Poetry: forms and language focus

Contents:

What is Poetry?

The answer is not so obvious!

Many different poets and writers have tried to define what Poetry is: it is not just about lines that rhyme, as Poetry does not have to rhyme.

See what you think of these different quotations; discuss them in pairs and then try to come up with some of your own.

'Poetry is the best words in the best order' – Samuel Taylor Coleridge.

'Poetry is an outpouring of emotions' – William Wordsworth.

'Poetry is metrical writing – if it isn't that, I don't know what else it can be!' –

J.V. Cunningham

'Poets deal in writing about feelings and trying to find the language and images for intense feelings. So all Poetry is emotional' – Carol Ann Duffy.

'Poetry is language at its most distilled and powerful' - Rita Dove

'Poetry makes us see things in a different way. It can make the ordinary become magical and shows us that language itself is magical' -Pablo Neruda

Haiku:

A form of Japanese poetry, usually connected with the seasons, with the traditional form being three short lines of syllable of 5-7-5

There are other forms of Haiku, with different syllable lengths, but the traditional form is the original Haiku.

Example:

The low hanging sun (5)

looks over the autumn land (7)

Shimmering brightly (5)

Notice in this short imagery of the sun in autumn, there is personification '*looks* over the autumn land'. This is because the sun is given a human quality.

The words in the last line are carefully chosen words: shimmering (a strong verb) and an adverb: brightly

Here is another example, this time of a winter haiku

The land looks lonely

As the white phantom snow falls

Covering the green

Notice in this, again an example of personification, but this time followed by 'the white phantom snow', giving the snow a strong atmospheric metaphor.

Now you try making your own haikus for the different seasons, concentrating and thinking carefully of word choice.

Stanzas:

Stanzas are what we call verses in poetry – they can be two line stanzas (couplets) three line stanzas (tercets) four line stanzas (quatrains) five line stanzas (cinquain) and so on…

Let's first look at a few examples of quatrains

Tyger! Tyger! burning bright

In the forest of the night

What immortal hand or eye

Dare frame thy fearful symmetry?

Notice how this verse from William Blake has a very strong rhythm and a set pattern of rhyming couplets (the first two lines)

I wondered lonely as a cloud

That floats on high o'er vales and hills

And all at once I saw a crowd

Of dancing yellow daffodils

Again, this is very regular and has a rhyme scheme. Note the use of personification.

Now try writing your own four line stanza.

Try the theme of either nature, the seasons or the weather.

Tercets:

Three line stanzas:

He clasps the crag with crooked hands;
Close to the sun in lonely lands,
Ringed with the azure world, he stands.

The wrinkled sea beneath him crawls;
He watches from his mountain walls,
And like a thunderbolt he falls.

How does this poem use the three line stanza as its form effectively (what is good about it?)

What other things can you find in this poem? (poetic devices)

Here is an example of a fun tercet

I don't want to be a cat

I'd rather be a purple bat

And wear a stripy cowboy hat

(notice how all lines rhyme)

Now try writing your own – it doesn't matter if it is a bit nonsensical or silly, it is more about practising the way it rhymes and the rhythm of the words.

The Sonnet:

This form is very traditional, it comes from the Italian courts of the 15th century and the form is 14 lines: 12 that rhyme alternately and the final 2 lines rhyme as a couplet.

Here is probably the most famous sonnet of all time:

William Shakespeare - Sonnet #18

Shall I compare thee to a Summer's day?

Thou art more lovely and more temperate:

Rough winds do shake the darling buds of May,

And Summer's lease hath all too short a date:

Sometime too hot the eye of heaven shines,

And oft' is his gold complexion dimm'd;

And every fair from fair sometime declines,

By chance or nature's changing course untrimm'd:

But thy eternal Summer shall not fade

Nor lose possession of that fair thou owest;

Nor shall Death brag thou wanderest in his shade,

When in eternal lines to time thou growest:

So long as men can breathe, or eyes can see,

So long lives this, and this gives life to thee.

Carefully go through this poem and consider the use of language and how the lines can be interpreted by you and your friends in your group.

Odes:

Usually ‘a tribute’ type of poem that can take any form; it has no set pattern. Odes can be about anything.

