

Basic Elements of Poetry

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OVERVIEW

You will most likely read one or two poems in the multiple-choice section of the AP Lit exam and have one poem to analyze and write about in the essay section. Therefore, it is important to have a good background in poetry. Just as it is important to stretch your intellect by reading a wide variety of novels and plays, you should also push your limits by reading challenging poems. At the end of this chapter I have listed twenty “must read” poems. By listing these poems, I am not suggesting that they are the only poems you should read, but they are poems that are often anthologized, often studied in AP Lit courses, and they will provide you with a good beginning for your study of poetry.

One of the most difficult things for students to conceive of as they read poetry is how figurative language functions in a poem. Poems are, by their nature, full of figurative language: metaphor, simile, personification, and more. Reading beneath the surface is critical to understanding a poem. (See Chapter 10, “Engaged and Active Reading” for more help with reading a text closely.) Poetry begs to be read several times, and in your preparation for the AP Lit exam, you need to train yourself to diligently and carefully read complicated poems as well as prose pieces.

This chapter will acquaint you with the poetry terms and concepts you are most likely to encounter on the AP Lit exam.

WHAT IS A POEM MADE OF?

IMAGERY

Imagery is what occurs when poets use words that appeal to our senses: we perceive, through his or her words, an idea or image. These images can appeal to all senses: sight, hearing, touch, smell, and taste.

Imagery is important in a poem because it is language that allows us to be transported to another place, time, and experience, which, if the image is effective, allows us to understand the emotion being conveyed in the poem. Imagery is one of the main tools in creating a specific tone.

We can only know the world through the senses. We perceive first and reason second. Imagery is critical to understanding. Imagery allows the poet to show us meaning by taking us into the environment of the poem.

“Imagism” refers to the idea that an image, presented on its own, in a poem, has the power to unite the poet and the reader/listener in the exact impulse or experience that led the poet to write the poem in the first place.

DICTION

Diction is primarily the poet’s choice of words. Since poetry, of all literary forms, uses the least number of words to accomplish its task, each word is important and must be chosen for its exactness. Also, unnecessary words should be eliminated so they don’t obscure the essential language of the poem.

How does a poet choose the exact word? Three reasons make sense:

Sound: How does the word sound? Does the sound contribute to the meaning, to the overall sound scheme, or does it interrupt or interfere? See the section on sound for specific aspects of sound to consider.

Denotation: What is the exact meaning of the word? This is the definition you will find in the dictionary.

Connotation: What meanings does this word suggest beyond its exact meaning? What is the emotive quality of this word? For example, the word “cancer” means a disease characterized by the abnormal growth of cells. Emotionally, the word “cancer” conjures up fear, terror, worry, helplessness, etc. Words often have such connotative connections and we need to be aware of them when we use them.

Initially, most poets write the poem so they don't lose the impulse or the reason they wrote it in the first place. Then, after a time of "estrangement" from the poem, they go back and look critically at the poem, and at each word. Good poets know that each word matters. As a critical reader of poetry, students should never skim over any word in a poem.

SOUND

Poems are meant to be heard. It has been said that poetry is language the "drips from the tongue." We must pay attention to the sound of language as well as to the meaning of language. Sound, when used intentionally, should always enhance or reinforce meaning.

Sound elements:

Rhyme: words that sound either exactly alike or merely similar

Exact rhyme:

- ▶ cat, hat, flat, mat: *masculine rime (one syllable rhymes)*
- ▶ falling, calling, stalling: *feminine rime (two or more syllables rhyme)*

Slant rhyme/approximate rhyme:

- ▶ *the words sound close but are not exact rhymes*
- ▶ mirror, steer, dear or book, crack, stick
(*consonance is used most often for slant rhymes*).

Internal rhyme vs. end rhyme: end rhyme occurs only at the end of the line whereas internal rhyme happens within the lines

Alliteration: repetition of beginning sounds in close proximity: "Susan sent sally some sunflowers," or "Loons lurk late in autumn lakes under lavender skies."

