**Basic Definition**

* Poetry is the most compressed form of literature.
* Poetry is composed of carefully chosen words expressing great depth of meaning.
* Poetry uses specific devices such as connotation, sound, and rhythm to express the appropriate combination of meaning and emotion.

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| There are two basic types of poetry:  traditional - follows standard rules of grammar and syntax with a regular rhythm and rhyme scheme.  modern - avoids rhyme and standard grammatical organization and seeks new ways of expression. |

Regardless of whether it is traditional or modern poetry, the subject of a poem can be anything.  It could be about something as intense as child birth, or as mundane as waiting at a bus stop.  Since there are so many poems written about the important parts of life that affect all humans (marriage, death,  love, and the natural world), there are names for poems with these subjects.  Clearly, not all poems fit into these categories.

* epithalamium - a poem that celebrates a wedding
* elegy - a poem that remembers the dead
* pastoral - a poem describing the joys or sorrows of living close to nature and away from the city
* love - a poem filled with expressions of joy, despair, passion, romance, spirituality, religion or unrequited love.

**Analyzing Poetry:**

You analyze a poem to *arrive at an intelligent interpretation* and *understand what you read*.

**A Rule!**

A poem should be read several times in order to "hear" it and feel its emotions. The more times you read the poem, the more you can analyze and understand subtle shades of meaning in a poem. These shades of meaning are often conveyed through specific poetic devices, or "parts" of the poem.

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| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| |  |  | | --- | --- | | Parts of a Poem: | | | * speaker * audience * subject * tone * theme | * diction * imagery * figures of speech * sound * rhythm | |

* **speaker** - the created narrative voice of the poem (i.e. the person the reader is supposed to imagine is talking).

The speaker is NOT necessarily the poet. The poet often invents a speaker for the poem in order to give him/hererself more freedom to compose the poem.

When the poet creates another character to be the speaker, that character is called the persona.

* + persona - A character created by the poet to narrate the poem. By creating a persona, the poet imagines what it is like to enter someone else's personality.

When the poet uses one persona to narrate the entire poem, the poem is called a dramatic monologue.

* + dramatic monologue - a poem in which the poet uses a persona, or a narrative voice other than his own, to tell the entire poem. These tend to sound like one-sided conversations, like the character is talking to him/herself.
* **audience** - the person or people to whom the speaker is speaking.  Identifying the audience within a poem helps you to understand the poem better. There are different people the speaker can address in the poem:
  + The speaker can address another character in the poem.
  + The speaker can address a character who is not present or is dead, which is called apostrophe.
  + The speaker can address you, the reader.
* **subject** - the general or specific topic of the poem (what the poem is about).
* **tone** - the poet's attitude toward the subject of the poem (this may be different from the speaker's attitude). We can identify the **tone** of the poem by noting the author's use of poetic devices such as [diction](http://depts.gallaudet.edu/englishworks/literature/poetry.html#diction#diction), [rhythm](http://depts.gallaudet.edu/englishworks/literature/poetry.html#rhythm#rhythm) and [syntax](http://depts.gallaudet.edu/englishworks/literature/poetry.html#syntax#syntax)
* **theme** - The statement the poem/poet makes about its subject.  (*Theme* for poetry has a slightly different meaning than [theme for a work of fiction](file:///C:\englishworks!\literature\fiction.html#theme)).
* **diction** - the poet's choice of words. The poet chooses each word carefully so that both its meaning and sound contribute to the tone and feeling of the poem. The poet must consider a word's:
  + denotation - its definition according to the dictionary
  + connotation - the emotions, thoughts and ideas associated with and evoked by the word.

Some words are neutral, but can have negative or positive connotations. For example, the word *island* is neutral. When it refers to a vacation on a Greek *island*, the word has positive connotations. When it describes being shipwrecked on an *island*, the word has negative connotations. Also, words associated with smell can be either positive or negative. For example, "scent" is positive, while "odor" is negative.

