

Poetic Forms and Devices

The Centre for Literacy in Primary Education is also the National Poetry Centre for Primary Schools (CLPE) and we believe poetry is fundamental in the development of children's reading and writing.

What is Poetry? It is a question that has concerned academics, poets and teachers for hundreds of years. To a large extent it is possible to say that if you call something a poem then that is what it is. John Hegley's poem *what a poem's not* below explores this issue further. Poetry began as an oral form using rhyme and rhythm to keep the listener's attention. As poetry has developed it has become more page oriented. It is vital that children are given the opportunity to hear how poetry sounds different to narrative through regular exposure and to begin to make connections between the forms and devices that poets use and their impact on meaning.

This part of the site contains definitions of the most common poetic terms (although many the devices could be used in other types of creative writing) alongside examples of that form or device in use.

Elements of Poetry

POETRY ASSUMPTIONS

Readers of poetry often bring with them many related assumptions:

- That a poem is to be read for its "message,"
- That this message is "hidden" in the poem,

- The message is to be found by treating the words as symbols which naturally do not mean what they say but stand for something else,
- You have to decipher (حل الشفرة) every single word to appreciate and enjoy the poem.

There are no easy ways to dispel these biases. Poetry is difficult because very often its language is indirect. But so is experience - those things we think, feel, and do. The lazy reader wants to be told things and usually avoids poetry because it demands commitment and energy. Moreover, much of what poetry has to offer is not in the form of hidden meanings. Many poets like to "play" with the sound of language or offer an emotional insight by describing what they see in highly descriptive language. In fact, there can many different ways to enjoy poetry; this reflects the many different styles and objectives of poets themselves. For an overview of the many ways to read a poem, click [here](#). Finally, if you are the type to give up when something is unclear, just relax! Like we just said, there can be many different approaches to examining poetry; often these approaches (like looking for certain poetic devices or examining the meaning of a specific phrase) do not require a complete and exhaustive analysis of a poem. So, enjoy what you do understand!

FIRST APPROACHES

Read the poem (many students neglect this step). Identify the speaker and the situation. Feel free to read it more than once! Read the sentences literally. Use your prose reading skills to clarify what the poem is about. Read each line separately, noting unusual words and associations. Look up words you are unsure of and struggle with word associations that may not seem logical to you. Note any changes in the form of the poem that might signal a shift in point of view. Study the structure of

the poem, including its rhyme and rhythm (if any). Re-read the poem slowly, thinking about what message and emotion the poem communicates to you.

Structure and Poetry

An important method of analyzing a poem is to look at the stanza structure or style of a poem. Generally speaking, structure has to do with the overall organization of lines and/or the conventional patterns of sound. Again, many modern poems may not have any identifiable structure (i.e. they are free verse (مقطع شعري)), so don't panic (ذعر) if you can't-find-it!

1-STANZAS: Stanzas are a series of lines grouped together and separated by an empty line from other stanzas. They are the equivalent (مساو) of a paragraph in an essay. One way to identify a stanza is to count the number of lines. Thus:

- couplet (2 lines)
- tercet (3 lines)
- quatrain (4 lines)
- cinquain (5 lines)
- sestet (6 lines) (sometimes it's called a sexain)
- septet (7 lines)
- octave (8 lines)

2-FORM: A poem may or may not have a specific number of lines, rhyme scheme (مخطط) and/or metrical (موزون) pattern, but it can still be labeled according to its form or style. Here are **the three most common types of poems** according to form:

***Lyric Poetry** قصيدة غنائية شعبية : It is any poem with one speaker (not necessarily the poet) who expresses **strong thoughts and feelings**. Most poems, especially modern

ones, are lyric poems.

* **Narrative Poem:** قصيدة قصصية It is a poem that **tells a story**; its structure resembles the plot line of a story [i.e. the introduction of conflict and characters, rising action, climax and the denouement].

* **Descriptive Poem:** قصيدة وصفية It is a poem that **describes the world** that surrounds the speaker. It uses elaborate imagery and adjectives. While emotional, it is more "outward-focused" than lyric poetry, which is more personal and introspective (موجه).

In a sense, almost all poems, whether they have consistent patterns of sound and/or structure, or are free verse, are in one of the three categories above. Or, of course, they may be a combination of 2 or 3 of the above styles! Here are some more types of poems that are subtypes of the three styles above:

* **Ode** قصيدة نشيد: It is usually a **lyric** poem of moderate (متوسط) length, with a serious subject, an elevated (راقى) style, and an elaborate (دقيق) stanza pattern.

* **Elegy** قصيدة رثاء: It is a **lyric** poem that mourns the dead. [It's not to be confused with a eulogy.] It has no set metric or stanzaic pattern, but it usually begins by reminiscing about the dead person, then laments the reason for the death, and then resolves the grief by concluding that death leads to immortality. It often uses "apostrophe" (calling out to the dead person) as a literary technique. It can have a fairly formal style, and sound similar to an ode.

* **Sonnet** قصيدة من ١٤ بيت: It is a **lyric** poem consisting of 14 lines and, in the English version, is usually written in iambic pentameter. There are two basic kinds of sonnets:

the Italian (or Petrarchan) sonnet and the Shakespearean (or Elizabethan/English) sonnet. The Italian/Petrarchan sonnet is named after Petrarch, an Italian Renaissance poet. The Petrarchan sonnet consists of an octave (eight lines) and a sestet (six lines). The Shakespearean sonnet consists of three quatrains (four lines each) and a concluding couplet (two lines). The Petrarchan sonnet tends to divide the thought into two parts (argument and conclusion); the Shakespearean, into four (the final couplet is the summary).

