

## Poetry

**Poetry** is a type of literature. It involves using language in a way that is different from everyday speech. Throughout history, poetry has been used for many purposes. People have used poetry in religious rituals, to praise and celebrate remarkable individuals, and to express intense emotions, from love to rage. Various social groups have also used poetry to record events and stories containing lessons that are important for the group to remember and pass down from generation to generation.

The basic feature of poetic language is rhythm. Rhythm is the repetition of sounds in a particular pattern. All human beings enjoy rhythm. Children may clap their hands or rock their body to match the rhythm of nursery rhymes, and the rhythmic words stick in their memory. Adults may detect more subtle patterns in poems and find that such patterns affect and deepen their response to the meanings and emotions the words convey.

Poetry began in prehistoric times. After the development of writing, poetry gradually became an important written art. In all languages throughout history, human beings have created poems, remembered them, recited them, and found deep meaning in them. There are times in life when every human being wants to say exactly the right thing in exactly the right words. That is what poets try to do. For people who do not write poetry, it can be a moving discovery to find a poem that expresses the feelings or experiences for which they themselves cannot find the words.

### Kinds of poetry

There are three main kinds of poetry: (1) narrative, (2) dramatic, and (3) lyric. When most people think of poetry, they think of short poems called *lyrics*. But before stories and plays began to be written in prose, they were written in verse for many thousands of years.

**Narrative poetry** tells stories in verse. There are two chief kinds of narrative poems: (1) epics and (2) ballads.

**Epics** are long poems. Most epics describe the memorable deeds of heroes or gods in battle or conflicts between human beings and natural and divine forces. Epics are probably the oldest surviving form of poetry. Most scholars believe the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*, two of the most famous epics in Western literature, were written down during the 700's B.C. The *Iliad* describes events in the last year of the Trojan War. The *Odyssey* tells the adventures of Odysseus on his return home after having fought for his fellow Greeks in the Trojan War. These epics were attributed to the Greek poet Homer, but they were probably put together out of many shorter poems about the Trojan War and the warriors who fought in it.

Many nations have an epic poem that tells their origin or history as a people. The Roman poet Virgil wrote the *Aeneid* in the 10 years before his death in 19 B.C. It tells about a legendary Trojan hero, Aeneas. After the Greeks destroy the city of Troy, Aeneas leads a few survivors to their ancient home in Italy. The city he founds eventually becomes Rome.



Epic poems may also present religious beliefs. The English poet John Milton published the epic *Paradise Lost* in 1664. It draws on the book of Genesis in the Bible to tell the story of Adam and Eve and the origin of human sin. The English poet Edmund Spenser published *The Faerie Queene* in the 1590's. He used the legend of King Arthur as a symbol or allegory to present teachings about what makes a life of virtue. Similarly, the Hindu scriptures and the Sanskrit language epics the Mahabharata and the Ramayana contain religious and moral teachings as well as historical and legendary stories.

Long narrative poems continue to be written in modern times. In *Omeros* (1990), the West Indian Nobel Prize winner Derek Walcott interwove the story of his own life with the story of the inhabitants of a black fishing village on Santa Lucia, a Caribbean island. The American poet W. S. Merwins *The Folding Cliffs* (1998) tells a story about native Hawaiians at the time Americans were beginning to take over the islands.

**Ballads** are shorter poems that tell about a particular person. For example, many ballads in English literature describe the adventures of Robin Hood. He was a legendary outlaw who stole from rich people and gave the bounty he collected to the poor. From the 1300's to the present day, many ballads have been written in English. Collections of ballads were especially popular from the 1700's to the 1900's. Ballads were usually sung to traditional tunes. Even today, some popular songs may be titled "The Ballad of . . ."

Not all long poems tell a continuous story. The Roman poet Lucretius, who lived in the 100 years before the birth of Christ, wrote a long poem to express a point of view. *On the Nature of Things* argues that the material world is composed of atoms and shaped by natural forces without any divine intervention or creation. The English poet Alexander Pope's *An Essay on Man* (1733-1734) presents his thoughts about human beings, their abilities, and their limitations. Pope also wrote *An Essay on Criticism* (1711) about the art of poetry. In his mock epic *The Dunciad* (1728-1743), he satirized (made fun of) what he judged to be bad writers and the corrupt government of his time. A mock epic is a poem that uses common features of epic for comic purpose.

