

Lecture I: Introduction to poetry.

What is poetry ?

Poetry (ancient Greek: ποιέω (poieo) = I create) is an art form in which human language is used for its aesthetic qualities in addition to, or instead of, its notional and semantic content. It consists largely of oral or literary works in which language is used in a manner that is felt by its user and audience to differ from ordinary prose.

Poetry is literature that **evokes a concentrated imaginative awareness** of experience or a specific emotional response through language chosen and **arranged for its meaning, sound, and rhythm.**

Poetry is a vast subject, as old as history and older, present wherever religion is present, possibly—under some definitions—the primal and primary form of languages themselves.

Some poets defined poetry as:

“the spontaneous overflow of powerful things” (William Wordsworth)

“Poetry is simply the most beautiful, impressive, and widely effective mode of expression” (Matthew Arnold)

“It teaches the enormous forces of a few words”

Simply put, Poetry is:

- Literature (art form) written in verse that conveys an intensity of emotions in a condensed language that is appealing to the ears.

History of poetry

Poetry as an art form **predates literacy**. In preliterate societies, **poetry was frequently employed as a means of recording oral history, storytelling (epic poetry), genealogy**, law and other forms of expression or knowledge that modern societies might expect to be handled in prose. The **Ramayana**, a Sanskrit epic which includes poetry, was probably written in the **3rd century BCE** in a language described by William Jones as "more perfect than Latin, more copious than Greek and more exquisitely refined than either." Poetry is also often closely identified with **liturgy** in these societies, as **the formal nature of poetry makes it easier to remember priestly incantations** or prophecies. The greater part of the world's sacred scriptures are made up of poetry rather than prose. (It is easier to remember melody, that's why a lot of children's songs are written as poems, easier for memorization)

Some writers believe that poetry has its origins in song. Most of the characteristics that distinguish it from other forms of utterance—**rhythm, rhyme, compression, intensity of feeling, the use of refrains**—appear to have come about from efforts to **fit words to musical forms**. However, in the European tradition the earliest surviving poems, the Homeric and Hesiodic epics, identify themselves as poems to **be recited or chanted to a musical accompaniment** rather than as pure song. Another interpretation, developed from 20th-century studies of living Montenegrin epic reciters by Milman Parry and others, is that rhythm, refrains, and kennings are essentially paratactic devices that enable the reciter to reconstruct the poem from memory.

Q: How were the very old poems transmitted to our generations?

In preliterate societies, all these forms of poetry were composed for, and sometimes during, performance. As such, there was a certain degree of **fluidity** to the exact wording of poems, given this **could change from one performance or performer to another**. The **introduction of writing tended to fix the content of a poem to the version that happened to be written down and survive**. Written composition also meant that poets began to compose not for an audience that was sitting in front of them but for an absent reader. Later, the **invention of printing** tended to accelerate these trends. Poets were now writing more for the eye than for the ear.

The development of literacy gave rise to more personal, shorter poems intended to be sung. These are called lyrics, which derives from the Greek *lura* or *lyre*, the instrument that was used to accompany the performance of Greek lyrics from about the seventh century BCE onward. The Greek's practice of singing hymns in large choruses gave rise in the sixth century BCE to dramatic verse, and to the practice of writing poetic plays for performance in their theatres.

In more recent times, the introduction of electronic media and the rise of the poetry reading have led to a resurgence of performance poetry and have resulted in a situation where poetry for the eye and poetry for the ear coexist, sometimes in the same poem. The late 20th-century rise of the singer-songwriter and Rap culture and the increase in popularity of Slam poetry have led to a renewed debate as to the nature of poetry that can be crudely characterised as a split between the academic and popular views. As of 2005, this debate is ongoing with no immediate prospect of a resolution.

Sound in poetry

Perhaps the most vital element of **sound** in poetry is **rhythm**. Often the rhythm of each line is arranged in a particular meter. Different types of meter played key roles in Classical, Early European, Eastern and Modern poetry. In the case of free verse, the rhythm of lines is often organized into looser units of cadence.

Poetry in English and other modern European languages often uses rhyme. **Rhyme** at the end of lines is the basis of a number of common poetic forms, such as ballads, sonnets and rhyming couplets. However, the use of rhyme is not universal. Much modern poetry, for example, avoids traditional rhyme schemes. Furthermore, Classical Greek and Latin poetry did not use rhyme. In fact, rhyme did not enter European poetry at all until the High Middle Ages, when it was adopted from the Arabic language. The Arabs have always used rhymes extensively, most notably in their long, rhyming *qasidas*.

Verse Vs. prose

Poetry can be differentiated most of the time from prose, which is language meant to convey meaning in a more expansive and less condensed way, frequently using more complete logical or narrative structures than poetry does. This does not necessarily imply that poetry is illogical, but rather that poetry is often created from the need to escape the logical, as well as expressing feelings and other expressions in a tight, condensed manner. English Romantic poet John Keats termed this escape from logic *Negative Capability*. A further complication is that prose poetry combines the characteristics of poetry with the superficial appearance of prose, such as in Robert Frost's poem, "Home Burial." Other forms include narrative poetry and dramatic poetry, both of which are used to tell stories and so resemble novels and plays. However, both these forms of poetry use the specific features of verse composition to make these stories more memorable or to enhance them in some way.

Types of Poetry:

- **Lyric poetry:** it is the expression of the speaker's innermost feelings, thoughts, imagination. The word comes from "lyre" which is a musical instrument used in medieval times to accompany singer. It has a musical quality, and its melody is derived from the words themselves and their arrangement.

+ **examples of lyric poetry include:** pastoral poetry, Ode, Elegy.

- **Narrative poetry:** it tells or narrates a story. The poet becomes like a narrator (persona) in an ordinary story.

+ **The Ballad:** rhythm suitable for singing, author often anonymous, it talks about the comedies and tragedies of life.

+ **Epic:** Longest narrative poetry; it is a record of heroic events and usually many stories interconnected (Beowulf – Dante's Divine Comedy, etc)

- **Dramatic poetry:** emotional piece of literature which includes a story which is recited or sung by a monologue.

Example:

Fame is a bee (1788)

By Emily Dickinson

Fame is a bee.
It has a song -
It has a sting -
Ah, too, it has a wing.

Assignment: What is the difference between prose and poetry?
