

CHAPTER 3 INTRODUCTION TO POETRY

Poetry is perhaps the oldest literary genre. It has existed since the creation of man. Nature provides the avenue for man to express his thoughts and feelings. When a man observes a natural landscape like the trees, the mountains, the animals, the sun, the moon or the stars, he could be moved to express his emotion by writing poetry. This has led to the writing of many poems. For example, the traditional poem, “Salute to the Elephant”, praises the greatness of the elephant. It reveals the might of the animal in the eye of the poet. Consider the words of the poet below:

O elephant, possessor of a saving basket full of money
O elephant, huge as a hill, even in a crouching posture
O elephant, enfolded by honour; demon, flapping fans of war.
Demon who snaps tree branches into many pieces and moves on to the forest farm...

Poems have also been produced as a result of close observation of man’s relationship(s) with another individual or group of people. A good example is the poem “The Casualties” by J. P. Clark. The poem describes the casualties of the Nigerian Civil War (1967 – 1970).

What is Poetry?

In simple terms, poetry is an expression of human feelings and emotions in an organised form of language. The language of expression is special and different from that used in day-to-day conversation. Poetry arouses the emotion of the reader and appeals to his imagination.

Good poetry might be difficult to understand at first reading. In order to appreciate the poem, one must be patient, attentive and determined. He must read the poem as many times as possible until the meaning of the poem gradually sinks in.

Characteristics of Poetry

One basic characteristic of poetry is that it shares some features of song. Many songs have been adapted to poems and poems adapted to songs. Rhyme, repetition, refrain and rhythm are some of the characteristics that poems and songs share. For example, “Old Roger is Dead” and “Twinkle, twinkle, little star” are poems that could be sung:

Twinkle, twinkle, little star
How I wonder what you are
Up above the world so high
Like a diamond in the sky.

The main features of poetry include stanza, the use of emotive and elevated language and the elements of melody such as rhythm, rhyme scheme, refrain and other figurative expressions.

Stanza

A stanza is a fixed number of lines of verse arranged to form a unit of a poem. The stanza is to a poem what a paragraph is to an essay. A stanza may be as short as two lines or four lines, and it could be as long as eight lines or more.

Language in Poetry

The language of poetry is emotive and elevated. Words are carefully chosen and ordered to reflect the feelings of the poet about his subject. The poet uses words in an imaginative way to express deep feelings.

Elements of Melody

The elements of melody in poetry include the use of rhythm, rhyme scheme, refrain and other figurative expressions. Rhythm is the pace or the regular beat in a line or lines of poetry. On the other hand, the rhyme scheme is the arrangement and repetition of sound patterns at the end of each line of a poem. When a word at the end of a line has the same sound with another word at the end of another line, they are said to rhyme. Refrain refers to the repetition of a line or lines at the end of stanzas. Therefore, rhythm, rhyme and refrain are the basic elements of melody that make poetry similar to song. Other figurative expressions used in poetry are simile, metaphor, personification, assonance, alliteration, euphemism, hyperbole, paradox, pun and many more.

Poetic Devices

Image: An image is generally described as any mental picture that is created with words.

Imagery: Imagery is a collection of images which express certain thoughts.

Image and imagery are general terms that cover the use of language to represent objects, actions, feelings, thoughts, ideas, state of mind and experience. They are the broad terms for other figurative expressions in poetry known as poetic devices. These are:

Simile: This is an indirect comparison between two unlikely objects or things. It is indicated by the use of “as” or “like”. An example is “*You are as restless as the sea*”. Another example is found in Oswald Mtshali’s “Boy on a Swing”.

His blue shirt
Billows in the wind
Like a tattered kite.

Metaphor: Metaphor is a direct comparison between two unlikely objects or things. Remi Raji’s poem, “Prologue: I am the million selves...”, is a series of metaphors.

I am the cactus tree, I bear your names on my bark
I am the sudden breath of the hurricane...

Alliteration: This is the repetition of the first consonant sounds in two or more words in a line of poetry. Take note of the “f” sound as repeated in the following line: “**Full fathom five thy father lies**”.