**Here is an example of some neutral words and their positive and negative connotations:**

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| **Neutral** | **Positive** | **Negative** |
| **island** | **vacation** | **shipwrecked** |
| **smell** | **scent** | **odor** |
| **teenager** | **young citizen** | **delinquent** |
| **house** | **home** | **dump** |

* **syntax** - the organization of words, phrases and clauses, i.e. the word order. Finding the right syntax for a poem is like finding the right light before you take a photograph. If the order of the words is "wrong," the emotional, psychological, and/or spiritual impact of the words will be lost. After reading the example below you will "feel" the impact of the "right order."

**Syntax examples:**

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| "wrong" order | "right" order |
| "At fourteen I married My Lord, you." | "I married you, My Lord, at fourteen." |
| "Thirty-five years I lived with my husband." | "I lived with my husband for thirty-five years"  (William Carlos Williams). |

* **imagery** - words and phrases used specifically to help the reader to imagine each of the senses: smell, touch, sight, hearing, and taste.

 Each of these types of imagery has a specific name:

* + olfactory imagery stimulates the sense of smell.
  + tactile imagery stimulates the sense of touch.
  + visual imagery stimulates the sense of sight.
  + auditory imagery stimulates the sense of hearing.
  + gustatory imagery stimulates the sense of taste.
  + kinesthesia is imagery that recreates a feeling of physical action or natural bodily function (like a pulse, a heartbeat, or breathing).
  + synaesthesia is imagery that involves the use of one sense to evoke another (Ex: *loud* color; *warm* gesture).

**Examples of two types of imagery:**

* + visual imagery -     From "The Widow's Lament in Springtime"

                    "masses of flowers

                    load the cherry branches

                    and color some bushes

                    yellow and some red..."    
                    (William Carlos Williams)

* + auditory imagery -    From "Dover Beach"    
                                "Listen! You hear the grating roar  
                                Of pebbles which the waves draw back, and fling,  
                                At their return, up the high strand,  
                                Begin, and cease, and then again begin,  
                                With tremulous cadence slow, and bring  
                                The eternal note of sadness in."    
                                (Matthew Arnold)
* **figures of speech** - poetic devices in which two images or objects are compared to make language interesting and meaningful. The poet uses common expressions in original and creative ways to compare objects and makes the poem more interesting and meaningful.

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| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| |  |  | | --- | --- | | Examples of figures of speech: | | | * + simile   + metaphor   + personification   + anthropomorphism   + synecdoche   + metonymy | * + allusion   + symbolism   + verbal irony   + overstatement   + understatement   + paradox   + oxymoron | |

* + **simile** - a comparison that uses the words *like* or *as*, or a verb like *seems* or *appears* to draw two objects or images into a relationship.

Example 1:     Your eyes are **as** blue as the sky.

                         You eat **like** a bird.

Example 2:       "Harlem"

                           What happens to a dream deferred?

                            Does it dry up  
                            like a raisin in the sun?  
                            Or fester like a sore-  
                            And then run?  
                            Does it stink like rotten meat?  
                            Or crust and sugar over-  
                            like a syrupy sweet?

                            Maybe it just sags  
                            like a heavy load.

                            Or does it explode?  
(Langston Hughes)

Hughes uses five different similes in this poem.  He compares unfulfilled dreams to a raisin, a sore, rotten meat, a syrupy sweet, and a heavy load.  Through these similes, Hughes paints a picture of a dream that is cast aside, and lies rotting and decaying.

* + **metaphor** - functions the same way simile does, except that the comparison is more implied and the words *like* or *as* are omitted. The verb *to be* is used.   
      Example 1:    Your cheeks are red cherries.

Here, the author does not mean that your cheeks are actually red cherries.  Instead, the metaphor simply conveys that your cheeks are the color of cherries: flushes, bright and red.

Example 2:       "Fame is a Fickle Food"

                            Fame is a fickle food  
                            Upon a shifting plate  
                            Whose table once a  
                            Guest but not  
                            The second time is set.

                            Whose crumbs the crows inspect  
                            And with ironic caw  
                            Flap past it to the Famer's Corn--  
                            Men eat of it and die.    
                            (Emily Dickinson)

In this example, Dickinson's entire poem is a metaphor about fame.  She compares fame to a food that is given to a man only once, and causes death.  Unlike the first example, she uses all nine lines of the poem to expand her metaphor.

