

What is poetry?

Most dictionaries and glossaries of literary terms define a poem along the following lines: a condensed, rhythmical composition with specifically arranged lines, figurative language, and sometimes rhyme.

However, poetry has two particular qualities:

first, as a type of writing, poetry is especially effective for expressing emotions – where ordinary conversation or prose might fall short of capturing an emotion, poetry can do so with precision;

second, poetry is more personal than other forms of writing – each reader experiences a poem differently so that each poem comes to life in a unique, personal way for each reader.

These two qualities make poetry a special form of writing that is enjoyable and challenging to discuss. The following examples illustrate this personal, emotional quality of poetry. Explain the ways in which they are different.

Consider first the following account of a motorcycle accident:

Man, 19, dies in cyclé accident

Yesterday afternoon a 19 year-old Calgary man died from injuries sustained when a semi-trailer collided with a motorcycle.

City police say Brian Smith was riding along 107 Avenue near 101 Street when his vehicle was struck from behind by a truck operated by Carl Phillips of Edmonton. Mr. Smith died from neck injuries after he was thrown from his bike about 5 p.m.

Patrolmen had a difficult time controlling rush-hour traffic in the area. This delayed the arrival of an ambulance dispatched to the accident scene.

Police are continuing their investigation of the accident.

July 15, 1986 by Richard Davies

red-blue lights
blink on
and off

the mangled motorbike
sputtering defeat
its twisted metal
a cruel sacrifice
to the invincible semi

some young male
(Caucasian, no previous record)
writhes in the dirt
and jagged glass
his black jacket
ridiculous with blood

on lookers and hangers-on
gape
await their turns
to babble with
tired police
who record the moment
for computer posterity

the inevitable vultures
cruise by slowly
eager for glimpses
of death and
gore

in my mirror
i see an urgent ambulance
approach the milling crowd
and wonder if
i'm late for
supper

Mrs Reece Laughs

by Martin Armstrong

Laughter, with us, is no great undertaking,
A sudden wave that breaks and dies in breaking.
Laughter with Mrs Reece is much less simple:
It germinates, it spreads, dimple by dimple,
From small beginnings, things of easy girth,
To formidable redundancies of mirth.

Clusters of subterranean chuckles rise
And presently the circles of her eyes
Close into slits and all the woman heaves
As a great elm with all its mounds of leaves
Wallows before the storm. From hidden sources
A mustering of blind volcanic forces
Takes her and shakes her till she sobs and gapes.
Then all that load of bottled mirth escapes
In one wild crow, a lifting of huge hands,
And creaking stays, a visage that expands
In scarlet ridge and furrow. Thence collapse,
A hanging head, a feeble hand that flaps
An apron-end to stir an air and waft
A steaming face. And Mrs Reece has laughed.

The Cremation of Sam McGee

by Robert Service

*There are strange things done in the midnight sun
By the men who toil for gold;
The Arctic trails have their secret tales
That would make your blood run cold;
The Northern Lights have seen queer sights,
But the queerest they ever did see
Was that night on the marge of Lake Lebarge
I cremated Sam McGee.*

Now Sam McGee was from Tennessee, where the cotton blooms and blows.
Why he left his home in the South to roam 'round the Pole, God only knows.
He was always cold, but the land of gold seemed to hold him like a spell;
Though he'd often say in his homely way that he'd "sooner live in hell".

On a Christmas Day we were mushing our way over the Dawson trail.
Talk of your cold! through the parka's fold it stabbed like a driven nail.
If our eyes we'd close, then the lashes froze till sometimes we couldn't see;
It wasn't much fun, but the only one to whimper was Sam McGee.

And that very night, as we lay packed tight in our robes beneath the snow,
And the dogs were fed, and the stars o'erhead were dancing heel and toe,
He turned to me, and "Cap," says he, "I'll cash in this trip, I guess;
And if I do, I'm asking that you won't refuse my last request."

Well, he seemed so low that I couldn't say no; then he says with a sort of moan:
"It's the cursed cold, and it's got right hold till I'm chilled clean through to the bone.
Yet 'tain't being dead — it's my awful dread of the icy grave that pains;
So I want you to swear that, foul or fair, you'll cremate my last remains."