This tradition continues in modern times. In *The Changing Light at Sandover* (1982), the American poet James Merrill claimed to have communicated with the spirits of the dead in the afterlife through a Ouija board. A Ouija board is a device supposed to allow people to ask questions of supernatural spirits. Merrill's poem interweaves stories about the living and the dead with discussions of the spiritual realm and the nature of the universe.

**Dramatic poetry** also tells a story, but it uses actors to represent the characters. The actors speak to each other and act out the story. In ancient Greece, poems about legendary heroes were recited at festivals. Out of such recitations grew presentations of these stories by individual actors and a group of actors called a *chorus*. The chorus danced and sang elaborate poems called odes in between episodes of the story presented by the actors.

The English playwright William Shakespeare wrote his plays in verse in the late 1500's and early 1600's, though often with some passages in prose. The French playwrights Pierre Corneille, Jean Racine, and Molière wrote tragedies and comedies in verse during the 1600's. Verse dramas intended to be read rather than performed continued to be written in English in the 1800's, but verse plays by such modern writers as the Irish poet William Butler Yeats and the American poet T. S. Eliot have been performed.

The *dramatic monologue* presents a story in the words of only one character, but the alert



reader often picks up hints that the character's words distort the truth. The English poet Robert Browning wrote many poems in this style. His *The Ring and the Book* (1868-1869) is an epic-length poem that consists of twelve dramatic monologues by the participants in a murder trial.

**Lyric poetry** is by far the most common type of poetry. The word *lyric* comes from *lyre*. A lyre is a harplike instrument that was played by ancient Greek poets during recitals of their shorter poems. Today, *lyric poetry* means any short poem.

The haiku, a Japanese form, is one of the shortest types of lyric poetry. In Japanese, the haiku consists of 17 syllables arranged in three lines. The first line has 5 syllables; the second, 7; and the third, 5. Some English translations of haiku try to capture their effect rather than imitate their form. For example, the translator may change the number of syllables and lines.

Other lyric forms are longer and more complicated than the haiku. The *ode* is a serious, elaborate lyric full of high praise and noble feeling. The ode originated in ancient Greece. It was used by the poet Pindar, who lived about 450 years before the birth of Christ, to praise victors in the Olympic Games. It was also used in tragedies, where choral odes were sung by the chorus. These odes were characterized by difficult ideas and references to myths, by strong emotion, and by complex language. In Roman times, the poet Horace wrote a different kind of ode. It was more meditative, contained simpler language, and often concerned the pleasures of rural life or poetry itself.

English poets adopted the ode to praise important persons, address important events, or present complex ideas of a religious or philosophical nature. For example, William Wordsworth wrote "Ode: Intimations of Immortality" (1807). Percy Bysshe Shelley wrote an impassioned "Ode to the West Wind" (1819). John Keats wrote a series of memorable odes, published in 1820, including "Ode on a Grecian Urn," "Ode to a Nightingale," and "To Autumn." Later poets did not use the form very often.

Although the stanzas of Keats's odes are similar to one another, the ode generally allows a great deal of variation in line length, meter, and rhyme pattern. Meter is the pattern of stressed and unstressed syllables in a poem. The ode is thus suited to express changeable and intense emotions, as well as complex and forceful intellectual argument.

The elegy, another common lyric, is a meditation on life and death. Many elegies mourn the death of a famous person or a close friend.

The sonnet is a form invented in Italy in the 1200's. Poets sometimes wrote a series of sonnets, called a sonnet sequence, on a particular subject, often the poet's beloved. Dante wrote sonnets to a young girl named Beatrice. Petrarch wrote sonnets to Laura.

The sonnet was introduced in England in the 1500's. Sir Philip Sidney wrote *Astrophel and Stella* (1580's), which tells the story of a love relationship in a series of sonnets from a young man to his beloved. The most famous English sonnets are by Shakespeare. A number are addressed to an anonymous "Dark Lady." Others are addressed to a male friend, urging him to find a young woman and get married. Still others speak about time and the immortality of poetry. Milton wrote a number of sonnets on public, political affairs. During the Romantic



period, Wordsworth and Keats wrote memorable sonnets, and poets have continued to write them into modern times.

