

"What is Poetry?"  
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<http://contemporarylit.about.com/od/poetry/a/poetry.htm>

There are as many definitions of poetry as there are poets. Wordsworth defined poetry as "the spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings;" Emily Dickinson said, "If I read a book and it makes my body so cold no fire ever can warm me, I know that is poetry;" and Dylan Thomas defined poetry this way: "Poetry is what makes me laugh or cry or yawn, what makes my toenails twinkle, what makes me want to do this or that or nothing."

Poetry is a lot of things to a lot of people. Homer's epic, *The Odyssey*, described the wanderings of the adventurer, Odysseus, and has been called the greatest story ever told. During the English Renaissance, dramatic poets like John Milton, Christopher Marlowe, and of course Shakespeare gave us enough to fill textbooks, lecture halls, and universities.

Poems from the romantic period include Goethe's *Faust* (1808), Coleridge's "Kubla Khan" and John Keats' "Ode on a Grecian Urn." Shall I go on? Because in order to do so, I would have to continue through 19th century Japanese poetry, early Americans that include Emily Dickinson and T.S. Eliot, postmodernism, experimentalists, slam...

So what is poetry?

Perhaps the characteristic most central to the definition of poetry is its unwillingness to be defined, labeled, or nailed down. But let's not let that stop us, shall we? It's about time someone wrestled poetry to the ground and slapped a sign on its back reading, "I'm poetry. Kick me here."

Poetry is the chiseled marble of language; it's a paint-spattered canvas - but the poet uses words instead of paint, and the canvas is you. Poetic definitions of poetry kind of spiral in on themselves, however, like a dog eating itself from the tail up. Let's get nitty. Let's, in fact, get gritty. I believe we can render an accessible definition of poetry by simply looking at its form and its purpose:

One of the most definable characteristics of the poetic form is economy of language. Poets are miserly and unrelentingly critical in the way they dole out words to a page. Carefully selecting words for conciseness and clarity is standard, even for writers of prose, but poets go well beyond this, considering a word's emotive qualities, its musical value, its spacing, and yes, even its spacial relationship to the page. The poet, through innovation in both word choice and form, seemingly rends significance from thin air.

How am I doing so far? On to purpose:

One may use prose to narrate, describe, argue, or define. There are equally numerous reasons for writing poetry. But poetry, unlike prose, often has an underlying and over-arching purpose that goes beyond the literal. Poetry is evocative. It typically evokes in the reader an intense emotion: joy, sorrow, anger, catharsis, love... Alternatively, poetry has the ability to surprise the reader with an Ah Ha! Experience -- revelation, insight, further understanding of elemental truth and beauty. Like Keats said: "Beauty is truth. Truth, beauty. That is all ye know on Earth and all ye need to know."

How's that? Do we have a definition yet?

*Poetry is artistically rendering words in such a way as to evoke intense emotion or an Ah Ha! experience from the reader.*

Pretty unsatisfying, huh? Kind of leaves you feeling cheap, dirty, all hollow and empty inside like Chinese food.

Don't do this. Don't shackle poetry with your definitions. Poetry is not a frail and cerebral old woman, you know. Poetry is stronger than you think. Poetry is imagination and will break those chains faster than you can say "Harlem Renaissance."

To borrow a phrase, poetry is a riddle wrapped in an enigma swathed in a cardigan sweater... or something like that. It doesn't like your definitions and will shirk them at every turn.