

Major forms of poetry

There are a number of ways of defining the form of a poem, including:

- ◆ a fixed pattern of rhyme, rhythm and number of lines (e.g. a sonnet has fourteen lines and a rhyme scheme)
- ◆ the nature of the content and mood (e.g. ode, elegy)
- ◆ the way in which a story is told (e.g. dramatic monologue, epic).

Note that blank verse and free verse, two important types of verse, can be used in various forms of poetry.

Blank verse



Blank verse is poetry written in unrhymed (hence ‘blank’) iambic pentameter.

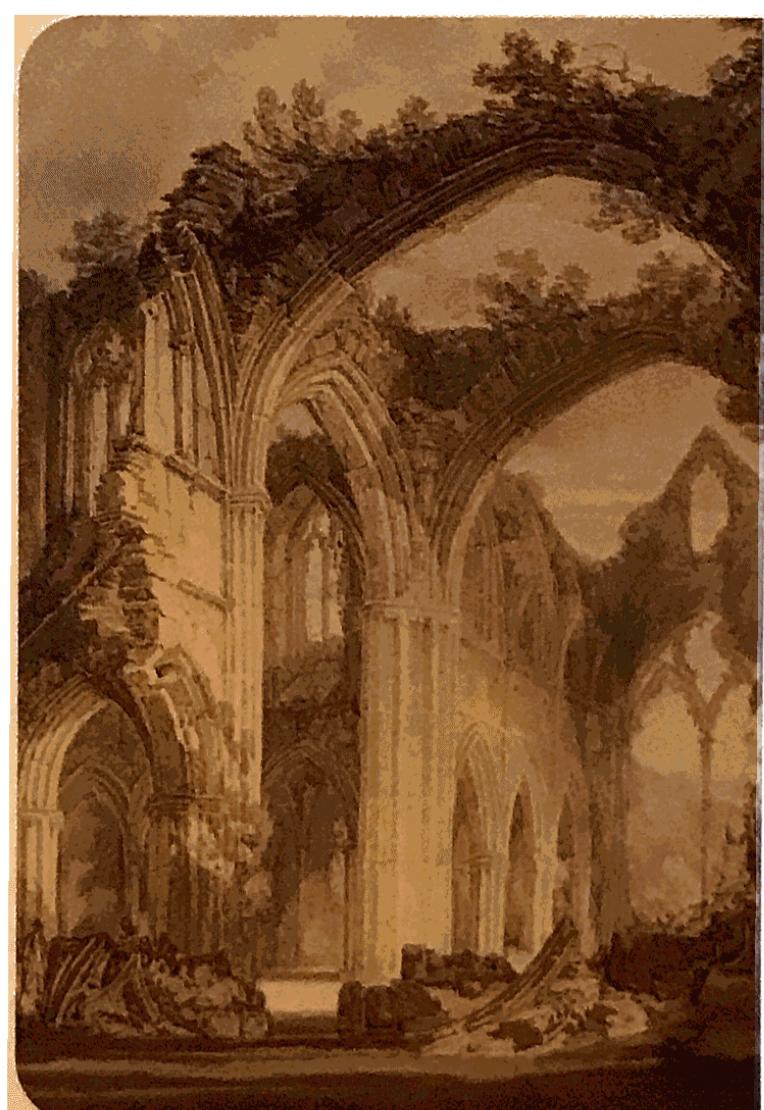
- ◆ Most Shakespearean drama is written in blank verse.
- ◆ The rhythm of blank verse is very close to that of normal speech in English.

The Romantic poets often used blank verse. The following example is the beginning of **William Wordsworth’s ‘Tintern Abbey’** (1798):

Five years have passed; five summers, with the length
Of five long winters! and again I hear
These waters, rolling from the mountain-springs
With a soft inland murmur. Once again
Do I behold these steep and lofty cliffs ...

The (mostly) regular pattern of alternating unstressed and stressed syllables creates a consistent rhythm. This helps generate a suitable mood for this meditative reflection on the nature of memory.

Note, however, the emphatic tone generated by the unexpected stress on ‘long’ in the second line, emphasising the difficulty of enduring the winters as compared to the summers.



William Turner’s 1794 watercolour painting of Tintern Abbey.

Free verse



Free verse is poetry with no regular line length, rhyme or rhythm.

Free verse became widely used in the 20th century when poets experimented with form by breaking down traditional structures. There were strong precedents for the use of free verse in the work of 19th-century poets, such as that of the American poet Walt Whitman.

Walt Whitman's *Leaves of Grass* (1855) uses free verse to express feelings of liberation and personal freedom; it also conveys a sense of self that is simultaneously ordinary and ecstatic:

I celebrate myself, and sing myself,
And what I assume you shall assume,
For every atom belonging to me as good belongs to you.