The Chilean poet **Pablo Neruda** wrote many odes on many unusual things…

Here is one of them:

Ode To The Lemon by Pablo Neruda

From blossoms
released
by the moonlight,
from an
aroma of exasperated
love,
steeped in fragrance,
yellowness
drifted from the lemon tree,
and from its planetarium
lemons descended to the earth.

Tender yield!
The coasts,
the markets glowed
with light, with
unrefined gold;
we opened
two halves
of a miracle,
congealed acid
trickled
from the hemispheres
of a star,
the most intense liqueur
of nature,
unique, vivid,
concentrated,
born of the cool, fresh
lemon,

of its fragrant house,
its acid, secret symmetry.

Knives
sliced a small
cathedral
in the lemon,
the concealed apse, opened,
revealed acid stained glass,
drops
oozed topaz,
altars,
cool architecture.

So, when you hold
the hemisphere
of a cut lemon
above your plate,
you spill
a universe of gold,
a yellow goblet
of miracles,
a ray of light that was made fruit,
the minute fire of a planet.

Phew! That was a long and detailed ode wasn't it?

Pick out four lines you consider to be effective and explain why you like them.

Focus on the imagery in the final two stanzas – how does Neruda transform (change) the lemon into something else?

Ode to My Socks

Mara Mori brought me
a pair of socks
which she knitted herself
with her sheepherder's hands,
two socks as soft as rabbits.
I slipped my feet into them
as if they were two cases
knitted with threads of twilight and goatskin,
Violent socks,
my feet were two fish made of wool,
two long sharks
sea blue, shot through
by one golden thread,
two immense blackbirds,
two cannons,
my feet were honored in this way
by these heavenly socks.
They were so handsome for the first time
my feet seemed to me unacceptable
like two decrepit firemen,
firemen unworthy of that woven fire,
of those glowing socks.

Nevertheless, I resisted the sharp temptation
to save them somewhere as schoolboys
keep fireflies,
as learned men collect
sacred texts,
I resisted the mad impulse to put them
in a golden cage and each day give them
birdseed and pieces of pink melon.
Like explorers in the jungle
who hand over the very rare green deer
to the spit and eat it with remorse,
I stretched out my feet and pulled on
the magnificent socks and then my shoes.

The moral of my ode is this:
beauty is twice beauty
and what is good is doubly good
when it is a matter of two socks
made of wool in winter.

Look at the metaphors in this poem – how many can you find and how are they effective or fitting for the poem?

Now try writing your own ode – it can be an ode to absolutely anything!

Blank verse:

Is a form of verse that has no real pattern, but is usually in iambic pentameter (where the lines tend to have roughly ten syllable words with the stress on the stronger word sounds)

Here is one example of blank verse from Shakespeare:

Seven ages of man

All the world's a stage,
And all the men and women merely players;
They have their exits and their entrances,
And one man in his time plays many parts,
His acts being seven ages. At first, the infant,
Mewling and puking in the nurse's arms.
Then the whining schoolboy, with his satchel
And shining morning face, creeping like snail
Unwillingly to school. And then the lover,
Sighing like furnace, with a woeful ballad
Made to his mistress' eyebrow. Then a soldier,
Full of strange oaths and bearded like the pard,
Jealous in honour, sudden and quick in quarrel,
Seeking the bubble reputation
Even in the cannon's mouth. And then the justice,
In fair round belly with good capon lined,
With eyes severe and beard of formal cut,
Full of wise saws and modern instances;
And so he plays his part. The sixth age shifts
Into the lean and slippered pantaloon,
With spectacles on nose and pouch on side;

His youthful hose, well saved, a world too wide
For his shrunk shank, and his big manly voice,
Turning again toward childish treble, pipes
And whistles in his sound. Last scene of all,
That ends this strange eventful history,
Is second childishness and mere oblivion,
Sans teeth, sans eyes, sans taste, sans everything

Go through this verse and put the seven stages in order…

First, a man is a baby, puking and whining in its mother's arms

Secondly, (try to use lines from the poem, but in your own words)

Now it is your turn to write your own extended metaphor poem based on 'Seven Ages of Man'…

It must begin with 'All the world's a…(you put your own idea here)

Then go through the seven stages, with your own ideas for metaphors and imagery/similes etc

Free verse – enjambment

Free verse means verse without any set pattern, enjambment means the lines run over on to the next line, instead of stopping as in a normal stanza. Look at the example below:

Two scavengers in a truck, two in a Mercedes

At the stoplight waiting for the light
Nine A.M. downtown San Francisco
a bright garbage truck
with two garbage men in red plastic blazers
standing on the back stoop
one on each side hanging on
and looking down into
an elegant open Mercedes
with an elegant couple in it
The man
In a hip three-piece linen suit
With shoulder-length blond hair & sunglasses
The young blond woman so casually coifed
with a short skirt and coloured stocking
On his way to his architect's office
And the two scavengers up since Four A.M.
Grungy from their route
On the way home
The older of the two with grey iron hair
And hunched back
Looking like some
Gargoyle Quasimodo
And the younger of the two
Also with sunglasses and long hair
About the same age as the Mercedes driver
And both scavengers gazing down
As from a great distance
At the cool couple

As if they were watching some odourless TV ad
In which everything is possible

And the very red light for an instant
Holding all four close together
As if anything at all were possible
Between them
Across that great gulf
In the high seas
Of this democracy

Go through this poem and discuss why you think it is written in the style that it is.

Also, discuss the language in it and how the writer describes this scene of two different cars with very different drivers/passengers at the traffic lights.

What is the writer trying to put across in this poem?

Theme focus: Elemental poems

Elemental means to do with the weather, the elements. These poems use a lot of poetic devices to try to bring the subject matter to life.

See of you can identify them…

Rain

The rain:

Liquid bullets that pelt the earth,

Blue jewels from heaven.

The rain sings sometimes;

a gentle lullaby on rooftops

As soothing as a mother hushing a baby

We find strange comfort in the

arms of rain.

Now you have looked at this short poem, try writing your own.

Choose an elemental subject – find some dramatic pictures online for fire, hurricanes, snow: choose one (or think of your own elemental subject) and try to write lines that use a mixture of metaphor, personification and simile.

Start by doing a thought cloud, prompting some good words for your subject.

Glossary of Poetry terms:

(by no means all of them, but the most useful to know)

Alliteration
The repetition of consonant sounds, especially at the beginning of words. Example: "Fetched fresh, as I suppose, off some sweet wood." Hopkins, "In the Valley of the Elwy."

Assonance
The repetition of similar vowel sounds in a sentence or a line of poetry or prose, as in "I rose and told him of my woe." Whitman's "When I Heard the Learn'd Astronomer" contains assonantal "I's" in the following lines: "How soon unaccountable I became tired and sick, / Till rising and gliding out I wander'd off by myself."

Ballad
A narrative or story written in four-line stanzas, characterized by swift action and narrated in a direct style. 'The Highwayman' is a classic example of a ballad poem.

Blank verse
A line of poetry or prose in unrhymed iambic pentameter. Shakespeare's sonnets, Milton's epic poem *Paradise Lost*, and Robert Frost's meditative poems such as "Birches" include many lines of blank verse. Here are the opening blank verse lines of "Birches": When I see birches bend to left and right / Across the lines of straighter darker trees, / I like to think some boy's been swinging them.

Caesura
A strong pause within a line of verse. The following stanza from Hardy's "The Man He Killed" contains caesuras in the middle two lines:

> He thought he'd 'list, perhaps,
> Off-hand-like--just as I--
> Was out of work-had sold his traps--

Closed form
A type of form or structure in poetry characterized by regularity and consistency in such elements as rhyme, line length, and metrical pattern. Frost's "Stopping By Woods on a Snowy Evening" provides one of many examples. A single stanzaillustrates some of the features of closed form:

> Whose woods these are I think I know.
> His house is in the village though.
> He will not see me stopping here
> To watch his woods fill up with snow.

Connotation
The associations called up by a word that goes beyond its dictionary meaning. Poets, especially, tend to use words rich in connotation. Dylan Thomas's "Do Not Go Gentle into That Good Night" includes intensely connotative language, as in these lines:

"Good men, the last wave by, crying how bright / Their frail deeds might have danced in a green bay, / Rage, rage against the dying of the light."

Couplet
A pair of rhymed lines that may or may not constitute a separate stanzain a poem. Shakespeare's sonnets end in rhymed couplets, as in "For thy sweet love remembered such wealth brings / That then I scorn to change my state with kings."

