

Poetry 101: Imagery, Metaphor, Repetition, Form

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Thanks for that introduction, and welcome to all you poetry enthusiasts out there.

I geared this presentation to two chief audiences: those who consider poetry their go-to genre, even if you're a beginning poet, and those who write in other genres who'd like to deepen and broaden their skill set as writers. If you're already a fairly accomplished poet, you'd probably be better served, then, by grabbing your Walt Whitman or Emily Dickinson and going to read under a tree.

A couple of notes. In a couple minutes I will go into a PowerPoint presentation, so you won't be looking at this craggy mug anymore. Number two, I'll be quoting eight or nine poems during my presentation.

All of these are readily available online if you just Google the title. Lots of websites with contemporary and classic poems available. So now we will go into PowerPoint mode.

Poetry 101: Imagery, Metaphor, Repetition, and Form.

First, the definition. This one comes from Emily Dickinson. "If I read a book and it makes my whole body so cold no fire can warm me, I know that is poetry.

If I feel physically as if the top of my head were taken off, I know that is poetry. These are the only ways I know it. Is there any other way?" Clearly, Emily Dickinson privileges a subjective, a physical reaction to poetry, a kind of visceral response, so your body almost knows more than your intellect.

I like that definition because that's often how we feel art. That's how we process it. I'd like to jump to another definition.

This comes a little bit later from one Carlos Williams in the early 20th century in the Machine Age. He says, "A poem is a small (or large) machine made out of words." Now if we take those two definitions and put them in our abracadabra bag, we end up with something like the following: A poem is a small or large machine made out of words designed to make our bodies so cold no fire will ever warm us, and designed to physically take off the tops of our heads.

That, I believe, is a pretty useful definition for what we want: something that creates a very clear emotional response in the reader, but that can be reproduced and has a machine-like quality and that it has a particular purpose and all the parts are working in a synchronous way to create this emotional response. Why do we write? I think it's useful to return to this every so often and remind ourselves.

Here's a quote I ran into recently from Mother Teresa. "I'm a little pencil in the hand of a writing God, who is sending a love letter to the world." I think all art in one way or another is a love letter to the world.

What we'll cover today: imagery, metaphor, repetition, and if we get to it, form.

What we won't cover: meter diction, juxtaposition, figurative language, compression, voice, etc. Simply don't have time. So if I don't cover those things and you feel shortchanged, we need to have a longer conversation. I also won't cover publishing in an LDS market or how to make a killing publishing in an LDS market. We'll save that discussion for a later millennium.

First topic of conversation: imagery. Usually when someone says "image," we think visual image, but in fact there are five types of imagery: What we can see, what we can hear, what we can smell, what we can taste, and what we can feel. Love this quote by Leonardo da Vinci. "The five senses are the ministers of the soul." If we want to reach someone deeply, we need to appeal to their senses.

The first poem I'm going to read is a poem by Theodore Roethke, who is a mid-century poet, lived in the Northwest, and taught at the University of Washington. This poem, "Root Cellar," I first encountered in a sophomore poetry class.

And it became a favorite then, and it has remained a favorite, in a sense that I've never recovered from that particular poem. So as we read this together, want you to notice how he

appeals to the senses, which senses, and in what lines. How does he pull all this off? It's a kind of black magic, isn't it? "Root Cellar." "Nothing would sleep in that cellar, dank as a ditch, / Bulbs broke out of boxes hunting for chinks in the dark, / Shoots dangled and drooped, / Lolling obscenely from mildewed crates, / Hung down long yellow evil necks, like tropical snakes. / And what a congress of stinks! / Roots ripe as old bait, / Pulpy stems, rank, silo-rich, / Leaf-mold, manure, lime, piled against slippery planks. / Nothing would give up life: / Even the dirt kept breathing a small breath." Now that's about as dense and sensory as one can imagine in a poem. So we can see nearly every image in every line. We can see a ditch. We can picture shoots dangling and drooping. They're all things that one might see in very low light, I assume, because this is a root cellar.

So we can see this poem. Can we hear it? I think in some of the repetitions, you can almost hear it. "Bulbs broke out of boxes." That's a very physical sound.

