Appreciating Poetry

The poet Robert Frost once said that a poem "begins in delight and ends in wisdom." While many poems are entertaining, a poem can also have the power to change how you see the world. Whether it follows a set pattern or bends all the rules, each poem uses language in a new way to communicate its message.

Part 1: The Basics

What do you see when you look at a poem? One difference between a poem and a short story is the **form,** or the structure of the writing. All poems are broken up into **lines.** The length of each line and where it breaks, or ends, contribute to the poem's meaning and sound. Lines often appear in groups, or **stanzas.** The stanzas work together to convey the overall message of the poem.

Some poems follow the rules of a traditional form. For example, a poem might have a specific number of lines and stanzas or a regular pattern of rhythm and rhyme. Other poems are unconventional, with no recognizable patterns. A poet might even choose to use incorrect grammar or spelling to create a particular sound or to emphasize meaning.

Just as a story has a narrator, a poem has a voice that "talks" to readers. This voice, or **speaker,** is sometimes a fictional character rather than the poet.

Take a look at the following poems. Which is traditional? Which is unconventional? Which one has a distinct speaker?

EXAMPLE 1

from **"The Geese"**
Poem by **Richard Peck**

My father was the first to hear
The passage of the geese each fall,
Passing above the house so near
He'd hear within his heart their call.

And then at breakfast time he'd say:
"The geese were heading south last
     night,"
For he had lain awake till day,
Feeling his earthbound soul take flight.

EXAMPLE 2

from **"Street Corner Flight"**
Poem by **Norma Landa Flores**

From this side . . .
   of their concrete barrio
     two small boys hold
       fat white pigeons
trapped in their trembling hands.

Then,
 gently,
   not disturbing
     their powers of flight,
       release them
into the air.
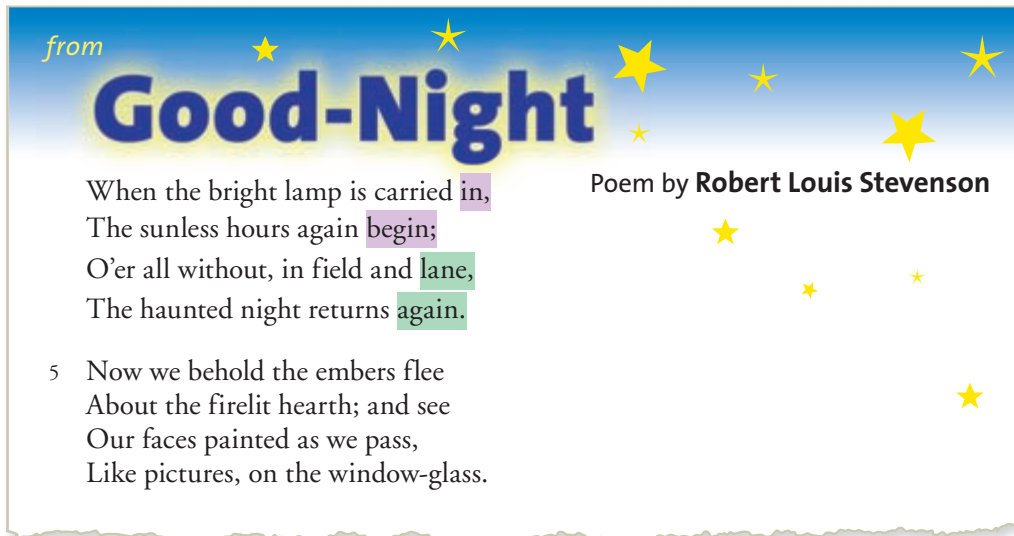
MODEL 1: TRADITIONAL FORM

In this traditional poem, the speaker reflects on the return of night at the end of a day. Read it aloud to help you identify the characteristics of its form.

from
Good-Night

Poem by **Robert Louis Stevenson**

When the bright lamp is carried in,
The sunless hours again begin;
O'er all without, in field and lane,
The haunted night returns again.

