Introduction

Poetry, in many ways, defies definition. Any restrictions would disqualify some works that are, nevertheless, poetry. The only statement about poetry that we can make with absolute certainty is that good poetry uses what is known as “compressed language.” That means that it says a lot but uses few words to do so. Every word is very valuable; the poets make their choices only after much deliberation, and we must understand each word to grasp the meanings of the poems.

This word compression is the primary reason that most students claim not to understand poetry. Students who are accustomed to skimming over their lessons once and dashing off correct answers in record time will find that poetry asks much more of us than this. It invites us to calm down, sit still, and think. Speed and accuracy are invaluable in mathematical computation but useless in poetry appreciation. You must not be frustrated or feel like a failure when (not if) you find it necessary to read a poem several times. This repetitive activity is standard operating procedure for the study of any art.

This guide takes a topical approach to the study of poetry, rather than an historical approach. It focuses on the elements of poetry and selected forms. As you study an element, you will consider specific poems that are particularly good examples of that element. However, almost all poems will contain most of the elements that you study. Therefore, after completing a portion of the guide on a particular element, such as sound devices, you should be able to identify and discuss that element in relation to the poems you study subsequently.

Some poetry study guides approach the study of poetry from an historical perspective. They will begin with the early epic poems like *Beowulf, The Iliad,* and *The Odyssey,* then move forward through Shakespeare’s time and those following him. To compensate for dropping this historical approach, we have provided a timeline on pages 10 and 11 for you to use in the course of your study. Every time you read a new poem, make a notation on the timeline. Include the poet’s name, the approximate date of the poem (or use the middle of the poet’s life), and the type of poem. The first poem we will consider, “Abou Ben Adhem,” has been added as your example.
Finally, poetry is primarily an auditory experience. From earliest history, poetry was transferred to subsequent generations through oral presentation. You, too, should read aloud the poems studied here. They will yield their meanings more readily that way, and you will enjoy them more.
Historical Timeline

Medieval Poetry
400–1500AD

In Europe, epic poems, such as Beowulf, were written until about 1000 AD, when lyrical poetry began to flourish and troubadours performed at court. Much of this poetry reflects the centrality of the church in European life.

Major poets: Dante, Chaucer.

Ancient Poetry
until 400AD

Many ancient cultures composed poetry. Both ancient Greeks and Romans wrote epics and love poems. The Greek epics The Iliad and The Odyssey were written about 700 BC. The ancient Hebrews wrote the lyrical poems that we know as the Psalms and Song of Songs (Song of Solomon).

Major poets: Homer, Virgil, King David, Ovid, Catullus, and Juvenal.

Renaissance Poetry
1450–1650

Europe experienced outstanding cultural achievement during this period and poetry flourished. New forms were developed and poets began to write in their native languages instead of the more formal Latin.

Neoclassical Poetry
1660–1800

The poets of this period tried to recapture the ideals of classicism in the ancients. They translated many of the classics and used elegant language in their own works.

**Major poets:** John Dryden, Alexander Pope.

Modern Poetry
1850–present

In the mid-19th century, French symbolists, reacting to realistic and naturalistic poetic styles, wrote poems which emphasized the importance of the sound of the verse, creating music through words. Their poetry was intense, complex, and full of symbolic imagery. They had an influence on later poets, who began to use varied rhythms of everyday speech to make poetry more like spoken language. Some poets continued to use traditional forms as well.

**Major poets:** Walt Whitman, Emily Dickinson, Ezra Pound, William Carlos Williams, T. S. Eliot, Dylan Thomas, Robert Frost, Wallace Stevens.

Romantic Poetry
1798–1850

The poets of this period, to quote William Wordsworth, viewed poetry as “the spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings.” They wrote about things they had actually experienced using simple language, focusing on everyday subjects (particularly nature), and stressing the expression of personal emotions. They were influenced by Charles Darwin’s work and expressed doubt about traditional religious values.

**Major poets:** William Wordsworth, Samuel Taylor Coleridge, William Blake, John Keats, Lord Byron, Percy Bysshe Shelley.
List of Poems Studied

In Alphabetical Order by Title:

