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## What Is Poetry?

What is poetry? One modern poet, perhaps a little vexed by this question, replied that poetry, unlike prose, is a form of writing in which few lines run to the edge of the page. Although this half-facetious response may have been intended to force the questioner to formulate his own definition of poetry, it also expresses how difficult it is to distinguish between poetry and prose on any grounds other than their appearance on the printed page. All imaginative literature—whether poetry, prose, or drama—is primarily concerned with human feelings and attitudes. This is why literature is one of the humanities. And nearly all great literature tries to recreate human experiences that involve the reader emotionally and intellectually. What then makes poetry unique and important? What is poetry?

Let us begin our study of poetry by considering a sentence in prose: "So much depends upon a red wheelbarrow, glazed with rain water, beside the white chickens." After a brief puzzled frown, few readers would give that sentence a second thought. It is certainly not a poem. Or is it? When the words are arranged somewhat differently on paper, they do take on the appearance of poetry:

### THE RED WHEELBARROW

so much depends  
upon

a red wheel  
barrow

glazed with rain  
water

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J.H. Pickering & J.D. Hooper

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beside the white  
chickens.

In fact, this is a very well-known poem, written by William Carlos Williams and published in 1923.

Only two things have changed: we now know that the words were written by a well-known poet, and their arrangement on paper is different. Perhaps in principle we should not be influenced by our knowledge of the author's name. After all, a good poem should be able to stand on its own merits. In practice, however, we *do* look more closely at words—even apparently ordinary words—if we know that they were written by a famous poet. Hence Robert Frost once contended that “poetry is the kind of thing poets write.”

If “The Red Wheelbarrow” is a poem, then its poetic nature must somehow grow out of the interplay between the meaning of the words and their arrangement on paper. It turns out, in fact, that this relationship between form and content is one of the key characteristics of poetry. But how does the arrangement of these words—their *form*, if you will—relate to meaning in this particular case? First, we might notice that Williams's rearrangement of the words creates an intriguing visual pun. The first line, “so much depends,” stands out all alone on the page. The rest of the poem quite literally “depends” on that line, in the original sense of *hanging down* from it. Note, too, how the first two lines constitute a *stanza*, a group of lines separated by white space from the other stanzas in the poem. That first stanza does not itself contain any imagery. The content of the poem—however “much” that is—all “depends” upon the first stanza both visually, grammatically, and logically.

Once we begin thinking about form, we might go on to note that there is a pleasing pattern of repetition in the lines. There are four stanzas. In each stanza the first line contains three words while the second line contains only one. Furthermore, Williams continues to play with visual effects. By breaking up the word *wheelbarrow* in the second stanza, Williams arrests the eye. As soon as we form the picture of a “red wheel” in our minds in line 3, line 4 instructs us to transform it into a “red wheel / barrow.” The same sort of thing happens as the rain in line 5 becomes rain water in line 6. Throughout the poem in fact, the first line of each stanza depends upon the second to expand, complement, or even alter the meaning. Thus the form of the poem helps to communicate its message that all things in life are interdependent.

Obviously, “The Red Wheelbarrow” is not a typical poem, but surely any adequate definition of poetry must allow its inclusion. Hence, we can reach one conclusion about part of the definition of poetry: **a poem is a composition that makes you think about words and their arrangement.**

Furthermore, if “The Red Wheelbarrow” is a poem, we can reach five other conclusions about what poetry is not.

1. **Poetry is not always rhymed.** “The Red Wheelbarrow” is unrhymed. Most of the great poetic passages in the plays of Shakespeare are unrhymed. Milton's *Paradise Lost* is unrhymed. So much of the poetry of the twentieth century is unrhymed that the return to traditional forms (including rhyme) by contemporary poets is seen as a surprising new trend.