Dactyl
A stressed syllable followed by two unstressed ones, as in *FLUT-ter-ing* or *BLUE-ber-ry*. The following playful lines illustrate double dactyls, two dactyls per line:

> Higgledy, piggledy,
> Emily Dickinson

Elegy
A lyric poem that laments the dead. Robert Hayden's "Those Winter Sundays" is elegiac in tone. A more explicitly identified elegy is W.H. Auden's "In Memory of William Butler Yeats" and his "Funeral Blues."

Elision
The omission of an unstressed vowel or syllable to preserve the meter of a line of poetry. Alexander uses elision in "Sound and Sense": "Flies o'er th' unbending corn...."

Enjambment
A run-on line of poetry in which logical and grammatical sense carries over from one line into the next. An enjambed line differs from an end-stopped line in which the grammatical and logical sense is completed within the line. In the opening lines of Robert Browning's "My Last Duchess," for example, the first line is end-stopped and the second enjambed:

> That's my last Duchess painted on the wall,
> Looking as if she were alive. I call
> That piece a wonder, now....

Epic
A long narrative poem that records the adventures of a hero. Epics typically chronicle the origins of a civilization and embody its central values. Examples from western literature include Homer's *Iliad* and *Odyssey*, Virgil's *Aeneid*, and Milton's *Paradise Lost*.

Epigram
A brief witty poem, often satirical. Alexander Pope's "Epigram Engraved on the Collar of a Dog" exemplifies the genre:

> I am his Highness' dog at Kew;
> Pray tell me, sir, whose dog are you?

Figurative language
A form of language use in which writers and speakers convey something other than the literal meaning of their words. Examples include hyperbole or exaggeration,

litotes or understatement, simile and metaphor, which employ comparison, and synecdoche and metonymy, in which a part of a thing stands for the whole.

Free verse
Poetry without a regular pattern of meteror rhyme. The verse is "free" in not being bound by earlier poetic conventions requiring poems to adhere to an explicit and identifiable meter and rhyme scheme in a form such as the sonnet or ballad. Modern and contemporary poets of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries often employ free verse. Williams's "This Is Just to Say" is one of many examples.

Iamb
An unstressed syllable followed by a stressed one, as in *to-DAY*.

Image
A concrete representation of a sense impression, a feeling, or an idea. Imagery refers to the pattern of related details in a work. In some works one image predominates either by recurring throughout the work or by appearing at a critical point in the plot. Often writers use multiple images throughout a work to suggest states of feeling and to convey implications of thought and action. Some modern poets, such as Ezra Pound and William Carlos Williams, write poems that lack discursive explanation entirely and include only images. Among the most famous examples is Pound's poem "In a Station of the Metro":

> The apparition of these faces in the crowd;
> Petals on a wet, black bough.

Lyric poem
A type of poem characterized by brevity, compression, and the expression of feeling. Most of the poems in this book are lyrics. The anonymous "Western Wind" epitomizes the genre:

> Western wind, when will thou blow,
> The small rain down can rain?
> Christ, if my love were in my arms
> And I in my bed again!

Metaphor
A comparison between essentially unlike things without an explicitly comparative word such as *like* or *as*. An example is "My love is a red, red rose,"

From Burns's "A Red, Red Rose." Langston Hughes's "Dream Deferred" is built entirely of metaphors. Metaphor is one of the most important of literary uses of language. Shakespeare employs a wide range of metaphor in his sonnets and his plays, often in such density and profusion that readers are kept busy analyzing and interpreting and unraveling them. Compare *Simile*.

Meter
The measured pattern of rhythmic accents in poems. See *Foot*and *Iamb*

Narrative poem
A poem that tells a story. See *Ballad*.

Narrator
The voice and implied speaker of a fictional work, to be distinguished from the actual living author. For example, the narrator of Joyce's "Araby" is not James Joyce himself, but a literary fictional character created expressly to tell the story. Faulkner's "A Rose for Emily" contains a communal narrator, identified only as "we."

Octave
An eight-line unit, which may constitute a stanza; or a section of a poem, as in the octave of a sonnet.

Ode
A long, stately poem in stanzasof varied length, meter, and form. Usually a serious poem on an exalted subject, such as Horace's "Eheu fugaces," but sometimes a more lighthearted work, such as Neruda's "Ode to My Socks."

Onomatopoeia
The use of words to imitate the sounds they describe. Words such as *buzz* and *crack* are onomatopoetic. The following line from Pope's "Sound and Sense" onomatopoetically imitates in sound what it describes:

> When Ajax strives some rock's vast weight to throw,
> The line too labors, and the words move slow.