Assonance: repetition of vowel sounds: *cake, stake, break, fate, drank, ache, placate*, etc. Some words using assonance will rhyme exactly: others will simply mirror the vowel sounds

Cacaphony: harsh, discordant, or displeasing sounds

Consonance: repetition of consonant sounds: exact rhymes use consonance: *foot, put, soot*. But any words that repeat consonant sounds are using consonance: add suit, unfit, and unlit to the preceding list. The key is that they all end with the "t" sound. Consonance can occur in the middle of words also: *river, liver, cadaver, palaver, waver, save, rave*, etc. The "v" sound repeats.

Euphony: pleasing, melodious, pleasant sounds

Meter: a rhythm accomplished by using a certain number of beats or syllables per line: the most common form of meter is iambic meter which is a foot consisting of one unstressed syllable followed by a stressed syllable represented like this: (U /). A foot is simply two syllables (or in some cases, three) that form a metrical pattern. Iambus are common in everyday English. Iambic Pentameter means a five-foot iambic line, or ten syllables.

Sound should never be more important than the idea or meaning of the poem, but should always work to extend the meaning of the poem.

Sound is less likely to be a significant factor in meaning in older, fixed form poems. Poets were not considered to have mastered their craft if they could not control rhyme schemes and metrical patterns. Free verse poets are free to experiment more liberally with sound, and for them, sound is something to mold, play with, and use to enhance their ideas.

METAPHOR

A metaphor is a comparison of two dissimilar things to help us see something in a new or more meaningful way. Similes are also metaphors, but use the words “like” or “as” in making the comparison. “Life is like a river” is a simile.

Besides the simile, there are two basic types of metaphor:

Direct metaphor: the comparison is made directly using the word “is.” “Life is a river.”

Indirect metaphor: “The river of life” also compares life to a river but does so indirectly.

Comparison is one of our basic patterns of reasoning. We perceive the world and compare new things/experiences to what we already know to see how they are alike or different and in this process, we make judgments and understand ideas.

There are other ways of comparing:

Personification: giving something non-human, human characteristics

Oxymoron: juxtaposing two things apparently contradictory that still reinforce one idea—jumbo shrimp, only choice, virtual reality

Hyperbole: using exaggeration to extend reality. Hyperbole gets us to look more closely at what is actually true by giving us a sharp contrast.

Understatement: this works in the opposite way from hyperbole. We use understatement when we say less than is appropriate for the situation or for our meaning.

THEME

Why write poems? Some people can’t help it. Writing poetry is as natural to them as breathing and it’s not a choice—they just do it. Still, there must be some reason beyond the process itself for writing poems. Theme is the purpose of the poem. It’s what the poet needed to say. Themes express the unity of human experience, and through poems we see that we are more alike as a human race than different.

Themes tell us what is true about us, and they aren’t always beautiful. Themes express the poet’s vision—the artist’s vision about the truth of the world. Some common themes are love, hate, hunger, growing up, growing old, dying, fears, cruelty, compassion, etc. A theme in a poem can be found in an epic tale or a simple reflection: both light the way to understanding.

SAVING SOMETHING NEW OR SAYING SOMETHING OLD IN A NEW WAY

Poetry is one of the oldest art forms, and poets have pretty much covered all there is to say. Still, we all are constantly reinventing ourselves and our world and we can say something new, or at least something old in a new way. As beginning poets, we learn, sometimes through imitating the great poems we admire. This is a good and natural way to learn. But we cannot imitate forever. At some point, we must find our own voices and we must allow them to say the things that “we know.” “What you know that I don’t know is what you can tell me in a poem,” award-winning poet Sharon Olds said. “After all, what else is there? I cannot write about anything else. I can only tell you what I know.”

This is a tricky thing, though. Sometimes we think we know things through our own experiences that we really don't—what we do is try to appropriate vicarious experience for our poems. Young poets may take a life lived on TV or in a movie and write about it as if it were their own. Ideas for poems can come through the observed lives of others—but what matters is what we know about that experience and this knowledge comes only from our own experience—from our own learning. This is what Olds meant: this is what we know.

