Poetry, how did it all begin?

Before humans had the technology to write down their thoughts, beliefs and legends, all information had to be remembered by each generation and passed down to the next generation through story telling. As the amount of information grew, it became more difficult to remember all of the details of each legend, law and event from the history of man. As a result, we started to add rhythm and rhyme to our stories that we told generation after generation to make them easier to remember. (Ice Cube, “Good Day” example).

All of this happened from the time man began his (and her) existence until we could write these ideas down so that we wouldn’t have to remember them year after year. After we could write, those people whose job it was to remember the rhythms and rhymes of history still wanted to make the rhythms and rhymes, even though it was no longer a necessity. These people eventually became poets and organized words into an enjoyable format to entertain, not just inform.

Soon, music was introduced to the poets. Specifically, the instrument called a lyre (a small guitar/harp like instrument, pronounced “leer”) was used to help make these rhythm and rhymes, now called poems, more enjoyable. One particular way that the poets used lyres to turn the poems into songs was at court. Courts used to be an open-to-the-public event with entertainment and vendors. At court, poets would sing the “lyrics” (from the word lyre, nice etymology huh?) to tell a story to entertain the people in attendance.

Eventually, poetry evolved into what it is today. The musical element has gone away from poetry making two distinct genres: poetry and music. However, as we now know from this brief history, music and poetry are closely linked. Furthermore, today it is hard to argue that all songs are actually the modern form of poetry. In fact, we will look at many songs as a class, treating them as poems.

So the question is why do people write poetry now? How are these reasons different than the reasons people first had to compose poetry? What makes poetry “good”?

**What is Poetry?**

Write your definition here: \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_

-“Poetry is the spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings; it takes its origin from emotion that is remembered in tranquility. Poetry is the breath and finer spirit of all knowledge.” (Wordsworth, 1800)

-“Poetry is the most honest and immediate art form…it is raw and unfiltered.” (Jewel Kilcher)

-I by no means rank poetry high in the scale of intelligence…It is the lava of the imagination whose eruption prevents an earthquake.” (Lord Byron, 1813)

-“Poetry is indispensable-if only I knew what for.” (Jean Cocteau, 1959)

-“One looks around one’s life for material for poetry, finds concrete examples to make abstract recognizable, describing things such a way as to make the reader see” (Albert Drake, 1976)

-“Poetry must have something in it that is barbaric, vast and wild.” (Denis Diderot, 1758)

-“The poet should…pretend to do more than win the mind over from wickedness to virtue.” (Edmund Sidney, 1595)

-“The poet relishes the dark side of things as well as the bright. He has no identity – he is continually informing and filling some other body…the Genius of Poetry must work out its own salvation in a man.” (Keats, 1818)

-“Poetry is the record of the best and happiest moments of the best and happiest minds.” (Shelley)

-“Poetry is not magic. Its purpose is to tell the truth, to disenchant, to disintoxicate.” (Auden, 1962)

-“Poetry is not a turning loose of emotion, but an escape from emotion.” (T.S. Elliot *The Sacred Wood*)

-“Poetry is the best words in the best order.” (Samuel Coleridge, 1827)

-“Poetry is either something that lives like fire inside you or else it is nothing, an empty formalized bore around which pendants can endlessly drone their notes and explanations.” (F. Scott Fitzgerald, 1940)

-Poetry is the universal language which the heart holds with nature and itself. He who has contempt for poetry cannot have respect for himself, or for anything else.” (William Hazlitt, 1818)

-“Perhaps no one can be a poet, or can even enjoy poetry, without a certain unsoundness of mind.” (Thomas Macaulay, 1825)

-“Poetry is the truth in its Sunday clothes.” (Joseph Roux, 1886)

-“A good poem is a contribution to reality. The world is never the same once a good poem has been added to it.” (Dylan Thomas, 1913-1953)

-“We do not enjoy poetry unless we know it to be poetry.” (Henry David Thoreau)

-“Write: make it true to what you know is and what you hope to exist inside you and it is poetry.” (Mr. Foster, 2001)

-Revise your definition of poetry at the top if necessary.

