



Introduction
to Poetry:
Forms and Elements
Study Guide
by Judy Cook

CD Version



Progeny Press

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Introduction to Poetry: Forms and Elements Study Guide

A Progeny Press Study Guide

by Judy Cook

edited by Andrew Clausen

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How to Use This Guide

This guide differs from other Progeny Press guides in that the works to be studied are short. For that reason, you are free to divide the study into as many parts as you deem appropriate. As a guideline, you may want to assign a particular section and the corresponding exercise as a unit.

The topics and exercises build upon one another. If you and your students are unfamiliar with the elements of poetry, you should begin at the beginning and proceed through the guide in a straightforward manner. Students who are interested only in studying particular elements of poetry and who have engaged with poetry previously can be more selective about the order in which they complete the lessons.

The questions in each exercise deal with such issues as poetic devices, interpretation, Biblical perspective, and creative attempts on the part of the students. You are free, of course, to select the questions that you believe are most helpful to your students. However, students generally gain a deeper appreciation of any art when they attempt to engage in it themselves. For that reason, the creative writing portions of the exercises, while requiring the most thought, will yield the fullest result.

Biblical passages used and referred to in this guide are generally from the New International Version of the Bible. We have indicated where other versions are used.

The Bible itself is filled with poetry and songs. These poems, while beautiful and worshipful as well as divinely inspired, are structurally very different from poetry written in western languages and influenced by western culture. None of the poetic devices studied in this guide, such as alliteration, rhyme, and meter apply to the psalms and Hebrew poetry. Much discussion takes place in ivory towers about what devices are used in Hebrew poetry, but scholars generally agree that parallelism and repetition are the primary ones. For these reasons, this guide does not attempt to include poetry of the Bible as study material. Many fine Bible studies, some extremely scholarly, exist and we would direct you to those for a study of poetry of the Bible.

Finally, a note about the texts selected for this study. All poems in this study guide are found in *100 Best-Loved Poems*, edited by Philip Smith, *101 Great American Poems*, edited by The American Poetry and Literacy Project, and *Great Short Poems*,

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edited by Paul Negri. All three books are published by Dover Publications and are available from Progeny Press. In this guide, the three volumes are referred to as BLP, GAP, and GSP with the page numbers following this designation. These books are *very* inexpensive; please encourage your students to write in these books—circle words with unclear meanings, identify rhyme schemes, make metrical marks, and jot interpretations and personal notations in the margins. Their study will be richer for it.

Introduction

Poetry, in many ways, defies definition. Any restrictions would disqualify some works that are, nevertheless, poetry. The only statement about poetry that we can make with absolute certainty is that good poetry uses what is known as “compressed language.” That means that it says a lot but uses few words to do so. Every word is very valuable; the poets make their choices only after much deliberation, and we must understand each word to grasp the meanings of the poems.

This word compression is the primary reason that most students claim not to understand poetry. Students who are accustomed to skimming over their lessons once and dashing off correct answers in record time will find that poetry asks much more of us than this. It invites us to calm down, sit still, and think. Speed and accuracy are invaluable in mathematical computation but useless in poetry appreciation. You must not be frustrated or feel like a failure when (not if) you find it necessary to read a poem several times. This repetitive activity is standard operating procedure for the study of any art.

This guide takes a topical approach to the study of poetry, rather than an historical approach. It focuses on the elements of poetry and selected forms. As you study an element, you will consider specific poems that are particularly good examples of that element. However, almost all poems will contain most of the elements that you study. Therefore, after completing a portion of the guide on a particular element, such as sound devices, you should be able to identify and discuss that element in relation to the poems you study subsequently.

Some poetry study guides approach the study of poetry from an historical perspective. They will begin with the early epic poems like *Beowulf*, *The Iliad*, and *The Odyssey*, then move forward through Shakespeare’s time and those following him. To compensate for dropping this historical approach, we have provided a timeline on pages 10 and 11 for you to use in the course of your study. Every time you read a new poem, make a notation on the timeline. Include the poet’s name, the approximate date of the poem (or use the middle of the poet’s life), and the type of poem. The first poem we will consider, “Abou Ben Adhem,” has been added as your example.

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Finally, poetry is primarily an auditory experience. From earliest history, poetry was transferred to subsequent generations through oral presentation. You, too, should read aloud the poems studied here. They will yield their meanings more readily that way, and you will enjoy them more.

Historical Timeline

Medieval Poetry 400–1500AD

In Europe, epic poems, such as *Beowulf*, were written until about 1000 AD, when lyrical poetry began to flourish and troubadors performed at court. Much of this poetry reflects the centrality of the church in European life.

Major poets: Dante, Chaucer.

5000 BC

400 AD

1500 AD

1650 AD

Ancient Poetry until 400AD

Many ancient cultures composed poetry. Both ancient Greeks and Romans wrote epics and love poems. The Greek epics *The Iliad* and *The Odyssey* were written about 700 BC. The ancient Hebrews wrote the lyrical poems that we know as the *Psalms* and *Song of Songs* (*Song of Solomon*).