Saying something old in a new way can mean using new forms, new ideas in language, infusing the truly new world of science/technology/reality with the very, very old questions of humanity. It's all about perception: how do you see the world? What can you say about it that hasn't already been said?

KEY TERMS

Familiarize yourself with the following list of terms. The starred terms (★) are those that have appeared more prominently on released AP Lit exams.

- alliteration:** repetition, at close intervals, of beginning sounds.
- ★ **apostrophe:** a speaker directly addresses something or someone not living, as a lady in a tapestry, or the wind.
- assonance:** repetition at close intervals of vowel sounds. At its most basic, assonance is simple rhyme (cat, hat). Assonance provides a fluency of sound.
- consonance:** repetition at close intervals of consonant sounds, such as *book, plaque, thicker*.
- couplet:** two lines that rhyme. Shakespearean sonnets end with a couplet. Set off, couplets may contain a separate or complete idea. Sometimes a couplet can serve as a stanza.
- ★ **epigram:** a short quotation or verse that precedes a poem (or any text) that sets a tone, provides a setting, or gives some other context for the poem.
- fixed form:** some poems have a fixed form, meaning that there are “rules” about numbers of lines, meter, rhyme schemes, etc. See a list of common fixed-form poems later in this chapter.
- iambic pentameter:** a line of five iambic feet, or ten syllables. See the section on Meter later in this chapter.
- ★ **metaphor:** a comparison of two unlike things in order to show something new. A basic metaphor contains a literal term (the thing being compared) and a figurative term (the thing the literal term is being compared with).
- ★ **imagery:** language that appeals to the senses and evokes emotion.
- metaphysical conceit:** an elaborate, intellectually ingenious metaphor that shows the poet's realm of knowledge; it may be brief or extended.
- ★ **meter:** the rhythmic pattern of poetry. See the section on meter later in this chapter.
- ★ **personification:** to personify is to attribute human qualities or characteristics to nonliving things. To attribute human qualities to animals is called **anthropomorphism**.
- pun:** a play on words where the juxtaposition of meanings is ironic or humorous.

15. **rhyme (internal rhyme):** words that rhyme within a line of poetry
16. **rhyme (rhyme scheme):** a regular pattern of end rhymes. To mark a rhyme scheme, label the first line “a,” the next line if it does not rhyme with the first “b,” and so on. Certain fixed form poems, like sonnets, have specific rhyme schemes.
17. **rhythm:** the beat or music of a poem. A regular beat indicates a metrical pattern.
18. **sestet:** a stanza of six lines. See other stanza types below.
19. **simile:** a metaphor that uses comparison words such as “like” or “as.” An **epic simile** or **Homeric simile** (named after Homer) is an elaborate simile that compares an ordinary event or situation (familiar to the audience) with the idea in the text. These similes are often recognized by the “just as, so then” construction. Dante Alighieri makes extensive use of epic similes.
20. ★ **speaker:** the narrative voice of a poem. A poem generally has only one speaker, but some poems may have more than one.
21. ★ **stanza:** the “paragraph” of a poem, whether consisting of equal or unequal numbers of lines. **Stanzaic form** refers to a poem that has stanzas. A poem without stanzas is a **continuous form** poem.
22. ★ **structure:** the way the poem is built, such as three stanzas of terza rima, or one stanza (continuous form) of successive couplets
23. **synechdoche** (pronounced sin-**eck**-doe-key, emphasis on second syllable): the use of a part for the whole, such as “all hands on deck”



Remember to pay attention to stanza shifts. A new stanza may present a new idea or theme or a shift in tone.

24. ★ **tone:** the emotional quality of a poem, such as regretful or contemplative. Tone also refers to the speaker’s attitude (feelings about) a particular thing or idea.
25. **unity:** the degree to which elements of a poem work together to produce a coherent effect.

HOW TO READ A POEM

As you read above, a poem is often full of figurative language, which means you shouldn’t read a poem for its literal sense. You have to be open to surprises in poems. Good poets get us to feel before we think, and often we must read poems several times to get meaning from them.

