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1. What is Poetry?

Poetry is emotion put into measure. The emotion must come by nature, but the measure can be acquired by art.

Thomas Hardy

How do we define poetry? Mark which of the following lines are poetry and which are lyrics.

*sing with me
sing for the year
sing for the laughter*

**empty lanes, empty streets
the sun goes down alone**

In the room the women come and go
Talking of Michelangelo.

***I provide everything you need and I
Like your smile I don't wanna see you cry***

**I want the whisper of the rain;
I want the great, blue, surging sea.**

You were made to go out and get her,
The minute you let her under your skin,
Then you begin to make it better.

**NO ATTORNEYS
TO PLEAD MY CASE
NO OPIATES
TO SEND ME INTO OUTER SPACE**

**Exactly as the setting sun
clips the heel of the garden,**

**Pain polluted days sucking crucifix money
pledging happiness upon the alter of indifference**

If you picked any lines that are not poetry, say why you chose them - what made you think it was poetry? (Look at the images, words or phrases which struck you as poetic, or note the structure of the lines, or any rhyme or rhythm.)

Construct your own definition of poetry. Choose from the list below the elements you consider necessary for poetry. Think about what makes poetry different from prose, both in the words used, but also how they are used.

Then lightly cross out any statements you think are not true for poetry.

Underline any statements you think are true for some poetry, but are not an essential part of every poem.

- *A poem must follow the rules of a traditional form (e.g. the sonnet).*
- *Poems have to rhyme.*
- *Poems must have some rhythm.*
- *Free verse is just chopped up sentences.*
- *Poetry is whatever you want it to be.*
- *A poem can mean anything you want it to mean.*
- *Poetry contains images.*
- *Poetry contains interesting use of language.*
- *Poems are abstract.*
- *Poems teach lessons.*
- *Poetry is a more compact form of expression than prose.*

Discuss the results of this exercise in class, or look below and work out which statements fit where.

Write in any other statements you think should be added to a definition of poetry.

Choose a short poem from anywhere you like (anthologies, set texts, the Internet). Rewrite the poem in prose. You can use the same vocabulary, but write the poem out in correct and grammatical English, making sure all the lines carry the same sense (as far as possible). Look at how many more words there are in your finished result. Has the impact of the poem been lessened? How?

Definitions of poetry

The word poetry comes from a Greek verb which means ‘to make’. The *Concise Oxford Dictionary* definition of poetry is

poetry n. art or work of the poet; elevated expression of elevated thought or feeling in metrical or rhythmical form; quality (in any thing) that calls for poetical expression.

It goes on to say that prose has all the qualities of poetry except metre.

Poetry is awkward to define. It runs from tightly structured forms, such as the haiku or sonnet, to free verse and even prose poetry. Poetry is written on every subject possible and its subjects and images can be as varied as its structure. It is not a fixed and rigid discipline and poets break rules (usually for a good reason) as often as they follow them. This makes poetry a challenge to study and write about.

Defining characteristics of poetry are its compact form (compared to the equivalent prose to describe something) and the use of striking imagery. Poetry always tries to express something in a new and original way, be it an emotion, a scene or an opinion. It shows interesting use of language and often has a powerful effect.

Poetry and song are closely linked – the first exercise will have shown you how. The forms and devices (rhyme, rhythm, imagery etc.) used are often the same. Poetry’s origins are in the oral tradition of storytelling and song. In the time when most people were illiterate, songs with definite rhyme schemes aided memory, keeping popular stories alive.

Poetry diverged along the lines of more formal structures and nowadays only the ballad is really song-like. Songs such as *Auld Lang Syne*, *Jerusalem* and *The Star Spangled Banner* began life as poems and this still happens today. Poets know that poems were meant to be heard, not just read on the page, and the oral tradition of poetry is not forgotten. It is preserved in tribal cultures and languages other than English.

It is easier to say what poetry is not rather than what it definitely is! There are some common misconceptions about poetry (such as ‘poetry has to rhyme’), which you may have put into the ‘poetry must have’ category, when really they are optional.

Here are some famous people’s ideas about what poetry is and isn’t:

“The function of the poet is not to point out ways, but most of all to arouse longing”

Hermann Hesse

“We do not write in order to be understood, we write in order to understand”

C Day Lewis

"Poetry should surprise by a fine excess, and not by singularity; it should strike the reader as a wording of his own highest thoughts, and appear almost a remembrance."