Assonance: This is the repetition of the same vowel sounds in two or more words in a line of poetry. This repetition can occur in any position in the words. An example is: The world is not good for anybo>dy (Kofi Awoonor “Songs of Sorrow”). What sound is repeated in this line?

Onomatopoeia: Onomatopoeia is the use of the sound of a word to suggest its meaning. Examples include “boom”, “bang”, “hiss” and “buzz”, among others.

Pun: Pun refers to a play on words. The words played on may have the same sound but different meanings. For example, the word “bank” is played on in this statement: We cannot **bank** (rely) on the **bank** (financial

institution) beside the river **bank** (shore).

Repetition: Repetition occurs when words or expressions are used two or more times in a poem. A good example can be found in Gabriel Okara's "The Call of the River Nun":

I hear your call!

I hear it far away:

*I hear it break the circle
of these crouching hills.*

Refrain: When a line or part of a line or a group of lines is repeated at different points in a poem, it is called a refrain. The repetition is usually at the end of each stanza. Consider the last line of every stanza in Lenrie Peters' "The Fence":

There where the dim past and future mingle
their nebulous hopes and aspirations
there I lie.

There where truth and untruth struggle
in endless and bloody combat,
there I lie.

Rhyme Scheme: The rhyme scheme is a technical device which poets use to arrange the repetition of sound patterns at the end of each line of a poem. There are different kinds of rhyme scheme. These include the couplet, alternate rhyme and the quatrain rhyme. The **couplet** occurs when two words at the end of two successive lines have the same sound. The **alternate rhyme** occurs when, for instance, in a four-line poem, the last words in the first and third lines have the same sound, while the last words in the second and the fourth lines have similar sound. The **quatrain** is a four-line stanza with sounds at the end of the lines rhyming in alternate fashion (**abab**) or in couplet fashion (**aabb**).

Rhythm: Rhythm refers to the regular and repeated pattern of sounds in a poem. If you are reading a piece of poem, the rise and fall of your voice will create a rhythm. The movement of sounds which the reading creates is known as rhythm. Therefore, the pace of rhythm in a poem may be fast, moderate or slow, depending on the combination of words in the poem.

Enjambment: Enjambment is the running-on of a thought or statement from one line, or stanza to another without a punctuation. It is often referred to as run-on-lines. An example is in Wole Soyinka's "Telephone Conversation":

Silence, Silenced transmission of
Pressurised good-breeding.

Synecdoche: Synecdoche occurs when a part of an object or something is used to represent the whole. An example is "All *hands* must be on deck." Here, "hands" represent individuals. What it means is that everyone must be ready to contribute. In some cases, the whole may be used to signify a part. An example is "Nigeria defeated South Africa in football." Here, "Nigeria" and "South Africa" stand for football teams.

Metonymy: Metonymy takes place when an object is used to represent another with which it has become closely associated. The association lies in the relationship between the two objects. For example, “The **crown** must give the **spade** their due.” Here “crown” represents **the king or the nobility**, while the “spade” refers to **the workers or the labour**.

Personification: Personification is a device in which non-living things are given the attributes of human beings. Study the example below:

I heard the singing of the Mississippi when Abe Lincoln
Went down to New Orleans...

In this example, a river (the Mississippi) has been given the ability of singing.

Symbol: A symbol is anything that represents something else. A flag is a symbol. It may represent a country, a body or an idea. Another example can be found in the first stanza of Oswald Mtshali’s “Nightfall in Soweto”. Here, the words ‘nightfall’ and ‘disease’ are symbols of death and destruction.

Nightfall comes
Like a dreaded disease
Sleeping through the pores
of a healthy body
And ravaging it beyond repairs

Apostrophe: Apostrophe takes place when a speaker addresses an absent object or person as if the object or the person were present. An example is in the praise poem “Salute to the Elephant”, where the elephant is addressed in such a manner as if it were present:

O elephant, possessor of a saving basket full of money
O elephant, huge as a hill, even in a crouching posture
O elephant, enfolded by honour; demon, flapping fans of war.