A pal's last need is a thing to heed, so I swore I would not fail;
And we started on at the streak of dawn; but God! he looked ghastly pale.
He crouched on the sleigh, and he raved all day of his home in Tennessee;
And before nightfall a corpse was all that was left of Sam McGee.

There wasn't a breath in that land of death, and I hurried, horror-driven,
With a corpse half hid that I couldn't get rid, because of a promise given;
It was lashed to the sleigh, and it seemed to say: "You may tax your brawn and brains,
But you promised true, and it's up to you to cremate those last remains."

Now a promise made is a debt unpaid, and the trail has its own stern code.
In the days to come, though my lips were dumb, in my heart how I cursed that load.
In the long, long night, by the lone firelight, while the huskies, round in a ring,
Howled out their woes to the homeless snows — O God! how I loathed the thing.

And every day that quiet clay seemed to heavy and heavier grow;
And on I went, though the dogs were spent and the grub was getting low;
The trail was bad, and I felt half mad, but I swore I would not give in;
And I'd often sing to the hateful thing, and it hearkened with a grin.

Till I came to the marge of Lake Lebarge, and a derelict there lay;
It was jammed in the ice, but I saw in a trice it was called the "Alice May".
And I looked at it, and I thought a bit, and I looked at my frozen chum;
Then "Here", said I, with a sudden cry, "is my cre-ma-tor-eum."

Some planks I tore from the cabin floor, and I lit the boiler fire;
Some coal I found that was lying around, and I heaped the fuel higher;
The flames just soared, and the furnace roared — such a blaze you seldom see;
And I burrowed a hole in the glowing coal, and I stuffed in Sam McGee.

Then I made a hike, for I didn't like to hear him sizzle so;
And the heavens scowled, and the huskies howled, and the wind began to blow.
It was icy cold, but the hot sweat rolled down my cheeks, and I don't know why;
And the greasy smoke in an inky cloak went streaking down the sky.

I do not know how long in the snow I wrestled with grisly fear;
But the stars came out and they danced about ere again I ventured near;
I was sick with dread, but I bravely said: "I'll just take a peep inside.
I guess he's cooked, and it's time I looked"; . . . then the door I opened wide.

And there sat Sam, looking cool and calm, in the heart of the furnace roar;
And he wore a smile you could see a mile, and he said: "Please close that door.
It's fine in here, but I greatly fear you'll let in the cold and storm —
Since I left Plumtree, down in Tennessee, it's the first time I've been warm."

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My Sealed Aquarium

Seatbelted for the worst,
 I slither into traffic like a trout.
Downstream, down
 sluicing ramps, down
 capillary boulevards, down
 freeway, Mississippi.
I ogle from my sealed
aquarium and swim with schools
in the current.
 Fish-eyed
in glass, I minnow sideways
to the blink of go and stop.
I race the passing gills.
I trail the leadering fins.

Samuel Hazo

1. Who is the speaker in this poem? What seems to be the poem's purpose?
2. Identify the simile in the poem. What unlike things are compared?
3. What is the relationship between the rest of the poem and the simile?
4. Describe the overall effect of this poem's figurative language. Did you enjoy it? Why or why not?

A. J. M. Smith

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TO HOLD IN A POEM

I would take words
As crisp and as white
As our snow; as our birds
Swift and sure in their flight;

As clear and as cold
As our ice; as strong as a jack pine;
As young as a trillium, and old
As Laurentia's long undulant line;

Sweet-smelling and bright
As new rain; as hard
And as smooth and as white
As a brook pebble cold and unmarred;

To hold in a poem of words
Like water in colourless glass
The spirit of mountains like birds,
Of forests as pointed as grass;

To hold in a verse as austere
As the spirit of prairie and river,
Lonely, unbuyable, dear,
The North, as a deed, and forever.

F. R. Scott

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SATURDAY SUNDAY

The triple-decker and the double-cone
I side-swipe swiftly, suck the coke-straws dry.
Ride toadstool seat beside the slab of morgue—
Sweet corner drug-store, sweet pie in the sky.