**“Author’s Craft” Literary Devices (most pertinent to poetry)**

* **What poetry is NOT** = Nowhere in the previous quotes does it list requirements for what poems must contain. In other words, rhyming schemes, syllabication, poetic tools, a structured format and many other things that we associate with the word, “poetry,” are not necessary to make poetry. However, poetry has a history, a myriad of forms and an extended use of specific literary devices that we need to familiarize ourselves with in order to help us appreciate it.
* **Poetic** **license =** Once a poet, or any writer, is established as “knowing what they are doing,” they are given poetic license. This means that the poet can bend the rules of rhythm and rhyme in order to fit his/her purpose-basically being a positive deviant.
* **Rhyme** = When words end in the same vowel sound they rhyme. How an entire poem rhymes is called the poem’s **rhyming scheme**. Each new sound is given a new letter-the next one in the alphabet.
  + Stanza Rhythm Rhyme

“In the deepest truths (5 syllables) (a)

where children play (4 syllables) (b)

are tinkertoy demons (6 syllables) (c)

and sacraments of clay.” (6 syllables) (b)

This is one **stanza** of a poem. This stanza has a consistent, predictable, formulaic **rhythm** because the last two lines both have six syllables. The **rhyming scheme** of this stanza is **abcb**. This is the rhyming scheme because “truths” (a) is the first ending sound, “play” is the second ending sound, “demons” is the third ending sound and “clay” is the fourth ending sound. “Play” and “clay” rhyme so they are given the same letter in the rhyming scheme.

* **Metaphor** = A “replacement” indirect comparison. An analogy identifying one object with another as ascribing to the first object one or more qualities of the second. Poetic technique that makes a comparison **without** using the words, “like” or “as.” It is what Aristotle called, “the greatest thing by far,” for poets.
  + “Wow, that chick is hot.” –In the halls of Armada, 2008. In this phrase the beauty of the female is being indirectly compared to the heat of fire without explicitly saying, “The power of her attractiveness is like the heat of a flame.”
* **Simile** = A direct, “moronic” comparison. A figure in which a similarity between two objects is directly expressed. Poetic technique that makes a comparison and often uses the words, “like,” “as,” “compare,” “liken,” or “resemble.” A simile is generally a comparison of two things that are fundamentally unalike.
  + “You’re as cold as ice, willing to sacrifice our love.” -Foreigner. In this passage, the comparison between the “cold” feeling of the author felt by the his/her lover to “ice” is directly expressed in the “as.”
  + “It’s hotter than hell in here.” –Whiner. In this passage, the comparison between the temperature in the room and the warmth of hell is being directly compared in the word “than.”
* **Personification** = A figure that endows animals, ideas, abstractions and inanimate objects with human form. A technique that gives human characteristics to items that are not human, hence making a person out of (or personifying) an object.
  + “Inspirational tidal wave, invite me to your wonder, you are always a guest at my table.” -Surfer guy. In this passage, a tidal wave (nonhuman, inanimate object) is treated like a human by suggesting that it can have feelings, pass judgment and attend a dinner.
  + “Man, that test killed my grade.” -Irresponsible student. In this passage, the “test” (nonhuman object) is being personified. Specifically, it is given the power to “kill” a grade. (Also, this is a metaphor because the lowering of the grade is being compared to the sensation of “killing.” I told you we use this stuff all the time.)
* **Symbolism** = A symbol is a thing or person that has a meaning in itself, but also represents something broader such as a value belief or attitude. Symbols differ from metaphors because they are usually less obvious, frequently repeated throughout a poem and we usually have to “read into” (look beyond the obvious meaning) the poem to see them. Samuel Coleridge said about symbols, “while it enunciates the whole, abides itself as a living part in that Unity, of which it is the representative.” Typically, there is a concrete/tangible/physical object (rose) that represents an abstract/intangible/emotional idea (love).
