

# Lecture 01: Poetry - Introduction

DR. ZOHRA MEHELLOU &  
MS BAFFI HAIFA

UNIVERSITY OF EL OUED  
FACULTY OF LANGUAGES  
AND LITERATURE

DEPARTMENT OF  
ENGLISH LANGUAGE

LEVEL: L1

5.1  
January 2023

# Table of contents

<b>I - What is Poetry?</b>	<b>3</b>
<b>II - Poetry Structure</b>	<b>4</b>
<b>III - Types of Poetry</b>	<b>5</b>
1. Lyric Poetry .....	5
2. Narrative Poetry .....	6
3. Descriptive and Didactic Poetry .....	6

# I What is Poetry?

Defining poetry is like defining literature, which means that there is no exact definition of it. However, shared characteristics and features can be considered defining aspects such as the use of fiction and the appealing writing style. Therefore, poems have some aspects that can be used as indicators in order to separate poetry from other literary genres.

The first indicator is the form in which poetry is written, that is in verses. Verses are often written in the middle of the page. This **visual indicator** helps the reader to expect the type of the text they are going to read. The second indicator of poetry is **the language used**. Poets tend to use specialised language in which they express their ideas and feelings using less space. Alexander Pope (1688-1744) is a good example of this, where he explains that he prefers the use of poetry even when he wants to write about philosophical topics as he did in his *An Essay on Man* (1733-1734).

The dense and compacted use of language by poets makes their messages difficult to be understood but at the same time open to different explanations. To reach this degree of aesthetic use of language, poets refer to the use of **figures of speech** in addition to structural, phonological, morphological, and syntactic over structuring.

Often readers consider poetry a subjective work as poets use it to express their personal experiences. This belief can be true when it comes of lyric poetry more than narrative and didactic poems. Nevertheless, as long as poetry is associated with fiction, such belief can be misleading.

## II Poetry Structure

Poetry is written in a special way where its short lines are known as verses. Moreover, poems are divided into **stanzas** as sub-units. Usually a stanza is used for specific function and addresses a specific theme and it is the reader or critic's role to define the function. Stanza in poetry is similar to paragraph in prose.

### Note

---

Stanzas are named according to the number of lines they group together:

1 line => Monostich

2 lines => Couplet

3 lines => Tercet

4 lines => Quatrain

5 lines => Cinquain

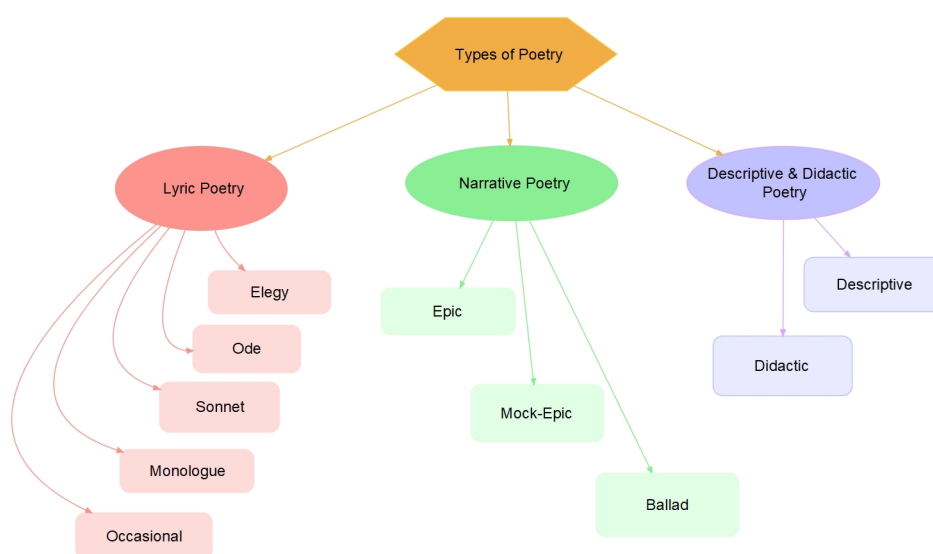
6 lines => Sestet

7 lines => Septet

8 lines => Octave

# III Types of Poetry

When defining the type of poetry, the theme of the studied poem should be taken into consideration. Due to this, poems are divided into three main types.



## 1. Lyric Poetry

Lyric poems are **non-narrative** poems. In this type of poetry, a single person (speaker) presents **a state of mind or emotion**. It has its origins in Greek culture where Greeks used to accompany a song with a lyre (an instrument in a U shape). Lyric poetry has its own subcategories.

- Elegy: usually used to express **sadness** and **sorrow**, especially to mourn someone's death.
- Ode: Is a long lyric poem used to treat **serious subjects** while using high elevated and sophisticated language.
- Sonnet: Originated in Italy during the 14th century by Francesco Petrarch (1304-1374)—also known as the Petrarchan or Italian sonnet. Sonnet comes from the Italian word “sonetto” which means a “sound” or “little song.” The use of sonnets became popular in England during the **Renaissance** period (1550-1660) when Thomas Wyatt and the Earl of Surrey Henry Howard translated the Petrarch sonnets into English. A sonnet is formed by a **stanza of 14 lines** written in **iambic pentameter**. Poets use sonnets to address various subjects such as religion (Milton), art (Keats), or war (Brooke). The Shakespearean sonnet is one of the famous sonnets in English poetry.

- Monologue: Is presented by a **sole speaker**. In this type of poetry, the speaker addresses a silent audience /listener expressing their ideas and thoughts.
- Occasional: As the name reflects, occasional poetry is written for special occasions like births and weddings or to comment on a specific event such as wars and memorials.

## 2. Narrative Poetry

It is a kind of poetry that **represents a story in a verse form**. Its structure resembles that of a story's plot. Narrative poetry has subcategories as the following

- Epic: It is a **long narrative poem** that tells a story of **heroic actions**. Mostly this kind of poetry contains superhuman powers, great adventures, and supernatural aspects. *The Iliad* and *The Odyssey* by the Greek poet Homer are considered the most famous epics. In English literature, *Beowulf* represents an Anglo-Saxon epic while John Milton's *Paradise Lost* is an epic with a Christian theme.
- Mock-Epic: Or mock-heroic. It is a piece of poetry that deals with common or **trivial subjects**. This kind of poetry uses a high elevated language which leads the poem to create a **comic effect** on its reader. *The Rape of the Lock* by Alexander Pope published in 1792 is a famous example to mock-epic English poetry, in addition to Lord Byron's *Don Juan*.
- Ballad: A narrative poem presented in a **musical style**, i.e. a song-like poem. This kind of poetry is arranged in quatrains and cinquains, and a simple rhythmic structure. It usually tells stories about ordinary people and their life. Ballads appeared during the 16th century and it is meant to be presented orally.

## 3. Descriptive and Didactic Poetry

- Descriptive Poetry: By using of **descriptive method** in poetry, poets tend to **deliver an image** they see through their eyes by using their words. This kind of poetry is used to describe an event, character, or a place in details. English descriptive poetry adopted its elements and inspirations from French poetry. It became well known during the 16th and 18th centuries.
- Didactic Poetry: Or instructional poetry, in which poets give **moral lessons** to their readers. The term didactic is of Greek origins "didasko" which means 'I teach.' Didactic poetry openly professes its intentions of conveying knowledge. This kind of poetry is usually meant for a **specific audience** and not any reader.