the hill  
To fetch a pail of water.  
Jack fell down and broke his crown  
And Jill came tumbling after.

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5. Note: Read some narrative poems, especially the poems of Lord Alfred Tennyson, William Wordsworth and Edgar Allan Poe.

More commonly, a narrative extends over several stanzas, as in Edwin Arlington Robinson's "The Mill" that narrates a domestic tale of two suicides. Other examples of a narrative poem are "The Epic of Gilgamesh".<sup>5</sup>

### **Types of Narrative Poems**

**Ballad (Folk or Popular Ballad).** It is a poem that tells a story. Originally, ballads were part of an oral tradition sung by poets. Dating at least as far back as the 13th century, ballads were handed down from one generation to another, and in the process undergoing changes in many of their details.

The heart of ballads is the story it narrates, with incidents taken from the supernatural, from folklore, political and family histories. In ballads, there are stories of battles and private quarrels, famous contests and romantic encounters, though little of their causes or motives are told; they are less important than the story itself. The story is usually presented from a neutral, impersonal point of view and with a minimum of descriptive detail.

Many ballads employ a set of formulas, which help the singer remember the course of the song. They include: (a) using stock descriptive phrases (b) a refrain in each stanza (c) incremental repetition, in which a line or stanza is repeated, but with an addition that advances the story. See "Lord Randall"

**Epic or a Heroic Poem.** It is an extensive serious poem that tells the story about a heroic figure. Put differently, Epics are long poems which describe the deeds of heroes in battle or conflicts between human beings and natural forces. Many other epics, however, tell of the origin of history of a people. Examples include *Iliad* and *Odyssey* by Homer, John Milton's *Paradise Lost*. Any poem that meets the following criteria is said to be an epic:

- A long verse narrative on a serious subject
- Told in a formal or elevated style
- Centered on a heroic or quasi-divine figure on whose actions depends on the fate of a tribe, a nation, or the human race (John Milton's *Paradise Lost*)
- Vast setting
- Contains long and formal speeches
- Contains scenes of divine intervention in human affairs
- Plays up values, culture of a particular civilization
- Begins *in media res*
- Shows the end of a hero which is often in hell or the underworld.

### **Epic Conventions**

Epic conventions most times contain the following: Opening or *Praepositio*; invocation; *in media res*; *enumeration*; and epithet.

In *Praepositio*, the story begins or opens with the narrator stating the cause of the story.

**Invocation.** The writer invokes a Muse – one of the nine daughters of Zeus, by calling on her to provide him with divine inspiration to tell the story of a great hero. Note: not all epics contain this.

*In media res.* Narrative begins in the middle of things.

**Enumeratio.** At this juncture, catalogues of some principal characters are presented. This section may also contain genealogies as well as long list of objects, people, places.

**Epithet.** Repetition and stock phrases are used. Epithets are adjectival terms used as recurrent formulas in referring to a distinctive feature of someone or something. They are usually a compound of two words.

Note: There are two types of epic. They include primary or traditional epic and secondary or literary epic. The former is the written version of what had originally been oral poems about a tribal or national hero during a warlike age, e.g. “Iliad” and “Odyssey” by Homer and “Beowulf”. Literary epics are those epic poems composed by individual poetic craftsmen in deliberate imitation of the traditional form, e.g. Virgil's "Aeneid", *Paradise Lost* by Milton.

### **Dramatic Poetry**

Though dramatic poetry, like a narrative, may have a strong story component, its primary emphasis is on character. It reveals character in a dramatic situation. The essential feature in all dramatic poems is the persona, a character created by the poet and placed in a situation that involves some conflict or action. In dramatic poetry, the poet lets one or more characters “act” out the story.

A dramatic poem may involve a single character or more than one, but the characters speak always in their own voices, which are not to be confused with the voice of the poet. However, the poet's attitude toward the speaker, which may range from sympathy to repugnance, will probably be more or less evident in the poem.