## The elements of poetry

**Rhythm and meter.** The word *rhythm* comes from the Greek word *rhythmos*, which means *measured motion*. In poetry, the flow of speech is broken into units. These units are measured by the repetition of some feature of the language in the pattern called meter. Meter gives form to what we hear in a poem by telling us how we can expect the flow of words to go from line to line. When the reader feels the rhythm, a misplaced word will stand out. The actual rhythm of any line may not follow the meter exactly, since good poets have the skill of slightly varying the meter so that it does not become mechanical. Singers and musicians use a similar skill when they slightly vary the rhythm of music. Poets use these variations to produce particular effects for the reader. A poet may also decide not to use any regular meter, but to rely on a very subtle sense of rhythm. This kind of poetry is called free verse. It is common in modern poems.

The feature of language that is used to measure a poem's rhythm varies according to the language in which it is written. In English, meters are based on syllables and on *stress*. Stress is the vocal emphasis given to a syllable. Other languages provide different features that can be shaped into rhythmic language. For example, the psalms in the Hebrew Bible are composed in two-line units that repeat the same image or thought. In Greek and Latin, meter is built up out of long and short syllables. Much French poetry is written in twelve-syllable verses rhymed in pairs. Cheyenne, a Native American language, has whispered syllables as well as spoken ones. The meters of Cheyenne poetry reflect this characteristic. Poets who work in English use three chief types of meters: (1) syllabic, (2) stress, and (3) foot-verse.

**Syllabic meters** are based on the number of syllables in a line. The most common syllabic meters are *continuous syllabics* and *stanza syllabics*.

In continuous syllabics, the poet uses the same number of syllables in each line of the poem. The English poet Andrew Marvell wrote "To His Coy Mistress" (about 1650) in eight-syllable lines called *octosyllabics*. Here are the first four lines:

Had we but world enough and time,  
This coyness, lady, were no crime.  
We would sit down, and think which way  
To walk, and pass our long love's day.

In stanzaic syllabics, a number of lines are grouped into a stanza, and successive stanzas have the same number of syllables in the corresponding lines of all other stanzas. A common form in English is the *ballad stanza*, which alternates eight-syllable with six-syllable lines. Wordsworth used this form in his "Lucy" poems (1798-1799), poems about a girl who died young:

A slumber did my spirit seal;



I had no human fears:  
She seemed a thing that could not feel  
The touch of earthly years.

No motion has she now, no force;  
She neither hears nor sees:  
Rolled round in earth's diurnal course,  
With rocks, and stones, and trees.

**Stress meters** are based on the number of stressed syllables in a line. The Old English epic *Beowulf* (700's?) is written in four-stress lines without a fixed number of syllables in each line. Here is a translation of the first three lines by the modern Irish poet Seamus Heaney that tries to preserve the original meter:

So. The Spear-Danes in days gone by  
And the kings who ruled them had courage  
and greatness.  
We have heard of those princes' heroic  
campaigns.

In the first line, stresses fall on *so*, *spear*, *days*, and *by*. The other lines also have four stressed syllables. A modern example is "Parity" (1966) by the American poet Kenneth Rexroth. Here are the opening lines:

My uncle believed he had  
A double in another  
Universe right here at hand  
Whose life was the opposite  
Of his in all things—the man  
On the other side of zero.

**Foot-verse meters.** Syllabic and stress meters are combined in foot-verse meters. Each verse contains a set number of syllables and is divided into *feet*. A foot is a set pattern of stressed and unstressed syllables.

Poets have created many types of foot-verse meters. The most widely used type in English by far is *iambic pentameter*, a line consisting of five iambic feet. An iamb is a two-syllable foot in which an unstressed syllable is followed by a stressed syllable.

Some words naturally form iambs: indeed, between, mistake. If a foot has two one-syllable, or monosyllabic, words, English ordinarily stresses one more than the other. But poets usually feel that a strict alternation of stressed and unstressed syllables produces a mechanical, or sing-song, effect. They vary the pattern of stress in particular feet without losing the basic alternating pattern. Skilled readers detect and enjoy this play between the



basic pattern and the variation in particular verses. For example, here are the final two lines from “Composed upon Westminster Bridge, September 3, 1802” by Wordsworth:

Dear God! the very houses seem asleep;  
And all that mighty heart is lying still!