Him of the front-flap apron, him I sing,
The counter-clockwise clerk in underalls.
Swing low, sweet chocolate, Oh swing, swing,
While cheek by juke the jitter chatter falls.

I swivel on my axle and survey
The latex tintex kotex cutex land:
Soft kingdoms sell for dimes, Life Pic Look Click
Inflate the male with conquest girly grand.

My brothers and my sisters, two by two,
Sit sipping succulence and sighing sex.
Each tiny adolescent universe
A world the vested interests annex.

Such bread and circuses these times allow,
Opium most popular, life so small and slick,
Perhaps with candy is the new world born
And cellophane shall wrap the heretic.

Who comes?
Is it the hound of death approaching?
Away!
Or I will harness you to my team.

Unknown Inuit

Waves

Waves
bow
before
the shore

courtiers
to their king

and then
withdraw.

Unknown (from Arabic)

Mother to Son

Well, son, I'll tell you:
Life for me ain't been no crystal stair.
It's had tacks in it,
And splinters,
And boards torn up,
And places with no carpet on the floor --
Bare.
But all the time
I'se been a-climbin' on,
And reachin' landin's,
And turnin' corners,
and sometimes goin' in the dark
Where there ain't been no light.
So, boy, don't you turn back.
Don't you set down on the steps
'Cause you finds it kinder hard.
Don't you fall now --
For I'se still goin', honey,
I'se still climbin',
And life for me ain't been no crystal stair.

Langston Hughes

Richard Cory

by Edwin Arlington Robinson

Whenever Richard Cory went down town,
We people on the pavement looked at him:
He was a gentleman from sole to crown,
Clean favored, and imperially slim.

And he was always quietly arrayed,
And he was always human when he talked;
But still he fluttered pulses when he said,
"Good-morning," and he glittered when he walked.

And he was rich – yes, richer than a king –
And admirably schooled in every grace:
In fine, we thought that he was everything
To make us wish that we were in his place.

So on we worked, and waited for the light,
And went without the meat, and cursed the bread;
And Richard Cory, one calm summer night,
Went home and put a bullet through his head.

“Warren Pryor” –Alden Nowlan

When every pencil meant a sacrifice
his parents boarded him at school in town,
slaving to free him from the stony fields,
the meagre acreage that bore them down.

They blushed with pride when, at his graduation,
they watched him picking up the slender scroll,
his passport from the years of brutal toil
and lonely patience in a barren hole.

When he went in the Bank their cups ran over.
They marvelled how he wore a milk-white shirt
work days and jeans on Sundays. He was saved
from their thistle-strewn farm and its red dirt.

And he said nothing. Hard and serious
like a young bear inside his teller's cage,
his axe-hewn hands upon the paper bills
aching with empty strength and throttled rage.

1. Explain how we know that Warren's family were poor farmers.
2. What is a passport? In what way could a graduation diploma be like a passport?
3. What kind of job does Warren have later in the poem? Explain how he feels about his new job.
4. Find and explain the simile in the last stanza.

Did I Miss Anything? Tom Wayman

From: *The Astonishing Weight of the Dead*. Vancouver: Polestar, 1994.

Question frequently asked
by students after missing a class

Nothing. When we realized you weren't here
we sat with our hands folded on our desks
in silence, for the full two hours

Everything. I gave an exam worth
40 per cent of the grade for this term
and assigned some reading due today
on which I'm about to hand out a quiz
worth 50 per cent

Nothing. None of the content of this course
has value or meaning
Take as many days off as you like:
any activities we undertake as a class
I assure you will not matter either to you or me
and are without purpose

Everything. A few minutes after we began last time
a shaft of light descended and an angel
or other heavenly being appeared
and revealed to us what each woman or man must do
to attain divine wisdom in this life and
the hereafter
This is the last time the class will meet
before we disperse to bring this good news to all people
on earth

Nothing. When you are not present.
how could something significant occur?

Everything. Contained in this classroom
is a microcosm of human existence
assembled for you to query and examine and ponder
This is not the only place such an opportunity has been
gathered

but it was one place

And you weren't here

Last Lesson of the Afternoon

D.H. Lawrence

When will the bell ring, and end this weariness?
How long have they tugged the leash, and strained apart,
My pack of unruly hounds! I cannot start
Them again on a quarry of knowledge they hate to hunt,
I can haul them and urge them no more.

