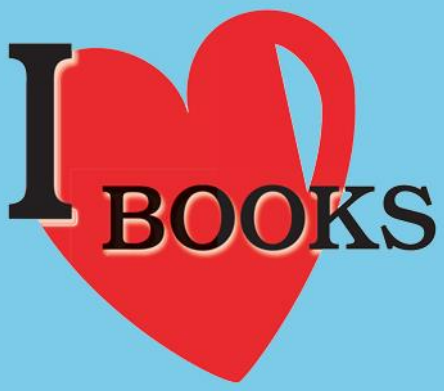


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Opening extract from

What is Poetry?

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Chapter 1

What is poetry?

A poem is a poem if the writer and the reader agree it's a poem. But people don't always agree, and when they argue about it, they try to find some special things about poetry that you can't find in other kinds of writing. They say:

- a poem has to **rhyme**, or should have a particular **rhythm**;
- a poem should have **metaphors** and **similes** (I'll be talking about these later on);
- a poem should say something beautiful in an especially beautiful way;
- a poem should say something that surprises us;
- a poem should say something in a memorable way.

One problem with this is that it's quite easy to find other kinds of writing that do some or all of these things: proverbs, riddles, jokes, plays, songs, holy writings and speeches. And another problem is that plenty of people have written what *they* say are poems which have no rhymes or particular rhythms, metaphors or similes, or special, beautiful language.

So answering the question "What is poetry?" is not easy. One way round it is to ask another question: "What can poetry DO?"

So I've chosen some pieces of writing that writers and readers agree are poems and I'm going to think about what they DO and what I'm doing in my mind as I read them.



What can poetry DO?

Poetry can suggest things

A Word Is Dead

A word is dead
When it is said,
Some say.
I say it just
Begins to live
That day.

Emily Dickinson (1830–86)

We often think of poems as things you find in books, but most of Emily Dickinson's poems weren't published when she was alive. She wrote them at home and put them into little packets, which her sister discovered after she died.

My first reaction when I read this poem is to ask questions: Can words die? What would a dead word be? When a word is said, how can that make it "begin to live"? What does it mean for a word to begin to live? And who is the "I" who says "I say"?

A six-line poem has got me asking a lot of questions. But there are no answers! When I read a story in the paper or watch the news on TV, quite often there are questions AND answers. Let's imagine that this poem is a news item. I'd be told just who it is going around claiming that words die when people say them. I'd be told who the "I" is in "I say". And there's every chance that the person speaking would explain to me why saying a word will make it "begin to live".

Not here, though. Not in this poem. I'm just left

hanging in mid-air to figure all this out myself. So, the poem has set me some problems, I've asked some questions and it hasn't answered any of them!

I could be very annoyed by this. On the other hand, I might realize that it's just the way some poems are. And instead of being annoyed, I could wait and see. Maybe something will crop up a few days later when I'm out and about, and I will think to myself, *That word seemed to come alive when it was said…*

And then the poem will work itself out as the days go by.

I'm going to use one word to cover everything I've said here: **suggestive**. I think a lot of poems are suggestive. They make suggestions – nothing more, nothing less. They suggest feelings, thoughts, problems and ideas. And they don't try to give answers. They leave us to do a lot of figuring out.



What can poetry DO?

Poetry can give an impression



From a Railway Carriage

Faster than fairies, faster than witches,

Bridges and houses, hedges and ditches;

And charging along like troops in a battle,

All through the meadows the horses and cattle:

All of the sights of the hills and the plain

Fly as thick as driving rain;

And ever again, in the wink of an eye,

Painted stations whistle by.

Here is a child who clambers and scrambles,

All by himself and gathering brambles;

Here is a tramp who stands and gazes;

And there is the green for stringing the daisies!

Here is a cart run away in the road

Lumping along with man and load;

And here is a mill and there is a river:

Each a glimpse and gone for ever!

Robert Louis Stevenson (1850–94)

Robert Louis Stevenson wrote novels – you probably know or have heard of *Treasure Island* – but he also wrote a book of poems about his childhood, and this is one of them.



When you read it, you can try tapping the rhythm just as you might when you hear a song. You can tap four times in each line of the poem. In the first line, for example, you can tap on "Fast" in "Faster", "fair" in "fairies", "fast" in the next "faster" and "witch" in "witches". If you say "TUM" for the tap and "tee" for the bits you don't tap, it goes:

FASTer than **FAIR**ies, **FAST**er than **WITCH**es.

TUM tee tee, **TUM** tee, **TUM** tee tee, **TUM** tee.

I think Stevenson wrote to this rhythm because he wanted the poem to sound like the thing he was writing about – a train going along a track. And if you're on a train you'll notice that there are times when your carriage has been moving at a steady pace and then suddenly the rhythm changes. Perhaps the poet wanted to show this (without telling us), because after the first five lines, the rhythm of the poem changes:

Fly as thick as driving rain.

If you are tapping four TUMs to the line it goes:

FLY as **THICK** as **DRIV**ing **RAIN**.

TUM tee **TUM** tee **TUM** tee **TUM**.

If you are a musician you will already know that there is something strange going on here. This line doesn't fit the rhythm. You are several "tees" short! If

the taps were to come at exactly the same time as in the other lines, either you'd have to leave little pauses or you'd have to make each of the tapped words last a tiny bit longer. Either way, it sounds to me like a train when it slows down.

I call all this **giving an impression**. The poem gives the impression of something without saying that it is doing it. A lot of poems work like this, but they do it in different ways – not just with rhythms. For example, they might try to show what a stream or rush of thoughts feels like by using parts of sentences, broken-up phrases and single words, instead of whole sentences.



What can poetry DO?

Poetry can express a belief or culture