Both *dear* and *God* are stressed. A two-syllable foot where both syllables are stressed is called a *spondee*. In the final line, *all* and *heart* are stressed, and *that* could be as well, so that the second foot could be a spondee. But most of the feet are iambic, so that the reader does not lose the basic underlying meter.

Variations in the pattern of stresses can enhance a poem’s meaning. Pope’s “The Rape of the Lock” appeared in 1714. It is a mock epic that tells how a nobleman sneaks up to a beautiful young woman and cuts off a lock of her hair as a keepsake without her permission. The young woman is upset that her beautiful hair is damaged, but a wise older friend urges her not to take the matter too seriously. As women grow older, she says, “Curled or uncurled, since locks will turn to gray,” the young woman should “keep good humor.” The verse is iambic pentameter, and we might expect that in the fourth foot (*will turn*), the stress would fall on *turn*. But if we consider the meaning, we could put the stress on *will*. That emphasis reinforces the message: locks will turn gray, no matter what you do.

A common way to help readers perceive the pattern of meter is to mark the stresses and count the syllables. A *breve* (curved mark) is written over unstressed syllables; an accent mark is placed over each stressed syllable; a vertical line is drawn between feet; and the number of syllables is written at the end of the line. Marking poetry this way is called *scanning*.

D éar Gód! | th# vé r#y | hóus|#s seém | #sleép;  
An#d áll | th#t mi#ht|y# héart | #s lý|in#g st#ill!

**Sounds.** Poets often use the sounds of words to create effects in their poems. The most common method in English is to use words that rhyme. If the words at the end of two or more lines of a poem rhyme, the poem has a *rhyme scheme*. The English poet Gerard Manley Hopkins used a rhyme scheme in “Pied Beauty.” This poem, written in 1877, celebrates *pied*, or *dappled* (spotted, many-colored) things:

Glory be to God for dappled things—  
For skies of couple-colour as a brindled cow;  
For rose-moles all in stipple upon trout that swim;  
Fresh-firecoal chestnut-falls; finches' wings;  
Landscape plotted and pieced—fold, fallow, and plough;  
And all trades, their gear and tackle and trim.  
All things counter, original, spare, strange;  
Whatever is fickle, freckled (who knows how?)  
With swift, slow; sweet, sour; adazzle, dim;



He fathers-forth whose beauty is past change:

Praise him.

In the standard way of indicating a rhyme scheme, the letter *a* represents the first rhyme sound; *b*, the second; *c*, the third; and so on. Thus, the rhyme scheme of “Pied Beauty” is *abcabcdbcdc*.

A rhyme is called *feminine* if an unstressed syllable follows the stressed rhyming syllables. Rhyme words with multiple syllables are often used with comic effect. For example, in his long comic poem *Don Juan* (1819-1824), the English poet George Gordon, Lord Byron, writes:

Let us have wine and woman, mirth and  
laughter,  
Sermons and soda water the day  
after.

Rhyme not only enhances the sound of the poem, it also makes the ends of lines easier to notice when the poem is read aloud and thus helps a reader perceive the metric pattern of the poem.

Poets also achieve effects by using words that have similar sounds but do not rhyme. Many such words appear in “Pied Beauty.” For example, the first two lines of the poem have words that begin with the same *g* sound (“Glory be to God”) and the same *c* sound (“couple-colour as a brindled cow”). Such repetition of the same first sounds in words is called *alliteration*. *Consonance* is a repetition of the same consonant sounds. The third line of “Pied Beauty” has consonance of *l* sounds (“rose-moles *all* in stipple”) and *t* sounds (*trout that swim*). The repetition of a vowel sound is called *assonance*. In the fourth line of the poem, the *e* sounds and the last two *i* sounds are examples of assonance (“Fresh-firecoal chestnut falls; *f*inches’ wings”). The fifth line of “Pied Beauty” combines alliteration, consonance, and assonance. Hopkins thus created a poem that is itself a “dappled thing” of sound.

A rich pattern of sound makes a poem pleasingly musical to the ear and also compact and memorable. Here is the first stanza of the short poem “Safe in Their Alabaster Chambers” (1861) by the American poet Emily Dickinson:

Safe in their Alabaster Chambers  
Untouched by Morning  
And untouched by Noon—  
Lie the meek members of the  
Resurrection—  
Rafter of Satin—And Roof of Stone.