John Keats

"Poetry is to prose as dancing is to walking."

John Wain

"Poetry is the spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings: it takes its origin from emotion recollected in tranquillity."

William Wordsworth

The Canon

The canon of literature is the group of writers and texts which are accepted as 'great' or important in the history of literature. You can also talk about a canon of works of one writer; that is all their collected writings.

In essence, the canon is all those famous texts that appear in the 'Classics' or 'Literature' section of bookshops. These are generally the most popular ones; there is a huge body of literature out there and not all of the classics are widely read. A lot of the canon is pretty old stuff, from the epic *Beowulf* through to Chaucer, Shakespeare and so on. (See the **Literature Timeline** chapter. This shows some of the most famous members of the canon.)

Here are a few examples of some famous lines most of us will have heard:

"Gather ye rosebuds while ye may"

To the Virgins, to Make Much of Time
Robert Herrick

"God moves in a mysterious way"

Light Shining Out of Darkness
William Cowper

*"Should auld acquaintance be forgot,
And never brought to min'?"*

Auld Lang Syne
Robert Burns

"I wandered lonely as a cloud"

The Daffodils
William Wordsworth

These examples have been made famous by their popularity and the frequency with which they are included in anthologies of poetry. The fact that many of these lines will be familiar shows how poetry is infused into our life and culture: the line from Cowper is a phrase used in general conversation.

Create your own canon. Pick lyrics, sayings, phrases and poetry that have impacted on your life. Things that you and all your peers know from songs, jingles, rap

etc. For this exercise, you can choose poetry and prose, rhyming or not.

The canon is often disputed. Try to find some discussions about the validity and the historical and political reasons for the choice of the canon as it is now. Keep in mind that these works were not necessarily selected for their literary merit alone!

Discuss the similarities and differences between poetry and songs. Use at least one poem and one song to explain your points.

SAMPLE

2. Haiku

*The temple bell stops -
but the sound keeps coming
out of the flowers*

Matsuo Bashō (1644-94)

The traditional haiku has

- three lines
- a syllable count of 5 in the first line
7 in the second
5 in the final line

Haiku is a traditional form of Japanese verse which began in the 14th century. The haiku often deals with comparisons and has nature and the seasons as its subject. Usually, two images are compared.

Haiku is still a popular form today and modern poets often experiment with the structure and write about diverse subjects. The short form means that words must be chosen very carefully and each has a special place in the poem.

An **image** is an appeal to any of the five senses. Imagery is crucial to poetry and what sets it apart from ordinary writing. Images may also make an impact on the emotions. (Imagery is closely tied to such poetic devices as simile, metaphor, personification, etc.)

*A giant firefly:
that way, this way, that way, this -
and it passes by.*

Yoshi Mikami Issa

*Water pools
among the rocks pools
and pools again*

John Wills

*empty room
one swinging coat hanger
measures the silence*

Jack Cain

*Moon
and melon cooling
with us in the stream*
Peggy Lyles

*Temple bells die out.
The fragrant blossoms remain.
A perfect evening!*

Bashō

*The air shimmers.
Whitish flight
Of an unknown insect.*
Buson Yosa (1716-83)

Pick the haiku that most appeals to you. Read it three times before answering these questions.

Chosen haiku: _____

What is its subject? _____

What is its tone (sad, reflective, tense)?

What is its syllable count?

First line: _____

Second line: _____

Third line: _____

Underline the words which are central to the images in the poem.

Ask yourself what you like about it. What struck you about the poem: an image, the tone, the pace, a particular word, the subject, an aspect of the rhyme or rhythm?

Mark which of the examples given above are structurally traditional haiku (i.e. follow the 5-7-5 rule) and which bend the rules. (Some of the poems were translated from the original Japanese and as such do not appear to be traditional.)

What similarities do you see in tone, subject and the pace of the poems given as examples?

Find out more about one of the authors above. Do they write only haiku?

Research another haiku author not shown in the examples above. Select a couple of examples of their haiku and find out a little of their background. What do others say about their poetry?

Write a haiku using the traditional structure, using nature as the subject. Make it a little descriptive snapshot of some familiar natural object.

References; further reading

www.worldhaikureview.org - international haiku magazine

www.badhaiku.com - for fun

www.everypoet.com/haiku/default.htm - this is part of a general poetry website

SAMPLE