Hyperbole: Hyperbole is a deliberate exaggeration or overstatement of facts. For example, “He flogged me a million times.”

Litotes: Litotes is the opposite of hyperbole. It presents something in a less important manner, and reduces the significance of an object or person in a poem. Another word for litotes is **understatement**.

Euphemism: Euphemism occurs when an unpleasant or serious idea is presented in a pleasant or mild manner. A good example is “**The chief has joined our ancestors.**” In reality, the chief is dead.

Climax: Climax is achieved in poetry when events or ideas are arranged in an ascending order of importance. The order begins with the least issue and ends with the greatest. An example is: “**He rose from pauper to painter, and to President.**” Also, study the second and third lines of this stanza from Robert Browning’s “The Pope and the Net”:

So much the more his boy minds book, gives proof of mother-wit,
Becomes first Deacon, and then Priest, then Bishop: see him sit
No less than Cardinal ere long, while no one cries "Unfit!"

Anticlimax: Anticlimax is the opposite of climax. it is achieved in poetry when events or ideas are arranged in a descending order of importance. Another word for anticlimax is **bathos**. An example is “We almost lost our *lives, houses* and *keys* during the incident.”

Allusion: Allusion is a poetic device in which reference is made to someone or a significant event usually in the past. It is made for the purpose of emphasis and connection. There are different types of allusions in this regard. They include biblical allusions, historical allusions and classical allusions.

Biblical Allusions: These are references made to events in the Bible.

An excerpt from Andrew Marvell’s poem “To his Coy Mistress” is an example:

I would love you ten years before the *Flood*

Till the conversion of the *Jews*.

Historical Allusions: These are references made to significant historical events or important personalities.

Consider the following statement:

“Those demonstrators are filled with the spirit of the Aba Women’s Riot.”

Classical Allusions: Classical allusion refers to the history of ancient civilisations like Greece and Rome. In the statement: “**This is a herculean task**”, reference is made to Hercules (in Greek mythology) who was put to some difficult tasks.

Rhetorical Question: This is the expression of a question that does not need an answer. It does not need an answer because the answer is obvious. Consider the set of rhetorical questions in “Ode on a Grecian Urn” by John Keats:

What men or gods are these? What maidens loth?

What mad pursuit? What struggle to escape? What wild ecstasy?

Another example of a rhetorical question is “**Are you not the son of your father?**”

Irony: Irony occurs when what the speaker says is the opposite of his intention. An example is: “**The student failed the examination woefully because he was so intelligent.**”

Oxymoron: Oxymoron occurs when two opposite words are placed side by side to create a special effect. An example is “Our grudge is an **open secret** to everyone.”

Paradox: A paradox can be defined as a statement which seems unreasonable and contradictory at first, but when it is thought about deeply, it makes sense. An example is “**The Child is father of the Man.**” and “I am Abiku, calling for the first and repeated time...”

Antithesis: Antithesis is used when we have contrasting meanings in the same line. An example is: “...peaceful in outlook, fearsome in battle.”

Forms of Poetry

There are different types or forms of poetry. These forms of poetry vary in terms of structure, theme, style, subject matter and length. The major types include the lyric, the ode, the ballad, the sonnet, panegyric, the dirge,

elegy and the epic.

Lyric

The lyric is the simplest form of poetry. It obtained its name from a musical instrument called ‘lyre’. The lyre was usually played to accompany the performance of the poem. The lyric is often easily understood because of the choice of simple language, and the use of rhyme and rhythm.

The lyric is one of the shortest forms of poetry. It is usually about love, betrayal, disappointment and so on. Examples of lyric are “Nightfall in Soweto” by Oswald Mtshali, “The Mesh” by Kwesi Brew and Christopher Marlowe’s “Come live with me and be my love”. Examine Kwesi Brew’s “The Mesh”:

We have come to the cross-roads
And I must either leave or come with you
I lingered over the choice
But in the darkness of my doubts
You lifted the lamp of love
And I saw in your face
The road that I should take.

