DEFINING POETRY

WILLIAM WORDSWORTH
“Poetry is the spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings: it takes its origin from emotion recollected in tranquility: the emotion is contemplated till, by a species of reaction, the tranquility gradually disappears, and an emotion, kindred to that which was the subject of contemplation, is gradually produced, and does itself actually exist in the mind.”

ROBERT FROST
“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.”

Introduction To Poetry
By Billy Collins
I ask them to take a poem and hold it up to the light like a color slide
or press an ear against its hive.
I say drop a mouse into a poem and watch him probe his way out,
or walk inside the poem’s room and feel the walls for a light switch.
I want them to waterski across the surface of a poem waving at the author’s name on the shore.
But all they want to do is tie the poem to a chair with rope and torture a confession out of it.
They begin beating it with a hose to find out what it really means.

Ars Poetica
By Archibald MacLeish
A poem should be palpable and mute
As a globed fruit,
Dumb
As old medallions to the thumb,
Silent as he sleeve-worn stone
Of casement ledges where the moss has grown—
A poem should be wordless
As the flight of birds

*  
A poem should be motionless in time
As the moon climbs,
Leaving, as the moon releases
Twig by twig the night-entangled trees,
Leaving, as the moon behind the winter leaves,
Memory by memory the mind—
A poem should be motionless in time
As the moon climbs.

*
A poem should be equal to:
Not true.
For all the history of grief
An empty doorway and a maple leaf.
For love
The leaning grasses and two lights above the sea—
A poem should not mean
But be.
**Main Entry:** po.et.ry

**Function:** noun

**Date:** 14th century

1 *(a)* metrical writing; verse *(b)* the productions of a poet; poems
2 writing that formulates a concentrated imaginative awareness of experience in language chosen and arranged to create a specific emotional response through meaning, sound and rhythm
3 *(a)* something likened to poetry especially in beauty of expression *(b)* poetic quality or aspect

**CAMBRIDGE INTERNATIONAL DICTIONARY OF ENGLISH**

**Entry:** "poem"

- "poem" noun [C]
  a piece of writing in which the words are chosen for their sound and the images and ideas they suggest, not just their obvious meaning. The words are arranged in separate lines, often ending in rhyme.

  If something has poetry, it is very beautiful or expressive.
  This film has a savage poetry and brilliance.
  The young gymnast’s moves were poetry in motion.

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poetic
1 emotive, flowery, imaginative, lyrical, metrical, musical.

poem
/"p:m/ noun 1 metrical composition. 2 elevated composition in verse or prose. 3 something with poetic qualities
1 ballad, eclogue (short, pastoral poem), elegy, epic, haiku, lay, limerick, lyric, ode, pastoral, rhyme, sonnet, verse.
... 3 poetic or tenderly pleasing quality.

lyric
/"lrk/ adjective 1 *(of poetry)* expressing writer’s emotion, usually briefly. 2 *(of poet)* writing in this way. 3 meant or fit to be sung; songlike.
Noun 1 lyric poem. 2 *(in plural)* words of song.

Lyrical
Adjective 1 lyric. 2 resembling, or using language appropriate to, lyric poetry. 3 colloquial highly enthusiastic.

1,2 emotional, expressive, impassioned, inspired, melodious, musical, poetic, rapturous, rhapsodic, sweet, tuneful. 3 emotional, enthusiastic, impassioned, rapturous, rhapsodic.