No longer now can I endure the brunt
Of the books that lie out on the desks; a full threescore
Of several insults of blotted pages, and scrawl
Of slovenly work that they have offered me.
I am sick, and what on earth is the good of it all?
What good to them or me, I cannot see!

So, shall I take
My last dear fuel of life to heap on my soul
And kindle my will to a flame that shall consume
Their dross of indifference; and take the toll
Of their insults in punishment? — I will not! —

I will not waste my soul and my strength for this.
What do I care for all that they do amiss!
What is the point of this teaching of mine, and of this
Learning of theirs? It all goes down the same abyss.

What does it matter to me, if they can write
A description of a dog, or if they can't?
What is the point? To us both, it is all my aunt!
And yet I'm supposed to care, with all my might.

I do not, and will not; they won't and they don't; and that's all!
I shall keep my strength for myself; they can keep theirs as well.
Why should we beat our heads against the wall
Of each other? I shall sit and wait for the bell.

1. *What is a teacher's responsibility to his or her students?*
2. *Does a teacher have the right to feel and act as this one does?*
3. a) *How is the tone of the first line developed in the sustained metaphor that follows it?*
b) *How does the tone change in the second stanza?*
4. a) *What is the teacher's attitude toward his students in the last four stanzas?*
b) *What is the teacher's attitude in the last two lines?*

At Seventeen

By Janis Ian

I learned the truth at seventeen
That love was meant for beauty queens
-- And high school girls with clear skinned smiles
Who married young and then retired.
The valentines I never knew
The Friday night charades of youth
Were spent on one more beautiful --
At seventeen I learned the truth.

And those of us with ravaged faces
Lacking in the social graces
Desperately remained at home
Inventing lovers on the phone
Who called to say, "Come dance with me,"
And murmured vague obscenities.
It isn't all it seems
At seventeen.

A brown-eyed girl in hand-me-downs
Whose name I never could pronounce
Said, "Pity, please, the ones who serve,
They only get what they deserve.
The rich related home-town queen
Married into what she needs
A guarantee of company
And haven for the elderly."

Remember those who win the game
Lose the love they sought to gain
In debentures of quality
And dubious integrity.
Their small town eyes will gape at you
in dull surprise when payment due
Exceeds accounts received,
At seventeen

To those of us who knew the pain
Of valentines that never came,
And those whose names were never called
When choosing sides for basketball.
It was long ago and far away,
The world was younger than today,
And dreams were all they gave for free
To ugly duckling girls like me.

We all play the game and when we dare
To cheat ourselves at solitaire
Inventing lovers on the phone,
Repenting other lives unknown,
That call and say, "come dance with me,"
And murmur vague obscenities
At ugly girls like me
At seventeen.

Janis Ian's poem "At Seventeen" shows many of the problems and complexities of growing up. Do you find adolescence a particularly trying time? Why or why not?

Dreams

Hold fast to dreams,
For if dreams die,
Life is a broken-winged bird
That cannot fly.

Hold fast to dreams,
For when dreams go,
Life is a barren field
Frozen with snow.

Langston Hughes

1. What is the first metaphor in this poem? What two things are being compared?
2. What is the meaning of the metaphor?
3. What is the second metaphor in this poem? What two things are being compared?
4. What is the meaning of this metaphor?

Invictus

Out of the night that covers me,
Black as the Pit from pole to pole,
I thank whatever gods may be
For my unconquerable soul.

In the fell clutch of circumstance
I have not winced nor cried aloud.
Under the bludgeonings of chance
My head is bloody, but unbowed.

Beyond this place of wrath and tears
Looms but the Horror of the shade,
And yet the menace of the years
Finds, and shall find, me unafraid.

It matters not how strait the gate,
How charged with punishments the scroll.
I am the master of my fate:
I am the captain of my soul.

William Ernest Henley

In "Invictus," is the speaker's claim to being "master" of his fate supported in the poem? In what kind of life situations can people demonstrate that they are "masters" of their souls?