And though you usually can't hear that in real life, in the poem you almost can. Later in the poem we have the line "the dirt kept breathing a small breath." I think that repetition of "breathe" and "breath" mimics the intake of breath, and the exhalation that follows.

Can you smell this poem? Absolutely, especially after the announcement in mid-poem. "What a congress of stinks! / Roots ripe as old bait." If you've ever gone fishing and left your angleworms on the pier on a hot day, you know what kind of smell we're talking about here.

Can you taste the poem? Perhaps not precisely, but the smell imagery, the olfactory imagery, is so vivid that we come close to tasting, I believe. Sometimes critics will talk about a sixth sense as well. That is, what we can ...

How would we describe it? Well, we can feel what we can perceive inside of a body. And so I think that that last line, "even the dirt kept breathing a small breath," is something that registers from inside. So I think you could argue that it has that kind of somatic sensory feeling that comes from inside of a body. So we are definitely inside of a root cellar and reading this poem, but there's a very real way in which the root cellar is inside of us.

Second key, right, in poetry, metaphor. So what's a metaphor? My love is a rose. What is a simile? My love is like a rose.

"The Arabic word for metaphor is 'isti'ara,' or 'loan.' ... A metaphor juxtaposes two different things and then skews our point of view so unexpected similarities emerge.

Metaphorical thinking half discovers and half invents the likenesses it describes.” So with metaphor, what we’re trying to do is freshen the language, defamiliarizing the familiar.

We describe something familiar in unfamiliar terms or something unfamiliar in familiar terms, but we want to bring a fresh strangeness to the world through metaphor.

So the example I’m going to give you is a poem by Sylvia Plath, who died tragically at the age of 31 or 32. She was a young, precocious, very talented poet.

Married to Ted Hughes, the Poet Laureate of England.

The poem we’ll take a look at is called “Riddle.” What I want you to do as we read this is try to figure out what it is she’s describing. The strategy is this: she has nine lines, 14 metaphors, and all 14 metaphors describe the same status of this speaker.

“Riddle.” “I’m a riddle in nine syllables, / An elephant, a ponderous house, / A melon strolling on two tendrils. / O red fruit, ivory, fine timbers! / This loaf’s big with its yeasty rising. / Money’s new-minted in this fat purse. / I’m a means, a stage, a cow in calf. / I’ve eaten a bag of green apples, / Boarded the train there’s no getting off.” Sometimes I’ll have students read it two or three times if they have trouble trying to piece it together, and then I’ll give them a few hints.

Look at the third to last line. The narrator describes herself as “a cow in calf.” What is that a description of? Pregnancy, right? Then if you jump around in the poem and go to the first line—“I’m a riddle in nine syllables”—what does nine have to do with pregnancy? Aah, nine months.

So it is kind of a riddle. And if you count that first line, it has nine syllables. Count every other line, also nine syllables. Count the lines of the poem, nine. So over and over again, she’s reinforcing this notion of gestation, how long it takes to carry a child. And then once you have a hint that this is what she’s describing, every line gives us a different taste of pregnancy, sort of like a group of mystics trying to describe what they see when they’re only shown part of an elephant. You put all of those perceptions together, you have a full perspective on what it’s like to be pregnant.

Don’t feel bad if you didn’t understand this poem. I sent it to my daughter who was six months pregnant for the first time, and she read it three times, gave up, and just Googled it on the internet.

But notice the power that comes from this poem. It's a riddle. I don't usually care for riddle poems, because they give up their secrets and then they're not very interesting after that.

But this one is so well made and the image is so precise, metaphor so precise, that I like teaching it every semester, and it continues to deliver.

For a very different poem, let's look at a poem by Linda Pastan, and I withheld the title here because I, to make a kind of rhetorical point. What I want you to do is read through this poem with me and try to ascertain what it is she's describing on a literal level, and maybe that could be the title, and see how that goes.

"In starched dresses / with ribbons, in miniature / jackets and tiny ties, / we would circle chairs / at birthday parties, / and when the music stopped, / lunge to be seated. / One by one we were / welcomed to hard / ground and empty air." Pretty clear, straightforward poem. If anybody has ever played musical chairs at a birthday party, that's what the poem seems to be about.

Well let's try out the title "Musical Chairs." This is a pretty clear description, then, of that event, but there's not a lot of surprise.

