

Some Views of Poetry

I like poetry because it makes me feel great. It makes me feel like spring is here: new birds singing, sunshine and inspiration.

I feel happy that I can relate to the poet's feelings. Sometimes the poet is writing about one of my own experiences.

I dislike poetry because some zipperhead writes a poem and a few years later another zipperhead reads it and figures it's a profound piece of nothing and makes all kinds of weird inferences that have nothing to do with the poem.

Poetry is one big crock looney language topic for society rejects. Mentals and quimbies, sitting around getting far-out vibes and writing them down so us norms have to read them and English teachers praise their life for creating such torture material for students. Poetry is weird and boring.

Can you relate to any of these statements? What is your view of poetry in general?

Your personal response to these questions will likely be different from anyone else in the class. This is as it should be!! Poetry, of all forms of literature, probably provides the most room for really personal reactions. What exactly is poetry though? For a few minutes, think hard and see if you can come up with a definition for poetry. Is this an easy task? Not really! Typically, if I were to ask a class to define poetry, this is how the discussion usually goes:

Me: What is poetry?

Student: A type of writing.

Me: OK, what distinguishes it from other types of writing?

Student: It rhymes.

Me: Many poems do rhyme yes, but there are also many poems that don't.

Student: Poems are written in stanzas.

Me: Again, many poems are written in stanzas, but there are also many poems that aren't!

Student: Poems use metaphors and similes.







Me: Very often they do, but many poems don't, and prose also makes use of figurative language.

Do you begin to see the problem here? For almost every characteristic that we tend to associate with poetry, there is always an exception. In some ways, this is what is so wonderful about poetry! Rather than trying to come up with a definition that probably would end up being too narrow, it may be more useful to compare poetry to prose (prose is regular writing).

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**POETRY and PROSE**

The columns are not mutually exclusive. Even everyday prose makes use of certain poetic devices, such as figures of speech. The chart should give you a better idea of the characteristics of poetry, even though the term itself is difficult to define.

PROSE	     
- tends to be analytical; breaks experience into separate constituent parts	- aims to synthesize; gives integrated wholeness of experience
- often a medium for black and white factual	- deals with shades of universal truths, the constants of human nature and experience
- scientific, objective tone	- artistic, dramatic, subjective tone
- concerned with judgment, information	- deals with intuitions, imaging
- written in sentences, paragraphs	- divided into lines, stanzas
- more conventional word choice	- unconventional word choice
- denotative language predominates	- connotative language predominates
- variable rhythms	- more rhythmical, musical-sounding; often has repetition
- purpose: to reason; to make a rational statement, concerned with precision of thought	- purpose: to present a total response; to present feelings, reactions, attitudes; concerned with truths in experience

TYPES of POETRY

Narrative Poetry

- tells a story with a strong emphasis on plot or physical action

Ballads

- rhythmical
- uses dialect and repetition
- often romantic in nature
- often contains supernatural elements

Epics

- very long and very detailed, serious tone
- usually involve good and evil on a large scale
- centers on the struggle between powerful opponents
- may have gods/supernatural

Allegory

- an extended metaphor that impresses a lesson
- tells a story that has a deeper meaning that applies to social, economic, moral or religious aspects of life

"The Listeners" (Walter de la Mare), "The Cremation of Sam McGee" (Robert Frost), "The Gambler" (Kenny Rogers)

Lyric Poetry

- reveals deep personal feeling and deals primarily with common human experience

free verse	epigram	ode	sonnet
song lyrics	epitaph	elegy	diamante
blank verse	pastoral	idyll	haiku

"Loon Song" (Lorna Crozier), "Both Sides Now" (Joni Mitchell)

Dramatic Poetry

- may present a drama or reveal character or conflict

dramatic monologue	Shakespearean plays (blank verse)
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"My Last Duchess" (Robert Browning), "To be or not to be..." (Hamlet - Shakespeare)

Social Commentary

- makes a comment or criticism on societal problems and issues

"Dulce Et Decorum Est" (Wilfred Owen), "The Unknown Citizen" (W.H. Auden), "Lost Tribe" (Wole Soyinka)

Light Verse

- amuses and entertains by clever use of language

limerick	parody	epigram	satire
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"Southbound on the Freeway" (May Swenson), Mad Magazine

DEVICES in POETRY and PROSE

alliteration - the repetition of initial consonant sounds, helps to form the pattern of poetry. Although it can sound comical or forced when used to excess (like in tongue-twisters), alliteration used deftly can create memorable and moving lines.