Annabel Lee ............................................. Edgar Allen Poe
A Red, Red Rose ........................................ Robert Burns
Abou Ben Adhem ....................................... Leigh Hunt
Acquainted with the Night ............................. Robert Frost
Because I Could Not Stop for Death .................. Emily Dickinson
Builders, The ........................................... Henry Wadsworth Longfellow
Charge of the Light Brigade, The ....................... Alfred, Lord Tennyson
Cinq Ans Après ........................................ Gelett Burgess
Destruction of Sennacherib, The ......................... Lord Byron
Do Not Go Gentle Into that Good Night ............ Dylan Thomas
Dream Deferred ........................................ Langston Hughes
Holy Sonnet XIV ......................................... John Donne
I Died for Beauty ....................................... Emily Dickinson
I Hear America Singing ................................ Walt Whitman
I’m Nobody! Who are You? .............................. Emily Dickinson
In a Station of the Metro ................................. Ezra Pound
I Wandered Lonely as a Cloud ......................... William Wordsworth
Lart, 1910 ............................................... Ezra Pound
Mending Wall ............................................ Robert Frost
New Colossus, The ..................................... Emma Lazarus
Noiseless Patient Spider, A ............................ Walt Whitman
On His Blindness ....................................... John Milton
Passionate Shepherd to His Love, The ............... Christopher Marlowe
Purple Cow, The ....................................... Gelett Burgess
Red Wheelbarrow, The ................................. William Carlos Williams
Requiem .................................................... Robert Louis Stevenson
Richard Cory ............................................. Edward Arlington Robinson
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Road Not Taken, The .................................................. Robert Frost
She Walks in Beauty .................................................. Lord Byron
Sir Patrick Spens ...................................................... Anonymous
Sonnet XVIII (Shall I compare thee to a summer’s day?) ....... William Shakespeare
Sonnet CXVI (Let me not to the marriage of true minds) ....... William Shakespeare
Sonnet CXXX (My mistress’ eyes are nothing like the sun) ....... William Shakespeare
Still Here .............................................................. Langston Hughes
Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening .......................... Robert Frost
Sympathy ............................................................... Paul Laurence Dunbar
This is Just to Say ...................................................... William Carlos Williams
Tyger, The .............................................................. William Blake
To Celia ................................................................. Ben Jonson
To Lucasta, Going to the Wars ...................................... Richard Lovelace
To My Dear and Loving Husband ................................... Anne Bradstreet
To the Virgins, to Make Much of Time ............................. Robert Herrick
Trees ................................................................. Joyce Kilmer
Upon Julia’s Clothes ............................................... Robert Herrick
Village Blacksmith, The ........................................... Henry Wadsworth Longfellow
We Wear the Mask .................................................. Paul Laurence Dunbar
When I Was One-and-Twenty .................................... A. E. Housman
**Part One:**

**Types of Poetry**

Poetry can be divided into three broad types: *narrative*, *lyric*, and *dramatic*. These types can be further divided into more specific categories.

**Narrative poems** tell stories. Like prose stories, narratives have a plot and characters. *Epics* are long narratives that tell of the deeds of heroes in battle or conflict. They are probably the oldest type of poetry. *The Iliad, The Odyssey,* and *Beowulf* are all examples of epic narratives. Another type of narrative is the *ballad*, a poem about a particular person who is not necessarily a hero.

**Lyric poems** are defined as short poems that express the thoughts and feelings of the speaker. Most of the poems in this study are lyric poems. There are many types of lyric poems. An *ode* is a serious lyric of elaborate praise or strong emotion for the subject. An *elegy* is a poem that meditates on life and death, sometimes speaking about the death of a particular person. Some forms of lyric poems are the *sonnet, villanelle, haiku,* and *limerick*, all of which you will study.

**Dramatic poems** are those that are written to be performed on a stage with a cast of actors. William Shakespeare’s plays are the best examples of these poems. After this study, you will be able to identify the poetic elements in those plays.

**Exercise I:**

Read “Abou Ben Adhem,” by Leigh Hunt (BLP, 32) and “The Road Not Taken,” by Robert Frost (BLP, 84). (“Abou Ben Adhem” is pronounced a-BOO ben AH-dum.)

1. Which of these is *narrative* and which is *lyrical*?
2. Symbolism is the use of one word or image to stand for another image or idea. What is the road a symbol for?

3. Many people interpret “The Road Not Taken” as praise for individualism, or doing things one’s own way. Do you agree or disagree with this interpretation? Explain your response.

4. How does the poet think he will be telling his story in the coming ages? Why will this be so?

5. How do you, personally, come to a decision between two options?

6. Read Luke 6:12–16 and Acts 1:15–26. In the passage from Luke, what does Jesus do before choosing his twelve disciples? In the passage from Acts, what do Peter and the other disciples do before choosing the replacement for Judas? What do these two scenes suggest should be a part of decision-making?
Part Two:
Elements of Poetry

Lines

The most apparent difference between prose and poetry is the length of the line. Prose begins at the left margin and marches relentlessly to the right. Poetry may or may not start at the left margin and it almost never gets all the way across the page. Poets deliberately choose when to end their lines to accentuate some idea or for a special visual effect. Sometimes, a poet will end a line of poetry with a punctuation mark such as a comma or a period, but at other times she will end a line in the middle of a thought allowing the thought to continue to the next line. This is called *enjambment*, the French word for “run-on.”

Scholars have long debated whether to read poetry as one does prose: without pausing until one reaches punctuation indicating a pause. This technique has been popular in past years, but it does destroy the importance of the line itself. The better method is to pause briefly at the end of a line, but not long enough that any rhyme is emphasized too prominently or that the meaning becomes unclear. Think of pauses in this way: a period is worth a full pause, a comma is worth a half-pause, and a line ending is a one-fourth pause.

Exercise II:

Read “She Walks in Beauty” (BLP, 33) aloud, pausing briefly at the end of each line or longer if the punctuation indicates. Circle the words that are unclear to you and look up their meanings in a dictionary.
1. Define these words as they are used in the context of the poem:
   a. aspect—
   b. gaudy—
   c. climes—

2. How many occurrences of enjambment are there? How many lines end with some kind of punctuation mark? How many lines contain internal (within the line) punctuation?

3. A stanza is a group of lines. Stanzas are separated by a blank line. How many stanzas occur in “She Walks in Beauty”?

4. What type of poem is this?

5. This poem contains many contrasting images of light and dark. Find three instances.
6. Is the poet talking primarily about the subject's outward or inner beauty? What words or phrases provide evidence for this?

7. What does the poet say are the results of his subject’s inwardly beautiful life?

8. Read 1 Peter 3:3–4. According to these verses, where should beauty come from? What does it mean to have a “gentle and quiet spirit”?

9. Refer to the information on Romantic poetry on the timeline at the front of this guide. How is this poem typical of Romantic poetry?