

Brief Introduction to English and American Poetry



What Is Poetry?



Brief Introduction I

What is poetry? It depends on what poets write and how they write. It also depends on how readers understand a poetic writing. So the level and the taste of the readers also determine how they view poetry. Thus, the knowledge of poetry and approaches to appreciating poetry become important. There have been many attempts to define what poetry is. Any of them is useful, but none is absolute.

Plato thus defines a poet as follows: “The poet is a light and winged holy thing, and there is no invention in him until he has been inspired and is out of his senses, and then the mind is no longer in him.” One can see that Plato thought that poetry comes out inspiration and ecstasy.

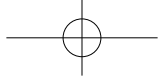
According to Aristotle, poetry is a more philosophical and higher thing than history, for poetry tends to express the universe, history, the particular. Poetry is a species of imitation or mimesis. In other words, Aristotle stresses that poetry imitates the world, to be more exact, reflects man’s action.

He affirmed the theory of imitation: “Poesy, therefore is an art of imitation, for so Aristotle termeth it in the word mimesis—that is to say, a representing, counterfeiting, or figuring forth. Poetry, above all the other arts and sciences, embodies truth.”

By saying that poetry embodies truth, Sidney is repeating that poetry imitates or reflects the world (truth or reality).

William Wordsworth, a representative of English Romantics, said that “all good poetry is the spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings: it takes its origin from emotion recollected in tranquility”.

What Wordsworth stressed is that poetry should first express feelings. It is more subjective. It is the display of the poet’s inner mind.



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Samuel Taylor Coleridge, another leading figure of English Romanticism and the good friend of Wordsworth once said, “The proper and immediate object of poetry is the communication of pleasure. Poetry is the best words in the best order.” Coleridge meant that the purpose of poetry is the exchange of delight, or poets tell the readers about their happiness. Coleridge also displayed his view on diction. Poetry should use defined words.

As a major romanticist of younger generation, Percy Bysshe Shelley had his own understanding of poetry. He said: “Poetry is the record of the best and happiest moments of the happiest and best minds. Poets are the unacknowledged legislators of the world.” Shelley’s theory of poetry as record is an echo of Aristotle’s theory of imitation. It memorizes the people’s feeling and action. What is more, Shelley held that poets are legislators or makers.

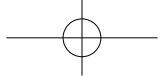
So much about how some of superb English poets defined poetry writing. Actually, T. S. Eliot, Carl Sandburg and many other eminent American poets also showed us something perceptive about poetry. Let’s first have a look at Carl Sandburg’s definition of poetry.

Sandburg said, “Poetry is the synthesis of hyacinths and biscuits... a series of explanations of life, fading off into horizons too swift for explanation.” Sandburg was talking about the importance of images in poetry, especially the synthesis of different images.

Thomas Sterns Eliot, a very influential American poet who won the Nobel Prize for literature in 1948, was against the Romantic poets’ idea of poetry as the overflow of feeling, by saying that “poetry is not the assertion of truth, but the making of that truth more fully real to us”.

Last but not the least, another popular American poet Frost said: “A poem begins with a lump in the throat, a home-sickness or a love-sickness. It is a reaching-out toward expression; an effort to find fulfillment. A complete poem is one where the emotion has found its thought and the thought has found the words.”

One can see that Frost laid stress on feeling and expression of the feeling in suitable words. One can never finish a summary of people’s definitions of poetry. Each definition given above can only reveal one part of its features. However, one can make an attempt to describe its properties, function, and characteristics as clearly as possible.



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Poetry is a method to express poets' emotion and make their readers feel it by means of the best language. Through poetry, one can acquire the knowledge of how to do with the change, how to come to terms with joy and grief, and how to celebrate the wonder still to be found in the extraordinary energy of daily life. Due to this perspective by itself, poetry cannot be limited by definitions. It cannot be communicated or fathomed other than by the use of poetry itself.

Generally speaking, poetry has the following major characteristics:

- Poetry is divided by lines. It is divided into stichic poetry (诗行制) and strophic or stanzaic poetry (诗节制). Any poem exhibits one of two kinds of basic organization: it is either stichic or strophic. In stichic organization, line follows line without any formal or mathematical grouping of the lines into stanzas; in strophic organization, the lines are arranged in stanzas of varying degrees of logical complexity. For example, *Paradise Lost* is a stichic poem; *The Faerie Queene* is strophic.
- Poetry is lyrical, even the epics. Almost all poems express the feeling of the poets.
- Poetry is metaphorical. There is no poetry without the use of metaphor or rhetoric device.
- Poetry is built of images, no matter in what country and what time.
- Poetry is mostly personal.
- Poetry is brief. It can describe things in the fewest words.
- Poetry is music composed with words.
- Emotion and imagination play an important role in poetry.

