

Literary definitions

Poetry

Here is a definition for you: *Poetry is an imaginative awareness of experience expressed through meaning, sound, and rhythmic language choices so as to evoke an emotional response. Poetry has been known to employ meter and rhyme, but this is by no means necessary. Poetry is an ancient form that has gone through numerous and drastic reinvention over time. The very nature of poetry as an authentic and individual mode of expression makes it nearly impossible to define.*

We do not want you to learn it by heart but to understand what it says!. If you read it carefully you will recognize a number of important characteristics.

- Rhythm plays an important role
- Personal choices in language, words, sounds, rhyme
- Evoke reaction, usually emotional
- Use of text on the page (e.g. stanzas)

Ballad

A ballad is a primitive form of poetry, originally sung or recited. Ballads were used by troubadours or minstrels, to tell stories in the Middle Ages. They invariably had the same rhythm, so that the public could sing along when the troubadour was around, in the village square, at the pub or at court. In those days people couldn't read or write so the ballads had an oral tradition. This is also the reason why we have different versions from the same ballads and why we find the same lines in different ballads. It's only from the fifteenth century that (these) ballads were written down.

. = unstressed syllable

- = stressed syllable

. -	. -	. -	. -	The horse fair Anet rode upon
. -	. -	. -	. -	He amb led like the wind , □
. -	. -	. -	. -	With silver he was shod before, □
. -	. -	. -	. -	With burning gold behind.

'Sir Patrick Spense' is a well-known medieval example. In the Romantic period people went back to old forms of poetry and a lot of new ballads were written then. 'Annabel Lee', written by Edgar Allan Poe is a good example. The former is often referred to as a traditional ballad, the latter as a literary ballad.

Characteristics

- Every stanza tells you the most important things that happen, so useless information is left out, you go from one bit of information to the next and the reader is left to fill in the gaps
- Usually the second and fourth line of a stanza rhyme
- They are narrative, i.e. they tell a story
- They are about important events or heroic deeds
- There is a lot of repetition of words, lines or stanzas
- They make use of dialogue (question/answer is also used)
- Action is often presented in the I-person or first person

Sonnet

A sonnet is a 14-line poem whose lines may be grouped in various ways bound by various rhyme schemes. Sonnets often **express the feelings or emotions** of the poet and that is why they are called **lyrical**.

The principal forms of sonnet that occur in English poetry are the Italian (Petrarchan) sonnet and the English (Shakespearean/Elizabethan) sonnet.

In an Italian sonnet the visible break between the octave and the sestet often runs parallel with a **break in the poet's mind or thought**.

In an English sonnet the **main idea** is often summarised or the **conclusion** given in the couplet.

If you need to find out which of the two you are dealing with, just look at the rhyme scheme. The four or three lines that go together often form one idea, followed by a full stop.

Many sonnets are written in so-called **iambic pentameters**, five times two syllables (,so ten in all), each consisting of an **unstressed** and then a **stressed** syllable. e.g. a line from Shakespeare's sonnet

Metaphor and simile

Poets often makes use of comparisons to express an idea or create a picture in the mind of the reader. This word or these (few) words together may call up in the imagination a suggestion that would otherwise take a great many words to explain or it may be used to create greater effect, clarify the situation, make it more vivid. This is called a **metaphor**.

The poet puts the image instead of the word(s) themselves. The reader is left to create his own idea as to what the poet means and this is sometimes why poetry is so difficult to understand. You first have to find out what is meant. It is also what makes poetry so beautiful, though!

e.g. Wilfred Owen describes a soldier dying in a mustard gas attack as “*someone drowning in a sea of green*”.

When a poet does this with the use of the words ‘as’ or ‘like’ it is called a **simile**.

e.g. My love is **like** a red, red rose.

Rhyme

In the Old English period, before the Middle Ages, alliteration was used as the only form of rhyme, so it is only in the twelfth century that we start to see rhyme at the end of a line, becoming a common feature of poetry in the fourteenth century. We can distinguish several forms.

- full rhyme - two words have identical vowels and final consonant in stressed syllables
bees - knees
- half rhyme - in the stressed syllable the consonant is identical but the vowel is not
face - force
- feminine rhyme - the stressed syllable is followed by an unstressed one
singing - ringing
- masculine rhyme - the stressed syllable is not followed by an unstressed one
flee - agree

Drama

Texts written to be performed on a stage are called drama.

Greek and Roman drama originates in the 5th century BC, our Western drama from the Middle Ages where the church performed mystery plays, in which the mysteries of the Bible were dramatised.

Miracle plays were about miracles that had occurred which were then put on stage.

The traditional form of drama is Classical Drama, the tragedy, in which a human conflict is shown. In five 'acts' the main character finally 'tragically' goes down, due to his own human faults.

Classical drama is characterised by the three unities of

- time - the event takes place within 24 hours
- place - in one and the same place
- action - round one central theme

Sophocles, Seneca, Shakespeare, Marlowe, Vondel, Racine and Corneille are famous for their drama.

Shakespeare

The most famous English playwright is Shakespeare. He wrote tragedies, comedies (which end well and make use of sometimes absurd and always comic situations) and histories (about the lives of famous historical figures, like kings or emperors).