  + Common: Skull and crossbones = poison, flag = country, cross = Christianity, etc
  + Literature: There are universal symbols that often appear in literature such as the rose = love, red = passion or anger, and water = rebirth. This is where symbolism comes into play. Symbolism is the use of one object to represent another. For example, Cinderella’s glass slipper = her potential to be a beautiful woman and Dorothy’s ruby slippers = her passage or gateway home.
* **Juxtaposition** = This is a broad category that includes the next two terms. Using contrasting terms side by side to create a desired effect, putting two very different ideas right next to each other to capture attention and explain a concept more clearly. Compares two dissimilar things to best describe one thing. Juxtaposition is a broad term that means putting two unlike items together to have one distinct meaning. The next two terms, oxymoron and paradox, are two kinds of juxtapositions. So, oxymorons and paradoxes are juxtapositions.
  + “Pride is a sick-sweet sensation.” -Jane Austen. In this passage, the two ideas of “sick” and “sweet” (two very different ideas) are placed together to create a singular description of “pride.” When we think of something “sick” we have a basically “bad” image in our heads, but when we think of something “sweet,” we have a basically “good” image in our heads. This phrase combines these two “good” and “bad” images in our heads to more accurately describe “pride.”
  + **Oxymoron** = A self-contradictory combination of words. It is words or phrases, which are examples of and used to illustrate juxtaposition. “Oxymoron” itself is an oxymoron as it comes from the Greek meaning, “sharp-dull.” “Jumbo shrimp,” “evil priest,” “liberal conservative.” In the second example, the two opposite ideas of holy and evil are juxtaposed. They are brought together to become an oxymoron. “Evil priest” is an oxymoron because it is very rare for something “good” (priest) to be “bad” (evil).
  + **Paradox** = A statement that although seemingly contradictory or absurd, may actually be true. Paradox teases the mind and tests the limits of our language. Cleanth Brooks says paradox is a fundamental element of poetic language. “For when I am weak, then I am strong.” St. Paul, Corinthians. This passage at first seems like it doesn’t make sense. How can a person be strong and weak at the same time? However, when we “read into” the phrase we “know what he meant” as “when I am peaceful and calm, I win most situations.”
* **Hyperbole** = Most commonly referred to as simply, “exaggeration,” hyperbole is a technique often used by authors to heighten an effect or for humor.
  + “No; this my hand will rather the multitudinous seas incarnadine, making the green one red.” –Shakespeare’s *Macbeth* In the passage, Macbeth is cleaning his hands of blood and he is stating that there is so much blood that if he put his hands into the “green” ocean, he would turn the entire body of water red.
  + “This fan is blowing like a tornado.” -Jeremy Larocque. In this passage, Jeremy is exaggerating how hard the fan is blowing. The fan is not actually as strong as a tornado, but he uses this simile to show a hyperbole.
* **Alliteration/Assonance** = These tools use sounds to attract attention to the reader. Alliteration is the repetition of the same consonant sounds at the beginning of words. Assonance is the repetition of the same vowel sounds (most frequently at the beginning of words). Poets often use these tools to say to the reader, “Hey, pay attention, I think this part is important.”
  + Alliteration: “Many dangerous pirates sailed from the east to west, Looking for the big, brilliant, bodacious booty.” Here the “b” sound is repeated at the beginning of the words to draw attention to that particular part of the poem.
  + Assonance: “Even the eagles eat equally.” Here the “ee” sound is repeated to draw attention and induce rhythm.