In the last line, the consonants repeat the sequence *r, f, s, t*.

In addition to the patterns of sounds of words, poets also work to control the flow and pauses in their poems. Longer lines often have a pause or break in the middle called a



*caesura*. The careful use of stresses can make lines move faster or slower. In his poem *An Essay on Criticism*, Pope illustrates these effects and shows their relation to meaning:

When Ajax strives some rock's vast weight  
to throw,  
The line too labors, and the words move slow;  
Not so when swift Camilla scours the plain,  
Flies o'er th' unbending corn, and skims along  
the main.

Because poetry is measured out in verses, the ends of lines gain special importance. If the line ends are too weak, then the poem seems to be just ordinary prose cut up into lines for no good reason. Even when rhymes do not mark line ends, poets may take care to end a phrase or sentence at the line end marked with punctuation.

But as with other devices, constantly stopping at line ends can become mechanical and stiff. Poets often let the grammatical units of meaning run past the line end. This device is called *enjambment*, and the lines are said to *run on*. Still, poets must make it possible for readers to feel the line end. Milton famously argued against rhyme in an epic poem, such as his *Paradise Lost*. He found “the jingling sound of like endings” was a “troublesome . . . bondage” that forced poets to distort word sequence and word choice. His poem is written in unrhymed iambic pentameters, called blank verse. Shakespeare used the same meter in his plays. Here are the opening lines of Milton's epic. Notice the subtle interplay he creates between the grammatical units of meaning and the metric units of verses. He does not boringly stop at every line end, but the reader still senses the meter, iambic pentameter:

Of man's first disobedience, and the fruit  
Of that forbidden tree, whose mortal taste  
Brought death into the world, and all our woe,  
With loss of Eden, till one greater Man  
Restore us, and regain the blissful seat,  
Sing Heavn'ly Muse . . .

**Poetic forms.** Poets usually combine verses into a unit called *poetic form*. Every poem in stanzas has a form, usually unique to that poem. The poet may create a form related to the meaning of the poem. For example, Percy Bysshe Shelley wrote a poem called “To a Skylark” (1820). Here is the first stanza:

Hail to thee, blithe Spirit!  
Bird thou never wert—  
That from Heaven, or near it,  
Pourest thy full heart



In profuse strains of unpremeditated art.

The first four lines suggest the fluttering of the bird's wings, and the final line suggests its soaring, swooping motion. The entire poem consists of twenty-one stanzas, all with the same form.

Some forms have been used by many poets over a long period of time. These forms become recognizable to readers, who may associate them with particular styles, topics, or poets. For example, as noted above, Milton wrote his epic *Paradise Lost* in blank verse. A couplet is a two-verse unit that rhymes. Pope became famous for writing *heroic couplets*, which use carefully balanced structures. Among his many well-known couplets is this one from *An Essay on Man*:

Know then thyself, presume not God to scan;  
The proper study of mankind is Man.

*Common measure* consists of four lines, alternating eight and six syllables and rhymed *abab* (called *cross rhyme*). *Ballad* measure is very similar but may rhyme only the second and fourth lines, *abcb*. This is the ordinary meter of nursery rhymes, ballads, and many hymns, including "Amazing Grace":

Amazing Grace, how sweet the sound,  
That saved a wretch like me.  
I once was lost but now am found,  
Was blind, but now I see.

There are two main forms of sonnet in English. Both consist of fourteen lines of iambic pentameter, with rare exceptions. The Italian sonnet follows the original form. It consists of two parts, called an *octave* (the first eight lines) and a *sestet* (the final six lines). The rhyme scheme is *abba abba cde cde*. The sestet rhyme pattern can vary, but it never uses a couplet. The Shakespearean sonnet consists of three *quatrains* (four-line units) and a concluding couplet, rhymed *abab cdcd efef gg*.

**Reading poetry aloud.** With few exceptions, poems are written to be heard. Readers should try to "hear" the sounds even when reading silently. When reading aloud, to oneself or to someone else, a reader should read a poem slowly enough for the meter and sound effects to be absorbed along with the meaning. If there is no punctuation at the end of a line, a reader should not stop, but make an effort to indicate the line end. A line end may be indicated by a slight change in *intonation*, the pattern of higher and lower pitches in speech, or by a very slight pause.

