

POETRY

What is poetry? Poetry is a form of literature consisting of writings in verse form. A poem is an expression of ideas, emotions, attitudes, or experiences of the poet. A poem is usually written for either the reader's pleasure or to record the feelings or ideas of the poet. A poem may be a song; it may tell a story; it may express the poet's point of view on a subject.

In writing poetry, a poet may start with a concrete, usually personal experience, either his or her own or someone else's. However, a poet may also write about abstract ideas.

Poems are usually rather short as compared to works of prose. The poet must convey the meaning in relatively few words. Poetry is a compressed literary form. The poet may leave out words that a writer of prose would use. Poets may also use words seldom if ever found in prose. In addition, poets use figures of speech, symbolism, word inversion, and other poetic devices. These techniques enable a poet to say in a few lines of poetry what it would take many pages to say in prose.

How is poetry read and understood? In order to read and understand poetry, you must comprehend special word usage, particularly figures of speech. A poet's language is highly personal and complex. A poet is careful to choose the words which will best express her or his thoughts. Familiar words may be used in ways which are unfamiliar to you. Compressed sentences often result from the use of meter, rhyme, and word inversion.

Reading poetry requires the use of many of your senses. Sight and hearing, combined with the imagined use of taste, smell, and touch, will soon enable you to understand and interpret what the poet is saying. The poet also uses punctuation to help the reader grasp the meaning of the words.

Below are some of the basic rules for reading poetry.

1. Read the whole poem first for an overall view.
2. Reread the poem very slowly, according to punctuation marks.
3. Check for the meanings and implied meanings of words.
4. Look for word inversion, figures of speech, and symbolism.
5. Paraphrase (restate) what you have read in your own words for better understanding.
6. Reread the poem again to make sure you understood all that the poet intended to convey.
7. Be very careful not to insert meanings that the poet did not intend.
8. If possible, read the poem out loud.

LESSON 1

Word Inversion

Word inversion is simply the reversal of normal word order in sentence structure. The unique uses of words is important in any literary work, but extremely so in poetry. Poetry is such a compressed literary work that the poet must choose each word with care. Many words have a number of different meanings. This places a great deal of importance on the reader's ability to interpret the literal or figurative meaning of words.

Poets use word inversion to emphasize ideas, expressions, and meanings in their work. Another important aspect of word inversion is that of rhyme and meter. Word inversion is often necessary to make words fit the rhyme scheme and the meter of a poem. Poetry written many years ago tends to include greater use of word inversion than does modern poetry.

EXERCISE 1

Read the following selections. Circle the best possible answer for each question.\

- (1) Who loves not more the night of June
- (2) Than dull December's gloomy noon?
- (3) The moonlight than the fog of frost?
- (4) And can we say, which cheats the most?

Sir Walter Scott, "Marmion"

1. In which of the above lines is word inversion used?
 - a. Line (1)
 - b. Line (2)
 - c. Line (3)
 - d. Line (4)

2. Which of the following sentences most clearly illustrates word inversion rewritten in prose?
 - a. Can we say which cheats the most?
 - b. Dull December's gloomy noon does not love
 - c. Moonlight which cheats the most
 - d. none of the above

- (1) But here, 'twixt rock and river, grew
- (2) A dismal grove of sable yew,
- (3) With whose sad tints were mingled seen
- (4) The blighted fir's sepulchral green.

Sir Walter Scott, "Rokeby"

3. Which line does *not* contain word inversion?
 - a. Line (1)
 - b. Line (3)
 - c. Line (4)
 - d. none of the above

4. In Line (3) the pronoun *whose* refers to
 - a. rock and river
 - b. grove of sable yew
 - c. fir's sepulchral green
 - d. none of the above

LESSON 2

Figurative Language

It is necessary to know how to interpret figurative language if one is to understand poetry. The literal meanings of words are not used in figures of speech. Figurative language is a method of saying one thing and meaning another. Figures of speech are often used by poets because they add to the pleasure and imagery of the poem. They also allow the use of a more compressed language.

Apostrophe (uh-PAHS-tro-fee) – the addressing of a person or thing not present.

EXAMPLE: “O Summer, you have the beauty of Venus.”

Hyperbole (hi PUR-bo-lee) – an extreme exaggeration for emphasis.

EXAMPLE: “Blind with thine hair the eyes of Day.”

Metaphor (MET-uh-for) – a comparison used to suggest a likeness of dissimilar objects. *Like* or *as* are not used to introduce the comparison.

EXAMPLE: “The Lord is my shepherd.”

Metonymy (me-THAN-uh-mee) – the substitution of a quality of something for the name of the thing.

EXAMPLE: substituting “wheels” for “vehicle.”

Onomatopoeia (ahn-uh-mah-tuh-PEE-uh) – the use of words in order to obtain a special effect.

EXAMPLE: sizzle, buzz, whisper, crash

Oxymoron (AHKS-ee-MO-rahn) – the use of contradictory words in order to obtain a special effect

EXAMPLE: “A little noiseless noise among the leaves.”

Pathetic fallacy (puh-THET-ik FAL-uh-see) – the attributing of human characteristics or feelings to lifeless objects.

EXAMPLE: “...sunset may breathe, from the lit sea beneath, its ardours of rest and of love...”

Personification (pur-sahn-ih-fih-KAY-shun) – the representation of a thing or an idea as a person or by the human form. Compare to pathetic fallacy.

EXAMPLE – “The lovely arms of Spring.”

Simile (SIM-uh-lee) – a comparison of two dissimilar objects usually introduced by *as* or *like*.

EXAMPLE: “Lips like cherry wine.”

EXERCISE 2

Read the following selections. Then circle the best possible answer for each question.