**The following are terms that you should have mastered in previous English classes**

**and/or we went over this year already.**

* **Allusion** = A reference to a work of literature to something outside the work such as a historical event, historical person or other literary work. *Hamlet*: “ere the mightiest Julius fell” = reference to Julius Caesar.
* **Imagery** = The images and sensory details of a work. These include visual, auditory and tactile images. These images are usually, but not always brought about by metaphors, similes and diction. For example, if a poem contains the words “shadows…eclipse…sunset” it is easy to see how the poem has “dark” imagery, probably used to create a sad tone.
* **Irony** = A pattern of words that turns away from its own obvious meaning; the tension between what happens and what is expected.
  + Dramatic irony = When the reader/audience knows something that the characters don’t.
  + Situational irony = When situation happen that are contradictory or opposingly predictable to what one would expect to happen.
  + Verbal irony = When the words themselves contradict their very meaning. This is closely related to juxtaposition.
* **Satire/parody** = Humorous, ridiculing renditions of an issue, historical figure or event. These typically use exaggeration as their primary vehicle.
  + Satire: Making fun of an issue or text in order to illicit change
  + Parody: Making fun of an issue or text usually simply for entertainment
* **Theme**= The “meaning of a work.” Incorrectly, some state that common themes are “love” or “revenge.” While these might be important reoccurring ideas in a text, called **motifs**, they cannot be considered the meaning of the text as a whole. A theme has the following characteristics:
  + Universal: Applies to all cultures through all time periods.
  + Complete thought/sentence: Sounds like a thesis statement and usually contains one or more major motifs
  + Author’s intent: Describes what the author probably intended when he/she wrote the text; the message that the author was trying to get across in writing the text.
  + Example: If it is a love story, one solid motif is certainly love, where the theme might be, “Love conquers all” or “Love is stronger than revenge.”
* **Tone** = Very similar to style, but is more accurately the mood, feeling, vibe or attitude of the author. Tone is described in adjectives and it usually requires several adjectives to describe tone accurately. Tone can be described by highlighting diction, allusions, syntax, use (or lack) of figurative language, imagery, style, and/or irony.
* **Allegory** = A long, extended metaphor; a story in which people, things and events have another meaning. Example: The Crucible Salem Witchcraft Trials = McCarthyism and the Red Scare
* **Soliloquy/Monologue** = Both are lengthy speeches by an actor on stage. In soliloquies, actors are “solo” or by themselves. These are typically used to inform the audience about the character’s thoughts and feelings.
* **Archetype** = Reoccurring, universally understood “images” in literature that act as the standard by which all others are judged; the epitome of a particular literary concept such as a character (hero), plot pattern (build up of suspense and resolution) or symbols
* **Foil** = A character whose traits are the opposite of another and who thus points up the strengths and weaknesses of the other character; Hamlet and Laertes.
* **Protagonist/Antagonist** = The protagonist is the main character that experiences (not necessarily wins) the main conflict. The antagonist “antagonizes” or causes the main conflict of the character. This battle identifies the type of conflict in literature that the text displays: man vs. man, self, society, nature or technology.
* **Characterization** = Two groups, characters have one trait from each group.
  + Round: “major character,” fully developed, audience can predict character’s actions logically based on the character’s role in the text
  + Flat: “minor character,” not crucial to the plot
  + Static: “stationary” character that stays the same throughout the text; the “bad guy” is “bad” through the end of the text.
  + Dynamic: character undergoes a profound change in attitude and spirit throughout the text; the “bad guy” turns out to be a “good guy”

**Walt Whitman (1819-1892)**  
  
*from Song of Myself*  
  
I.  
I celebrate myself,  
And what I assume you shall assume,  
For every atom belonging to me as good belongs to you.  
I loaf and invite my soul,  
I lean and loafe at my ease . . . observing a spear of summer grass.  
  
II.  
Houses and rooms are full of perfumes . . . the shelves  
are crowded with perfumes,  
I breathe the fragrance myself, and know it and like it,  
The distillation would intoxicate me also, but I shall not let it.  
  
The atmosphere is not a perfume . . . it has no taste  
of the distillation . . . it is odorless,  
It is for my mouth forever . . . I am in love with it,  
              I will go to the bank by the wood and become undisguised and naked,  
              I am mad for it to be in contact with me.  
  
The smoke of my own breath,  
Echoes, ripples, and buzzed whispers . . . loveroot, silkthread,  
crotch and vine,  
My respiration and inspiration . . . the beating of my heart . . .  
the passing of blood and air through my lungs,  
The sniff of green leaves and dry leaves, and of the shore  
and darkcolored sea-rocks, and of hay in the barn,  
The sound of the belched words of my voice . . . words loosed  
to the eddies of the wind,  
  
A few light kisses . . . a few embraces . . . reaching around of arms,  
The play of shine and shade on the trees as the supple boughs wag,  
The delight alone or in the rush of the streets, or along  
the fields and hill-sides,  
The feeling of health . . . the full-noon trill . . . the song of me  
rising from bed and meeting the sun.  
  
Have you reckoned a thousand acres much? Have you reckoned  
the earth much?  
Have you practiced so long to learn to read?  
Have you felt so proud to get at the meaning of poems?  
  
Stop this day and night with me and you shall possess the origin  
of all poems,  
You shall possess the good of the earth and sun . . . there are  
millions of suns left,  
You shall no longer take things at second or third hand . . . nor  
look through the eyes of the dead. nor feed on the spectres  
in books,  
You shall not look through my eyes either, nor take things from me,  
You shall listen to all sides and filter them from yourself.