It is possible to misread a poem. Sometimes students say that a poem can mean whatever you want it to mean, sort of like looking at an abstract painting and interpreting it however you like. However, you are not allowed to ignore the context of the poem when making your interpretation. A poem is a small thing, generally. Each word has been chosen carefully and it should have a purpose. You cannot simply notice some words and ignore others. If there is a word in a poem you don’t understand, you have to look it up. This is different from reading a novel.

Below is a simple method of reading a poem. It will help you focus on what you should typically focus on so you can understand a complex poem.

1. Read the poem

- ▶ Read slowly and, if possible, out loud.
- ▶ Read meaningful chunks, not lines. If there is punctuation, use it. If not, find discrete chunks of meaning (phrases and clauses).
- ▶ Be very careful of rhythmic poems that have a beat; you can lose your quest for meaning if you get caught up in the “music.” However, the music might be a clue to the poet’s theme, so keep it in mind.

2. Annotate the poem for STIFS (see Chapter 10 for a sample annotated poem)

S = Speaker

- ▶ Identify the speaker and any particular character traits of the speaker (especially his or her point of view)
- ▶ Who is the speaker addressing?
- ▶ What is the speaker’s topic, argument, etc.

T = Tone

- ▶ What is the dominant tone in the poem?
- ▶ If so, where is it and why do you think the shift occurs?

I = Imagery

- ▶ Isolate the major images: what do you see, smell, hear, taste, feel?
- ▶ What is suggested by the imagery? Emotion? Idea?

F = Figurative Language

- ▶ Find and understand the figurative language evident in the poem: metaphor, simile, apostrophe, personification, hyperbole, and more.
- ▶ Determine what’s really being said in each example and how that relates to other elements in the poem.

S = Sound

- ▶ What sound elements are most striking and why? You should be looking for sound repetition, cacophony/euphony, or any element of sound that reinforces meaning.

3. Read the poem again after you’ve annotated it.

4. If you are stuck on particular phrases, that is, if you don’t understand them, make sure you have defined all complex language and then paraphrase the tricky parts. By simplifying the language in clauses and phrases, it will be easier for you to understand the basic idea.

5. Answer this question: What is this poem about and how do I know this? Be sure you can support your claims with evidence from the poem. Look to your annotations for your evidence. This question can serve as an essay prompt.

**Test Tip**

Understanding Shakespeare can be difficult. You might find it helpful to study smaller passages, such as sonnets, and paraphrase them until you get the knack of Elizabethan language.

METER

Meter is the regular pattern of accented and unaccented syllables in a poem.

There are generally very few questions on the AP Lit exam that ask you to determine meter, but if you have time, knowing about meter is good just in case there might be a question or two.

Meter is marked by stressed (/) and unstressed syllables (U). A metrical foot consists of either two syllables per foot (duple meter) or three syllables per foot (triple meter). The most common meter is iambic, a duple meter. The most common measure is iambic pentameter which is found throughout Shakespeare's works.

TYPES OF METER

Type	Adjective Form	Syllable pattern
iamb	iambic	U /
trochee	trochaic	/ U
anapest	anapestic	U U /
dactyl	dactylic	/ / U
spondee	spondaic	/ /

MEASURES OF METER

monometer	One foot
dimeter	Two feet
trimeter	Three feet

STANZA TYPES

couplet	two-line stanza
tercet	three-line stanza
quatrain	four-line stanza
quintain	five-line stanza
sestet	six-line stanza
septet	seven-line stanza
octave	eight-line stanza

COMMON FIXED FORM POEMS

Haiku: Haiku is a traditional Japanese fixed-form poem. It is structured in three lines, with five syllables in the first, seven syllables in the second, and five syllables in the third. One intention of a haiku poem is to capture a moment in time or a perceived aspect of nature.

Sestina: A sestina is a complicated French form of poetry traditionally consisting of six six-line stanzas followed by a tercet, called an "envoy," to equal 39 lines in all. A set of six words is repeated in varying patterns at the ends of the lines of each of the six-line stanzas. These six words also appear in the envoy, two in each line of the tercet.