- (1) Like as the waves make towards the pebbled shore,
- (2) So do our minutes hasten to their end;
- (3) Each changing place with that which goes before,
- (4) In sequent toil all forwards do contend.

William Shakespeare, "Like as the waves make
towards the pebbled shore."

1. In lines (1) and (2), the poet makes use of which of the following?
 - a. metaphor
 - b. simile
 - c. personification
 - d. hyperbole

- (1) With ruddy, open hand,
- (2) I saw the wild rose stand
- (3) Beside the green gate of the summer hills
- (4) And, pulling at her dress.
- (5) I cried, "Sweet hermitess,
- (6) Hast thou beheld Him who the dew distills?"

Alice Cary, "The Sure Witness"

2. In lines (1) and (2), the poet uses
 - a. hyperbole
 - b. alliteration
 - c. personification
 - d. simile
3. In line (5), "Sweet hermitess" represents which of the following?
 - a. personification
 - b. metonymy
 - c. oxymoron
 - d. metaphor

- (1) The curved strand of cool, gray sand
- (2) Lies like a sickle by the sea:
- (3) The tide is low, but, soft and slow,
- (4) Is creeping higher up the lea.

John W. Chadwick, "By the Seashore"

4. In which line does the poet use a simile?
 - a. Line (1)
 - b. Lines (1) and (2)
 - c. Line (3)
 - d. Lines (3) and (4)

LESSON 3

Imagery

Using language to convey impressions or representations to the reader's senses is called imagery. These sensual experiences may range from pictorial images to emotional responses. Basically, an individual's five senses are involved in imagery: sight, smell, taste, hearing, and touch.

The poet employs imagery by using figures of speech and other poetic devices, such as alliteration. Alliteration is the repetition of initial consonant sounds in two or more neighboring words or syllables.

EXAMPLE: The wild and wooly dog died on the long lonely trail.

This appeals to our sense of hearing.

Imagery is widely used in poetry. Its major uses are for making comparisons, aiding in interpretations, causing sensual reactions on the part of the reader, and allowing the poet to express what she or he wishes. Seldom is imagery used just for decoration. Often, there is no other way a poet may express specific thoughts.

EXERCISE 3

Read the following selections. Then circle the best possible answer to each question.

- (1) Season of mists and mellow fruitfulness,
- (2) Close bosom-friend of the maturing sun;
- (3) Conspiring with him how to load and bless
- (4) With fruit the vines that round the thatch-eves run;
- (5) To blend with apples the mossed cottage-trees,
- (6) And fill all fruit with ripeness to the core;
- (7) To swell the gourd, and plump the hazel shells
- (8) With a sweet kernel; to set budding more,
- (9) And still more, later flowers for the bees,
- (10) Until they think warm days will never cease,
- (11) For Summer has o'er-brimmed their clammy cells.

John Keats, "To Autumn"

1. In line (11) "clammy cells" gives which of the following sensations?
 - a. hunger
 - b. heat
 - b. sadness
 - d. cold
2. The poet appeals to which particular sense in this selection?
 - a. sight
 - b. taste
 - b. hearing
 - d. touch

- (1) St. Agnes' Eve – Ah, bitter chill it was!
- (2) The owl, for all his feathers, was a-cold;
- (3) The hare limp'd trembling through the frozen grass,

John Keats, "The Eve of St. Agnes"

3. Lines (1) – 3) appeal to the sense of touch by evoking an image of
 - a. heat
 - c. pain
 - b. cold
 - d. gentleness
4. Lines (2) and (3) appeal to which sense other than touch?
 - a. smell
 - c. sight
 - b. taste
 - d. hearing

LESSON 4

Symbolism

A symbol is a word used by a poet to represent or suggest something other than the literal meaning of the word. The meaning of a symbol depends upon the identification or definition which the poet intends the object to have. Symbolic words quite often describe concrete objects but represent something abstract.

We are all familiar with everyday symbols. For example, the American flag symbolizes freedom and liberty, and at the same time it has many other connotations.

Symbolism and imagery both appeal to the senses; however, there is a difference between them. An image represents an object as it is; a symbol represents something else. What the “something else” is depends on the meaning of the poet. It is important not to confuse symbols in a poem with devices of imagery such as metaphors and similes.

Some of the more common symbols used in poetry may be familiar to you. The dove is often used to represent peace. Night is used to represent death. A red rose symbolizes physical love. All symbols, however, depend on the poet’s intention for their meaning.

In reading poetry you must use care because of the endless number of symbols which are possible. However, do not spend all your efforts in searching for hidden meanings. Poetry which uses symbolism often has meaning on two levels—the obvious and the hidden. Understanding one level of meaning in a poem may help you to discover the other.

EXERCISE 4

Read the following selections. Then circle the best possible answer for each question.

- (1) The red rose whispers of passion
- (2) And the white rose breathes of love;
- (3) O, the red rose is a falcon,
- (4) And the white rose is a dove.

John B. O'Reilly, "A White Rose"

1. What are two symbols in this selection?
 - a. passion and love
 - b. roses
 - c. whispers and breaths
 - d. white rose and passion

2. What is the symbol for passion (physical love) in the selection?
 - a. dove
 - b. white rose
 - c. red rose
 - d. falcon

3. Lines (3) and (4) make use of which of the following figures of speech?
 - a. metaphor
 - b. simile
 - c. apostrophe
 - d. metonymy

- (1) O Rose, thou art sick!
- (2) The invisible worm
- (3) That flies in the night
- (4) In the howling storm,
- (5) Has found out thy bed
- (6) Of crimson joy,
- (7) And his dark secret love
- (8) Does thy life destroy.

William Blake, "The Sick Rose"

4. What two major symbols are used in this poem?
 - a. howling storm and secret love
 - b. rose and worm
 - c. bed and joy
 - d. night and bed