

Introduction to Poetry
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What Is Poetry?

Poetry is as universal as language and almost as ancient. The most primitive peoples have used it, and the most civilized have cultivated it. In all ages and in all countries, poetry has been written, and eagerly read or listened to, by all kinds and conditions of people — by soldiers, statesmen, lawyers, farmers, doctors, scientists, clergy, philosophers, kings, and queens. In all ages it has been especially the concern of the educated, the intelligent, and the sensitive, and it has appealed, in its simpler form, to the uneducated and to children. People have read it, listened to it, or recited it because they liked it — because it gave them enjoyment. But this is not the whole answer. Poetry in all ages has been regarded as important, not simply as one of several alternative forms of amusement, as one person might choose bowling, another chess, and another poetry. Rather, it has been regarded as something central to existence, something having unique value to the fully realized life, something that we are better off for having and without which we are impoverished. , to the uneducated and to children. Why? First, because it has given pleasure.

Poetry takes all life as its province. Its primary concern is not with beauty, not with philosophical truth, not with persuasion, but with experience. Beauty and philosophical truth are aspects of experience, and the poet is often engaged with them. But poetry as a whole is concerned with all kinds of experience — beautiful or ugly, strange or common, noble or ignoble, actual or imaginary.

However, To the question, What is poetry? no one will ever give a satisfactory answer. Poetry, as we have already suggested, does not mean the same thing to any two poets or lovers of poetry. It does not even mean the same thing to the same person in two successive decades and therefore, there is no final and satisfactory definition of poetry because it is as diverse and variable as life itself. It is impossible to frame a definition of poetry which will include all poetry and exclude prose. The true antithesis of poetry, as Coleridge pointed out, is not prose but

science. Poetry is emotional; science is the opposite. Science deals with facts, poetry with emotions. The scientist calls water H₂O; the poet calls it murmuring, rippling, still, or blue. It is impossible to make any exact or comprehensive distinction between the language or the subject matter of poetry and prose. Nevertheless we all feel that poetry and prose are not the same thing. Instead of attempting a definition of poetry, we shall quote a number of representative definitions, which taken together give as accurate a conception of poetry as it is possible to convey in definitions. Below are some of the famous attempts to define poetry:

- "The end of writing is to instruct; the end of poetry is to instruct by pleasing"
(Samuel Johnson)
- "A poem is that species of composition, which is opposed to works of science, by proposing for its immediate object pleasure, not truth; and ... discriminated by proposing to itself such delight from the whole, as is compatible with distinct gratification from each component part"
(Samuel Taylor Coleridge).
- "Poetry is the spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings recollected in tranquility" (William Wordsworth).
- "Poetry is the record of the best and happiest moments of the best and happiest minds." (Percy Bysshe Shelley)
- "the rhythmical creation of Beauty" in words. (Edgar Allan Poe)
- The language of poetry, should be "simple, sensuous, and passionate." (John Milton).
- "poetry is the concrete and artistic expression of the human mind in emotional and rhythmical language." (Theodore Watts-Dunton).
- "Poetry is a language that tells us, through a more or less emotional reaction, something that cannot be said. All poetry, great or small, does this. And it seems to me that poetry has two characteristics. One is that it is, after all, undefinable. The other is that it is eventually unmistakable." (Edwin Arlington Robinson).
- "Poetry is a way of saying" (Cleanth Brooks)

How it is Done

I. Structural Devices.

Structural Devices: They are the devices that indicate the way a whole poem has been built. They include:

1. **Contrast:** It is the use of two opposite pictures side by side, such as *day* and *night*; *black* and *white*; *life* and *death*.
2. **Illustration:** A vivid picture by which a poet may make an idea clear such as the pictures in Shakespeare's poem "Winter"
3. **Repetition:** It means repeating single line or a whole stanza at intervals to emphasize an idea or aiming at a special musical effect, e. g. the repetitions in Coleridge's "The Ancient Mariner".

II. Sense Devices

Sense Devices: The devices that are related to sense (meaning) and they include:

1. **Simile:** It is a direct comparison between two dissimilar things and can be recognized by the use of the words: like and as. A good example is Wordsworth's lines:

*Fair as a star when only one
Is shining in the sky*

2. **Metaphor:** It is an implied (indirect) comparison between two dissimilar things without using the words like or as, e. g. Coleridge's line:

The furrow followed free

In which the ship is compared to a plough.

3. **Personification:** To deal with an inanimate object as a human being, e. g. Blake's *O Rose, thou art sick*.

III. Sound Devices

Sound Devices: These devices are related to sound to and they add considerably to the musical quality of the poem when it is read aloud. They include:

1. **Alliteration:** The repetition of the initial consonant sounds at frequent intervals in a line of verse or in a stanza, e. g.:

Sweet be not proud of those two eyes
That star-like sparkle in their skies

2. **Onomatopoeia:** It means the use of words whose sounds suggest their sense, such as cuckoo, buzz, crash, bomb, etc. A good example is the lines from Shakespeare's "Winter":

Then nightly sings the staring owl
Tu-who;
Tu-whit, tu-who – a merry note

3. **Rhyme:** Rhyme occurs at line endings and it consists of words which have the same sound, however, the letters preceding the vowel should be different, e. g. *night, right; bare, care; moon, noon*.

4. **Assonance:** The use of imperfect rhyme (the vowel sounds which precede the consonant are different), e. g. *wreck, rock; red, road; hind, hound*.

5. **Rhythm:** The pattern of sounds which the poet imposes on the language he uses and it is the most striking of all sound devices; it may be light, slow, heavy, etc.

Metres of English Poetry

Metre: The recurrence of a rhythmic pattern in poetry.

Iambic: A metrical foot which consists of a short syllable followed by a long one.

Iambic monometre: A line of verse which consists of one foot, e. g.:

'Tis odd
Of God
To Choose
The Jews.

Diametre: A line of verse which consists of two feet:

Roses are red
Violets are blue
Sugar is sweet
And so is you

Trimetre: A line of Verse which consists of three feet
Half hidden from the eye

Tetrametre: A line of verse which consists of four feet:

Sweet be not proud of those two eyes

Pentametre: A line of verse which consists of five feet:

Shall I compare thee to a summer's day
Thou art more lovely and more temperate

Hexametre: A line of verse which consists of six feet:

And in the lower grove, as on the rising knoll

Heptametre: A line of verse which consists of seven feet:

Cursed be the social wants that sin against the strength of youth