

Chapter 13

Short text – poetry

The material covered in this chapter helps meet the requirements for Achievement Standard 90378 (English 2.4) ‘Analyse short written texts’ by outlining and explaining the following aspects of poetry texts:

- What is poetry?
- What makes poetry unique as a literary form?
- Sound and visual patterning in poetry.
- Poetic language and diction.
- Tone and mood in poetry.
- Poetic themes.
- Responding to poetry.
- Carrying out a theme study – ‘Personal experiences of war’.

Achievement Standard 90378 (English 2.4) requires that at least two poems be analysed for assessment (*or* one poem and another short text, eg short story).

What is poetry?

‘A poem should not mean but be.’ Archibald MacLeish.

‘Poetry is a search of the inexplicable.’ Wallace Stevens.

‘When in public, poetry should take off its clothes and wave to the nearest person in sight; it should be seen in the company of thieves and lovers rather than that of journalists and publishers.’ Brian Patten.

‘A poem is a little machine of words.’ William Carlos Williams.

‘Poetry is the language of the imagination.’ William Hazlitt.

‘Poetry is a celebration of life’s possibilities.’ David Holbrook.

These quotations about the nature of poetry from poets and writers show that poetry can be many different things to different people. It is a literary form whose features vary widely, yet which have in common the characteristics of economy and an element of mystery.

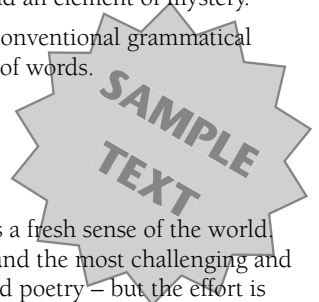
Poetry is distinguished from prose in that it can do without conventional grammatical constructions and can play fast and loose with the meanings of words.

Samuel Taylor Coleridge sums up this difference very well:

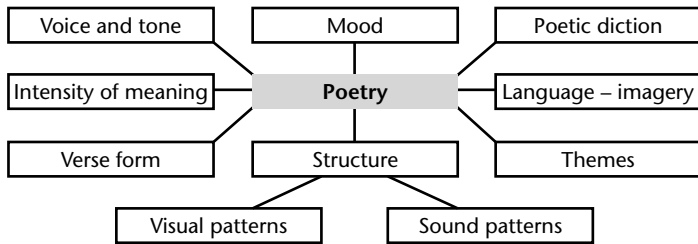
‘Prose: words in their best order.

Poetry: the best words in their best order.’

With this freedom, poetry is capable of opening in its readers a fresh sense of the world. It is at once the most exhilarating and exciting literary form and the most challenging and frustrating. It takes time and effort to reveal the riches in good poetry – but the effort is always worthwhile.



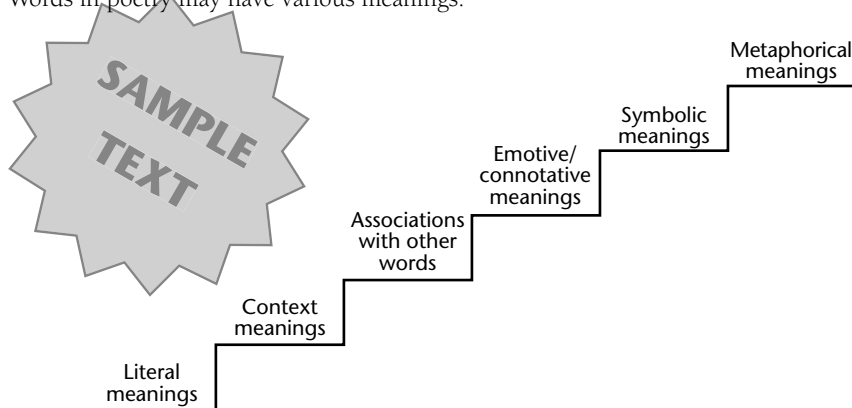
What makes poetry unique as a literary form?



Intensity of meaning

Because poetry, unlike other literary forms, conveys its message within the confines of a small space, its language is much more dense and economical than prose. Every word is carefully chosen and made to work hard, many words using more than one level of meaning.

Words in poetry may have various meanings.



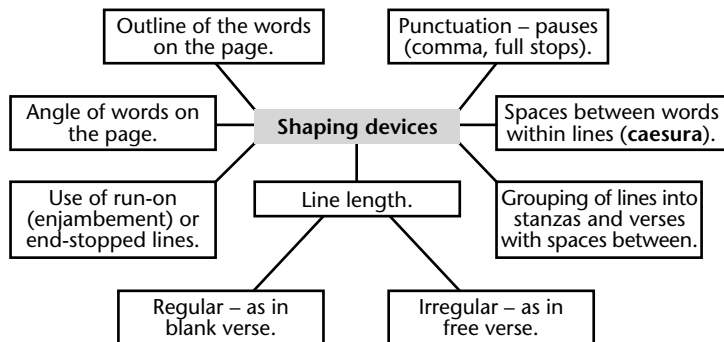
Because meaning in poetry may be presented in such layers, the reader must carefully search for all the possibilities of meaning contained within a work or phrase in order to respond fully to the poem.

The structure of poetry

Poetry uses language in a *patterned* way. *Visual* or *shape* patterns and *sound* patterns work together to intensify meaning. A poet will use a selection of sound and shaping possibilities to recreate experience in words.

Visual or shape patterns

Unlike prose, poetry forms a distinct shape on the page. It is not possible to distinguish some poetry from prose when hearing it read aloud, but when seen on the page it becomes obvious that it has been shaped with great care.