Major poets: Homer, Virgil, King David, Ovid, Catullus, and Juvenal.

Renaissance Poetry 1450–1650

Europe experienced outstanding cultural achievement during this period and poetry flourished. New forms were developed and poets began to write in their native languages instead of the more formal Latin.

Major poets: Edmund Spenser, John Donne, Ben Jonson, Richard Lovelace, William Shakespeare, John Milton.

Sounds

Alliteration is the repetition of consonant sounds. Alliteration may be initial (at the beginning of words) or internal (in the middle of words). This device directs our attention to the alliterated words and the ideas or feelings that the poet is trying to convey. *Assonance* is the repetition of vowel sounds within words. Like alliteration, it may be internal or initial. A third type of sound device is *onomatopoeia* (ON uh MAT uh PEE uh), in which words resemble the sounds they are portraying. The words *crash*, *boom*, *smash*, or *clip-clop* are examples of onomatopoeia. Onomatopoeiac words are also common in comic strips.

Exercise V:

Circle the *alliterated* sounds in the following lines of poetry:

1. The sun was warm, but the wind was chill.
2. Grieve and they turn and go.
3. I too am not a bit tamed, I too am untranslatable.
4. The watchful night-wind as it went
5. Between the dark and the daylight
6. What I was walling in or walling out
7. Her hardest hue to hold.
8. Miniver mourned the ripe renown
9. Only the stuttering rifles' rapid rattle
10. But ah, my foes and oh, my friends

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Circle the examples of *assonance* in the following lines of poetry:

11. Tyger! Tyger! burning bright
12. Here he lies where he longed to be
13. But still he fluttered pulses when he said
14. I took the one less traveled by
15. The muscular one and bid him whip
16. anyone lived in a pretty how town
17. Old age should burn and rave at close of day
18. Awoke one night from a deep dream of peace.
19. One, two! One, two! And through and through
20. To shut her up in a sepulcher

Think of *onomatopoeic* verbs to represent the following phrases:

21. Make the soft, low cry of a dove: _____
22. Strike a surface sharply: _____
23. Burst a balloon: _____
24. Make a sharp sibilant sound: _____
25. Strike a liquid substance: _____
26. Sound a short blast on a horn: _____
27. Strike lightly: _____
28. Cry shrilly or piercingly as an owl: _____

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Exercise VI:

Read “I Wandered Lonely as a Cloud,” by William Wordsworth (BLP, 29). Place a check mark beside any words you do not understand. Circle instances of *alliteration*; underline any instances of *assonance*.

Match the words with their definitions

- | | |
|-----------------|-------------------------|
| 1. ____ vales | a. high spirited |
| 2. ____ host | b. musing or thoughtful |
| 3. ____ jocund | c. multitude |
| 4. ____ pensive | d. valley, dale |
5. How many *stanzas* are in this poem? How many lines per stanza?
6. What, in your opinion, is the most powerful or most memorable instance of alliteration?
7. Give three examples of assonance.
8. What is the subject of this poem? How is it typical of Romantic poetry?

Part Three: **Forms of Poetry**

As you've seen in your study, poets craft their work using different meters and rhyme schemes. Over the course of time, certain combinations of rhyme scheme and meter became standardized and were given names. Writing good poetry within these boundaries is quite difficult, but when poets are successful, the result can be beautiful and memorable. When you read these forms, consider the following: rhyme (is it forced? Is the sentence structure altered to make the poem rhyme?), meter (is it too heavy?), content (does it say something worth hearing?)

The Sonnet

Scholars generally recognize two types of sonnets: the Italian, or *Petrarchan* (named for the Italian poet, Petrarch), and the English, or *Shakespearean*. The Italian is an earlier form and is a little more difficult to write due to the constraints on its content and larger number of rhyming words.

The Italian Sonnet:

The Italian sonnet, like the English, has 14 lines written in iambic pentameter. Its rhyme scheme is **abbaabba cdecde** or a close variation of this. The first eight lines are called the *octave* and they state the theme of the poem or present a sort of problem. The final six lines are called the *sestet* and they comment on the theme or answer the problem. This form is very difficult in the English language due to a scarcity of rhyming words.

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Exercise XVI:

Read “On His Blindness,” by John Milton (BLP, 14). Scan the poem, marking the meter and rhyme scheme. Draw a line between the octave and the sestet.

1. What is the “problem” identified in the octave? What is the “solution” given in the sestet?
2. Rewrite this poem as a prose paragraph using modern language. Rewriting or *paraphrasing* a poem in this way can help you understand the poem’s meaning.
3. An *allusion* is a reference to an historical or literary person, place, or event with which the reader is assumed to be familiar. The third line of “On His Blindness” contains an allusion to a Biblical parable. Identify the allusion and the parable to which it refers. How does the use of the allusion shed light on Milton’s problem?
4. What line do you find to be the most memorable in the entire poem?

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5. Read 2 Corinthians 12:7–10. When the apostle Paul pleads for his weakness to be taken away, how does God respond? How is the lesson of this passage of scripture similar to the lesson of Milton’s poem?