The **d**ay of his **d**eath was a **d**ark cold **d**ay.

allusion - this is one of the richest and most demanding literary devices. Meaning "reference", it calls on the vast wealth of history, religion, literature, and mythology. It rewards readers in direct proportion to their background knowledge by referring to ideas and things they recognize.

The magic of allusion is its shorthand. A single name - Venus, Job, Achilles, Fagin - can trigger a host of associations, as can a brief word or phrase. "**Scrooge**", of Charles Dicken's *A Christmas Carol*, has become another word for "miser", while "**Watergate**" will long refer to major political scandal.

apostrophe - means speaking to someone absent or to something non-human as if it were present, alive, and able to respond. Addressing nearly every aspect of our world, apostrophic poems include "To a Snowflake", "To a Louse", "To an Athlete Dying Young", "To Age", "To Autumn", and "To a Red-Headed Do-Good Waitress" among others. Apostrophe has honoured the smallest animals, is in "**To a Field Mouse**", by 18th-century Scottish poet Robert Burns:

Wee sleek it, cow'rin, tim'rous beastie,
O what a panic's in thy breastie!

And the largest objects, as in "**To a Locomotive in Winter**", by the 19th-century American poet Walt Whitman:

Fierce-throated beauty!...
Thy madly-whistled laughter, echoing, rumbling like an earthquake, rousing all.

assonance - is the repetition of vowel sounds when consonant sounds are unlike, creating partial rhyme such as **late/make**. "Time out of mind", "slap dash", and "free and easy" all have assonance, or internal rhyme.

A sadder and **a** wiser man
He rose the **mo**rrow **mo**rn.

consonance - is the repetition of consonant sounds when vowel sounds are unlike. "**First** and **last**", "**hill** and **dale**", "**stroke** of **luck**" - in each of these pairs the words begin differently and have unlike vowel sounds, yet each pair "clicks" because of repeated consonant sounds.

"A lonely cab-horse **steams** and **stamps**."

hyperbole - or overstatement, is exaggeration used for humour or emphasis. Josh Billings, nineteenth century American humourist, tells of an Erie Canal mule so dedicated that when he once fell into the water, he kept right on towing, "breathing thru his ears which stuck out of the water about 2 feet 6 inches." Although inaccurate, hyperbole can be strong and effective, as seen in these two examples from 19th-century English poetry, Alfred, Lord Tennyson's eagle nests "Close to the sun in lonely lands" and William Wordsworth writes of daffodils that "stretch in never-ending line."

**"...a skyscraper so tall, they had to put hinges
On the two top stories to let the moon go by."**

imagery - is the use of vivid language to convey sensations and it helps us to experience fully what we read. We experience much of life through our senses, the flicker of a candle, the smell of woodsmoke on a winter night, the taste of raspberries warm from the sun....Look for imagery in these lines from "Winter" by William Shakespeare.

**When icicles hang by the wall
And birds sit brooding in the snow,
And Marion's nose looks red and raw
When roasted crabs hiss in the bowl,
Then nightly sings the staring owl,
"Tu-whit, tu-who!"**

irony - verbal irony always implies the opposite of what is said. The ironical writer presents a surface meaning - what is said - and an intended meaning - what is really meant. The reader must discern the difference. At its crudest, irony is sarcasm, a tool of insult; at its best, it adds force, pleasure, and grace. Mark Twain, a 19th-century American writer, used irony expertly in his humour:

"If a person offend you...do not resort to extreme measures; simply watch your chance and hit him with a brick."

metaphor - is an *implied* comparison between two unlike things. While a simile states that it is a comparison, a metaphor substitutes a new idea for the original and is often direct and strong, as when Robinson Jeffers, modern American poet, says the Pacific is "a bulging eyeball of water".

**"An aged man is but a paltry thing,
A tattered coat upon a stick."**

metonymy - sometimes, instead of using the actual subject, a writer will use an attribute of that subject or something related to it. This is used to highlight a certain aspect or detail of the subject. Another name for using a part for the whole is *synecdoche*. Using metonymy, we put ourselves in someone's *hands*, have *mouths* to feed, bring home the *bacon*, and grumble about *city hall*. Metonymy is keen and vivid.