My mentor poet Leslie Norris once said that any good poem is at least two poems, if not more, at the same time. Let's read it again, but with a different title. And notice how the poem gets wilder and more jagged and much more satisfying.

"Reading the Obituary Page." "In starched dresses / with ribbons, in miniature / jackets and tiny ties, / we would circle chairs / at birthday parties, / and when the music stopped, / lunge to be seated. / One by one we were / welcomed to hard / ground and empty air." Notice how the poem takes on a certain darker tone with a new title. The first case, we're hearing the poem as a description of a childhood game. But once we have this title, we're reading that and simultaneously thinking about what it means to lose those that we love.

Some of the images become extremely powerful as a result. So, begins with starched dresses and miniature jackets and ties. I think this is an apt description of a beloved in a casket or the kind of dress, the way that we dress when we go to a viewing. And the ending, I think, is very poignant. "One by one we were welcomed to hard ground and empty air." So in the childhood game, we just fall to the floor.

In life, when there's no longer a chair for you, you no longer have a place on this turning planet.

Another chilling point is that right now, the narrator seems to be reading the obituary page, but he or she has to know that before too long, someone will be reading the obituary page in which their own specific details of life on this earth are listed. So, in this case, you have a controlling metaphor for the entire poem. So you can do all sorts of things with metaphor.

Third device of poetry we should talk about: repetitions. In this one, rather than explain, rather dramatizes repetitions from Macbeth. “Double, double toil and trouble; / Fire burn and caldron bubble. / Cool it with a baboon’s blood, / Then the charm is firm and good.” Of course you can remember, you can think of the picture of the three Weird Sisters chanting these lines in cackling voices.

But I think it demonstrates the fact that good writing, which relies on repetition, good poetry of various sorts does create a kind of charm that’s firm and good. It’s incantatory—repetitions, or what we think of when we think of prayers, magic spells, invocations, other things of this sort. So let’s see how this might play out in a very short poem. This one is titled “We Real Cool” by Gwendolyn Brooks. It has a subtitle: “The Pool Players. Seven at the Golden Shovel,” which sets up the situation.

The Golden Shovel is some kind of pool hall, probably. Pool players, as you’ll see from the poem, probably high school dropouts. So sort of between being children and young men.

“We real cool. We / Left school. We / Lurk late. We / Strike straight. We / Sing sin. We / Thin gin. We / jazz June. We / Die soon.” So Gwendolyn Brooks talks about this poem when she reads it. That’s how she reads it, in a kind of syncopated way with a strong emphasis with “we” at the end. So what are the repetitions here? Notice the poem is four stanzas long, twenty-four words is all, all of them one-syllable words (or maybe “cool” and “school,” depending on how you pronounce those two-syllable words).

What’s remarkable is that we have rhymes running down the middle: cool, school; late, straight; sin, gin; June, soon. So that’s a repetition. All we’re doing is changing the initial consonant, and so we get that chime, which is very satisfying. But there are also other kinds of repetitions in the poem.

Alliteration. Look at the third line: lurk, late. Repetition of consonant sounds at the beginning: strike, straight; sing, sin; thin, gin; jazz, June. So it’s an intricate mouthful of a poem, quite remarkable. The other thing that you might notice is that we have a line of “we”s down the right-hand margin. Seems a little bit awkward to read. Most of us, if we were writing this poem, would just have the lines rhyme up more obediently—the “we”s line up more obediently down the left-

hand side, and each line would end with a period: cool, school, late, straight. That's a way of sort of forcing the poem to comply and make it overly orderly. I love the fact that Gwendolyn Brooks brings in a kind of syncopation.

The other thing that happens with those repetitions is that at the beginning we have a line that's framed by "we"s. "We real cool. We." There's a kind of collective identity emphasized in that way. A gang, if you will, right? Notice what happens visually and in sort of a rhetorical way as we finish the poem. "We / thin gin. We / jazz June. We / die soon." It's the only line that does not have a "we" supporting it, which I think formally suggests that there are certain things that we can do as a group and experience collectively.

But finally, we're on our own, and each person dies individually. It's a devastating poem, and one can sing it as if one is dancing skip rope to it, but there's always this stark undertone. That's one of the reasons why this is anthologized over and over.