2. **Poetry is not always metrical.** While we have noted a pattern in the structure of “The Red Wheelbarrow,” the lines do not sustain any particular

rhythm. Despite Edgar Allan Poe's contention that “poetry is the rhythmical creation of beauty,” formal rhythmic patterns, or meters, are no more necessary than rhyme in great poetry. A composition in meter and rhyme is entitled to be called verse, but not necessarily poetry. Nursery rhymes like “Jack and Jill” or “Twinkle, Twinkle Little Star” are not poetry; nor are the facile verses on greeting cards. Poetry is *often* metrical, but it need not always be.

3. **Poetry is not always concerned with beauty.** William Carlos Williams's lines on the red wheelbarrow may strike readers as funny, or pretentious, or simply matter-of-fact, but it is a rare reader who would cry out at the beauty of this description. Generally, the goal of a poet is to recreate human experience as vividly, powerfully, and originally as possible. Sometimes the poet seeks to make the words beautiful, as Edgar Allan Poe does in “Annabel Lee” (1850) or as John Keats does in his “Ode to a Nightingale” (1819). But often the subject of the poem itself is distinctly unbeautiful and the poem, in keeping with its subject, sounds harsh, grating, or downright ugly. How else could Wilfred Owen write about a mustard gas attack during World War I in “Dulce et Decorum Est” (1920)? How else could Jonathan Swift describe a grimy eighteenth-century street in “A Description of the Morning” (1709)?

4. **Poetry is not always high-toned and moral.** In “The Red Wheelbarrow” Williams makes what some may consider a pompous pronouncement about rain water and white chickens, but the moral significance of the lines—if indeed they have any—is certainly not apparent. Since great poetry always involves human perceptions and human experiences, there is perhaps always a moral and ethical dimension to poetry. Yet good poetry is rarely preachy. When Robert Browning, for example, describes a bizarre sexual strangulation in “Porphyria's Lover” (1836), or a cruel, tyrannical duke in “My Last Duchess” (1842), or a petty, spiteful monk in “Soliloquy of the Spanish Cloister” (1842), he lets the characters speak for themselves, and he lets the readers reach whatever moral conclusions they wish.

5. **Poetry is not always profound.** William Carlos Williams wrote only sixteen words in “The Red Wheelbarrow.” Although most of us accept that poetry is more concentrated than ordinary speech, we expect too much if we expect great profundity from only sixteen words. Nevertheless, Williams does challenge us to think for ourselves about the significance of the wheelbarrow, the rain water, and the chickens. When we do so, we may well conclude with Thomas Dilworth that these three images “suggest the major components of agrarian life—which may, in turn, suggest all civilized life in its practical aspect. The wheelbarrow represents human labor and ingenuity; the chickens represent animals bred for human nourishment; and the rain represents the life-giving natural elements. The interrelationship of these components makes possible civilized life.”<sup>1</sup> While some may object that Dilworth's analysis is fabricating symbols in order to make the poem seem more significant than it is, we are probably all willing to grant that Williams's poem is capable of stimulating us to think about the interdependence of life. If the poem itself is not profound, it may nonetheless cause us to think about life a bit more deeply.

So far our quest to define poetry leaves us in much the same predicament first described by the great eighteenth-century critic and lexicographer Samuel

<sup>1</sup> “Williams' ‘The Red Wheelbarrow,’” *The Explicator*, 40 (Summer 1982): 40–41.

2. What kind of stomach is capable of digesting "Rubber, coal, uranium, moons, poems"? Is there anything particularly American about that list of indigestibles?
3. Do you think that poetry is anything like a shark? Explain your opinion.
4. How can a shark (or a poem) "swim for miles through the desert"? Is this paradox appropriate in a description of poetry or the task of an American poet?
5. Why are the cries of the poet (or the poem) "almost human"?

As the previous examples illustrate, poets throughout the ages have differed in their assumptions about the genre, and it is unrealistic to expect a single definition of poetry to serve equally well for all periods in literary history. If we stand outside the spectrum of history, we can see how one view dominates an age only to give way to another. So long as poetry remains a vital form of human expression, we can expect that its techniques and purposes will continue to change.

What is poetry? We ask again. Although we may be unable to answer this question for all time, we can summarize those elements in the definition of poetry that have remained nearly constant throughout the ages.