**personification** - a type of metaphor that gives living qualities to inanimate objects or abstract ideas; or human qualities (feelings, thoughts) to animals.  It gives non-living things and animals the ability to think, feel emotions, or have human relationships.

Example 1:    The moon smiles. Fires rage.  
                        The wind vexes the lake and the waves crash angrily.

Example 2:    "The Wind"   (by James Stephens)

                         The wind stood up, and gave a shout;  
                         He whistled on his fingers, and

                         Kicked the withered leaves about,  
                         And thumped the branches with his hand,

                         And said he'd kill, and kill, and kill;  
                         And so he will!  And so he will!

Stephens' poem personifies the wind as a cruel, abusive man.  Though he never says directly that the wind is a man, it is apparent through his word choice, and the actions that he attributes to the wind (standing, shouting, whistling, speaking, etc).

* + **anthropomorphism** - a kind of personification that gives human attributes to something not human, such as parts of nature, abstract ideas, or, in particular, deities.   
    Example 1:    Referring to the Earth as a maternal figure:   
                                           "Mother Earth."  
                            Referring to a ship as a female:   
                                            "She rides the waves well."

Example 2:    From "Because I Could Not Stop for Death"

                    "Because I could not stop for Death--  
                     He kindly stopped for me--  
                    The Carriage held but just Ourselves--  
                    And Immortality."  (Emily Dickinson)

By using anthropomorphism, Dickinson makes Death and Immortality seem like people.  Dickinson gives human attributes and actions to Death, a non-human thing.  She creates the image of Death driving a carriage and kindly stopping by to pick her up and take her with him.  She also makes Immortality seem human by introducing him as another passenger in the carriage.

* + **synecdoche** - a form of metaphor where one part stands for the whole, or the whole is substituted for one part. In other words, we speak of something by naming only a part of it.

Examples:    "Robby got wheels this summer."   
                                           wheels = car

                              "All hands were on deck."   
                                     hands = sailors

                              ". . . the hand that wrote the letter . . ."   
                                            hand = person

* + **metonymy** - a play on words based on association. With metonymy, an object is referred to in terms of something closely related to it, yet not actually a part of it (i.e. not synecdoche).  In other words, we comment on something by naming a separate object, but one that is closely associated with the original subject.

Examples:    Queen Elizabeth controlled the crown for years.   
                                                                      the crown = the monarchy

                      He has always loved the stage.   
                                                          the stage = the theater

                      He will follow the cross.   
                                              the cross = Christianity

* **allusion** - a reference made to another literary work, historical event, work of art, or a famous person's quote that adds more depth to the poet's/author's meaning. In fact, all poems retelling old stories are allusive. For example, a modern version of *Casey and the Bat* would allude to the old ballad.   
   Example:    "To An Artist, To Take Heart"    
                  "Slipping in blood, by his own hand, through pride,  
                  Hamlet, Othello, Coriolanus fall.  
                  Upon his bed, however, Shakespeare died,  
                  Having outlived them all."  (Louise Bogan)

These three, Hamlet, Othello, and Coriolanus, are tragic Shakespearean heroes. The first sentence alludes to how the three each died: Hamlet in a duel, Othello by suicide, and Coriolanus' by pride. Shakespeare died a less violent death in his bed.

* **symbolism** - when an author uses an object or idea to suggest more than its literal meaning. A person, place, or event stands for something other than it is, usually something broader or deeper than it is.

The author intentionally uses symbolism in his/her writing. The author selects specific objects, places or things to function as symbols in his/her work in order to expand and deepen the meaning of the piece. The author trusts that the reader will be skilled enough to notice the symbolism.

Example:    "The Sick Rose"

                    O rose, thou art sick!  
                    The invisible worm  
                    That flies in the night,  
                    In the howling storm,

                    Has found out thy bed  
                    Of crimson joy,  
                    And his dark secret love  
                    Does thy life destroy. (William Blake)  
                            

Blake uses the *rose* as a symbol for all that is beautiful, natural and desirable. He uses the *worm* to symbolize the evil that destroys natural beauty and love. The poem is more than a description of an infested flower bed. Because of the symbolism, it suggests that all that is beautiful, natural, and good in the world is being secretly destroyed by something we cannot see. The worm "flies in the night," and then hides beneath the dirt of the flower bed. This means that we cannot see the evil that attacks the purity in the world, nor do we understand its reasoning (Clayes 42).