Sonnet: You may have heard the phrase, "If it's square, it's a sonnet." A sonnet is fourteen lines of iambic pentameter, generally with either of two traditional rhyme schemes: Shakespearean/English: ABAB CDCD EFEF GG (three quatrains followed by a rhyming couplet); or Petrarchan/Italian: ABBAABBA CDEDCD (two quatrains) presenting a problem followed by a sestet (two tercets) giving the solution. Or, the sestet signals a change in tone or other shift.

Villanelle: This fixed-form poem consists of 19 lines composed of five tercets (rhyme scheme: aba) and a concluding quatrain (rhyme scheme: abaa). Lines one and three of the first tercet serve as refrains in a pattern that alternates through line 15. This pattern is repeated again in lines 18 and 19. The most famous example of a villanelle is Dylan Thomas' poem, *Do Not Go Gentle Into That Good Night*.

OTHER TYPES OF POEMS

1. **Ballad:** a short poem in song format (sometimes with refrains) that tells a story
2. **Elegy:** a poem, the subject of which is the death of a person or, in some cases, an idea
3. **Epic:** long, adventurous tale with a hero, generally on a quest
4. **Lyric:** expresses love, inner emotions, tends to be personal; usually written in first person
5. **Narrative:** the poet tells a story with characters and a plot
6. **Ode:** Originally a Greek form, odes are serious lyric poems. There are a variety of types of odes. English Romantic poets reinvented the form.
7. **Prose poem:** a prose poem looks like a paragraph, even having a jagged right margin. It may even read like a paragraph, but it retains poetic elements such as imagery, figurative language, and concise diction.

TWENTY "MUST READ" POEMS

There are thousands of great poems and hundreds of great poets. This list is meant only to acquaint you with some standard poems that AP Lit students often study. But please, do go beyond this list. Embrace poems and they will cease to frighten you. The following poems are in no particular order. They are examples of old, new, British, and American poems. Each one should be easy to find in a good college literature anthology, and many may even be online.

1. *My Last Duchess*, Robert Browning
2. *The Lovesong of J. Alfred Prufrock*, T.S. Eliot
3. *Ozymandias*, Percy Bysshe Shelley
4. *A Valediction: Forbidding Mourning*, John Donne (or anything by Donne)
5. *Out, Out—*, Robert Frost
6. *Dover Beach*, Matthew Arnold
7. *Bells for John Whiteside's Daughter*, John Crowe Ransom
8. *The Second Coming*, William Butler Yeats
9. *Dulce et Decorum Est*, Wilfred Owen
10. *I felt a Funeral, in my Brain*, Emily Dickinson
11. *Those Winter Sundays*, Robert Hayden
12. *To His Coy Mistress*, Andrew Marvell
13. *The Weary Blues*, Langston Hughes
14. *Woman Work*, Maya Angelou
15. *Do Not Go Gentle Into That Good Night*, Dylan Thomas

- 16. *In the Waiting Room*, Elizabeth Bishop
- 17. *Ode on a Grecian Urn*, John Keats
- 18. *Sunday Morning*, Wallace Stevens
- 19. *The Colonel*, Carolyn Forché
- 20. Any Shakespearean sonnet

SAMPLE ANNOTATED TEXTS

The prose passage below is from Willa Cather's novel My Antonia. The poem is John Donne's The Broken Heart. These samples are meant to give you an idea of what an annotated text looks like. As you study each one, you may find other literary elements that you would have marked or made note of. If so, it shows you are thinking critically. Good for you!



Try writing an essay for each of the texts below using the insights in the annotations. Use this generic prompt to guide you: What is the narrator's/speaker's attitude toward the setting/situation?

Excerpt from My Antonia by Willa Cather
Jim Burden is narrating this passage.

1st person
narrator

Overall tone:
content/warm/contrasted
tone.