6. Using an encyclopedia or the internet, read about John Milton and write a one-paragraph summary of his religious views.

The English Sonnet:

The English sonnet has 14 lines and is written in iambic pentameter. The rhyme scheme is different, however, and that difference alters the content. Its rhyme pattern is **abab cdcd efef gg**. Instead of a clear division of thought as in the octave and sestet of the Italian sonnet, the English sonnet takes a looser approach to its presentation. It may contain three or four changes in thought. The final two lines, which rhyme with each other, are the *couplet*. These two lines are usually the strongest of the English sonnet.

Exercise XVII:

Read “Sonnet XVIII” and “Sonnet CXVI” (BLP, 6 and 7), by William Shakespeare. Scan the sonnets to find the meter and rhyme scheme.

1. Define these terms as they are used in the context of the poems. Write the definitions in your books somewhere on the same page as the poems.
 - a. bark—
 - b. tempest—
 - c. impediment—
 - d. temperate—

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2. Use the room below to write a paraphrase of both sonnets.

- Sonnet XVIII—

- Sonnet CXVI—

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An *explication* goes beyond a paraphrase. An explication attempts to understand the theme of a poem and then to explain how all the elements of a poem contribute to the whole. When you write an explication, you discuss all the elements of poetry we have studied: imagery, analogy, tone, and any other pertinent techniques. The explication identifies the form used as well as the rhyme scheme and meter, if any. Then it discusses the other elements used and explains how they contribute to the meaning of the poem.

3. Read “The New Colossus,” by Emma Lazarus (GAP, 33). Write an explication of the poem using the following format (use one to three sentences for each part):
 - a. Part 1: identify and explain briefly the form of the poem and how the poem may vary from form.
 - b. Part 2: explain the content in terms of the form.
 - c. Part 3: note any literary devices or poetic techniques. Indicate whether they seem to underscore the theme.
 - d. Part 4: note any historical allusions and explain their significance
 - e. Part 5: discuss the tone of the poem and the feeling with which the reader is left after reading it.

Answer Key

Part One: Types of Poetry

Exercise I:

1. “Abou Ben Adhem” is narrative; “The Road Not Taken” is lyrical.
2. Answers may vary. The road is most obviously a symbol for the choices we must make in life.
3. Answers may vary. If the choice is meant to praise individualism, students may point out that the poet calls one road “less traveled by,” and says it was “grassy and wanted wear.” Hence, he is taking a road that others had not taken. On the other hand, the poet also states that the roads really look about the same—they are worn equally, they are equally covered with leaves, they are equally fair. The poet is very torn about which to take and hopes to keep one for another day.
4. With a sigh. He will remember that he made a choice in his life between two equally attractive options and he will wonder about the one he didn’t choose.
5. Answers will vary.
6. In the passage from Luke, Jesus spends a night in prayer before choosing his twelve disciples. In the passage from Acts, Peter and the other disciples pray and believe that God will direct the lot to fall to the person who should be chosen as Judas’ replacement. Through both scenes it is strongly suggested that prayer should be a part of decision-making.
7. Answers may vary. The poem suggests that by loving his fellow man, Abou Ben Adhem proves that he loves God. All these passages support the sentiment that loving God is connected to loving one’s neighbors. In the passage from Matthew, Jesus states that the first and greatest commandment is to love God, and “the second is like it: ‘Love your neighbor as yourself.’” He goes on to say that “all the Law and the Prophets hang on these two commandments.” In the passage from John, Jesus states that if the disciples show love for each other, the world will know that they are his disciples. In the passage from Romans, Paul writes that loving one another “is the fulfillment of the law.” Finally, in the passage from 1 John, John writes that if we love one another, “God lives in us and his love is made complete in us.” Note that one cannot truly love God and not love his neighbor, but one can love his neighbor without loving God.

Part Two: Elements of Poetry

Lines

Exercise II:

1. a. facial expression; b. tastelessly brilliant or showy; c. a country, region, or climate
 2. There are five occurrences of enjambment. Thirteen lines end with some kind of punctuation mark. Six lines contain internal punctuation.
 3. Three stanzas.
 4. lyric
 5. “dark and bright,” “tender light” and “gaudy day,” “shade” and “ray,” “raven tress” and “softly lightens.”
 6. Answers may vary. Though the poet does speak of his subject’s hair, her face, and her eyes, the last two lines of the second stanza turn our attention to the subject’s “serenely sweet” thoughts and her purity. His subject’s inner beauty is his primary focus.
 7. The results of her life of inward beauty are days spent in goodness, a peaceful mind, and an innocent heart.
 8. According to these verses, true beauty should come from within—“the unfading beauty of a gentle and quiet spirit.”
- Answers may vary.
9. The subject of the poem is a “regular” woman, rather than a goddess, and it expresses powerful feelings about her.

Words

Exercise III:

1. pursue / stalk
2. quaint, singular / deviant, mutant, bizarre
3. admire / idolize
4. unsuspecting, innocent / gullible
5. pattern / habit, addiction