*However, be aware that the same objects (rose, worm) can be used in many different pieces of literature and can symbolize something different in each one. For example, the word "rose" can be a symbol for sensual love, spiritual love, youth, natural beauty, vulnerability, etc., depending on the author's intention.*

* **verbal irony** - one meaning is stated, but another, antithetical (opposite and opposed) meaning is intended. This subtle irony is dependent on the author's word choice.   
   Example:      From "Of Alphus"    
                      No egg on Friday Alph will eat,  
                      But drunken will he be  
                      On Friday still. Oh, what a pure  
                      Religious man is he!  
                              (Anonymous, 16th Century)

The author does not really mean that Alph is "pure" and "religious," in fact, he means the opposite (Simpson 431). The reader can discern by studying the word choice that the author does not really mean what he appears to be suggesting.  Alph will not eat eggs on Friday, presumably because of the religious rules of the time.  He will, however, get drunk.  One can assume that getting drunk was not in accordance with the religious rules, and therefore, the author is actually pointing out Alph's impurity and sacrilege.

* **overstatement** (hyperbole)- An exaggeration; giving something more or less of a quality than it really has. This term is usually used as a put down, or to discredit what someone is saying.   
   Example:    After so many years, he can still feel the sting of his mother's slap.

He cannot literally feel the sting, but the hyperbole conveys that his mother's slap was a deeply damaging experience.

* **understatement** (litotes, meiosis) - saying something with an overly light tone; the speaker's words convey less emotion than he actually feels.   
   Example:    "I'm really glad that you have come to visit," said the spider to the fly.

The spider is not simply pleased to have a visitor, but is excited to have his next meal trapped in his web.

* **paradox** - a statement that appears to be absurd, untrue, or contradictory, but may actually be true.   
   Example:    From "Death, Be Not Proud, Though Some Have Called Thee"

                     "One short sleep past, we wake eternally,  
                     And death shall be no more; death, thou shalt die."   
                      (John Donne)

It seems impossible that man could live beyond death, and that death itself could die.  However, if one believes in the Christian doctine, it is possible.  The Christian faith teaches that after the body dies, the soul wakes again and lives for eternity.  Therefore, if the passage is examined from a Christian perspective, the "impossible" statement becomes true.

* **oxymoron** - a form of paradox where two contradictory terms are combined in one phrase.   
   Examples:   cold fire                       honest thief  
                        darkly lit  
                        fearful joy

 **sound** - the use of specific vowels, consonants, accents and the combination of these three make up the sound of the poem. Most poetry is composed to be read aloud. Sound devices can influence the reader/listener's perception of the poem both intellectually and emotionally. A couple of sound devices are as follows:

* alliteration - the repetition of the same consonant sounds at the beginnings of words that are near each other in a poem.

Example:  From "A Bird came down the Walk"

     "Than Oars divide the Ocean,  
       Too silver for a seam--  
       Or Butterflies, off Banks of Noon  
       Leap, plashle**ss** a**s** they **s**wim."   
       (Emily Dickinson)

* + rhyme - the effect caused by matching vowel and consonant sounds at the end of words such as *song* and *long*, *hope* and *cope*, *sat* and *cat*, and *love* and *dove*.
  + rhyme scheme - a structural device that uses a pattern of *end rhyme* (where the last words in two or more lines rhyme) in a stanza.   
     Example: Look at the underlined words and match the letters to see the rhyme scheme of abab cdcd efef gg.

