

## The Poem as Craft: Poetic Elements

“She was in a class all by herself.  
It is not often that someone comes along  
who is a true friend and a good writer.  
Charlotte was both.”

Charlotte’s Web – E.B. White

### **I. Overview and Definition of Poetic Terms –**

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The most memorable poetry balances evocation and exposition. Poems evoke meaning and emotion in subtle, figurative ways, and yet also expose or describe an image, an idea or a moment more directly and literally to communicate meaning. Both evocation and exposition are essential to effective poetic communication. When crafting poems, poets evoke and expose meaning, in part, by means of the following **Poetic Elements**:

**Music** – Meaningful poems are pleasing to the ear. Poets use **Sound Devices** to interpose music into their poems.

- **Alliteration** – repetition of the initial sound in a line of verse
- **Assonance** – repetition of vowel sound in a line of verse
- **Repetition / Refrain / Chorus / Anaphora**
- **End Rhyme / Eye Rhyme / Internal Rhyme**
- **Onomatopoeia** – when the word mimics the actual sound
- **Meter** -- the pattern of stressed and unstressed syllables

**Emotion** – Meaningful poems invite or evoke an emotional response. They have a distinct tone or mood that may change as the ideation of the poem progresses.

- **Irony** – When the unexpected happens, or is said
- **Satire** – Making fun or light of a person or situation
- **Tragic / Uplifting / Astonishing / Mysterious / Mournful / Exhilarating / Joyful / Humorous / Sardonic / Witty / Sarcastic / Playful / Depressing / Witty / Ominous**

**Imagery** – Meaningful poems create word pictures in the mind of the reader or listener by means of precise, unique, imaginative vocabulary, interesting word combinations (**juxtaposition / oxymoron**), and by means of the following **Figurative Language**:

- **Symbolism** - When something represents something other than itself
- **Metaphor** - The comparison of two different things without using the words *like* or *as*

**Metaphors invite reader inference and active participation in the rendering of the comparison, whereas a simile is a more direct, straightforward comparison.**

- **Simile** - The comparison between two different things using the words *like* or *as*
- **Hyperbole** - exaggeration for dramatic effect
- **Understatement** - purposefully downplaying a situation, event, or impact
- **Personification** - giving inanimate objects life-like characteristics

**Journey** - Meaningful poems take the reader to a **new place of knowing, seeing, or understanding** - like Alice down the rabbit hole.

- **Theme** - The nugget of meaning; the vision, the life-lesson, the observation, or universal truth about life and/or the human condition that can be made based on the experience of the poem.
- **Reflective Thought** - **The essence that lingers** after the poem's end / What remains to ponder / What has challenged, inspired, or astonished the reader / how the poem changed, enlarged, or enriched you as a reader. How does the poem resonate with you?

## **Form**

Meaningful poems have a form that complements the poem's intentions. The ordering of the lines of verse adds significantly to the poem's effect and meaning, as does the white space between the stanzas and words, the punctuation that is used (or not used), and even the way the poem is placed on the page.

### **Free Verse or Classical Form?**

**The “type” of poem often dictates, in part, how the poem takes shape.** Examples of **Poetic “types” are:** ballad / haiku / limerick /sonnet /concrete poem /ode /cinquain, villanelle / epic poem /free verse / lyric

\*A **haiku** has three lines and just 17 syllables / A limerick has 5 lines and a regular meter and rhyme scheme

\*A **concrete poem** visually takes the shape of the poem’s topic or theme

\*A **sonnet** has 14 lines, as well as the possibility of quatrains, sestets, octaves, or couplets.

\***In addition**, some poems have regular rhyme schemes and rhythms that give the poem an anticipated pattern and shape; and yet, **free verse poems** tend toward enjambed lines, and a more spontaneous journey across the page.

**Here are some other terms that help the understanding of “form” as a poetic element:**

- **End Line** – Where a poet chooses to “break” or end a line can add white space to a poem that offers a pause, suspense, drama, or a time for the reader to think or to absorb a moment of irony, humor, or pathos.
- **Enjambment** – The poet chooses to end the line in a way that breaks the normal expectation of where the reader might otherwise “break” the line. The flow of verse simply continues into the next line without the break of a period or a comma.
- **Couplet** – Two lines of rhyming verse intentionally meant to operate “as a couple.”
- **Stanza** – How a poem groups and orders the lines of verse – for example two line stanzas are called couplets, four line stanzas are called quatrains etc. Often, stanza breaks come at a moment where the poem takes a turn, begins a new emphasis, or offers a kind of pause or progression.
- **Intentionality of Placement** – How individual words, lines of verse, or stanzas are placed on the page enriches and complements the meaning of the poem.