The difference between drama and dramatic poetry is a matter of degree. If the dialogue of a play rhymes, has repeating rhythms, or features other distinct poetic elements, the play is considered to be dramatic poetry. William Shakespeare is the most famous dramatic poet.

**Soliloquies.** In soliloquy, one person speaks aloud and does so with no one else present to hear the words. When this occurs in a play, it is usually a means of providing information so that the plot can move forward or the hidden self can be revealed, enabling the audience to recognise motives and eventually understand the conflict played out before them. Consider A. R. Ammons' “So I Said I Am Ezra”, “Elsa Wertman” by Edgar Lee Masters.

**Dramatic Monologue:** A poem spoken to a listener. The speaker addresses a topic while the listener unwittingly reveals details about himself. Poets developed the dramatic potential of the soliloquy into dramatic monologue by building an audience into the poem. In both, there is a

single speaker, a setting in time and place, an event or incident usually marked by conflict; but the dramatic monologue provides the added dimension between the speaker and one or more listeners. William Carlos Williams' "Tract", where a man addresses members of a funeral party...

### **Lyric Poetry**

The derivation of the term, lyric, from lyre, a musical instrument, relates the genre to song, suggesting brevity, a strongly musical component, a significant presence of emotion, and a direct involvement of the singer or poet, who seems to be speaking in his or her own person rather than through the developed persona characteristic of dramatic poetry. Almost any subject or mood, public or private, can be accompanied by the lyric mode. Consider these three types of lyric poems:                   the                   sonnet,                   elegy,                   and                   ode.

### **Sonnets**

A sonnet is a lyric poem consisting of a single stanza of fourteen iambic pentameter lines linked by an intricate rhyme scheme. Sonnet implies "little song". It is believed to have originated in Italy where Dante used it passionately. Petrarch, too, made it popular and had established it as a favourite poetic structure before Shakespeare started using it in the late 16th century. There are two types of sonnet: Petrarchan and Shakespearian, though there is another one, called Spenserian, which is very similar to Shakespearian. The Italian (Petrarchan) sonnet divides into two unequal parts: an opening octave, invariably rhyming abba abba, followed by a sestet whose lines may rhyme cdecde or cdcdcd. The octave will tend to propose an issue: a question perhaps, or a premise, a doubt, an experience, a principle. The sestet in turn disposes of the issue, presenting, as the case may be, an answer, a conclusion, a reassurance, an application, a reversal. Consider Petrarch's "The Eyes that Drew from Me such Fervent Praise", Michael Drayton's "Since there's no Help, Come Let Us Kiss and Part".

Shakespearian Sonnet falls into three quatrains and a concluding couplet: abba cdcd efef gg.

In Spenserian sonnet, the each quatrain is linked to the next by a continuing rhyme: abab bcbc cdcd ee.

### **Elegies**

A lyric poem which commemorates the dead, may convey profound personal emotion but tends to do so according to a set of long-established literary conventions. The dirge is subtype of elegy. It is also a versified expression of grief on the occasion of a particular person's death, but differs from elegy in that is short, less formal, and is usually represented as a text to be sung. Examples include Shakespeare's "Full Fathom Five Thy Father Lies". Threnody is now used as an equivalent of dirge, while monody stands for elegy. Consider W. H. Auden's "In Memory of W. B. Yeats".

### **Ode**

Odes, like sonnets and elegies, belong to the genre of lyric but tend to be less private, addressing themes such as liberty, justice, immortality, the nature of art and truth. The diction is elevated, the rhythms stately, the progression of ideas orderly. Ode can be regular/Pindaric, irregular/Cowleyan or Horatian/homostrophic.

## **Forms of Poetry**

Poetry, apart from the foregoing classifications, can also be classified using the parameters of form, content and structure. Consequently, we can have the following types of poem, even though all of them can be further grouped into narrative, dramatic and lyric typologies of poetic discourse.

### **Types of Poems<sup>6</sup>**

#### **ABC**

A poem that has five lines and creates a mood, picture, or feeling. Lines 1 through 4 are made up of words, phrases or clauses while the first word of each line is in alphabetical order. Line 5 is one sentence long and begins with any letter.

