

## Poetry – An Introduction

Poetry is the most individual and subjective form of literature. Everyone develops a personal interpretation of any text based on their own reading, as influenced by their own background, perspective and experience. This level of interpretation is often far more pronounced within poetry, given the length, detail, structure and content of the poem. Due to the intense level of figurative language employed in the writing of poems, attempting to understand the meaning of a poem can be very problematic.

Keeping this in mind, it is essential that your reading of a poem, like any interpretation of any text, must be substantiated by the poem itself and, depending on the level of detailed reading and support needed, secondary sources as well.

**When you begin your analysis of a poem, try to start off by identifying the type of poem (*poetic style*) you are dealing with.**

There are a number of accepted **poetic styles**, and most likely a number of styles, which as of yet, have no formal labelling. I have included a brief list of some of the more popular **poetic styles**, but remember that this list is far from exhaustive.

### Sonnet

- A short poem of 14 lines, which follows a particular rhyming scheme and makes use of iambic pentameter.
- Originally from around the 13th century, this style of poetry was popularised within Elizabethan England's Renaissance movement.
- More information about sonnets can be found here:
  - <http://www.rc.umd.edu/sites/default/RCOldSite/www/rchs/sonnet.htm>
  - <http://www.writing.upenn.edu/~afilreis/88/sonnet.html>
  - <http://www.shmoop.com/literature-glossary/sonnet.html> (Please note: This site makes use of a very casual tone, making it inappropriate to use as a source in your assignments)
- For an explanation of **iambic pentameter**, look here:
  - <http://www.shmoop.com/literature-glossary/iambic-pentameter.html> (Please note: This site makes use of a very casual tone, making it inappropriate to use as a source in your assignments)

### Ode

- An elaborately structured poem, consisting of three major parts.
- Typically employed to praise or glorify an event or individual, often describing nature in an intellectual, as well as emotional manner.

### Epic Poem

- Poetry which spans volumes (numerous books) and often has a Grand narrative embedded throughout the texts.
- Often the theme of Epic poetry can be linked to mythology and legends.
- More information about epic poetry can be found here:
  - [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Epic\\_poetry](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Epic_poetry)
  - [https://web.cn.edu/kwheeler/documents/What\\_is\\_an\\_Epic.pdf](https://web.cn.edu/kwheeler/documents/What_is_an_Epic.pdf)
  - <http://www.wisegeek.com/what-is-epic-poetry.htm>

### Free Verse

- These types of poems follow no particular set of rules. Methodology (if there is any) is determined by the poet, rather than any particular stylistic requirements.

**Never forget:** Even within Epic Poetry and Free Verse, the structural limitations and demands of poetry (length, line number, word structure, figurative language, and linguistic devices) mean that every line and every word has meaning and significance.

If you look at your study guide, you will find that the intention of the guide is to provide active examples which emphasise the relevance of each chosen word and how, through careful consideration of each word (and by linking the meaning of one word and phrases to the next), meaning begins to develop.

1. Activity one asks you to consider the significant changes of meaning which occur when words are changed.
2. Activity two asks that you attempt to begin finding ways to express the meaning and intention of the poem, without re-writing the words and phrases directly from the poem itself. It asks that you consider alternative words and phrases which are your own, while maintaining the basic understanding of the concepts the poet is attempting to present.
  - a. Within this exercise you should have noticed how difficult it is to provide an interpretation of meaning from your own perspective which remains true to the meaning of the poem itself.
  - b. This section also asks that you expand (if needed) your vocabulary in order to find synonyms for words the poem uses. Synonyms will also provide a list of words which have different connotative, or associative, meanings, which will add depth of understanding to the poem and the words/phrases used. Always make sure that the synonyms used are the ones you intend to use. Some of them will have slightly different meanings which may cause unintended problems with comprehension and understanding of an argument within an essay, so always be mindful of the definitions of your chosen words and make sure that they are appropriate to the symbolism contained in the original poem

**Please Note:** Maintaining vocabulary lists, such as those suggested above, is an excellent general practise for improving your command of English and your understanding of the more difficult concepts expressed in academic English. Get into the habit now, if you can, and it will serve you well for the rest of your life!

**An example of connotative meaning:**

**The word, “damage”.**

**Definition from the Oxford English Dictionary:**

**Noun**

1. [Mass noun] Physical harm that impairs the value, usefulness, or normal function of something:  
“Bombing caused extensive damage to the town.”
  - 1.1 Detrimental effects:  
“The damage to his reputation was considerable.”
2. (damages) A sum of money claimed or awarded in compensation for a loss or an injury:  
“She was awarded \$284,000 in damages.”

**Verb**

[With object]

1. Inflict physical harm on (something) so as to impair its value, usefulness, or normal function:  
“The car was badly damaged in the accident.”
2. Have a detrimental effect on:  
“The scandal could seriously damage his career.”

**Origin**

Middle English: from Old French, from *dam*, *damne* 'loss or damage', from Latin *damnum* 'loss or hurt'; compare with damn.

In turn all of these words may be linked to other words of similar meaning. Within poems, often words with similar connotations which can be found throughout the text provide possible themes and tropes.

**Phrases**

The damage is done.

1. Used to indicate that it is too late to prevent the occurrence of something unfortunate or undesirable:  
“There didn’t seem any point in arguing now—the damage was done.”

What's the damage?

2. *Informal , humorous* Used to ask the cost of something:  
“I'll settle up now, what's the damage?”

[1]

**Synonyms** (grouped depending of the chosen definition of Fire):

- harm, injury, destruction, vandalization, vandalism

- impairment, defilement, desecration, defacement, disfigurement, scarring, mutilation, vitiation, detriment
- ruin, havoc, devastation
- wear and tear, battering, friction, erosion, attrition, corrosion, abrasion, deterioration, degeneration
- compensation, recompense, restitution, redress, reparation(s)
- repayment, reimbursement, remuneration, requital, indemnification, indemnity, satisfaction
- harm, do damage to, injure, mar, deface, mutilate, mangle, impair, blemish, disfigure, vandalize, blight, spoil, defile, desecrate
- tamper with, sabotage, disrupt, play havoc with, vitiate
- ruin, devastate, destroy, wreck, cripple, drive a nail into the coffin of
- harmful, detrimental, injurious, hurtful, inimical, dangerous, destructive, ruinous, calamitous, disastrous, deleterious, pernicious, ill, bad, evil, baleful, malign, corrupting, malignant, adverse, undesirable, prejudicial, unfavourable, unfortunate, counterproductive
- unhealthy, unwholesome, poisonous, cancerous, noxious, environmentally unfriendly
- cost, price, expense, charge, bill, account, total

[1] "damage". Oxford Dictionaries. Oxford University Press, n.d. Web. 04 September 2014.

<http://www.oxforddictionaries.com/definition/english/damage>