
Unit 5:2 How “Free” Is Free Verse?



POETRY: IT DOESN'T HAVE TO RHYME

A poem is what the poet chooses to make it, and it doesn't have to rhyme unless he wants it to. Because the earliest poems we learn are nursery rhymes and jingles, most of us first associate poetry with rhyme. But people identify poetry by many qualities, and much poetry has no rhyme at all.

Just as different kinds of games have their own rules, so different kinds of poems have theirs. You can't play any kind of game well unless you know the rules; poetry becomes more enjoyable when you understand what guideline or pattern the poet is following.

Much poetry written before the twentieth century conformed to very strict rules, or forms. But a modern poet sometimes decides that the meaning and emotion he wants to express don't fit into a traditional form. In such a case, the poet is free to develop a new form to fit what he wants to say.

Let's examine just a few of the many ways of putting a poem together. The first example comes from [Alfred, Lord] Tennyson's "Lady of Shalott"; the third from [Henry Wadsworth] Longfellow's "Hiawatha"; the fourth from [Walt] Whitman's "I Saw in Louisiana a Live-Oak Growing"; the sixth from [Alexander] Pope's "Rape of the Lock." The others were written especially for demonstration purposes.

A poet can use rhyme to help create mood and melody:

On either side the river lie
Long fields of barley and of rye,
That clothe the wold and meet the sky;
And through the field the road runs by
To many towered Camelot.

Or, if he wishes, he may use words whose meaning and sound combine to establish a mood and create a melody:

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Summer seething with silly-simple days
Suns seemingly under burnished branches . . .

He may use a very regular rhythm:

By the shores of Gitche Gumee
By the shining Big-Sea-Water
Stood the wigwam of Nokomis,
Daughter of the moon, Nokomis



Or an irregular rhythm:

I saw in Louisiana a live-oak growing,
All alone stood it and the moss hung down from the branches,
Without any companion it grew there uttering joyous leaves of dark green,
And its look, rude, unbending, lusty, made me think of myself

We can use sounds to make a poem move slowly:

Thou watchest the last ooziings hours by hours . . .

Or rapidly:

And wretches hang that jurymen may dine . . .

The poet should use the sound patterns and rhythm and movement that are best suited to his subject matter. For example, a grief-stricken poet would not write:

Grief is here, grief is there.
Grief is round us everywhere.

Can you point out what is inappropriate about these two lines?

In summary, the poet should use the form that best fits his subject matter. He can use an existing set of rules or invent his own. Whichever he does, the poem should be based on careful repetition of rhythms and sounds; but the rhythm doesn't necessarily have to be regular, and sound patterns don't necessarily have to be rhymes.