#### **Acrostic**

Poetry that certain letters, usually the first in each line form a word or message when read in a sequence. Example: Edgar Allan Poe's "A Valentine".

#### **Ballad**

A poem that tells a story similar to a folk tale or legend which often has a repeated refrain.

#### **Ballade**

Poetry which has three stanzas of seven, eight or ten lines and a shorter final stanza of four or five. All stanzas end with the same one line refrain.

#### **Blank verse**

A poem written in unrhymed iambic pentameter and is often unobtrusive. The iambic pentameter form often resembles the rhythms of speech. Example: Alfred Tennyson's "Ulysses".

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6. Check [http://www.poemofquotes.com/articles/poetry\\_forms.php](http://www.poemofquotes.com/articles/poetry_forms.php)

#### **Bio**

A poem written about one self's life, personality traits, and ambitions. Example: Jean Ingelow's "One Morning, Oh! So Early".

#### **Burlesque**

Poetry that treats a serious subject as humor. Example: E. E. Cummings "O Distinct".

#### **Canzone**

Medieval Italian lyric style poetry with five or six stanzas and a shorter ending stanza.

### **Carpe diem**

Latin expression that means 'seize the day.' Carpe diem poems have a theme of living for today.

### **Choreutic**

It is a poem associated with a particular dance, especially among non-Western society.

### **Cinquain**

Poetry with five lines. Line 1 has one word (the title). Line 2 has two words that describe the title. Line 3 has three words that tell the action. Line 4 has four words that express the feeling, and line 5 has one word which recalls the title.

### **Classicism**

Poetry which holds the principles and ideals of beauty that are characteristic of Greek and Roman art, architecture, and literature.

### **Concrete**

Also known as "size poetry". Concrete poetry uses typographical arrangements to display an element of the poem. This can either be through re-arrangement of letters of a word or by arranging the words as a shape.

### **Couplet**

This type of poem is two lines which may be rhymed or unrhymed. Example: Walt Whitman's "To You".

### **Dramatic monologue**

A type of poem which is spoken to a listener. The speaker addresses a specific topic while the listener unwittingly reveals details about him/herself.

### **Elegy**

A sad and thoughtful poem about the death of an individual. Example: Gary R. Hess's "1983".

### **Epic**

An extensive, serious poem that tells the story about a heroic figure.

### **Epigram**



A very short, ironic and witty poem usually written as a brief couplet or quatrain. The term is derived from the Greek *epigramma* meaning inscription.

### **Epitaph**

A commemorative inscription on a tomb or mortuary monument written to praise the deceased. Example: Ben Jonson's "On My First Sonne".

### **Epithalamium (Epithalamion)**

A poem written in honor of the bride and groom.

### **Free verse (vers libre)**

Poetry written in either rhyme or unrhymed lines that have no set fixed metrical pattern.

### **Found**

Poetry created by taking words, phrases, and passages from other sources and re-framing them by adding spaces, lines, or by altering the text with additions or subtractions.

### **Ghazal**

A short lyrical poem that arose in Urdu. It is between 5 and 15 couplets long. Each couplet contains its own poetic thought but is linked in rhyme that is established in the first couplet and continued in the second line of each pair. The lines of each couplet are equal in length. Themes are usually connected to love and romance. The closing signature often includes the poet's name or allusion to it.

### **Haiku**

A Japanese poem composed of three unrhymed lines of five, seven, and five morae, usually containing a season word.

### **Horatian ode**

Short lyric poem written in two or four-line stanzas, each with the same metrical pattern, often addressed to a friend and deal with friendship, love and the practice of poetry. It is named after its creator, Horace.

### **Iambic pentameter**

One short syllable followed by one long one five sets in a row. Example: la-LAH la-LAH la-LAH la-LAH la-LAH. Used extensively in sonnets.

### **Idyll (Idyl)**

Poetry that either depicts a peaceful, idealized country scene or a long poem telling a story about heroes of a bygone age.