The meter should be evident from the pattern of stressed and unstressed syllables, but it is very important not to force the normal flow of stresses into a mechanical rhythm. If the normal stresses in speaking do not match the meter, it is likely that the poet is deliberately varying from the basic pattern for a specific effect. In a few cases, some variation from normal stress patterns is common and accepted in poems. For instance, a final *-ed* may be stressed in order to provide an extra syllable to fit the meter. In one of his short poems,



Shakespeare says that lust is

Enjoyed no sooner but despised straight . . .

The accent mark in *despised* alerts the reader to stress the final syllable.

Many websites now include audio or video of actors reading poems or poets themselves reading their own poems. Public readings of their work by poets are popular. Poetry readings are often held at local libraries, bookstores, schools, and college or university campuses. Some places have poetry festivals. In the United States, one of the most famous is the Geraldine R. Dodge Poetry Festival, held annually in New Jersey. The Poetry Foundation and the National Endowment for the Arts sponsor a poetry recitation contest for high school students called "Poetry Out Loud."

Another type of competition is called a *poetry slam*. Contestants in a poetry slam each have three minutes to read a poem of their own creation. Judges award points both for the poem and the recitation, and audiences are encouraged to respond with cheers or boos to the poem, the poet, or the score awarded by the judges. A National Poetry Slam is held in the United States annually. Poetry slams also take place in Australia, Canada, India, Nigeria, the United Kingdom, and many other countries of the world.

**Words, images, and content.** Because the language of poetry is carefully and deliberately crafted, poets have long felt that the words of poems should be carefully chosen and sometimes different from the words of ordinary speech. The choice of words is called *diction*.

Poets may use *archaic* words that may once have been common but are no longer in use. For example, poets often use older forms of pronouns and the corresponding verbs. John Keats began one of his famous sonnets with the words, "Bright star, would I were stedfast as thou art." *Thou* and its corresponding verb *art* are archaic forms of *you are*. They are familiar to most people today only through poetry and the King James translation of the Bible. *Stedfast*, which means *unchangeable*, is also a somewhat archaic word.

Poets may make up words, such as the word *viewless* (meaning *invisible*) that Keats also used. Or they may take advantage of the contrast between multisyllable *Latinate* (derived from Latin) and single-syllable Anglo-Saxon words in English to produce striking and memorable phrases. For example, in Shakespeare's play *Macbeth*, Macbeth has killed his king, Duncan. He looks at his bloody hands with horror and feels he will never be able to wash them clean:

No, this my hand will rather  
The multitudinous seas incarnadine,  
Making the green one red.

Shakespeare turns the unusual adjective *incarnadine* (meaning *crimson* or *blood-red*) into a verb meaning *to color pink or red*. In the next line, he translates his vivid phrase into common words. Unusual words sometimes challenge a reader of poetry, but they also stimulate thought and attention. When considered carefully, such words almost always enhance the poem's meaning in many ways.

Some poets, however, have argued strongly that poetry should use the words of ordinary



speech and avoid any special vocabulary. Wordsworth insisted poets should use “the real language of men.” His simple language could be emotionally powerful, but he was sometimes criticized for using language not dignified enough for poems. Yeats spoke about a similar trend in his own lifetime. His early poem “The Lake Isle of Innisfree” (1893) begins:

I will arise and go now, and go to Innisfree,  
And a small cabin build there, of clay and  
wattles made . . .

His last poem, “Under Ben Bulbin” (1939), shows his change to a style that relies on ordinary speech:

Irish poets, learn your trade,  
Sing whatever is well made . . .

A similar contrast is found in modern American poetry. Wallace Stevens often used unusual words, as in the opening lines of “The Emperor of Ice-Cream” (1922):

Call the roller of big cigars,  
The muscular one, and bid him whip  
In kitchen cups concupiscent curds.

William Carlos Williams, on the other hand, insisted on making poetry out of ordinary speech. In the following poem from 1937, the title is also the first line:

This Is Just to Say  
  
I have eaten  
the plums  
that were in  
the icebox  
  
and which you were probably  
saving  
for breakfast  
  
Forgive me  
they were delicious  
so sweet  
and so cold

Another distinctive feature of poetic language is the frequent use of figures of speech. These devices extend the usual meaning of words beyond dictionary definitions.

