

Appreciating Poetry

The poet Robert Frost once said that a poem “begins in delight and ends in wisdom.” While many poems are entertaining, a poem can also have the power to change how you see the world. Whether it follows a set pattern or bends all the rules, each poem uses language in a new way to communicate its message.

Part 1: The Basics

What do you see when you look at a poem? One difference between a poem and a short story is the **form**, or the structure of the writing. All poems are broken up into **lines**. The length of each line and where it breaks, or ends, contribute to the poem’s meaning and sound. Lines often appear in groups, or **stanzas**. The stanzas work together to convey the overall message of the poem. Some poems follow the rules of a traditional form. For example, a poem might have a specific number of lines and stanzas or a regular pattern of rhythm and rhyme. Other poems are unconventional, with no recognizable patterns. A poet might even choose to use incorrect grammar or spelling to create a particular sound or to emphasize meaning.

Just as a story has a narrator, a poem has a voice that “talks” to readers. This voice, or **speaker**, is sometimes a fictional character rather than the poet. Take a look at the following poems. Which is traditional? Which is unconventional? Which one has a distinct speaker?

from “The Geese”

Poem by **Richard Peck**

My father was the first to hear
The passage of the geese each fall,
Passing above the house so near
He’d hear within his heart their call.
And then at breakfast time he’d say:
“The geese were heading south last
night,”
For he had lain awake till day,
Feeling his earthbound soul take flight.

from “Street Corner Flight”

Poem by **Norma Landa Flores**

From this side . . .
of their concrete barrio
two small boys hold
fat white pigeons
trapped in their trembling hands.
Then,
gently,
not disturbing
their powers of flight,
release them
into the air.

model 1: traditional form

In this traditional poem, the speaker reflects on the return of night at the end of a day. Read it aloud to help you identify the characteristics of its form.

FROM GOOD-NIGHT Poem by **Robert Louis Stevenson**

When the bright lamp is carried in,
The sunless hours again begin;
O'er all without, in field and lane,
The haunted night returns again.

Now we behold the embers flee
About the firelit hearth; and see
Our faces painted as we pass,
Like pictures, on the window-glass.

Close Read

1. How many lines are in each stanza?
2. In the first stanza, rhyming pairs are highlighted. Identify the rhyming words in the second stanza. What pattern do you see?

model 2: free verse

In this unconventional poem—called a **free verse** poem—the poet lets the ideas drive where each line breaks and when each stanza ends.

THAT DAY POEM BY DAVID KHERDIAN

Just once
my father stopped on the way
into the house from work
and joined in the softball game
we were having in the street,
and attempted to play in *our*
game that *his* country had never
known.

Just once
and the day stands out forever
in my memory
as a father's living gesture
to his son,
that in playing even the fool
or clown, he would reveal
that the lines of their lives
were sewn from a tougher fabric
than the son had previously known.

Close Read

1. How does the form of this poem differ from that of “Good-Night”?
2. Notice the short lengths of the boxed lines. What might the poet be trying to emphasize by isolating and repeating this phrase?
3. What do you learn about the speaker of this poem?

Part 2: Poetic Elements

Like different colors of paint or the notes on a musical scale, language can be arranged to create a desired effect. For example, short, choppy lines can produce a fast-paced pounding beat, while long, rhythmic lines can create a soothing melody. Poets manipulate the words and lines in their writing, fully conscious of how their work will sound when read aloud and how it will make readers feel. Sound devices, imagery, and figurative language are important tools of the trade.

sound devices

Poets choose words not only for their meaning, but also for their sounds. The sound of a word or line can help emphasize meaning or create a musical quality. Here are some examples of sound devices poets use.

“Afternoon on a Hill”

Poem by **Edna St. Vincent Millay**

I will be the gladdest thing *a*

Under the sun! *b*

I will touch a hundred flowers *c*

And not pick one. *b*

I will look at cliffs and clouds *d*

With quiet eyes, *e*

Watch the wind bow down the grass, *f*

And the grass rise. *e*

And when lights begin to show *g*

Up from the town, *h*

I will mark which must be mine, *i*

And then start down! *h*

rhythm

the pattern of stressed () and unstressed () syllables in each line. A regular pattern of rhythm is called meter.

rhyme

the repetition of sounds at the ends of words, as in *sun* and *one*. Rhyme scheme is the pattern that the end-rhyming words follow. To identify rhyme scheme, assign a letter to each sound, as shown here.

repetition

the use of a word, phrase, line, or sound more than once, such as the repeated use of the phrase *I will*

alliteration

the repetition of consonant sounds at the beginning of words, such as the *m* in *mark*, *must*, and *mine*

assonance

the repetition of vowel sounds in words that don't end with the same consonant, such as the *ow* sound in *bow* and *down*

model 1: rhythm and rhyme

Read this traditional poem aloud, listening for its rhythm and rhyme.

