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WHAT IS POETRY?

Think of a poem. What comes to mind? Some think of fancy words on a page. Others say it's a story that rhymes.

Some poems do tell a story. But they are different from most tales. Stories have full sentences. Grammar rules are followed. A poem doesn't have to stick to these rules.

Poems can have structure. Words make up lines. Sets of lines are grouped. These are called **stanzas**. Poets may use full sentences. But not all do. Some do not even capitalize words. Poems can be written in many forms.

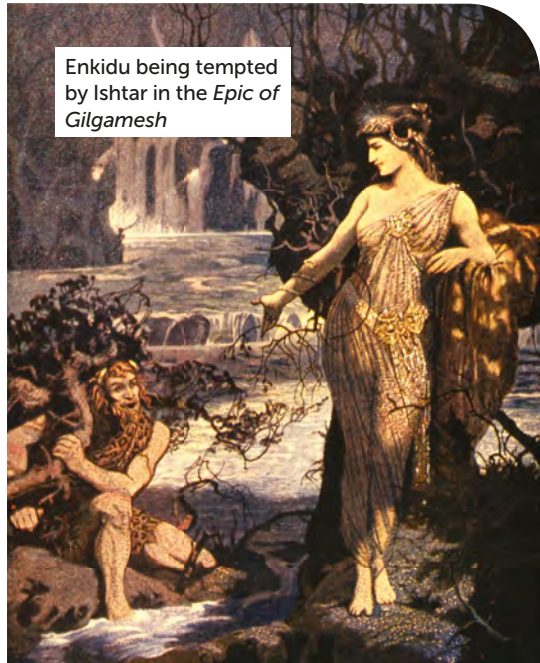
Poetry has a long history. It has been around for ages. Poems were only spoken at first. Words were not yet written. People told stories instead. These were passed on to others. That is how they lived on.

The **Epic** of *Gilgamesh* is the oldest known poem. It is more than 5,000 years old. The poem was told to others. People passed it on.

This poem told of a king. He was powerful. But he upset the gods. The king was punished. His friend was killed by the gods. The king was haunted by death. Living forever became his goal. But he lost. There was a message. No one lives forever.



Gilgamesh



Enkidu being tempted by Ishtar in the *Epic of Gilgamesh*



Tablet piece of the
Epic of Gilgamesh

⚡
Fast Fact

The original author
of the *Epic of
Gilgamesh* is
unknown.

Many years went by. Writing was developed. Then the *Epic of Gilgamesh* was written. There was no paper. Clay **tablets** were used. Then they were lost. Thousands of years passed. The tablets were found. That was how the poem lived on.

Poetry began long ago. But times have changed. Poems have too. Are they still important? Some say yes. Poems may help us see our world in new ways.

O Captain! My Captain!
by Walt Whitman

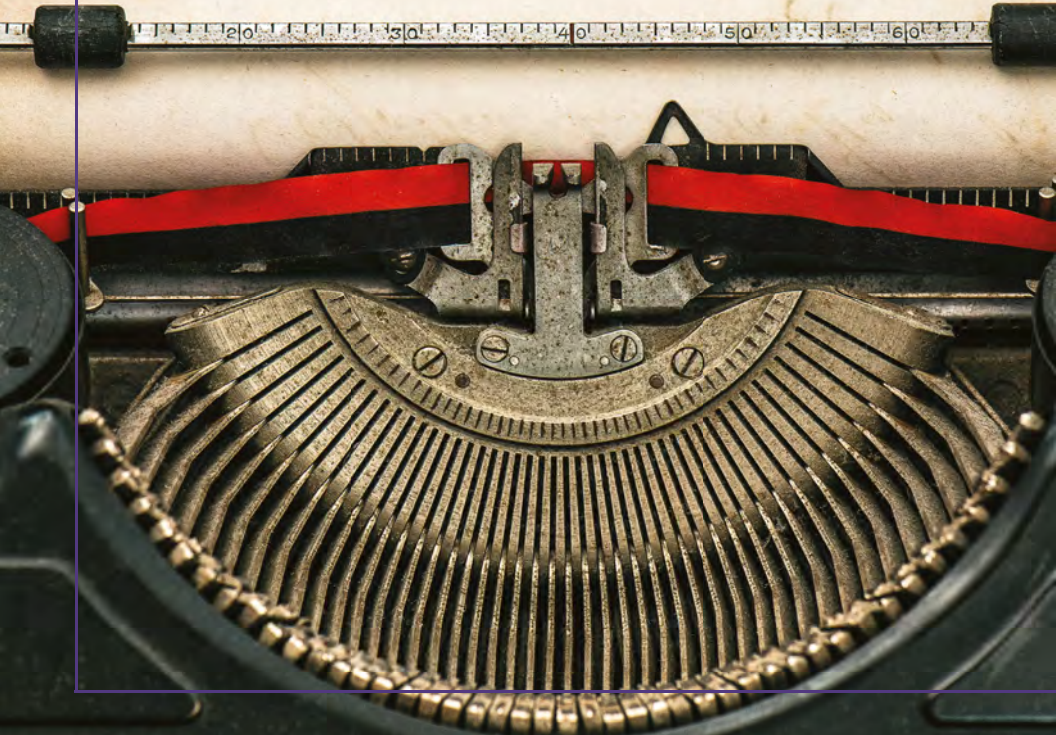
O Captain! my Captain!
our fearful trip is done,

The ship has weather'd every rack,
the prize we sought is won,

The port is near, the bells I hear,
the people all exulting,

While follow eyes the steady keel,
the vessel grim and daring;

But O heart! heart! heart!



