

Getting into... Poetry

If you're an avid reader of poetry, you need no further encouragement: you know a few carefully selected words can express extraordinary and beautiful ideas. You are also likely to know that many of our most important, influential, and imaginative writings – from the earliest times through the present – are, if not poems, rather *poetic*.

If, on the other hand, you tend to *avoid* poetry, you might not realize what you are missing. Perhaps your first encounters with poetry were frustrating, a struggle to determine what a poem was saying or might have meant. Whatever your reasons for staying away, we encourage you to discover – or *rediscover* – the promise, profundity, and powers of poetry.

Why? There are *many* good reasons to read poetry. There is the sheer enjoyment of seeing words (and hearing them as you read a poem aloud) come together to create intriguing impressions, fascinating descriptions, sounds, rhythms – *music!* Poetry can be very entertaining as well! Poetry sparks imagination, dares you to see things in new light, and helps to reveal truths about ourselves and our world. One poem can mean *many* things to different persons: interpretations can make poems come alive, affect and inspire us in unexpected ways.

Some Poetry Concepts Worth Learning...

Formal Verse – Poems adhering to certain rhythms, rhymes, and rules (such as a Sonnet – see below).

Free Verse – Poems that tend to follow no particular set of rules or rhymes. Words can be arranged any number of ways.

Haiku – These very short meditative poems are usually about nature, run three lines long, and can speak volumes!

Metaphor – Something or someone equated with something else, as in “Juliet is the sun” or “All the world’s a stage.”

Simile – When something or someone is likened to something else, as in “My love is like a red, red rose.”

Sonnet – A classic form of poetry, usually 14 lines long, with lines that rhyme in a certain pattern (a *rhyme scheme*).

Stanza – Groups of words or lines of text. Two, three, or four line stanzas are *couplets*, *tercets*, or *quatrains* respectively.

Some Fairly “Easy-to-understand” Poets to Consider...

Maya Angelou
Basho (haiku)
Wendell Berry
Billy Collins
Emily Dickinson

Robert Frost
Nikki Giovanni
Langston Hughes
Ted Kooser
W. S. Merwin

Sharon Olds
Mary Oliver
Kay Ryan
Gary Snyder
William Carlos Williams

Some Classic Poets & Poems

William Blake (*Songs of...*)
Dante (*Divine Comedy*)
John Donne (*Sonnets*)
Homer (*The Iliad, The Odyssey*)
John Keats (*Endymion*)

Omar Khayyam (*The Rubaiyat*)
John Milton (*Paradise Lost*)
Ovid (*Metamorphoses*)
The Book of *Psalms*
Rumi (mystical poems of love)

William Shakespeare (*Sonnets*)
Lao Tzu (*Tao Te Ching*)
Vyasa (*The Bhagavad Gita*)
Walt Whitman (*Leaves of Grass*)
William Wordsworth (*The Prelude*)

Challenging & Thought-Provoking Poets to Consider...

Rae Armantrout: One of many “language poets,” she frequently weaves words in compelling and challenging ways.
John Ashbery: Many of his poems can resist a reader’s expectations, confound literary critics, and defy definition.
Geoffrey Chaucer: His *Canterbury Tales* can be difficult in its original Middle English. Modern renditions can be helpful.
Hart Crane: His poem *The Bridge*, inspired partly by the Brooklyn Bridge, uses myth and metaphor to explore American life.
E. E. Cummings: Many of his *verbally* and *visually* acrobatic poems are simply amazing – often a joy to see *and* to read!
T. S. Eliot: *The Waste Land* is one of the most difficult and popular poems. Also try his more meditative *Four Quartets*.
Pablo Neruda: Nobel Prize for Literature winner (1971). Translations of his impassioned sonnets and other poems exist.
Ezra Pound: His epic (yet unfinished) *Cantos* contain passages written in various languages, including Chinese.
Louis Zukofsky: His poem *A* is one of the longest and challenging-to-read poems ever written – over 800 pages!

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Popular Poetry Anthologies & Periodicals for Further Reading

Best American Poetry (anthology published annually)

The Norton Anthology of Poetry (a standard poetry collection used in many colleges)

Paris Review (published quarterly)

Poetry (magazine published monthly)

Poetry 180: A Turning Back to Poetry - Billy Collins (poetry anthology edited by a U.S. Poet Laureate, 2001-2003)

Some Poetry Reading Tips...

Try *not* to rush it: **experience every single word** when reading a poem.

Enjoy the act of reading.

Try approaching a poem like a **gourmet dish** whose ingredients were meant to be tasted and savored fully.

Consider **reading a poem aloud** to hear the **sounds** and **rhythms** of its words.

Try to notice if the poem **rhymes** –if it has a “rhyme scheme” (a regular pattern of rhyming).

Try to **pay close attention to phrases** used throughout in a poem. Do any of them **repeat**?

Are the poem’s lines **arranged in groups** of two or three or more? Are they evenly grouped or irregular?

Are there any obvious **comparisons** between two or more things (what we would call similes)?

Are there **metaphors** – dissimilar things compared without the words “like” or “as,” as in these two examples from William Shakespeare: “the world is a stage” and “Juliet is the sun” (note the word “is”)

Keep in mind any **“I”** in the poem can be a **character** (a “speaker”) and *not* the poet.

What is the overall **emotional tone** of the poem? Joyful, sorrowful, angry, pensive, unsure, inspired?

What do you think the poem **means**? How does it make you **feel**? What do you **see**?

Try **rereading** a poem and see if you notice anything new or feel differently toward it.

See if you can **memorize** one or more lines of poetry. It can be challenging but fun to quote later on!

Explore **different poets from different times, places, and cultures** to enrich your reading experiences, broaden your perspectives on life, and to increase your understanding and appreciation of the world around you.

Some Books to Help You Get More out of Poetry

The Art of Reading Poetry - Harold Bloom

How to Read a Poem and Fall in Love with Poetry - Edward Hirsch

The Discovery of Poetry: A Field Guide to Reading and Writing Poems - Frances Mayes

The Making of a Poem: A Norton Anthology of Poetic Forms - Mark Strand and Eavan Boland

The Sounds of Poetry: A Brief Guide – Robert Pinsky

Going Beyond Poetry Reading: Learning to Write Poetry

The Ode Less Travelled: Unlocking the Poet Within – Stephen Fry

The Poetry Home Repair Manual: Practical Advice for Beginning Poets - Ted Kooser

A Poetry Handbook – Mary Oliver

Rules for the Dance: A Handbook for Writing and Reading Metrical Verse - Mary Oliver

The Book of Forms: A Handbook of Poetics, Including Odd and Invented Forms - Lewis Turco

Poemcrazy: Freeing Your Life with Words - Susan G. Wooldridge

For More Information on Poetry in and Beyond Middletown Thrall Library...

Please be sure to check out our online **poetry catalog**, our **directory of poetry websites**, our **literature and poetry criticism/analysis databases**, **poetry eBooks**, and **downloadable / printable guide** (“Looking for... Poetry”) full of reading suggestions and names of classic and contemporary poets you might enjoy.

All you need to do is visit our home page (www.thrall.org) and click the **“poetry” link** (on the **Literature** line in the center column). You can also go directly to www.thrall.org/poetry to access all of the above resources!