The most important figure of speech for poetry is metaphor. A metaphor brings two things



together in a comparison that provokes the reader to consider similarities and differences and to see both things in a new light. If the comparison includes the words *like* or *as*, it is called a *simile*. Some poets like to compare things that have little in common. In “A Valediction: Forbidding Mourning” (about 1611), the English poet John Donne compares two lovers who must be apart for a time to the extended legs of a drafting compass:

If they be two, they are two so  
As stiff twin compasses are two,  
Thy soul the fixed foot makes no show  
To move, but doth if th' other do.

Wordsworth uses more common items in one of his “Lucy” poems, about a young girl who lived in a remote part of England, known only to a few friends and family. She was, he writes:

A violet by a mossy stone  
Half hidden from the eye!  
—Fair as a star, when only one  
Is shining in the sky.

The young girl is humble and commonplace, like the violet half-hidden by the stone. But to the poet, she is as conspicuous as a single star high up in the sky.

Another very common figure of speech is *apostrophe*, addressing something that is not a person. Keats begins his poem “Ode on a Grecian Urn” with the words:

Thou still unravish'd bride of quietness . . .

He wrote other odes to *melancholy* (sadness), *indolence* (laziness), a nightingale, and autumn.

Another important feature of poems is *imagery*. This term refers to the sensations that language creates in the mind. These sensations, or *images*, are often thought of as being like pictures. But images are not limited to visual sensations. For example, the imagery of the second stanza of Keats's "Ode to a Nightingale" (written 1819, published 1820) evokes many of the senses:

O for a draught of vintage! That hath been  
Cooled a long age in the deep-delved earth,  
Tasting of Flora and the country green,  
Dance, and Provencal song, and sunburnt  
mirth!  
O for a beaker full of the warm South,  
Full of the true, the blushful Hippocrene,  
With beaded bubbles winking at the brim,



And purple-stained mouth;  
That I might drink, and leave the world  
unseen,  
And with thee fade away into the forest dim.

**Why poetry is important.** More and more, prose is the language we encounter most in writing. Poetry has come to seem strange to many people. Yet, we still discover poetry in many places in our world.

Popular songs still usually have regular meter and rhyme. Nursery rhymes and children's verse remain popular. At important events in life—a wedding, a funeral—people may read poetry to express their feelings and to mark the significance of the event. U.S. President John F. Kennedy invited the poet Robert Frost to read a poem at his presidential inauguration in 1961, and this has become a tradition.

People still turn to poetry to express romantic feelings, whether reciting well-known poems or writing their own. Poems remain not only among the most enjoyable uses of language but the most precise and significant as well. In some cultures, poetry remains highly valued, and many people have memorized numbers of poems.

The Greek philosopher Plato distrusted poetry because he thought it was too emotional and not always strictly true. His contemporary Aristotle argued on the contrary that poetry provokes close attention and thought that lead us to realize important truths. Sir Philip Sidney argued that poets go beyond nature to present “a golden” world of ideals that sets before us fictional examples of humans worthy of our imitation. Shelley went further and claimed that poets are “the unacknowledged legislators of mankind.” The English poet and critic Matthew Arnold later argued that poetry presents “the best that has been thought and said” by human beings. When some people argued that we know more than the older poets, T. S. Eliot replied that that was true, because “they are what you know.”

Some modern poets have been uncomfortable with such lofty claims. The English-born poet W. H. Auden wrote, “Poetry makes nothing happen.” Yet William Carlos Williams, in his poem “Asphodel, That Greeny Flower” (1955), wrote:

It is difficult  
to get the news from poems  
yet men die miserably every day for lack  
of what is found there.

The American poet Marianne Moore likewise captures a more modest but compelling case for poetry. In a poem titled “Poetry” (1919) she begins:

I, too, dislike it: there are things that are  
important beyond all this fiddle.  
Reading it, however, with a perfect contempt  
for it, one  
discovers in



it after all, a place for the genuine.

A few lines later, she distinguishes between “half-poets” and those who have the extraordinary gift to present “imaginary gardens with real toads in them.” She concludes:

In the meantime, if you demand on the one  
hand  
the raw material of poetry in  
all its rawness and  
that which is on the other hand  
genuine, you are interested in poetry.

Not every poem is well-written or memorable. But among the countless poems that have been written throughout the ages, every individual will find at least some that strike a deep and resonant chord.

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