Most often, however, onomatopoeia refers to words and groups of words, such as Tennyson's description of the "murmur of innumerable bees," which attempts to capture the sound of a swarm of bees buzzing.

Parody
A humorous, mocking imitation of a literary work, sometimes sarcastic, but often playful and even respectful in its playful imitation. Examples include Bob McKenty's parody of Frost's "Dust of Snow" and Kenneth Koch's parody of Williams's "This is Just to Say."

Personification
The endowment of inanimate objects or abstract concepts with animate or living qualities. An example: "The yellow leaves flaunted their color gaily in the breeze." Wordsworth's "I wandered lonely as a cloud" includes personification.

Quatrain
A four-line stanza in a poem, the first four lines and the second four lines in a Petrachan sonnet. A Shakespearean sonnet contains three quatrains followed by a couplet.

Rhyme
The matching of final vowel or consonant sounds in two or more words. The following stanza of "Richard Cory" employs alternate rhyme, with the third line rhyming with the first and the fourth with the second:

> Whenever Richard Cory went down town,
> We people on the pavement looked at him;
> He was a gentleman from sole to crown
> Clean favored and imperially slim.

Rhythm
The recurrence of accent or stress in lines of verse. In the following lines from "Same in Blues" by Langston Hughes, the accented words and syllables are underlined:

I said to my baby,
Baby take it slow....
Lulu said to Leonard
I want a diamond ring

Sestet
A six-line unit of verse constituting a stanza or section of a poem; the last six lines of an Italian sonnet. Examples: Petrarch's "If it is not love, then what is it that I feel," and Frost's "Design."

Sestina
A poem of thirty-nine lines and written in iambic pentameter. Its six-line stanza repeat in an intricate and prescribed order the final word in each of the first six lines. After the sixth stanza, there is a three-line tercet.

Simile
A figure of speech involving a comparison between unlike things using *like*, *as*, or *as though*. An example: "My love is like a red, red rose."

Sonnet
A fourteen-line poem in iambic pentameter. The Shakespearean or English sonnet is arranged as three quatrains and a final couplet, rhyming abab cdcd efef gg. The Petrarchan or Italian sonnet divides into two parts: an eight-line octave and a six-line sestet, rhyming abba abba cde cde or abba abba cd cd cd.

Stanza
What we call verses in Poetry – for example a four line stanza (quatrain)

Symbol
An object or action in a literary work that means more than itself, that stands for something beyond itself. The glass unicorn in *The Glass Menagerie*, the rocking horse in "The Rocking-Horse Winner," the road in Frost's "The Road Not Taken"--all are symbols in this sense.

Syntax
The grammatical order of words in a sentence or line of verse or dialogue. The organization of words and phrases and clauses in sentences of prose, verse, and dialogue. In the following example, normal syntax (subject, verb, object order) is inverted:

"Whose woods these are I think I know."

Tercet
A three-line stanza, as the stanzas in Frost's "Acquainted With the Night" and Shelley's "Ode to the West Wind." The three-line stanzas or sections that together constitute the sestet of a Petrarchan or Italian sonnet.

Theme
The idea of a literary work abstracted from its details of language, character, and action, and cast in the form of a generalization. See discussion of Dickinson's "Crumbling is not an instant's Act."

Tone
The implied attitude of a writer toward the subject and characters of a work, as, for example, Flannery O'Connor's ironic tone in her "Good Country People."

Trochee
An accented syllable followed by an unaccented one, as in *FOOT-ball*.

Villanelle
A nineteen-line lyric poem that relies heavily on repetition. The first and third lines alternate throughout the poem, which is structured in six stanzas --five tercets and a concluding quatrain. Examples include Bishop's "One Art," Roethke's "The Waking," and Thomas's "Do Not Go Gentle into That Good Night."

Finally, test yourself with what you have learnt from this booklet!

1- Explain what the form is for a traditional Haiku poem.
2- Explain what a tercet is.
3- What is the rhyme scheme for a traditional sonnet?
4- How does a simile differ from a metaphor?
5- What is the effect of using personification?
6- An Ode has a strict poetic form or pattern – true or false?
7- Who wrote 'I wandered lonely as a cloud?'…
8-