### **Irregular (Pseudo-Pindaric or Cowleyan) ode**

Neither the three part form of the pindaric ode nor the two or four-line stanza of the Horatian ode. It is characterized by irregularity of verse and structure and lack of correspondence between the parts.

### **Italian sonnet**

A sonnet consisting of an octave with the rhyme pattern abbaabba followed by six lines with a rhyme pattern of cdecde or cdcdcd.

### **Lay**

A long narrative poem, especially one that was sung by medieval minstrels.

### **Limerick**

A short sometimes vulgar, humorous poem consisting of five anapestic lines. Lines 1, 2, and 5 have seven to ten syllables, rhyme and have the same verbal rhythm. The 3rd and 4th lines have five to seven syllables, rhyme and have the same rhythm.

### **List**

A poem that is made up of a list of items or events. It can be any length and rhymed or unrhymed.

### **Lyric**

A poem that expresses the thoughts and feelings of the poet. Many songs are written using this type of writing. Read more about lyric poetry.

### **Memoriam stanza**

A quatrain in iambic tetrameter with a rhyme scheme of abba – named after the pattern used by Lord Tennyson.

### **Name**

Poetry that tells about the word. It uses the letters of the word for the first letter of each line.

### **Narrative**

A poem that tells a story.

### **Ode**

A lengthy lyric poem typically of a serious or meditative nature and having an elevated style and formal stanza structure. Example: Sappho's "Ode to a Loved One".

**Pastoral**

A poem that depicts rural life in a peaceful, romanticized way.

**Petrarchan**

A 14-line sonnet consisting of an octave rhyming abbaabba followed by a sestet of cddcee or cdecde

**Pindaric ode**

A ceremonious poem consisting of a strophe (two or more lines repeated as a unit) followed by an antistrophe with the same metrical pattern and concluding with a summary line (an epode) in a different meter. Named after Pindar, a Greek professional lyricist of the 5th century B.C.

**Quatrain**

A stanza or poem consisting of four lines. Lines 2 and 4 must rhyme while having a similar number of syllables.

**Rhyme**

A rhyming poem has the repetition of the same or similar sounds of two or more words, often at the end of the line.

**Rhyme royal**

A type of poetry consisting of stanzas having seven lines in iambic pentameter.

**Romanticism**

A poem about nature and love while having emphasis on the personal experience.

**Rondeau**

A lyrical poem of French origin having 10 or 13 lines with two rhymes and with the opening phrase repeated twice as the refrain.

**Senryu**

A short Japanese style poem, similar to haiku in structure that treats human beings rather than nature: Often in a humorous or satiric way.

**Sestina**

A poem consisting of six six-line stanzas and a three-line envoy. The end words of the first stanza are repeated in varied order as end words in the other stanzas and also recur in the envoy.

### **Shakespearean**

A 14-line sonnet consisting of three quatrains of abab cdcd efef followed by a couplet, gg. Shakespearean sonnets generally use iambic pentameter. Example: Shakespeare's "Sonnet 2".

### **Shape**

Poetry written in the shape or form of an object. This is a type of concrete poetry.

### **Sonnet**

A lyric poem that consists of 14 lines which usually have one or more conventional rhyme schemes.

### **Sound**

Intended primarily for performance, sound poetry is sometimes referred to as "verse without words". This form is seen as the bridging between literary and musical composition in which the phonetics of human speech are used to create a poem.

### **Tanka**

A Japanese poem of five lines, the first and third composed of five syllables and the other seven.

### **Terza Rima**

A type of poetry consisting of 10 or 11 syllable lines arranged in three-line tercets.

### **Verse**

A single metrical line of poetry.

### **Villanelle**

A 19-line poem consisting of five tercets and a final quatrain on two rhymes. The first and third lines of the first tercet repeat alternately as a refrain closing the succeeding stanzas and joined as the final couplet of the quatrain.

### **Visual**

The visual arrangement of text, images, and symbols to help convey the meaning of the work. Visual poetry is sometimes referred to as a type of concrete poetry.