"Sonnet XVIII: Shall I Compare Thee to a Summer's Day?"   
         Shall I compare thee to a summer's day?                     a  
         Thou art more lovely and more temperate.                    b  
         Rough winds do shake the darling buds of May,           a  
         And summer's lease hath all too short a date.               b  
         Sometime too hot the eye of heaven shines.                 c  
         And often is his gold complexion dimmed.                    d  
         And every fair from fair sometimes declines.                c  
         By chance or nature's changing course untrimmed.     d  
         But thy eternal summer shall not fade,                            e  
         Nor lose possession of that fair thou owest,                   f  
         Nor shall Death brag thou wander'st in his shade         e  
         When in eternal lines to time thou grow'st.                      f  
         So long as men can breathe, or eyes can see,             g  
         So long lives this, and this gives life to thee.                 g  
          ([William Shakespeare 1609](http://www3.ns.sympatico.ca/educate/shakesp.htm))

* **rhythm** - the repetition of stress within a poem. It is the entire movement or flow of the poem as affected by rhyme, stress, diction and organization.
  + meter- the organization of stressed and unstressed syllables in a line of poetry.   
     Example:    I came, I saw, I conquered.

The repeated pattern of unstressed to stressed syllables in the above line tends to move the reader forward, pushing him through the line in a rhythmic, methodic way. This adds to the meaning of the line, implying that the speaker came, saw and conquered quickly and methodically without much thought or emotion.

* + organization - The structure of the poem; the way the verses (lines) are organized on the page.   
     *The organization can impact the poem's rhythm by affecting the flow of the verses.* *Different organizations of verses within a poem make up different length stanzas, or poetic units. Stanzas operate like paragraphs in a story.* *A few types of stanzaic organization are as follows:*  
    - couplets - stanzas of only two lines. Usually, the two lines rhyme.   
       Example:    From "An Essay on Criticism"    
                      "Let such teach others who themselves excel,  
                      And censure freely who have written well."    
                      (Alexander Pope)
    - tercets - stanzas of three lines. The three lines may or may not have the same end rhyme. If all three lines rhyme, the tercet is a triplet (as below).

Example:    From "Upon Julia's Clothes"

                    "Whenas in silks my Julia goes,  
                    Then, then, methinks how sweetly flows  
                    The liquefaction of her clothes."    
                    (George Herbert)

* + - quatrains - stanzas of four lines. The quatrain is the most common form of stanzaic organization. The four lines can be written in any rhyme scheme.

Example:    From "Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard"

                    "The curfew tolls the knell of parting day,  
                    The lowing herd wind slowly o'er the lea,  
                    The plowman homeward plods his weary way,  
                    And leaves the world to darkness and to me."    
                    (Thomas Gray)

* + *Different combinations of meters, rhyme, and organization make up different kinds of verse.*  
    - blank verse - verse that does not rhyme but follows a metric pattern; i.e. iambic pentameter without rhyme (it is empty of rhyme).

Example:       "To one who has been long in city pent

                        'Tis very sweet to look into the fair  
                        And open face of heaven." (John Keats)  
                                             

* + - free verse - lines of poetry strong in rhythm but free of the regular repetitions of rhyme or meter. This kind of poetry is closer to natural speech.

Example 1:    "Musee des Beaux Arts"

About suffering they were never wrong,  
     The Old Masters: how well they understood  
     Its human position; how it takes place  
     While someone else is eating or opening a window or just walking dully along;  
     How, when the aged are reverently, passionately waiting  
     For the miraculous birth, there always must be  
     Children who did not specially want it to happen, skating  
     On a pond at the edge of the wood:  
     They never forgot  
     That even the dreadful martyrdom must run its course  
     Anyhow in a corner, some untidy spot  
     Where the dogs go on with their doggy life and the torturer's horse  
     Scratches its innocent behind on a tree.

     In Brueghel's Icarus, for instance: how everything turns away  
     Quite leisurely from the disaster; the ploughman may  
     Have heard the splash, the forsaken cry,  
     But for him it was not an important failure; the sun shone  
     As it had to on the white legs disappearing into the green  
     Water; and the expensive delicate ship that must have seen  
     Something amazing, a boy falling out of the sky,  
     Had somewhere to get to and sailed calmly on.    
      (W. H. Auden)  
 

Example 2:    "The Red Wheelbarrow"    
                        so much depends  
                        upon

                        a red wheel  
                        barrow

                        glazed with rain  
                        water

                        beside the white  
                        chickens.  
                        (William Carlos Williams)

Clayes, Stanley A. and John Gerrietts. *Ways to Poetry.* New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, Inc., 1975.

Simpson, Louis. *An Introduction to Poetry.* 2nd ed. New York: St. Martin's Press, 1972.