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**The most meaningful poems communicate the following as a by-product of the effectiveness of the music, emotion, imagery, journey, and form inherent in the poem: Clarity / Complexity / Astonishment**

**Clarity** - The purpose of all writing is to communicate effectively. Robert Frost says that the poems with the most clarity and resonance "**say the most they can in the fewest words possible.**"

Poems reach for clarity in many ways, including the following:

- **Transparent** - Poems that are easily accessible and easy to understand achieve clarity in a transparent way. Narrative poems and many lyrical poems tend towards literal interpretation. These poems are most often appreciated rationally, or with a simple “taking-in” of the essence of the poem. With transparent poems, there is a danger of over-manipulation of the reader's mind or emotions with over sentimentality, or there is a lack of white space in the poem needed for free interpretation.
- **Translucent** - **Poems that are translucent are interpreted more figuratively than literally.** In translucent poems, there is an infusion of symbolism, metaphor, and personification. The reader must be more reflective, intuitive, imaginative, and thoughtful to ascertain the poem's deeper meaning. Much poetry we call **free verse** is translucent in nature. A poem can be appreciated on many different levels. Sometimes

the beginning of a poem is more transparent, and then a poem moves into an area of white space or translucence - and then the poem ends leaving the reader with something to savor, re-visit, or think about. White space, or areas in a poem that invite reader participation in ascertaining the poem's essence or vision, allow great variation in interpretation. These poems tend towards intuition, and move a bit away from the rational. Most well-remembered poems are translucent in nature at some point in the poem.

- **Opaque** - Opaque poems are written with such a sense of mystery, free association of thought, or private myth-making and symbolism that sometimes even the most astute readers have difficulty "taking in" the poem rationally. The beauty of these poems, or poetic lines, lies in the realm of the imaginative, the intuitive, the metaphysical. Stream of consciousness poems are in this category. Sometimes poems or poetic lines are best appreciated for the stream of ideas and the sound combinations rather than for the reader to come away with a logical, coherent, rational meaning. Carried to extremes, the reader may leave the poem feeling isolated from the poem's "meaning" and intent.

### Complexity

- **Meaningful poems are richly layered** and evoke a myriad of thoughts, feelings, and responses. (See the discussion on transparent, translucent, and opaque.)
- **Meaningful poems invite the reader to enter into the poem and to add their own life experiences** and imagination to the interpretation of the poem.
- **Meaningful poems are literal *and* figurative**, real *and* surreal, grounded in the every day, and yet through metaphor and symbolism they transcend into areas of thoughtfulness and contemplation.
- **Meaningful poems have *Implicative Lacunae*** - a Greek term meaning to have multiple layers of reception and perception. In other words, the best poems are multi-layered and can be perceived and received by readers in a variety of ways to offer many different interpretations and emotional and intellectual responses.

### Astonishment

- **Meaningful poems often have a surprising turn, a hinge moment, or a volta** where the poem takes a new direction, challenges the reader's expectations, or leads the reader into the realm of mystery or white space where the literal gives way to the figurative.
- **Meaningful poems have one or more "meta" moments**, or places where the poem leaves the earth and enters into a higher plane of thoughtfulness or appreciation, again where the literal gives way to the figurative.
- **Meaningful poems make use of the notion of caesura or dramatic pause**, often by means of a stanza or line break. These dramatic moments allow the reader to experience

the full power, intensity, or intention of a single word, or an entire line or stanza of the poem.

- **Meaningful poems make good use of the liminal line** - The term liminal means threshold. The end of every line of verse is pregnant with possibility. There is drama, or some type of anticipation that builds at the end of every line of verse. A poem with effective line breaks adds complexity to a poem, and offers an almost intuitive level of appreciation to the poem.
- **Meaningful poems generate astonishment.** Astonishment often comes through irony, dramatic moments, humor, or suspense. Often the juxtaposition of imagery, the push and pull of line breaks, unique word choice, or the beauty of the poem's music adds to a poem's astonishment.

**The temple bell stops --  
but the sound keeps coming  
out the flowers.**

Basho (1644-1694)  
*(translated by Robert Bly)*