His tragedies are considered to be the best on earth. Some examples are Macbeth, Othello, Romeo and Juliet, Hamlet and King Lear.

Some titles of comedies are A Midsummer Night's Dream, All's Well that Ends Well and Twelfth Night. Histories carry names like Henry V, Richard II and Anthony and Cleopatra.

His plays have been at the centre of attention for over four centuries and that is for a number of reasons. First of all his use of (often poetic) language is of sublime quality. Then he has added a great number of household phrases to the English language, enriched it with sayings and proverbs.

Furthermore his plays are about universal themes like revenge, everlasting love, corruption of power and jealousy, presented to us in a new and fresh way but and as important then as they are to this very day. And last but not least he has been a great example to every writer from that time onward.

Prose

Whereas poetry is mostly about feelings, emotions and expressing yourself, prose is about telling a story. The most common form of prose is the novel.

Novel

A novel is a long piece of prose telling a story.

Characteristics

1. There is always a central theme. This is the total experience of the story, what it means to you, the reader. Different readers can formulate different themes, because each reader will respond differently to the story and consider different things essential. The theme is usually given as an abstract summary of what the story is about, e.g. love, greed, revenge, war, emancipation, jealousy, etc..
2. Man is always central. Even when the characters are animals, like for instance in 'Animal Farm', they behave like humans
3. There is realism, the story gives a true picture of life, it can, may or could happen in real life.

Story and plot

A **story** is the arrangements of events in a time sequence, which means that one thing happens after another. E.g. "The plane landed at the airport and taxied to the tarmac."

Plot also puts the events of the story in a certain order but it also establishes the relationship between the events, in other words, it tells what the effect of one event is on the other. E.g. "The plane was running out of fuel and landed on the nearest airstrip."

Plot is much more than the story; it is the complete pattern or design of the story, deliberately created by the author. It is the way the events are interconnected, the way in which the material, the story has been arranged and it includes both action and characters. It tells what people do and why they are doing it. The plot should be plausible, it should remain within the boundaries of what we think is normal.

The plot can be worked out in three ways:

- Chronologically - one event follows the other in due course of time
- Start in the middle and make use of flashbacks, going back and forth in time
- Events in the novel can be pictured by means of impressions in the minds of the characters, in which time does not exist in the sense of ordered progression. (stream-of-consciousness)

Characters

The people in novels are called characters.

Main characters are the most important characters in the novel (,of whom there are only one, two or three). They are people like you and me, who go through experiences and change because of them, who learn through time. For this reason we also call them **round** or **complex** characters. They can think, remember, show free will, they are never the same and can easily surprise us. Important is that they show development of character in the course of the novel. This characterisation is an important element in modern fiction.

Minor characters are less important. They are necessary to take the plot one step further, to make the main characters act but they are not the ones the story evolves around. Very often they are also called **flat** or **simple** characters, because only a part of their character is developed, only one aspect displayed, only outward appearance shown. They tend to do things in the same way and can therefore hardly surprise us.

The writer can reveal his characters in a number of ways. He can describe them directly, giving us a clear idea of who and what they are (the so-called discursive method), or he can let the characters reveal themselves through their actions and conversations (dramatic method).

Setting

Setting is the literary term for background of the story. It indicates where, when and under what circumstances the action takes place. The setting always affects the characters

Point of view

A novel gives the author's personal view on reality, of the way he looks upon the situation(s) he is describing. Compare it to a film. A film consists of a great number of shots, taken by different cameras, from different positions and angles. Then the director decides which shots he is going to use, which shots he believes will give the viewers the impression he wants to convey to them. He will pick out the information about the environment or background that he thinks is important but he will also show people speaking, acting or commenting on actions of others. In other words, he manipulates the viewers. The author does this, not through direct images but by using words, situations and leaving out others. Sometimes the reader knows more than the character, sometimes it is the other way around.

At the beginning of the story a lot of information has to be supplied to make the situation or setting understandable to the reader. Later on usually more attention is paid to the characters and their actions.

Some stories are told in the first person. The I-person seems to be an insider in the story and gives a subjective account. We get to know about events through his/her eyes.

A story may also be told by one (or more) of the characters or a nameless narrator or by both. Such stories are written in the third person and give a more objective account. The omniscient narrator, the one who knows it all, can tell the whole story without taking part in the story and thus he can even comment on the characters.

Type of novels

Novels can belong to more than one category, it is a matter of stress on the one or the other

1. Novel of ideas - the writer shows the reader what his ideas are through the story
(Brave New World)
2. Novel of adventure - adventure(s) are the most important element in the novel (Robinson Crusoe)
3. Novel of character - character development is central
4. Novel of manners - description of (the behaviour of) a certain class in society takes the most prominent position (Sense and Sensibility)
5. Psychological novel - the writer describes what is going on in the minds of the characters, what they think and what their motivations are
6. Autobiographical novel - the story (partly) corresponds with the writer's life (David Copperfield)
7. Panoramic novel - the story offers a wide, panoramic view of society with lots of characters, giving a cross-section of society
8. Science-fiction, detective, historical, war novels, chick lit, and so on