Poetry: Patterns & Parts

We'll start with the obvious: the title of a poem. Many titles can help us understand the topic or feeling(s) to be expressed in a poem. Some titles can have multiple meanings or be ironic (saying one thing but meaning something entirely different). Many poems have no titles!

If two or more lines repeat at the beginning, that is called anaphora. Words and sounds can repeat through a poem.

Notice how each poem's words are often arranged in lines, and how those lines can be grouped together. Each group of lines is called a stanza.

A two-line stanza is often called a couplet. A 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, or 8-line stanza is respectively called a tercet, quatrain, quintet (or cinquain or quintain), sestet, septet, or octet.

Many poems have regular rhythms (known as meter) and rhyme at regular points within each stanza—a rhyme scheme. Many poets do not use meter or rhyme.

Poems often have imagery—verbal pictures, like the forest and the roads in this poem. Such images can be symbols (symbolic) or metaphors (metaphorical), representing and saying more than what they might seem to suggest at first.

When, in disgrace with fortune and men's eyes, I all alone beweep my outcast state And trouble deaf heaven with my bootless cries And look upon myself and curse my fate, Wishing me like to one more rich in hope, Featured like him, like him with friends possess'd, Desiring this man's art and that man's scope, With what I most enjoy contented least; Yet in these thoughts myself almost despising, Haply I think on thee, and then my state, Like to the lark at break of day arising From sullen earth, sings hymns at heaven's gate: For thy sweet love remember'd such wealth brings That then I scorn to change my state with kings.

Sonnet 29 by William Shakespeare

This kind of poem is called a sonnet, one of the most popular poetic forms over the last few centuries!

Sonnets often have 14 lines written in iambic pentameter (5 unstressed / stressed syllables a line).

Rhyming in this poem happens nearly every other line (see the words in bold). The rhyme scheme for this poem can be written as ABAB CDCD EFEF GG.

The last two rhyming lines in this kind of sonnet are known as a “heroic couplet.”

This is haiku, one of the oldest yet most popular poetic forms from Japan. Haiku are brief yet very meaningful!

Haiku poems traditionally have 3 lines (5, 7, and 5 syllables respectively per line). Haiku are often about nature and can contain a kigo (words depicting a season, like summer).

An old silent pond... A frog jumps into the pond, splash! Silence again.

haiku by Matsuo Basho

The Road Not Taken

Two roads diverged in a yellow wood, And sorry I could not travel both And be one traveler, long I stood And looked down one as far as I could To where it bent in the undergrowth;

Then took the other, as just as fair, And having perhaps the better claim, Because it was grassy and wanted wear; Though as for that the passing there Had worn them really about the same,

And both that morning equally lay In leaves no step had trodden black. Oh, I kept the first for another day! Yet knowing how way leads on to way, I doubted if I should ever come back.

I shall be telling this with a sigh Somewhere ages and ages hence: Two roads diverged in a wood, and I— I took the one less traveled by, And that has made all the difference.

poem by Robert Frost