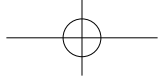


The Function of Poetry

No matter in Chinese or Western culture, generally speaking, poetry has two functions. One is to delight; the other is to instruct.

Since ancient times, the Chinese agreed to the function of poetry as expressing the poet's will.

Besides, Plato thought that poetry not only can bring pleasure to people but also should be useful to the state. He attached importance to the function of instruction and



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thought that too much delight harms the function of instruction or education.

Horace defined the function of poetry as giving the readers benefit and pleasure, and teaching the readers how to live. He advocated the function of giving amusement and teaching, that is, to delight and instruct.

Sir Philip Sidney repeated this theory by saying that poesy's chief end is "to teach and delight". He also adds that poetry should make people touched.

This is also repeated by Samuel Johnson who insisted that "the end of writing is to instruct; the end of poetry is to instruct by pleasing".

Major Types of Poetry

According to the French critic Gérard Genette, poetry can be classified into three major types: narrative poetry (叙事诗), lyric poetry (抒情诗) and dramatic poetry (戏剧诗). Some of these types have several subdivisions and each adheres to different conventions.

1 Narrative poetry

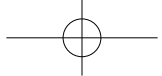
A narrative poem tells a story. It is always told by a narrator. Narrative poetry is written with the poets standing outside their material, representing human experiences by what is often called the "objective" method. It aims primarily at telling a story in a sequence of events. Epic, ballad, metrical romance and dramatic monologue are four main categories of narrative poetry.

1) Epic

An epic is a long narrative poem of great scale and grand style, typically a recounting of history, legend or the deeds of national heroes. It deals with noble characters and heroic deeds. Many nations have their own epics. For example, *Iliad*, *Odyssey*, *Aeneid*, *Beowulf*, *Song of Roland*, *The Divine Comedy*, and *Paradise Lost*, etc.

2) Metrical romance

A metrical romance is the prevailing literary form of literature in the Middle Ages. It was a long composition, mostly in verse, describing the life and adventures of noble heroes. *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* is a famous metrical romance.



3) Ballad

A ballad is a story told in song, usually in 4-line stanzas, with the second and fourth lines rhymed.

4) Dramatic monologue

A dramatic monologue is a kind of narrative poem in which one character speaks to one or more listeners whose replies are not given in the poem. The occasion is usually a crucial one in the speaker's life, and the dramatic monologue reveals the speaker's personality as well as the incident that is the subject of the poem. The main user of dramatic monologue was Robert Browning whose principal achievement lies in his introduction of dramatic monologue into English poetry. His *My Last Duchess* is one of its examples.

② Lyric poetry

Lyric poetry is the type in which the poets speak for themselves, setting forth inner experiences by a subjective method. It has many forms of expression, such as song, ode, elegy, sonnet, pastoral, etc.

1) Song

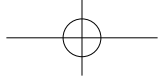
A song is a short lyric poem with distinct musical qualities, normally written to be set to music. It expresses a simple but intense emotion. George Gordon Byron's "She Walks in Beauty" is a song. There are many poems entitled "song".

2) Ode

An ode is a complex lyric poem of some length, dealing with a noble theme in a dignified manner and originally intended to be sung. Odes are often written for a special occasion, to honor a person or a season or to commemorate an event. John Keats is famous for his odes such as "Ode to the Nightingale", "Ode on a Grecian Urn" and "To Autumn".

3) Elegy

An elegy is a poem of mourning, usually over the passing of life and beauty or a meditation on the nature of death. An elegy is a type of lyric poem, usually formal in language and structure, and solemn or even melancholy in tone. Among the best are



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Thomas Gray's "Elegy Written in the Country Churchyard" and John Milton's "Lycidas".

4) Sonnet

A sonnet is a lyric poem consisting of a single stanza of fourteen iambic pentametre lines linked by an intricate rhyme scheme.

There are mainly two major patterns of rhyme scheme in sonnets written in English.

The Italian or Petrarchan sonnet comprises an octave (eight lines) rhyming "abbaabba" and a sestet (six lines) rhyming "cdecde" or "cdccdc". The transition from octave to sestet usually coincides with a "turn" in the argument or mood of the poem, usually in Line 9.

The English or Shakespearean sonnet comprises three quatrains and a final couplet, rhyming "abab cdcd efef gg". The "turn" comes with the final couplet, which may sometimes achieve an epigram. Yet, one can still see the influence of the Italian form, that is, in some sonnets one can still find the turn in Line 9.

There was one notable variant, the Spenserian sonnet, in which Spenser linked each quatrain to the next by a continuing rhyme "abab bcbc cdcd ee".

There are three famous sonnet sequences in the Elizabethan Age: Spenser's *Amoretti*, Shakespeare's sonnets and Sidney's *Astrophel and Stella*.