I loafe and invite my soul,
I lean and loafe at my ease observing a spear of summer grass.

Whitman rejected the conventional forms widely used at the time (such as the sonnet and blank verse), and sought a poetic idiom that would convey a uniquely American voice. He also opened up poetry to the expression of thoughts and feelings that would normally only be hinted at, such as sexual desires and experiences:

Heroic couplets



Heroic couplets are rhyming couplets in lines of ten syllables (usually iambic pentameter).

- ◆ Heroic couplets have been used for long poems such as narrative poems and epics (see below).
- ◆ The form was widely used in the 16th and 17th centuries, but is most closely associated with the poets John Dryden (late 1600s) and Alexander Pope (early 1700s).

Alexander Pope used heroic couplets extensively, in both serious and comic poems. In *The Rape of the Lock* (1717) the use of heroic couplets contributes to the mock-heroic effect:

Say what strange motive, Goddess! could compel
A well-bred lord to assault a gentle belle?
Oh, say what stranger cause, yet unexplored,
Could make a gentle belle reject a lord?
In tasks so bold can little men engage,
And in soft bosoms dwells such mighty rage?

In an epic, heroic couplets help to create a serious, elevated tone, appropriate to weighty subject matter. Here, though, Pope's use of inflated language ('assault', 'mighty') and the contrast of the poem's form and style with its actual subject matter – the 'theft' of a lock of hair from a young woman – create a comic rather than a serious tone.

Ballad

 A **ballad** tells a story, often with a strong dramatic element and drawing on the local folk culture. It is usually written in short stanzas.

Some famous ballads in the literary tradition are *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner* (1798) by Samuel Taylor Coleridge, 'Lucy Gray' (1800) by William Wordsworth and 'Maude Clare' (1859) by Christina Rossetti.

Lyric

 The **lyric** is the most common poetic form. It was originally accompanied by music, and the term retains this meaning (as in 'song lyric'). A lyric poem:

- is relatively short
- is in the voice of a single 'character', known as the speaker
- uses a personal tone that conveys the speaker's private thoughts and feelings to the reader/listener
- often focuses on a moment, mood or image.

There are many forms or structures in which a lyric can be written: a series of quatrains is the most common. In Renaissance Italy and Elizabethan England the sonnet became the dominant form of the lyric, which usually focused on the subject of romantic love (see below). Lyrics can also be religious or mystical in nature.

Sonnet

 A **sonnet** is a fourteen-line poem usually written in iambic pentameter in one of a few established rhyme schemes.

Sonnets are conventionally about love, but can be religious – John Donne's *Holy Sonnets* are famous examples of the latter (see page 149). They can also be about more everyday experiences.

Although seemingly quite strict, the sonnet form has proved to be flexible enough to allow for considerable variation and experiment. The main sonnet forms are defined in the table on the next page.

Type of sonnet	Rhyme scheme	Structure
Petrarchan named after the Renaissance Italian poet Petrarch	<i>abbaabba cdecde</i> or <i>abbaabba cdcdcd</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> The first eight lines are the octave; the last six lines are the sestet. The octave develops the main idea or problem; the sestet provides a response or resolution.
Shakespearean (sometimes known as 'English') Shakespeare used this form throughout his cycle of 154 sonnets	<i>abab cdcd efef gg</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> The three quatrains develop different aspects of the main idea. The final rhyming couplet resolves the argument.
Spenserian named after the Elizabethan poet Edmund Spenser	<i>abab bcbc cdcd ee</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> The three linked quatrains develop the main idea. The final rhyming couplet generates a sense of closure and resolution.

Ode



The **ode** is another type of lyric poem, often written in the form of an address. It has a ceremonial, stately quality and a complex stanza form.

There are two main kinds of odes: those for a public occasion, and those intended for private reflection.

John Keats' odes, including 'To Autumn' and 'Ode to a Nightingale', are some of the most famous ever written. His 'Ode on a Grecian Urn' (1820) was written for private reflection, and has five ten-line stanzas that follow the rhyme scheme *abab cdedce* (or with a variation of this rhyme sequence in the sestet).

The speaker admires the urn's beauty, which transcends the passage of time. The two lovers depicted on its surface 'cannot fade', yet the 'Bold Lover' will never succeed in kissing his beloved. Thus, the poem is a tribute to the beauty and permanence of art, while also acknowledging what art fails to capture – the vitality and sensuousness of life itself.