We'll look at another poem with some repetitions embedded in it. It's a poem titled "Smoking." What I want you to do is notice how the repeating phrases carry a kind of argument and emphasize the turn of the poem, which comes about two-thirds of the way through. So notice how the language changes as we move from one to the next.

"Smoking." "I like the cool and heft of it, dull metal on the palm, / And the click, the hiss, the spark fuming into flame, / Boldface of fire, the rage and sway of it, raw blue at the base / And a slope of gold, a touch to the packed tobacco, the tip / Turned red as a warning light, blown brighter by the breath, / The pull and the pump of it, and the paper's white / Smoothed now to ash as the smoke draws back, drawn down / To the black crust of lungs, tar and poisons in the pink, / And the blood sorting it out, veins tight and the heart slow, / The push and wheeze of it, a sweep of plumes in the air / Like a shako of horses dragging a hearse through the lake centennium, / London, at the end of December, in the dark and fog." I think most of the language of this poem is self-explanatory, except maybe the last few lines, which are a little more obscure. A shako is one of those plumed helmets that military sometimes wear.

And we have a reference to the late centennium, which is the last year of the century. Even if you don't understand those exactly, you notice that the horses are driving a hearse. This is probably 1899 or 1799, some end of the year time period and that it's London, which is a very foggy place.

In any case, I think you can sense from this poem that it moves from perhaps a celebration of smoking, this sort of physical satisfaction of inhaling the smoke, especially for someone who is

addicted, to what happens by the end of the poem. Notice we move from “the cool and heft of it,” you know, the physical feeling of it, maybe in the mouth and in the fingers, to “rage and sway of it.” So it has a kind of social payoff to it, right, a kind of rebellion or transgressiveness. “The pull and the pump of it.” All those things sound engaging and good in a way, right, if you didn’t know that we’re talking about cigarettes. And then the ending, we have this “blood sorting it out, veins tight and the heart slow, the push and wheeze of it,” which reinforces the notion of what has been hinted at earlier in the poem: “drawn down to the black crust of lungs.” So we see the start with the celebration ends up being dark and negative and problematic. So this gives you another sense of what one can do with various repetitions.

Well, let’s move on to form, which may be the most usual thing we think of when talking about poetry. First mention traditional forms. I’ve mentioned several of them here. Haiku. We all know that they should be three lines, at least in the Americanized tradition of the haiku, 17 syllables. This doesn’t hold true in Japanese. But in American tradition of American haiku. We have rules, right? Terza Rima, pantoum, villanelle, sonnet. Most of these will be unfamiliar to you, except for perhaps the sonnet, which is a very popular form in Anglo-American poetry.

What I want to suggest with this is that when you write in traditional forms, you inherit certain rules and formal expectations, and you work within those constraints, at times transgressing those in judicious ways.

So let’s look at one example of a sonnet. This is a Shakespearean sonnet.

If you remember anything about sonnets from high school, they have a specific rhyme scheme. You see that I’ve written that down the right-hand margin. A, B, A, B, C, D, C, D, E, F, E, F, G, G. So, English is a rhyme poor language. It’s somewhat difficult to rhyme, which is not the case in other Romance languages. So Shakespeare and other practitioners during the Renaissance went easy on themselves. Rather than write really difficult Italian sonnets with multiple lines, they opted for two. And once you’re done with those rhymes, you can retire them and move on to the next one.

So here’s a poem titled “Shakespearean Sonnet: With a first line taken from the tv listings.” We won’t read all of it. But let’s read a few lines.

“A man is haunted by his father’s ghost. / Boy meets girl while feuding families fight. / A Scottish king is murdered by his host. / Two couples get lost on a summer night.” So you can hear that pattern those first four lines make up, what’s called a quatrain. And then we have another quatrain and then another. And then at the end we have a rhyming couplet. “A Roman leader

makes a big mistake. / The sexy queen is bitten by a snake.” So the rhymes, “terminal chimes” we might call them, follow quick on each other in those last two lines, whereas earlier they’re separated by a complete line. So there’s a formal quality of things quickening, becoming clearer and more weighty and significant. What’s the poem about? Well, I think the first two lines are the key, right? The writer wants to give us the impression that he found the first line in a TV guide or something like that. “A man is haunted by his father’s ghost.” It’s just a description of Hamlet. Of course, I think this was probably made up. It’s just a convention, but it draws us in. And what does the rest of the poem do? Each line attempts to sum up one of Shakespeare’s tragedies, comedies, or histories.