5) Pastoral

A pastoral is a highly conventional mode of writing that celebrates the innocent life of shepherds and shepherdesses in poems, plays and prose romances.

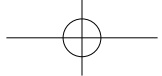
Pastoral literature describes the loves and sorrows of shepherds, usually in an idealized Golden Age of rustic innocence and idleness; paradoxically, it is an elaborately artificial cult of simplicity and virtuous frugality.

③ Dramatic poetry

Dramatic poetry is the type intended for the stage. It presents human life in conflict, mainly including comedy, tragedy and the historical drama.

1) Comedy

A comedy typically deals with common people and is dominated by a light tone



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that encourages laughter (or at least amusement or entertainment) and ends happily, often with the uniting of a pair of young lovers. Shakespeare wrote many comedies, such as *Twelfth Night*, *The Merchant of Venice* and *As You Like It*, etc.

2) Tragedy

Traditionally, a tragedy is dominated by a serious tone, concerns characters of noble birth, perhaps a king like Oedipus or a prince like Hamlet, deals with profound issues, and usually concludes with the death of the leading character. Shakespeare is famous for his four great tragedies—*Hamlet*, *Othello*, *King Lear* and *Macbeth*.

3) Historical drama

A historical drama deals with some historic events or personages. For example, Shakespeare's *Henry IV*, *Richard III*, etc.



IV *Elements of Poetry*

1 Rhyme (韵)

Rhyme refers to the repetition of certain sound in words, usually at the end of poetic lines.



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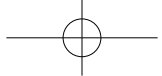
i. Types of rhyme according to its place

1) End rhyme (尾韵)

End rhyme is the repetition of the last stressed vowel in a line and all the following syllables. End rhyme is the commonest type of rhyme in English poetry after the medieval period.

2) Internal rhyme (行内韵)

Internal rhyme is also called crossed rhyme. An internal rhyme occurs when the word in the middle rhymes with the one at the end of a line. For example, "The guests are met, the feast is set" and "Spring, the sweet spring, ..."



ii. Types of rhyme according to its structure

1) Masculine rhyme (阳韵)

Masculine rhyme is the repetition of one syllable at the end of respective lines. For example,

Under the green wood tree
Who loves to lie with me.

2) Feminine rhyme (阴韵)

A feminine rhyme is a rhyme that matches two or more syllables, usually at the end of respective lines, in which the final syllable or syllables are unstressed. Feminine rhyme is relatively rare in English poetry and usually appears as a special effect.

William Shakespeare's sonnet makes use of feminine rhymes:

	Rhyming Syllables	Rhyme Pattern
A woman's face with nature's own hand painted ,	pain-ted	A-B
Hast thou, the master mistress of my passion ;	pass-ion	C-D
A woman's gentle heart, but not acquainted	quain-ted	A-B
With shifting change, as is false women's fashion ...	fash-ion	C-D
But since she prick'd thee out for women's pleasure ,	plea-sure	E-F
Mine be thy love and thy love's use their treasure .	trea-sure	E-F

iii. Other types of rhyme

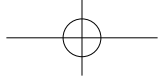
Besides the above rhymes, there are other types of rhyme frequently used in English poetry as follows.

1) Alliteration, head rhyme or initial rhyme (头韵)

Alliteration is the repetition of the same sounds—usually initial consonants of words or of stressed syllables—in any sequence of neighboring words. For example, “O wild West Wind, thou breath of Autumn's being.”

2) Assonance (腹韵, 亦称元音韵)

Assonance is the repetition of vowel sounds within a noticeable range. Assonance



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occurs in words as: fight / bike; fat / map; morning / falling. In poetry, it goes as follows.

She walks in beauty, like the night
Of cloudless climes and starry skies.

3) Consonance (辅音韵)

Consonance is the repetition of consonant sounds before and after different vowels. Consonance occurs in words as block / black; creak / croak.

4) Eye rhyme or sight rhyme (眼韵)

Eye rhyme occurs when the spelling of the rhyming element matches, but the sound does not. For example,

Come live with me and be my Love,
And we will all the pleasures prove.

iv. Rhyme scheme (押韵格式, 亦称韵式)

English poetry has various rhyme schemes. Here we take the 4-line stanza as an example to illustrate its diverse patterns.

1) abab (隔行押韵, 交叉韵). For example,

Gather ye rosebuds while ye may,
Old time is still a-flying;
And this same flower that smiles today,
Tomorrow will be dying.

2) aabb (双偶四行). For example,

Come live with me and be my Love,
And we will all the pleasures prove
That valleys, groves, hills and fields,
Woods, or steepy mountain yields.

3) aaaa (通韵, 一韵到底). For example,

The woods are lovely, dark, and deep,
But I have promises to keep,
And miles to go before I sleep.