***Ballad** **قصيدة شعبية**: It is a **narrative** poem that has a musical rhythm and can be sung. A ballad is usually organized into quatrains or cinquains, has a simple rhythm structure, and tells the tales of ordinary people.

***Epic** **ملحمة**: It is a long **narrative** poem in elevated style recounting the deeds of a legendary (اسطوري) or historical hero.

Meaning and Poetry

We knew earlier that poetry is not always about hidden or indirect meanings (sometimes called **meaning play**). Nevertheless, it often is a major part of poetry, so here are some of the important things to remember:

Concreteness and Particularity

In general, poetry deals with particular things in concrete language, since our emotions most readily respond to these things. From the poem's particular situation, the reader may then generalize; the generalities arise by implication from the particular. In other words, a poem is most often concrete and particular; the

"message," if there is any, is general and abstract; it's implied by the images.

Images, in turn, suggest meanings beyond the mere identity of the specific object. Poetry "plays" with meaning when it identifies resemblances or makes comparisons between things; common examples of this "figurative" comparison include:

- ticking of clock = mortality
- hardness of steel = determination
- white = peace or purity

Such terms as connotation, simile, metaphor, allegory, and symbol are aspects of this comparison. Such expressions are generally called **figurative** or metaphorical language.

Denotation and connotation

Word meanings are not only restricted to dictionary meanings. The full meaning of a word includes both the dictionary definition and the special meanings and associations a word takes in a given phrase or expression. For example, a tiger is a carnivorous animal of the cat family. This is the literal or denotative meaning. But we have certain associations with the word: sinuous movement, jungle violence, and aggression. These are the suggestive, figurative or connotative meanings.

Figurative/Connotative Devices

1. **Simile**: - is the rhetorical term used to designate the most elementary form of resemblances: most similes are introduced by "like" or "as." These comparisons are usually between dissimilar situations or objects

that have something in common, such as "My love is like a red, red rose."

2. **A metaphor** leaves out "like" or "as" and implies a direct comparison between objects or situations. "All flesh is grass." For more on metaphor, click here.
3. **Synecdoche** is a form of metaphor, which in mentioning an important (and attached) part signifies the whole (e.g. "hands" for labour).
4. **Metonymy** is similar to synecdoche; it's a form of metaphor allowing an object closely associated (but unattached) with a object or situation to stand for the thing itself (e.g. the crown or throne for a king or the bench for the judicial system).
5. **A symbol** is like a simile or metaphor with the first term left out. "My love is like a red, red rose" is a simile. If, through persistent identification of the rose with the beloved woman, we may come to associate the rose with her and her particular virtues. At this point, the rose would become a symbol.
6. **Allegory** can be defined as a one to one correspondence between a series of abstract ideas and a series of images or pictures presented in the form of a story or a narrative. For example, George Orwell's *Animal Farm* is an extended allegory that represents the Russian Revolution through a fable of a farm and its rebellious animals.
7. **Personification** occurs when you treat abstractions or inanimate objects as human, that is, giving them human attributes, powers, or feelings (e.g., "nature wept" or "the wind whispered many truths to me").
8. **Irony** takes many forms. Most basically, irony is a figure of speech in which actual intent is expressed through words that carry the opposite meaning.
 - Paradox: usually a literal contradiction of terms or situations
 - Situational Irony: an unmailed letter

- Dramatic Irony: audience has more information or greater perspective than the characters
- Verbal Irony: saying one thing but meaning another
 - Overstatement (hyperbole)
 - Understatement (meiosis)
 - Sarcasm

Irony may be a positive or negative force. It is most valuable as a mode of perception that assists the poet to see around and behind opposed attitudes, and to see the often conflicting interpretations that come from our examination of life.

POETRY AS A LANGUAGE OF INDIRECTION

Thus, if we recognize that much of the essential quality of our experience is more complex than a simple denotative statement can describe, then we must recognize the value of the poet's need to search for a language agile enough to capture the complexity of that experience. Consider this four-line stanza:

*O Western wind, when wilt thou blow
That the small rain down can rain?
Christ, that my love were in my arms,
And I in my bed again!*

The center of the poem is the lover's desire to be reunited with his beloved (lines 3 and 4). But the full meaning of the poem depends on the first two lines also. Obviously, the lover associates his grief with the wind and rain, but the poet leaves to implication, to indirection, just how the lover's situation and the wind and rain are related. We note that they are related in several ways: the need for experiencing and manifesting love is an inherent need, like nature's need for rain; in a word, love, like the wind

and rain, is natural. Secondly, the lover is living in a kind of drought or arid state that can only be slaked by the soothing presence of the beloved. Thirdly, the rising of the wind and the coming of the rain can neither be controlled nor foretold exactly, and human affairs, like the lover's predicament, are subject to the same sort of chance.

Undoubtedly, too, there are associations with specific words, like "Western" or "small rain" that the reader is only half aware of but which nonetheless contribute to meaning. These associations or connotations afford a few indirections that enrich the entire poem. For example, "small rain" at once describes the kind of rain that the lover wants to fall and suggests the joy and peace of lover's tears, and "small" alone might suggest the daintiness or femininity of the beloved.