**"...a pair of ragged claws
Scuttling across the floors of silent seas."**

onomatopoeia - is words that sound like what they mean. Listen to summer; the "whirring of bees; the "slap and slop" of waves against a boat; the "plinkle" of ice in a glass. Words like "bang", "boom" and "sizzle" are simple onomatopoeia.

"I heard a fly buzz when I died -"

oxymoron - a figure of speech in which two words of opposite meanings are placed side-by-side. Oxymoron typically conveys mixed feelings and conflict, and these lines by Romeo from Shakespeare's famous tragedy express the character's mixed feelings about a never-ending feud.

Romeo: ... **O brawling love! O loving hate!
O anything, of nothing first create!**

**O heavy lightness! serious vanity!
 Mis-shapen chaos of well-seeming forms!
 Feather of lead, bright smoke, cold fire, sick health!
 Still-waking sleep, that is not what it is!**

When Juliet learns that her husband, Romeo, has slain her cousin, Tybalt, she cries

**"Beautiful tyrant! fiend angelical
 Dove-reather'd raven! wovish-ravens lamb!
 Despised substance of divinest show!
 just opposite to what thou justly seem'st,
 A damned saint, an honourable villain!**

paradox - is an apparent contradiction that is actually true. The phrase "alone in a crowd" is an example. Another, by the American poet Edward Arlington Robinson, defines poetry itself as a paradox: "Poetry is a language that tells us, through a more or less emotional reaction, something that cannot be said.

**"The more a man learns,
 the more he realizes how little he knows."**

personification - is the giving of human characteristics to an animal, object, or idea. The writer using personification depends upon that knowledge of people and human behaviour held in common by most readers, as shown by 19th-century English novelist Charles Dickens, when he personifies fog as "cruelly pinching the toes and fingers" of a young deck hand. More recently, the late U.S. Senator Adlai Stevenson used personification in describing Eleanor Roosevelt:

**"Falseness withered in her presence,
 hypocrisy left the room."**

simile - is an obvious comparison between two unlike things. It is easy to spot because it is always prefaced by "like", "as", "similar to", "resembles" or "as if". A writer who uses simile helps readers to understand something new by comparing it with something familiar, as does the contemporary American poet W.D. Snodgrass in his simile of a milkweed pod: "Bulging like a coin purse fallen on the ground of damp woods."

**"On the points of radio towers in New Jersey
 red lights like small hearts beat or tingled."**

symbol - is an object that stands for something larger than itself, usually an abstract concept. It means both what it is and something more, as a dove is both a bird and a symbol of peace. William Blake, the 18th-century English writer and artist, often used symbols in his poetry. In "A Poison Tree", the growth of hatred is symbolized as a young sapling being nurtured into a tree. In the two poems "The Lamb" and "The Tiger", Blake symbolizes the gentle and the mighty sides of God. "The Road Not Taken", by the modern New England poet Robert Frost, is about coming to a fork in the road and having to decide which road to take. It symbolizes the choices we face in life.

**"O to be a dragon
 a symbol of the power of Heaven...."**



ANALYZING A POEM

- **Read the poem through to get a general idea of what it says.** Your first response may, for example, be in terms of pleasure/pain, activity / inaction. You are probably responding to the emotional content of the poem.

- **Read the poem aloud several times.** Don't bypass this step; enjoy the luxury of a subjective response.
 - Pay attention to sound; listen for tone colour.
 - Listen for harmony between content and form.
 - Let the poem work on you for a while before you work on the poem.
- **Now tackle a *written* analysis of the poem.** Unless your poem is very long, you will save time if you make a copy of the poem that you can write on.
 1. Look at the **title**. What does it suggest about the poem - subject matter, setting, themes, mood...
 2. Who is the **speaker** in the poem? It is not necessarily the poet. Defend your answer.
 3. Briefly, clarify the **poet's attitude** (or the attitude of the speaker if the speaker is not the poet) **toward the subject** of the poem. Look for the poet's attitude toward love, death, childhood, the passing of time, or some other subject treated in the poem. Examine the title as well as the poem for clues.
 4. Look for **figurative language** - hyperbole, metaphor, simile, symbol, personification, etc. How does the figure of speech make the poetic idea more vivid for you?
 5. Look for **imagery** - sight, sound, smell, taste, touch. How do the images make the poem more vivid?
 6. Check the **diction** of the poem. Look for connotative and denotative values of key words in the poem. What do these add to the poem? Look for assonance, consonance, alliteration, onomatopoeia. What do the presence of any of these add to the poem?
 7. Look for **motifs** - recurring ideas or word patterns. What do the motif(s) add to the poem?
 8. Finally, explain in a few sentences, the **theme** of the poem.