I'm contemplating
one of the

I sat down in the middle of the garden, where snakes could scarcely approach unseen, and leaned my back against a warm - he nestles into nature.
yellow pumpkin. There were some ground-cherry bushes growing along the furrows, full of fruit. I turned back the papery triangular sheaths that protected the berries and ate a few. All about me giant grasshoppers, twice as big as any I had ever seen, were doing acrobatic feats among the dried vines. The gophers scurried up and down the ploughed ground. There in the sheltered draw-bottom the wind did not blow very hard, but I could hear it singing its humming tune up on the level, and I could see the tall grasses wave. The earth was warm under me, and warm as I crumbled it < facile imagery > through my fingers. Queer little red bugs came out and moved in slow squadrons around me. Their backs were polished vermilion, with black spots. I kept as still as I could. Nothing happened. I did not expect anything to happen. I was something that lay under the sun and felt it, like the pumpkins, and I did not want to be anything more. [I was entirely happy] Perhaps we feel like that when we die and become a part of something entire, whether it is sun and air, or goodness and knowledge. At any rate, that is happiness; to be dissolved into something complete and great. When it comes to one, it comes as naturally as sleep.

*he's safe
into nature.

sustenance

Colors:
warm reds &
yellows +
oranges reinforce
warm feeling;
Sun - yellow, too.

What does it mean to be happy?

It's one among them
and he respects their
movement on life. He
won't scare the red bugs.
It's also part of something
bigger. Pauticism?
What's happiness
but contentment?

Not to far - to
welcome.
The contentment of the
day extends to
something more universal.

* Movement:

grasshoppers doing acrobatic feats "
"gophers scurried"
"fall grasses wave"
Jim crumbles the earth through his fingers
bugs move in slow squadrons
Even the wind is active + singing
Our movement = our purpose
Action = Life We also move from life
to death.

Life on earth is
fully sustaining and
we belong there as
do pumpkins. But life
beyond earth is also fully sustaining + where we belong.

Diction:
 "Decay" - "devour" - suggest death, end of being.
 "plague" - "burn" -

Speaker is addressing a former love who broke his heart.

The Broken Heart

He is stark mad, who ever says,
 That he hath been in love an hour,
 Yet not that love so soon decays,
 But that it can ten in less space devour;
 Who will believe me, if I swear
 That I have had the plague a year? — Love sickness — or been in
 Who would not laugh at me, if I should say,
 I saw a flask of powder burn a day?

Love doesn't last. Anyone who's really been in love knows this.

Love eats us alive as if we're nothing of value.

Love is a greedy, but one.

Ah, what a filthy is a heart, voracious
 If once into love's hands it come!
 All other grates allow a part
 To other grates, and ask themselves but some:
 They come to us, but we Love draws.
 He swallows us, and never chaws:
 By him, as by chain'd shot, whole ranks do die.
 He is the tyrant pike, our hearts the fry;
 If 'twere not so, what did become
 Of my heart, when I first saw thee?
 I brought a heart into the room,
 But from the room, I carried none with me:
 If it had gone to thee, I know
 Mine would have taught thine heart to show
 More pity unto me; but Love, alas,
 At one first blow did shiver it as glass.
 Yet nothing can to nothing fall,
 Nor any place be empty quite,
 Therefore I think my breast hath all
 Those pieces still, though they be not (mine)
 And now as broken glasses show
 A hundred lesser faces, so
 My rage of heart can like, wish, and adore,
 But after one such love, can love no more.

Love is the big fish and our hearts are the little fish that the big fish eats.
 Love is personified - a voracious eater.
 Metaphor - Love is compared to the pike.

They grieve, but leave us something to feel.

If my heart held you to you - it would have thought pity on me.

implies her heart was cruel.

torn/ Shredded (you)

Negative tone

Lies heart is ruined for love
 Shattered glass cannot be mended.

My rage of heart can like, wish, and adore,
 But after one such love, can love no more.

-John Donne

After having loved you - my heart can no longer love. You broke my heart & ruined me for others.

Metaphor - Comparing broken heart to broken mirror.