I’m not sure it’s an especially ambitious poem. I think it’s kind of funny, entertaining, certainly clever. But one of its arguments, finally, I believe, is that you can never sum up a work of art in one sentence, even if it is a decasyllabic line, even if it is written in iambic pentameter. “A Scottish king is murdered by his host.” “A sexy queen is bitten by a snake.” So he’s playing along with the conventions of Shakespearean drama and having a good time with it.

Okay, let’s look at another example. This is a poem by Gerard Manley Hopkins, a British writer in the late 19th century, also a priest.

I’m discussing this in the same breath with the sonnet. See if you can figure out why, because it certainly does not have 14 lines.

Let’s take a look at it together. “Pied Beauty.” “Glory be to God for dappled things / For skies of couple-color as a brindled cow; / For rose-moles all in stipple upon trout that swim; / Fresh-firecoal chestnut-falls; finches’ wings; / Landscape plotted and pieced—fold, fallow, and plough; / And all trades, their gear and tackle and trim. / All things counter, original, spare, strange; / Whatever is fickle, freckled (who knows how?) / With swift, slow; sweet, sour; adazzle, dim; / He fathers-forth whose beauty is past change. / Praise him.” Hopkins was a big admirer of sonnets and wrote a number of traditional ones, but he also liked to experiment, as most poets do. So he invented a form. Rather than write a conventional 14-line sonnet, he invented the curtal, or curtailed sonnet.

The closest equivalent thing is probably an Italian sonnet, which is written in two halves, eight lines and then six lines. What he does in “Pied Beauty” is he shrinks those eight lines down to six, and those six lines down to four and a half.

And the rhyme scheme is a little tricky, right? I’ve emphasized that in the right-hand margin. ABC, ABC—that’s pretty straightforward. Usually what you get in a Petrarchan or Italian sonnet

is new rhymes: D, E, and F. Instead what he does is he gives us D, but then returns to B and C, gives us another D, and then ends with a C. So it's a little more ungainly or a little more subtle and elaborate. And the two stanzas, rather than standing in complete contrast, in a sense reaffirm each other.

I wish we had time to unpack the complete meaning of this poem. But I think what's important is that it's a celebration of the creations of God, and not just the simple perfect ones, but the ones that are a little askew, the "dappled things." Now "dappled" usually has connotations of beauty. Dappled shade, for instance, sun and shade together. But if you look up the meaning of "pied," you find that one of the definitions is that it's described as blotchy. If you look up one of the other words, "brinded cow," again, a term that's not very familiar to us. It's a patchwork of gray and brown, and it's described as patchy. So bad, patchy, and blotchy—these are usually not positive terms, but what Hopkins is doing is extending the sorts of things that we should celebrate in God's world. The poem starts out in praise of God, but mostly in praise of the things that he creates. By the end it returns to the Creator. "He fathers-forth whose beauty is past change." And that very last line, he extends the invitation to the reader to share in these beauties, especially the ones that we might not especially celebrate at first blush, and invite him and all readers to celebrate these things that God has given us.

Let's go on to another kind of form.

So I mentioned traditional forms that come with certain rules, usually related to rhymes and meter and stanzas, plus one experiment as well. You've probably heard the term "free verse." At first it sounds like anything goes, but as Robert Frost said, "Free verse is like playing tennis with the net down." He wasn't a big fan of free verse. I would modify that a little and say that bad free verse is like playing tennis with the net down, but good free verse has lots of charms to offer the reader.

Often poets will look for other nonliterary forms when they're writing poems, and these are sometimes called hermit crab poems. So if you think of a hermit crab, it doesn't have a shell of its own.

And if it were to walk around in the sea unprotected by a shell, it would get eaten very quickly by something larger than it is.

But it protects itself with the shell, and when that shell no longer serves its purposes, it discards that shell and picks up another. So what a number of poets do is they find forms that they found

elsewhere. They're not literary forms. And they adapt those for poetry to often dazzling effect. So what are some of these forms? I've just jotted down a handful.