**Poetry, like all literature, attempts to communicate an author's emotional and intellectual responses to his or her own existence and to the surrounding world.** It is an expression of what is thought and felt, rather than what is known as fact. It depends on observation, just as science does, but poetry draws comparisons between phenomena that science might find distant and unrelated. When Keats wishes to share his emotions upon first reading Chapman's translation of Homer's poetry, he finds an apt metaphor in the conquistador's silent wonder at the vast Pacific Ocean. When MacLeish wishes to describe the unity and concreteness of poetry, he uses a vivid comparison: "A poem should be palpable and mute / As a globed fruit." Such comparisons require a bold leap of imagination in both the poet and the reader. When they are effective, they reproduce emotions in the reader similar to those actually experienced by the author. Thus, **poetry is fundamentally metaphoric and is capable of communicating in very few words thoughts and emotions of great complexity.**

Prose literature, of course, is capable of achieving everything suggested in the preceding paragraph. As a result of modern experiments with free verse and the increasing literary artistry of short story writers and novelists, the distinctions between poetry and prose are often slight and sometimes blurred. Hence, all of the techniques of poetry can, on occasion, be properly considered in the critical explication of fiction and drama. However, poetry ordinarily does differ from prose in several significant ways. First, **poetry provides a traditionally accepted format (in ballads, lyrics, odes, and sonnets) for the publication of short but independent pieces of narration, description, or reflection.** Second, "poetic license" permits verse to depart on occasion from the standard rules of logic and grammar governing ordinary prose. Third, **poetry tends to make more use than prose of symbolism, imagery, and figures of speech.** And finally, **poetry relies more heavily than prose on the sound and rhythm of speech and hence often employs both rhyme and meter.**

The formal patterns of meter and rhyme, which continue to dominate poetry

despite modern experiments with free verse, place obvious restrictions on the poet's choice of words. The poet must write carefully and reflectively in order to find words that not only fulfill the demands of meter and rhyme, but also express the meaning in a manner that complements the imagery and tone of the rest of the poem. This careful use of language is the most significant difference between ordinary prose and poetry. The ordinary prose writer neatly builds an argument using words the way a mason builds a house using bricks; the poet is a craftsman who creates a fieldstone hearth—each stone or each word is turned over, examined, and often laid aside until it can be placed where its shape, weight, and color will contribute to the strength and beauty of the whole. **Prose, according to Samuel Taylor Coleridge, is "words in their best order," and poetry is "the best words in their best order."**

Very little of the poetry of any age comes up to the high standards set in the previous paragraph. Even great poets write relatively few great poems, and our disappointment in the inferior works of notable poets is often greater than it is in the secondary works of great novelists. This, too, points out a difference between prose and poetry. Mediocre prose is often enjoyable in much the same way that a walk in the city can be enjoyable even though it is not so fresh and invigorating as a hike through the wilderness. But if prose is like walking, then poetry is like riding. Either the rider or his mount will have control over the rhythm, the pace, and the direction of the journey. When the horse is in command—that is, when the meter and rhyme govern the poet—the ride will be uneven, misdirected, unintelligible, and sometimes fearsome. When the rider is in control—that is, when the poet fully controls the rhythm and sound—the gait will be swift, smooth, graceful, and elegant.

In the preceding paragraphs we have compared the poet with an artisan and an equestrian. Both comparisons convey something about the essential quality of poetry. Perhaps, however, they emphasize too strongly the skill of the poet and not strongly enough the skills that are necessary in an appreciative reader. Poetry shares with all other literary genres the fact that it is a form of communication between the author and the reader. It depends as much on the good will, intelligence, and experience of the latter as on the genius of the former. Robert Frost once said that writing free verse is like playing tennis with the net down. Regardless of whether we agree with Frost's implied criticism of free verse, his remark underscores the fact that poetry is a game played according to established rules between poet and form and also between poet and reader. In order to play the game, in order to understand poetry, one must first learn the rules.