Ode

The ode is a poem which appreciates someone or something. It describes the features or characteristics of an object or personality. Sometimes, it focuses on nature and its beauty. It makes use of emotive and elevated expressions. A prominent poet who wrote quite a number of odes is John Keats. Examples of his poems include “Ode on a Grecian Urn”, “Ode to the Nightingale” and “Ode to Melancholy”. P. B. Shelley’s “Ode to the West Wind” is another popular example.

The poem “Ode on a Grecian Urn” appreciates the beauty of an object – the urn – as a work of art. It addresses the urn as if it were a living thing by using a series of figurative expressions like apostrophe, personification and rhetorical question. Study and enjoy the first stanza of the poem:

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 of mortals, or both,
In Temple or in 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?

Ballad

The word “ballad” comes from a Latin word “ballare”, which means ‘to dance.’ It is actually a performance poem. The ballad is regarded as one of the oldest forms of poetry, which originated from oral tradition. It is defined as a narrative poem composed as a song. Most ballads tell stories of heroic actions of people.

There are two major types of ballad. The first one is called folk or primary ballad, which belongs to oral tradition and is passed down from one generation to another. The second ballad is known as literary or secondary ballad. The literary ballad is usually composed by literate individuals. Unlike the literary ballad, the authorship of the primary ballad is unknown. An example of a primary ballad is “Sir Patrick Spens” while the example of a

literary ballad is S. T. Coleridge's "The Rime of the Ancient Mariner". The most common stanza form of the ballad is the quatrain, that is a verse made up of four lines.

Sonnet

A sonnet is a particular kind of poem composed in fourteen lines. It has certain special features regarding its subject matter, stanza form and rhyme scheme. The typical subject of the sonnet revolves around the issue of love. There are two main types of sonnet, namely: the Italian or Petrarchan Sonnet and the English or Elizabethan/Shakespearean Sonnet. These two types are determined by their stanza forms. The fourteen line of the Petrarchan Sonnet is divided into two: the octave (eight lines) and the sestet (six lines), while the Shakespearean Sonnet is divided into four parts of three quatrains (twelve lines) and one couplet (two lines). The sonnets have different but fixed rhyme schemes. An example of the Petrarchan sonnet is William Wordsworth's "London, 1802". An example of Shakespearean sonnet is William Shakespeare's "Shall I compare thee to a summer's day?"

Panegyric

The word panegyric comes from the Greek term, *panegurikos*, meaning speech at public assembly. The poem panegyric was originally a formal public speech which was later turned into verse. It is usually delivered in praise of a person or thing. Another term for panegyric is eulogy, that is elaborate praise. A poet who writes a panegyric usually focuses on the positive qualities of the subject. An example of a panegyric poem is "Salute to the Elephant".

Dirge

A dirge is a song of lamentation. It is composed at the death of a person and is usually sung at the funeral. Compared to the elegy (see next poem), it is shorter and less formal. The mood reflects a deep sense of sorrow and anguish. Two examples of a dirge are William Shakespeare's "Full fathom five thy father lies" and Kofi Awoonor's "Songs of Sorrow".

Elegy

The word 'elegy' comes from the Greek expression 'elegeiakos', which means a lament or a mournful song. The poem revolves mainly around the sense of loss. The loss could be either the death of a person or the passing of an age that is remembered with great affection. Examples include "In Memoriam" by Lord Tennyson, "Lycidas" by John Milton and "Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard" by Thomas Gray.

Epic

An epic is a long narrative poem. It is regarded as the longest form of poetry which usually recounts the heroic exploits of people who have either noble or superhuman qualities. The epic also focuses on the histories of races or nations.

There are two types of the epic: the oral epic and the literary epic.

Oral Epic: This is often also referred to as traditional epic. It is narrated by the word of mouth by special singers called bards or griots. The traditional epic celebrates the heroic deeds of legends who fight spirits or wild beasts or other superhuman beings. The oral epic is also known as primary epic. Examples include the African epic "Sundjata" and the English epic "Beowulf".