Poems that work like recipes, like Facebook status updates, Christmas lists, eviction notices, letters to the editor, footnotes in a research paper, story problems, product reviews, rejection letters.

You probably haven't seen many poems in this mode. But let's take a look at one that I think is especially powerful. I cheated a little. This is not actually a poem. It's part of a longer essay, 10 or 12 mini essays making up one, but it demonstrates what one might do with the form of a rejection letter. So this is written by a writer named Brenda Miller. The essay is titled "We Regret to Inform You." And this is one of 10 or 12 sections. See if you can figure out what kind of form is going on here, what she's doing with the rejection letter.

"Dear Young Artist: Thank you for your attempt to draw a tree. We appreciate your efforts, especially the way you sat patiently on the sidewalk, gazing at that tree for an hour before setting pen to paper, and the many quick strokes of charcoal you executed with enthusiasm.

But your smudges look nothing like a tree. In fact, they look like nothing at all, and the pleasure and pride you take in the work are not enough to redeem it.

We are pleased to offer you remedial training in the arts, but we cannot accept your "drawing" for display. With regret and best wishes, The Art Class, Andasol Avenue Elementary School." So what I like about this is she's writing nonfiction here. So this is an essay. She was rejected. And she wrote, or she created a picture that was not hung in the show when she was a young child. Of course, the rejection wasn't this overt. It wasn't a slap in the face the way that this one was, but it hurt nonetheless. What I like here is that by fictionalizing through the form what actually happened, she recaptures the disappointment of what it means not to be chosen.

Let's look at another example, this one when she was in 10th grade. "Dear Tenth-Grader: Thank you for your application to be the girlfriend of one of our star basketball players. As you can imagine, we have received hundreds of similar requests and so cannot possibly respond personally to every one.

This letter is to inform you that you have not been chosen for one of the coveted positions, but we do invite you to continue hanging around the lockers as if you belong there.

This selfless act will help the team members learn the art of ignoring lovesick girls. Sincerely, The Granada Hills Highlanders.” Wow. Funny and devastating at the same time. I think it calls into question the hierarchies that exist in high school.

But if you were to write about how tortured she was because she didn’t attract the right basketball boyfriend, most of us would look the other way. It would come off as being self-indulgent and modeling, but by switching things up, we immediately end up on her side fighting against this callous letter. So I just think it’s a brilliant rhetorical move that she does. Lucky for us, this one comes with a P.S.

“P.S. Though your brother is one of the star players, we could not take this familial relationship into account. Sorry to say no! Please do try out for one of the rebound-girlfriend positions in the future.” Weren’t we all glad that we graduated from high school, gone on to better things.

Okay, so here are four basic principles that we’ve talked about. Let’s see if I can remember them: imagery, metaphor, repetitions, and form.

There are lots of others, but these are some building blocks that you might try out. I also promised that you’d have a chance to write a couple of poems on your own.

If we were meeting in real time, we would do that with pen and paper and maybe share some of those. We don’t have that luxury now. But let me just point to some places where you can find some prompts for poetry.

For dozens of poetry prompts from Utah poets, including eight that I like to give students, just Google “poetry central” and “Utah Division of Arts” and you’ll see a list of poets and the prompts that they recommend. Here are a couple that I use.

One: “Write a poem listing all the things you might find in a junk drawer, a taxidermy shop, a purse, a glove compartment, an alley, or a personal effects bag.” I give this assignment because it forces writers to write concretely. You have to include things that you can hold in your hand; if they’re in a junk drawer, they’re tangible. And that’s, again, one of the first rules is try to show the reader and create the physical world before them. The other one relies on repetitions: “Write a poem in which you repeat the same word or color in every sentence. From Julie Sheehan’s ‘Hate Poem’: ‘The history of this keychain hates you. ... The goldfish of my genius hates you. My aorta hates you. Also my ancestors.’” Poetry, like all writing, is hard work, but we get better at it the longer we stick with it. Here’s a final quote that I’d like to end with by the Nobel Prize winner

Samuel Beckett, author of "Waiting for Godot." "Try again. Fail again. Fail better." Thanks, and good luck with your writing.