STOPPING BY WOODS ON A SNOWY EVENING

Whose woods these are I think I know.
His house is in the village, though;
He will not see me stopping here
To watch his woods fill up with snow.
My little horse must think it queer
To stop without a farmhouse near
Between the woods and frozen lake
The darkest evening of the year.
He gives his harness bells a shake
To ask if there is some mistake.
The only other sound's the sweep
Of easy wind and downy flake.
The woods are lovely, dark and deep,
But I have promises to keep,
And miles to go before I sleep,
And miles to go before I sleep.

Close Read

1. Stressed () and unstressed () syllables are marked in the first stanza. Read the second stanza out loud. Does it follow the same pattern as the first stanza?
2. The end rhymes in the first stanza are highlighted. Examine the end rhymes in the other stanzas to figure out the rhyme scheme.

model 2: alliteration and repetition

This unconventional poem uses alliteration and repetition to help emphasize meaning. Make sure to read the lines all the way across.

FROM CHRYSALIS DIARY poem by Paul Fleischman

November 13:

Cold told me
to fasten my feet
to this branch,

to dangle upside down
from my perch,

to shed my skin,

and I have obeyed.

to cease being a caterpillar
and I have obeyed.

Close Read

1. The alliteration in the boxed line helps to create a sense of the caterpillar's strong grip. Find another example of alliteration.
2. What does the repetition in the last line help emphasize?
3. Who is the speaker of the poem?

imagery and figurative language

In addition to sound devices, poets use **imagery**, or language that appeals to one or more of your senses—sight, hearing, smell, taste, and touch. Vivid images help readers to more clearly understand what a poet describes. In “Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening,” for example, images like “the sweep / Of easy wind and downy flake” help you to visualize the scene and hear the sounds of winter. One way poets create imagery is by using **figurative language**, or imaginative descriptions that are not literally true. Notice how these examples of figurative language help you to picture ordinary things in new ways.

simile

a comparison of two things using the word *like* or *as*

The sun spun like
a tossed coin.
It whirled on the azure sky,
it clattered into the horizon,
it clicked in the slot,
and neon-lights popped
and blinked “Time expired,”
as on a parking meter.
—“Sunset”
by Oswald Mbuyiseni Mtshali

personification

**a description of an object, animal, or idea
as if it has human qualities and emotions**

When I opened the door
I found the vine leaves
speaking among themselves in abundant
whispers.
My presence made them
hush their green breath,
embarrassed, the way
humans stand up, buttoning their jackets,
acting as if they were leaving anyway, as if
the conversation had ended
just before you arrived.
—from “Aware”
by Denise Levertov

metaphor

**a comparison of two things that does not
include the word *like* or *as***

In the pond in the park
all things are doubled:
Long buildings hang and
wiggle gently. Chimneys
are bent legs bouncing
on clouds below.
—from “Water Picture”
by May Swenson

THE LESSON OF THE MOTH

Don Marquis

i was talking to a moth
the other evening
he was trying to break into
an electric light bulb
and fry himself on the wires

why do you fellows
pull this stunt i asked him
because it is the conventional¹
thing for moths or why
if that had been an uncovered
candle instead of an electric
light bulb you would
now be a small unsightly cinder²
have you no sense

plenty of it he answered
but at times we get tired
of using it
we get bored with the routine

1. **conventional:** customary; usual; accepted.
2. **cinder:** a piece of burned material.

ANALYZE VISUALS

What might the light bulb **symbolize**?

SPEAKER

What are your first impressions of the speaker?

CLARIFY MEANING

Imagine that this stanza was punctuated like regular text. Where would the punctuation appear?



and crave beauty
and excitement
fire is beautiful
and we know that if we get
too close it will kill us
but what does that matter
it is better to be happy
for a moment
and be burned up with beauty
than to live a long time
and be bored all the while
so we wad all our life up
into one little roll
and then we shoot the roll
that is what life is for
it is better to be a part of beauty
for one instant and then to cease to
exist than to exist forever
and never be a part of beauty
our attitude toward life
is to come easy go easy
we are like human beings
used to be before they became
too civilized to enjoy themselves

and before i could argue him
out of his philosophy
he went and immolated³ himself
on a patent⁴ cigar lighter
i do not agree with him
myself i would rather have
half the happiness and twice
the longevity⁵
but at the same time i wish
there was something i wanted
as badly as he wanted to fry himself

3. **immolated** (GmPE-lAtdQ): killed as a sacrifice.

4. **patent** (pBtPnt): patented; covered by a lawful grant that gives the inventor the exclusive right to manufacture an item for a certain time period.

5. **longevity** (lJn-jDvPG-tC): length of life.

FREE VERSE

In what ways do the lines in this stanza sound like the way people really talk? In what ways do they sound different?