Literary Epic: This also has all the qualities of the oral epic, except that its medium of expression is through writing. Therefore, its authorship is known. Some literary epics are extremely long that they are composed as books. John Milton's *Paradise Lost* is an epic of twelve books.

Subject Matter in Poetry

Subject matter refers to the content or the topic of the poem. It dwells upon the issues the poem is all about. It is from the subject matter that the theme or the message of any literary work is derived. The sonnet "Batter my Heart" by John Donne will serve as a useful illustration.

Batter my heart, three-personned God, for you
As yet but knock, breathe, shine and seek to mend;
That I may rise and stand, overthrow me and bend
Your force to break, blow, burn, and make me new.
I, like a usurped town to another due
Labour to admit you, but O to no end.
Reason, your viceroy in me, me should defend,
But is captive and proves weak and untrue
Yet dearly I love you, and would be loved fain
But am bethrothed unto your enemy.
Divorce me, untie, or break that knot again,
Take me to you, imprison me, for I,
Except you enthrall me, never shall be free,
Nor ever chaste except you ravish me.

The poem centres on the lament of the poet in his quest to seek reconciliation with his Maker. At the beginning of the poem, there is an urgent call for God's intervention to reshape or remould the frail state of the poet. There is a desire for a new beginning which can only be achieved through God's efforts. Later, the poet admits his sinful state, caused by the weakness of the flesh. This weakness prevents him from drawing closer to God. Instead, there is a strange acceptance of being helplessly hedged in by God's enemy, the devil.

On a final note, the poet seeks a forceful division from the grasp of the devil, which can only be made possible by the power and grace of God. Essentially, this is the subject matter of the poem.

What is a Theme?

Theme refers to the message or messages that the writer states in the literary work. The theme could be said to be the lesson learnt or derived from the literary work. It is important once more to stress that the subject matter simply involves the summation of what the poem or piece of literature is about. It is from the subject matter that the themes come alive.

Now, we can as well discuss the themes in the poem. While some students prefer to use a single word to describe themes, it is better to generate themes in form of simple expressions. This would help to foster a better understanding of the texts. The two ways would be discussed below.

1. Theme of *Salvation*
2. Man is mortal
3. Sin brings destruction
4. The supremacy of God

Theme of Salvation

This is no doubt a central theme in this poem. Here, the poet longs for the salvation of his soul from the shackles of the evil one. This is supported in the second to the last line of the poem, “Except you enthrall me, never shall be free.” Therefore, the poet’s desire to be set free becomes clear in his use of antithetical (opposite) statements, which equally show some measure of enforcement. But he does not mind, as long as God is control.

Man is mortal

Man is portrayed as a weak vessel who would always be enslaved to one master. In fact, the question of choice does not arise, as the poet undermines man’s influence over his life and environment. Man, therefore, is depicted as helpless and, in fact, hopeless to his own cause. Study lines 7-10 of the poem above.

At a metaphorical level of interpretation, the poet underscores the inability of man to be in control of his own fate or destiny. Man is constantly in the grasp of Satan, through sin. Therefore, he is helpless and needs constant help from God.

Sin brings destruction

Another theme is the destructive nature of sin. Here, the poet condemns sin as a negative force which hinders man from receiving God’s mercy: “Divorce me, untie, or break that knot again”.

The supremacy of God

The poet finally recognises the supremacy of God. In the last three lines, the poet seeks the intervention of God to break the yoke of sin.

Language and Style

Usually, a good poem does not easily yield its meaning at first reading. In some cases, some poems are difficult to understand because of the use of certain expressions, which could come from Old English language. All in all, students should be patient in appreciating the meaning of any given poem.

The language of the poem is also understood through the diction, mood and tone of the poem. Diction simply means the choice of words used by the poet to convey meaning.

In the above poem “Batter my heart”, words such as “divorce”, “untie”, and “captive”, and so on determine the message of the poem. They bring to mind the imagery of captivity. The mood of the poem reflects sadness and helplessness. But in the end, there is a ray of hope and a call for salvation.

Style usually centres on the tools or elements the poet uses to project his thoughts. These can be the structure of the poem, the language used, the mood and other poetic devices.