SAMPLE ANALYSIS

Read through the poem "The Sound of Silence" by Paul Simon below, followed by the question and answer set. Take the time to carefully read through the suggested answers.

The Sound of Silence - Paul Simon

Hello darkness my old friend,
I've come to talk with you again,
Because a vision softly creeping,
Left its seeds while I was sleeping
And the vision that was planted in my brain
Still remains within the sound of silence.

In restless dreams I walked alone,
Narrow streets of cobble stone
'Neath the halo of a street lamp,
I turned my collar to the cold and damp
When my eyes were stabbed
by the flash of a neon light
That split the night,
and touched the sound of silence.

And in the naked light I saw
Ten thousand people maybe more,
People talking without speaking,
People hearing without listening,
People writing songs that voices never share
And no one dares disturb the sound of silence.

"Fools!" said I, "You do not know
Silence like a cancer grows
Hear my words that I might teach you
Take my arms that I might reach you."
But my words like silent raindrops fell
And echoed, in the wells of silence.

And the people bowed and prayed
To the neon God they made,
And the sign flashed out its warning
In the words that it was forming.
And the sign said:
"The words of the prophets are written
on the subway walls and tenement halls"
And whispered in the Sounds of silence.

1. Quote **one example of each** of the following from the poem and **explain how the example fits** the definition of the term:

apostrophe - "*Hello darkness my old friend*" Simon is speaking directly to darkness as though it could answer him.

oxymoron - "*the sound of silence*" The words "sounds" and "silence" are direct opposites in meaning.

personification - "*a vision softly creeping*" Human attributes, namely, the ability to "creep", are given to "a vision".

simile - "*Silence like a cancer grows*" In this example, the growth of silence is compared to the growth of cancer, a disease greatly feared.

simile - "my words like silent raindrops fell" In this second example, Simon is suggesting that his words go unheard, as do silent drops of rain.

imagery - The second stanza presents a picture of Simon walking in the night, collar turned up to ward off the damp and cold.

metaphor - "the wells of silence" Simon suggests that his words are lost in deep holes of non-communication.

symbol - "sounds of silence" This repeated phrase represents humans lack of meaningful communication.

alliteration - "And no one **d**ares **d**isturb the **s**ounds of **s**ilence" This line contains two examples - one where the "d" sound is repeated, the other with the "s".

assonance - "Fools!" said I, "You do not know" - The "oo" sound is repeated within "Fools" and "You", creating a partial rhyme.

consonance - "But my words like silent rain**d**rops **f**ell" This line contains two examples - one where the "d" sound is repeated, the other with the "l", in both cases, a pleasing, non-rhyming sound is created.

2. Identify the **mood** of the poem. *The mood that is created is nightmarish "restless dreams", in which the speaker finds himself alone and confused. The weather, "cold and damp", and the dark and silence of the night contribute to this effect. The speaker finds himself unable to communicate with the "Ten thousand people maybe more", as his "words like silent raindrops fell".*

3. How does **diction** such as "stabbed" and "naked" contribute to the effect of the poem? *The speaker describes in vivid detail his dream. He walks alone through the dark wet night and the only light he sees "stabs" at his humanity. The light, a bright neon light, is described as "naked. What the light reveals are thousands of wretched people who are unable to communicate. In desperation the speaker attempts to talk to and to touch these people, but they are incapable of hearing as well as feeling, and his words are lost in "wells" of non-communication.*

4. What is the effect of the **repetition** of "the sound of silence" in the last line of each stanza?

The speaker, alone and confused, tells "the darkness," his inanimate but only friend, about a nightmare that has left him with a very disturbing vision of a world becoming less and less human - a world that has fallen victim to the "sound of silence". The repetition emphasizes the effect that non-communication has on the human spirit.

5. What is the **theme** of this poem? *There is a lack of meaningful communication in our modern urban world. Modern humanity's increasing sense of alienation, loneliness, and dislocation as well as a rapidly disappearing sense of individualism are all a tragic result of the "sound of silence"- all a result of this lack of meaningful communication. The future of humanity looks bleak since the prophets, the only remaining communicators, write their messages in dark hide-aways, such as subway stations and tenements. Their messages are barely able to whisper amid the over-whelming power of non-communication. Is this a fair depiction of modern life as you know it?*