SPEAKER

In what way does the speaker compare himself to the moth?

—archy

Identity

Julio Noboa

Let them be as flowers,
always watered, fed, guarded, admired,
but harnessed to a pot of dirt.

I'd rather be a tall, ugly weed,
clinging on cliffs, like an eagle
wind-wavering above high, jagged rocks.

To have broken through the surface of stone
to live, to feel exposed to the madness
of the vast, eternal sky.
To be swayed by the breezes of an ancient sea,
carrying my soul, my seed beyond the mountains
of time

or into the abyss¹ of the bizarre.

I'd rather be unseen, and if,
then shunned² by everyone
than to be a pleasant-smelling flower,
growing in clusters in the fertile valley
where they're praised, handled, and plucked
by greedy, human hands.

I'd rather smell of musty, green stench
than of sweet, fragrant lilac.
If I could stand alone, strong and free,
I'd rather be a tall, ugly weed.

1. **abyss:** a seemingly bottomless space.
 2. **shunned:** deliberately avoided; shut out.
- The Mountain* (1991), Albert Herbert.
Oil on canvas, 50.8 cm × 61 cm. Private
collection. © Bridgeman Art Library.

SPEAKER

Reread lines 1–6. How does the speaker's view of himself or herself contrast with the way the speaker views "them"?

CLARIFY MEANING

Reread lines 13–18, paying attention to the commas. What effect do they have on the way you read this stanza?

After Reading

Comprehension

- 1. Recall** According to “the lesson of the moth,” why do moths fly toward light?
- 2. Represent** Create a sketch that shows the differences between the flower and the weed described in “Identity.” Make sure your sketch reflects at least two specific details from the poem.

Literary Analysis

- 3. Make Inferences** What does the **speaker** learn about himself in “the lesson of the moth”? Support your response with evidence from the poem.

- 4. Examine Stanza** In “the lesson of the moth,” how does the poet use **stanzas** to help you follow the conversation between the cockroach and the moth?

- 5. Analyze Metaphor** What kind of person does the speaker in “Identity” want to be? What kind of person does he not want to be?

- 6. Clarify Meaning** Refer to the charts you created as you read. For each poem, tell whether the line breaks, the stanzas, or the punctuation did the most to help you understand the poem’s meaning. Explain what and how that element helped you understand.

- 7. Compare and Contrast Views** In “the lesson of the moth,” what is the moth’s attitude about the price of **beauty**? In “Identity,” what is the speaker’s attitude about the price of beauty? Explain whether you think their views are more similar or more different.

- 8. Evaluate Free Verse** Use a chart like the one shown to list examples of rhyme, repetition, or other sound devices, such as **alliteration** (the repetition of consonant sounds at the beginning of words). What images or ideas do these devices emphasize?

Extension and Challenge

- 9. SCIENCE CONNECTION** How do the qualities of real cockroaches and moths correspond to the poetic creations Don Marquis presents in “the lesson of the moth”? Research to find out about each creature’s habits and life span. Display your findings in a poster, and be ready to explain how the poem does—or does not—relate to reality.

research links

For more on cockroaches and moths, visit the **Research Center** at **ClassZone.com**.

Reading-Writing Connection

Continue to explore the meaning of “the lesson of the moth” and “Identity” by responding to these prompts. Then complete the **Grammar and Writing** exercise.

A. Short Response: Answer the Big Question

Choose one of the “characters” from the poems— Archy, the moth, or the speaker in “Identity.” Write a **paragraph** answering the question, “Does **beauty** matter?” from the point of view of this character.

An effective answer will . . .

- use the first person pronoun “I”
- express the character’s personality and perspective

B. Extended Response: Identify Emotions

A critic once wrote that Don Marquis was “remarkable for his ability to intertwine the humorous and the melancholy [sad].” How does “the lesson of the moth” display this ability? Write a **two- or threeparagraph response**.

A strong response will . . .

- show an understanding of the poem’s meaning
- cite both funny and serious lines and images

grammar and writing

USE COMMAS CORRECTLY By using commas properly, you can avoid confusing your readers. When writing a sentence that lists **items in a series**, insert a comma after every item except the last one. (A series consists of three or more items.) Also insert a comma between two or more **adjectives** of equal rank that modify the same noun.

Original: Both the moth in “the lesson of the moth” and the speaker in “Identity” find beauty in unusual surprising places.

Revised: Both the moth in “the lesson of the moth” and the speaker in “Identity” find beauty in unusual, surprising places.

PRACTICE Insert commas where needed in the following sentences.

1. The moth would rather take risks get injured and die young than be bored.
2. He thinks that the dangerous exciting heat of fire is beautiful.
3. I wouldn’t mind being unseen shunned and alone like a weed.
4. Unlike flowers, weeds are strong free and independent.

*For more help with using commas correctly, see page R49 in the **Grammar Handbook**.*