Ode on a Grecian Urn

1

Thou still unravished bride of quietness,
Thou foster child of silence and slow time,
Sylvan historian, who canst thus express
A flowery tale more sweetly than our rhyme:
What leaf-fringed legend haunts about thy shape
Of deities or mortals, or of both,
In Tempe or the dales of Arcady?
What men or gods are these? What maidens loth?
What mad pursuit? What struggle to escape?
What pipes and timbrels? What wild ecstasy?

2

Heard melodies are sweet, but those unheard
Are sweeter; therefore, ye soft pipes, play on;
Not to the sensual ear, but, more endeared,
Pipe to the spirit ditties of no tone:
Fair youth, beneath the trees, thou canst not leave
Thy song, nor ever can those trees be bare;



Elegy



An **elegy** is a poem that laments the death of a person, or a tragic event.

A feeling of sadness and loss pervades an elegy, but the ending can express hope and a sense of renewal. An important subgenre is the pastoral elegy, which has a rural setting and features shepherds and mythological references.

WH Auden's 'In Memory of W. B. Yeats' (1940) is a famous elegy from the 20th century, while John Milton's 'Lycidas' (1637) is an important early pastoral elegy in English poetry. Thomas Gray's *Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard* (1751) is a well-known elegy in the pastoral tradition, though it takes the form of a general meditation on death rather than a lament for a particular individual.

Haiku



Haiku is a Japanese form of poetry with three lines and a fixed number of syllables in each line: five syllables in the first line, seven in the second line and five in the third line.

A haiku captures a single image or feeling in a very distilled form, usually including a reference to a season or to nature more broadly. English translations of Japanese haiku do not always adhere to the syllable scheme; nor do many haiku written in English.

Three Japanese masters of haiku in the 17th and 18th centuries were Matsuo Bashō, Naitō Jōsō and Yosa Buson. This example by **Jōsō** retains the conventional syllable scheme in the English translation:

Both plains and mountains
Have been captured by the snow
There is nothing left

In early 20th-century English poetry, a number of writers in the imagist movement, such as Ezra Pound and Amy Lowell, drew on the haiku form in writing short, concentrated poems. These poets were reacting against the longer and more discursive poems of the Victorian period, and sought to create clear, focused images free from sentimentality.

Dramatic monologue



A dramatic monologue contrasts with a lyric: it is a longer poem in which the speaker is more strongly characterised and developed. There is more of a storytelling aspect to a dramatic monologue than there is in a lyric. The dramatic quality of the poem comes from a situation described by the speaker.

The Victorian poets Alfred, Lord Tennyson and Robert Browning wrote several dramatic monologues: ‘Ulysses’ (Tennyson) and ‘My Last Duchess’ (Browning) are two of the most famous examples.

In **Tennyson’s** ‘Ulysses’ (1842) the speaker is the disenchanted hero of Homer’s *Odyssey* (Ulysses is another name for Odysseus), who expresses regret at the end of his adventures and the approach of old age:

It little profits that an idle king,
By this still hearth, among these barren crags,
Matched with an agèd wife, I mete and dole
Unequal laws unto a savage race,
That hoard, and sleep, and feed, and know not me.
I cannot rest from travel: I will drink
Life to the lees ...

Ulysses’ restless character and pensive mood are quickly established; his audience is unspecified, so it is as if the reader is eavesdropping on his private thoughts.

Browning creates a more explicitly dramatic situation in ‘My Last Duchess’ (1842). The speaker is identified by the subtitle ‘Ferrara’ – Alphonso II d’Este, Duke of Ferrara (born in 1533), whose first wife (his ‘last duchess’) died, in suspicious circumstances, at the age of sixteen. Ferrara, who is seeking to marry again, is showing a portrait of his late wife to an emissary from the family of his prospective bride. The monologue evokes the drama of the encounter between the two men, as well as capturing the Duke’s assured but threatening character – particularly in the lines ‘I gave commands; / Then all smiles stopped together’. Underneath the Duke’s courteous demeanour lies, it seems, a jealous and ruthless personality, just as underneath the veneer of polite society lies a culture in which powerful men treat women as possessions.

Epic



The **epic** is the longest and most narrative-driven form of poetry. Its subject is usually on a grand scale, encompassing events of a momentous nature and/or occurring over a number of years, such as a war or a dangerous quest.

John Milton's *Paradise Lost* (1667) is the most famous epic poem written in English. It describes the original sin of Adam and Eve and their banishment from the garden of Eden; each of its twelve 'books' is several hundred lines in length.

A much older epic poem is *Beowulf*, written between the 8th and 11th centuries in Old English, an early form of the English language. It has been translated into modern English a number of times: a relatively recent well-regarded translation is by the Irish poet Seamus Heaney (published in 1999).