**DOUGLAS McGUI says:**

A piece of writing is poetic when it:
1. Sings
2. Moves
3. Shimmers
4. Cracks the whip
5. Has an undefinable “woo woo” quality
6. Recreates the early childhood pleasures of moon, Mom, and mud
7. Forces an epiphany
8. Imitates nature
9. Contains the music of plain speech
10. Marries sound and meaning
11. Just sounds good
12. Shatters self-important, secluded views of the world
13. Snaps you into a different state of mind
14. Sets off your indicator lights
15. Is the exact opposite of a gabezungle
16. Connects the reader with an interior “otherness,” sort of like music
17. Brings the whole soul of man into activity
18. Offers the most accurate possible symbolic image of objects which when they are actually seen cause distress (corpses, worms, etc.)
19. Instructs by pleasing
20. Proposes pleasure, not truth, as the immediate object of attention
21. Creates a sort of religious feeling
22. Is nothing else, so is poetic by default
23. Remembers things silently gone out of mind
24. Induces movement by precise expression
25. Transforms contemplated emotion into actual, felt emotion
26. Breathes the finer spirit of all knowledge
27. Looks before and after
28. Sees relationships and love everywhere
29. Binds together by passion and knowledge the vast empire of human society
30. Feels as if it was always intended to be written as a poem and does not feel like prose in drag
31. Achieves a certain level of song that exceeds the limits of human language
32. Causes a crackling blue spark to arc from the page to the reader’s mind
33. Purges pity and terror
34. Ritualistically recalls horrible memories in loving detail
35. Is news that stays news
36. Hits you with a brick
37. Lives beautifully for a moment and then dies
38. Burns for the joy of it
39. Rings your bell
40. Lifts you off
Poetry (ancient Greek: ποιεω (poieo) = I create) is traditionally a written art form (although there is also an ancient and modern poetry which relies mainly upon oral or pictorial representations) in which human language is used for its aesthetic qualities in addition to, or instead of, its notional and semantic content. The increased emphasis on the aesthetics of language and the deliberate use of features such as repetition, meter and rhyme, are what are commonly used to distinguish poetry from prose, but debates over such distinctions still persist, while the issue is confounded by such forms as prose poetry and poetic prose. Some modernists (such as the Surrealists) approach this problem of definition by defining poetry not as a literary genre within a set of genres, but as the very manifestation of human imagination, the substance which all creative acts derive from.

Poetry often uses condensed form to convey an emotion or idea to the reader or listener, as well as using devices such as assonance, alliteration and repetition to achieve musical or incantatory effects. Furthermore, poems often make heavy use of imagery, word association, and musical qualities. Because of its reliance on “accidental” features of language and connotational meaning, poetry is notoriously difficult to translate. Similarly, poetry’s use of nuance and symbolism can make it difficult to interpret a poem or can leave a poem open to multiple interpretations.

It is difficult to define poetry definitively, especially when one considers that poetry encompasses forms as different as epic narratives and haiku. Needless to say, many poets have given their own definitions. Carl Sandburg said that “poetry is the synthesis of hyacinths and biscuits.” Robert Frost once said “Poetry is the first thing lost in translation.”

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Quotes concerning “Poetry”:

- “A poem begins in delight and ends in wisdom.” ~ Robert Frost
- “A poet dares be just so clear and no clearer... He unzips the veil from beauty, but does not remove it. A poet utterly clear is a trifle glaring.” ~ E. B. White
- “A poet looks at the world the way a man looks at a woman.” ~ Wallace Stevens
- “A poet must leave traces of his passage, not proof.” ~ Rene Char
- “A poet’s work is to name the unnameable, to point at frauds, to take sides, start arguments, shape the world, and stop it going to sleep.” ~ Salman Rushdie
- “Always be a poet, even in prose.” ~ Charles Baudelaire
- “As a poet I hold the most archaic values on earth . . . the fertility of the soil, the magic of animals, the power-vision in solitude, the terrifying initiation and rebirth, the love and ecstasy of the dance, the common work of the tribe. I try to hold both history and the wilderness in mind, that my poems may approach the true measure of things and stand against the unbalance and ignorance of our times.” ~ Gary Snyder
- “Children and lunatics cut the Gordian knot which the poet spends his life patiently trying to untie.” ~ Jean Cocteau
- “Even when poetry has a meaning, as it usually has, it may be inadvisable to draw it out... Perfect understanding will sometimes almost extinguish pleasure.” ~ A. E. Housman
- “Everything one invents is true, you may be perfectly sure of that. Poetry is as precise as geometry.” ~ Gustave Flaubert
- “Genuine poetry can communicate before it is understood.” ~ T. S. Eliot
- “He lives the poetry that he cannot write. The others write the poetry that they dare not realise.” ~ Oscar Wilde
- “He who draws noble delights from sentiments of poetry is a true poet, though he has never written a line in all his life.” ~ George Sand
- “I think one of poetry’s functions is not to give us what we want... [T]he poet isn’t always of use to the tribe. The tribe thrives on the consensual. The tribe is pulling together to face the intruder who threatens it. Meanwhile, the poet is sitting by himself in the graveyard talking to a skull.” ~ Heather McHugh
- “In Poetry I have a few axioms, and you will see how far I am from their center. I think Poetry should surprise by a fine excess and not by Singularity--it should strike the Reader as a wording of his own highest thoughts, and appear almost a Remembrance! Its touches of Beauty should never be half way thereby making the reader breathless instead of content: the rise, the progress, the setting of imagery should like the Sun come natural natural too him--shine over him and set soberly although in magnificence leaving him in the Luxury of twilight--but it is easier to think what Poetry should be than to write it--and this leads me on to another axiom. That if Poetry comes not as naturally as the Leaves to a tree it had better not come at all.” ~ John Keats, Letter to John Taylor (27 Feb 1818)
- “Poetry heals the wounds inflicted by reason.” ~ Novalis
• “Poetry is a deal of joy and pain and wonder, with a dash of the dictionary.” ~ Kahlil Gibran
• “Poetry is a mirror which makes beautiful that which is distorted.” ~ Percy Bysshe Shelley
• “Poetry is all that is worth remembering in life.” ~ William Hazlitt
• “Poetry is just the evidence of life. If your life is burning well, poetry is just the ash.” ~ Leonard Cohen
• “Poetry is language at its most distilled and most powerful.” ~ Rita Dove
• “Poetry is nearer to vital truth than history.” ~ Plato
• “Poetry is not a turning loose of emotion, but an escape from emotion; it is not the expression of personality, but an escape from personality. But, of course, only those who have personality and emotions know what it means to want to escape from these things.” ~ T. S. Eliot
• “Poetry is not an expression of the party line. It’s that time of night, lying in bed, thinking what you really think, making the private world public, that’s what the poet does.” ~ Allen Ginsberg
• “Poetry is ordinary language raised to the Nth power. Poetry is boned with ideas, nerved and blooded with emotions, all held together by the delicate, tough skin of words.” ~ Paul Engle
• “Poetry is plucking at the heartstrings, and making music with them.” ~ Dennis Gabor
• “Poetry is the art of uniting pleasure with truth.” ~ Samuel Johnson
• “Poetry is the journal of the sea animal living on land, wanting to fly in the air. Poetry is a search for syllables to shoot at the barriers of the unknown and the unknowable. Poetry is a phantom script telling how rainbows are made and why they go away.” ~ Carl Sandburg
• “Poetry is the one place where people can speak their original human mind. It is the outlet for people to say in public what is known in private.” ~ Allen Ginsberg
• “Poetry is the opening and closing of a door, leaving those who look through to guess about what is seen during the moment.” ~ Carl Sandburg
• “Poetry is the revelation of a feeling that the poet believes to be interior and personal which the reader recognizes as his own.” ~ Salvatore Quasimodo
• “Poetry is the rhythmical creation of beauty in words.” ~ Edgar Allan Poe
• “Poetry is thoughts that breathe, and words that burn.” ~ Thomas Gray
• “Poetry is what gets lost in translation.” ~ Robert Frost
• “Poetry is when an emotion has found its thought and the thought has found words.” ~ Robert Frost
• “Poetry should... should strike the reader as a wording of his own highest thoughts, and appear almost a remembrance.” ~ John Keats
• “Science is for those who learn; poetry, for those who know.” ~ Joseph Roux
• “The poem is a little myth of man’s capacity of making life meaningful. And in the end, the poem is not a thing we see-it is, rather, a light by which we may see-and what we see is life.” ~ Robert Penn Warren
• “The poet doesn’t invent. He listens.” ~ Jean Cocteau
• “The poet is in the end probably more afraid of the dogmatist who wants to extract the message from the poem and throw the poem away than he is of the sentimentalist who says, “Oh, just let me enjoy the poem.” ~ Robert Penn Warren
• “There is poetry as soon as we realize that we possess nothing.” ~ John Cage
• “There’s no money in poetry, but then there’s no poetry in money, either.” ~ Robert Graves
• “To have great poets, there must be great audiences.” ~ Walt Whitman
• “Writing poetry after Auschwitz is barbaric.” ~ Theodor Adorno
• “You can tear a poem apart to see what makes it tick... You’re back with the mystery of having been moved by words. The best craftsmanship always leaves holes and gaps... so that something that is not in the poem can creep, crawl, flash or thunder in.” ~ Dylan Thomas
• “You will find poetry nowhere unless you bring some of it with you.” ~ Joseph Joubert