PARTS OF A POEM

Stories have **elements**. Characters are key. They bring us into the action. The place and time set the mood. The **plot** tells us what happens.

But what about a poem? A poem can tell a story too. Yet it is done differently. Poems are often short. They use special elements.

Taylor Swift performing
at the Eras Tour, 2023



Choosing the right words is key. Think of a song. The words say one thing. They might mean another. Singer Taylor Swift wrote these words. “You’re a mansion with a view.” This is a **metaphor**. She is singing about a big house. But the words really describe a boy she likes.



Poems are similar. Words are used to form images. These words make us feel a certain way.

A poem must paint a picture. Think about this line by William Wordsworth. "I wandered lonely as a cloud." This is a **simile**. The person isn't a cloud. He is comparing himself to one. Now think about this line. "I walked alone." It says the same thing. Yet it is different. We don't get a colorful picture.

STRIKING SIMILES

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The dawn with silver-sandaled feet crept like a frightened girl.

The day stunned me like light upon some wizard way

The day was sweeter than honey and the honey-comb

The days have trampled me like armed men

The dead past flew away over the fens like a flight of wild swans

The deep like one black maelstrom round her whirls

The deepening east like a scarlet poppy burnt

The desolate rocky hills rolled like a solid wave along the horizon

The dome of heaven is like one drop of dew

The dreams of poets come like music heard at evening from the depth of some enchanted forest

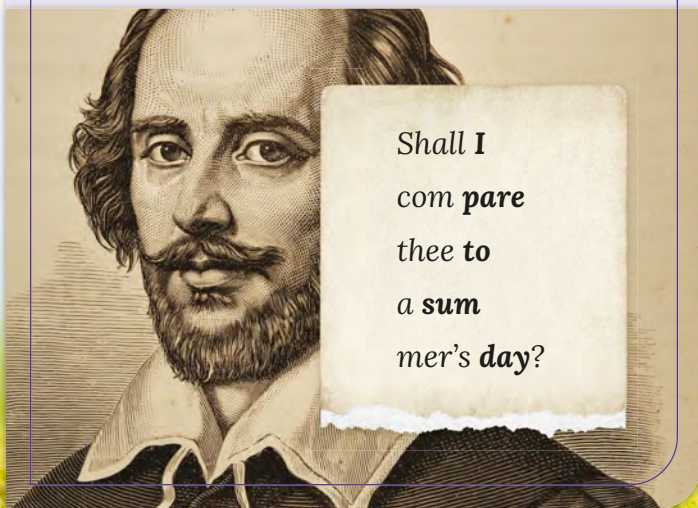
The eagerness faded from his eyes, leaving them cold as a winter sky after sunset

The earth was like a frying-pan, or some such hissing matter

Songs have structure. They have verses. There is often a chorus too. **Rhythm** is key. A poem often has structure. Some use stanzas. They have two or more lines. These lines have meter. This is a pattern. It gives the poem rhythm. The words take on a musical tone.

Meter in Poetry

Meter breaks down a line of poetry into beats. How these beats sound depends on the type of meter. In iambic pentameter, the first syllable is not emphasized, while the second syllable is. This creates a *bum BUM* beat that sounds like a heartbeat. William Shakespeare used iambic pentameter in "Sonnet 18."



Shall I
com **pare**
thee to
a **sum**
mer's **day**?

so that her idea of the tale was something like this: — "Fury said to

a mouse, That
 he met
 in the
 house,
 ' Let us
 both go
 to law :
 I will
 prosecute
 you.—
 Come, I'll
 take no
 denial ;
 We must
 have a
 trial :
 For
 really
 this
 morning
 I've
 nothing
 to do.'
 Said the
 mouse to
 the cur,
 'Such a
 trial,
 dear sir,
 With no
 jury or
 judge,
 would be
 wasting
 our breath.'
 'I'll be
 judge,
 I'll be
 jury,'
 Said
 cunning
 old Fury ;
 'I'll try
 the whole
 cause,
 and
 condemn
 you
 to
 death.'"

"The Mouse's Tale" from *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* by Lewis Carroll, 1865

The elements of poetry work together. They make a poem flow. We see more than words on the page. A picture is made for us. We see art.



Fast Fact

Aram Saroyan holds the world record for writing the shortest poem. It is a close-up of a four-legged letter "m."