Activity 13A: Visual shaping of a poem

Look carefully at the following poem by New Zealand writer Michele Leggott. Work out *which* of the listed poetic *shaping devices* are featured and how they reinforce meaning. Calligraph means a beautiful specimen of writing. Here it is being compared to a tulip tree in spring.

Calligraph

a character
 meaning
 tangle wood
 a scribble of limbs
 rocking
 rubbing
 in the light spring
 evening

 strokes
 elbows
 oh buds
 here you come
 & the complete figure
 shoots up
 loaded
 alight

 a tulip tree.



Sound Patterns

Rhythm

Rhythm is produced by **metre** (from the Greek work meaning ‘to flow’ or ‘to measure’). Metre refers to the number of stressed beats in a line. The rhythmical patterns in verse are formed by the use of differing combinations of stressed and unstressed syllables.

Traditional analysis of English metre divides poetic lines into combinations of stressed (/) and unstressed (∪) syllables. Every unit of metrical pattern is called a **foot**.

The most common foot in poetry is iamb or iambic (∪ /) – light syllable followed by a stressed one:

∪ / ∪ / ∪ /
because, arrange, escape.

Used in all blank verse, eg Shakespeare's plays.

A *line*, or the metre, is classified according to the number of *stressed* syllables it contains. **Iambic pentameter** is the most common rhythmic pattern in metrical English poetry. Each line contains five stressed beats. Lauris Edmond used it to begin her poem 'Waterfall'.

∪ / ∪ / ∪ / ∪ / ∪ /
I do not ask for youth, nor for delay

How rhythm works

Rhythm depends very much on what combination of syllable patterns are used and where the poet places pauses such as commas and full stops. A poem with no punctuation of lines (called **enjambement** or 'run-on lines') will have a different rhythm from a poem with punctuation at the end of lines (**end-stopped**), even though both are in the same metre.

- The flow or pace of poetry will tend to closely parallel the meaning. Rhythm can be regular or irregular and may change to match the content at any point in a poem.
- *Sprung rhythm* imitates the pattern of conversational speech and therefore is irregular rather than regular.
- Long vowels in words tend to draw out the pace, short vowel words will speed it up.
- Rhythm can be affected by clusters of consonants and the length of words. Polysyllabic words establish a different rhythm to monosyllabic words.

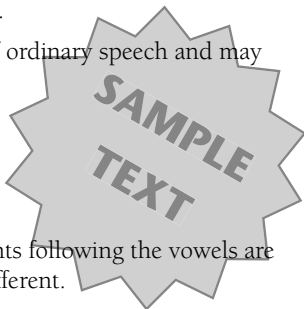
Modern free verse poetry is written in the irregular rhythm of ordinary speech and may sound like talking rather than poetry.

Rhyme

Rhyme is the repetition of identical or closely similar sounds.

Perfect rhymes

- **Exact rhymes** have identical vowel sounds, the consonants following the vowels are the same, but the consonants preceding the vowels are different.
eg song/long, rope/hope
- **Single syllable rhymes** – occur when the rhyming words are monosyllables or have final syllables which are stressed, and differing initial consonant sounds.
eg park/lark, collect, effect
- **Double syllable rhymes** – have stressed rhyming syllables followed by identical unstressed syllables.
eg revival/arrival, hotter/jotter
- **Triple syllable rhymes** – rhymes on three syllables, often in separate words. Identical stressed vowel sounds are followed by two identical unstressed syllables.
eg tenderly/slenderly,
tournaments/ornaments



- **Internal rhyme** – has at least one of the rhyming words *within* the line.
eg ‘let us weep for those who sleep’.

Imperfect rhymes

Imperfect rhymes correspond incompletely and have been the most popular with poets since the twentieth century.

- **Unstressed rhyme** – the rhyming syllable is unstressed.
eg wonder/liver, brothers/flowers
- **Eye rhyme** (or slant rhyme) – the words look alike but are pronounced differently. (They may have rhymed at some time in the past.)
eg rough/bough,
go/do, love/move
- **Partial rhyme** – uses approximately similar sounds.
eg trees/rose,
rocks/wax,
flower/fever

— Page Break —

Activity 13A: Visual shaping of a poem

Outline of words on the page – the shape the words make on the page is like a tulip tree.

Punctuation – there is none, which suggests continuous movement of the growing tulip tree.

Spaces between words – irregular spaces in lines suggest the way tree branches grow as well as the varied sizes of the calligraphic shapes.

Groupings of words and lines and the angle of words on the page – reflects the stages of growth of the tulip tree and the way a calligraphic symbol may be built up.

— Page Break —

Glossary/Index

abbreviation (306): shortened form of a word

abstract noun (49): noun denoting an idea, emotion or concept (*see also* concrete noun)

acronym (306): new word formed using the first letters, or first elements, in the names of organisations and things

active voice (232): verb form in sentences where the subject of the sentence carries out the action of the verb (*see also* passive voice)

adjectival phrase (228): group of words that fulfils the function of an adjective

adjective (227): word that describes a noun or pronoun

adverb (233): word that tells reader/listener more about the meaning of a verb, adjective or another adverb

adverbial phrase (233): group of words performing same function as an adverb

adverbial phrase (235): a group of words that fulfils the function of an adverb

aerial shot (film) (189): filmed from a plane or helicopter

after-dinner speech (277): speech related to a specific occasion

alliteration (139): repetition of initial sound in a group of words

allusion (267): a reference to a famous quotation or incident, often from literature

amelioration (in meaning) (308): occurs when a word or phrase gradually gains more positive or favourable connotations than it had originally