5 Now we behold the embers flee
About the firelit hearth; and see
Our faces painted as we pass,
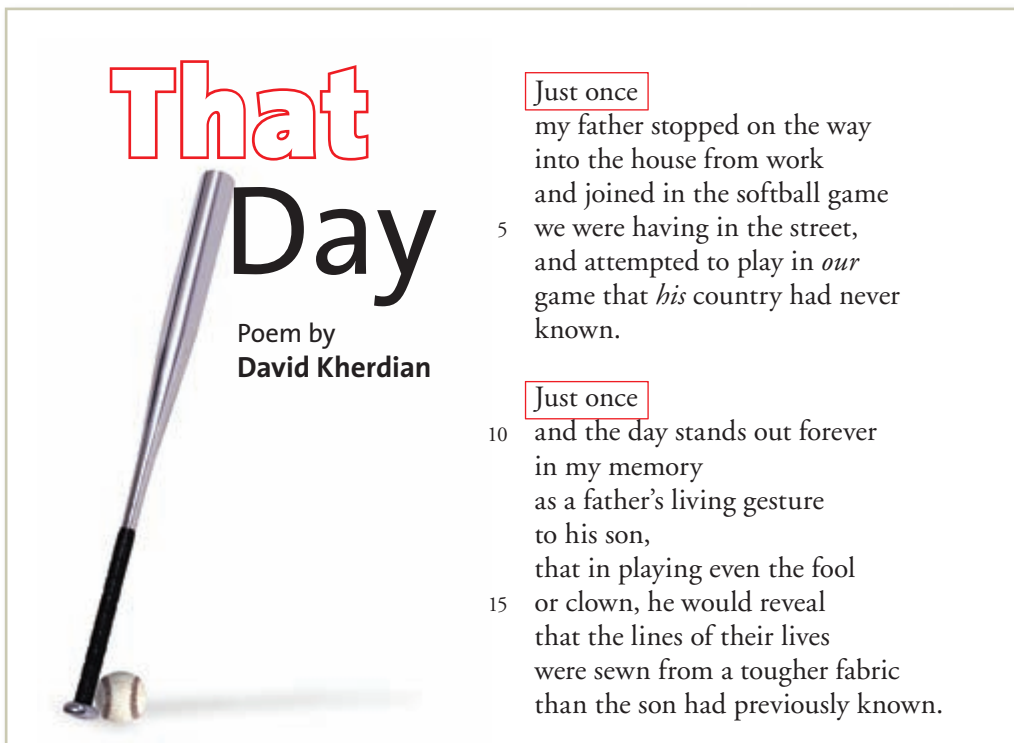Like pictures, on the window-glass.

MODEL 2: FREE VERSE

In this unconventional poem—called a **free verse** poem—the poet lets the ideas drive where each line breaks and when each stanza ends.

That Day

Poem by
David Kherdian

Just once
my father stopped on the way
into the house from work
and joined in the softball game
5 we were having in the street,
and attempted to play in *our*
game that *his* country had never
known.

Just once
10 and the day stands out forever
in my memory
as a father's living gesture
to his son,
that in playing even the fool
15 or clown, he would reveal
that the lines of their lives
were sewn from a tougher fabric
than the son had previously known.

Part 2: Poetic Elements

Like different colors of paint or the notes on a musical scale, language can be arranged to create a desired effect. For example, short, choppy lines can produce a fast-paced pounding beat, while long, rhythmic lines can create a soothing melody. Poets manipulate the words and lines in their writing, fully conscious of how their work will sound when read aloud and how it will make readers feel. Sound devices, imagery, and figurative language are important tools of the trade.

SOUND DEVICES

Poets choose words not only for their meaning, but also for their sounds. The sound of a word or line can help emphasize meaning or create a musical quality. Here are some examples of sound devices poets use.

SOUND DEVICES	EXAMPLE

RHYTHM
 	
 the pattern of stressed (´) and unstressed (˘) syllables in each line. A regular pattern of rhythm is called **meter**.
	"Afternoon on a Hill"
	 Poem by **Edna St. Vincent Millay**
	
	 I will be the gladdest thing *a*
	      Under the sun! *b*
	 I will touch a hundred flowers *c*
	      And not pick one. *b*

RHYME
 	
 the repetition of sounds at the ends of words, as in *sun* and *one*. **Rhyme scheme** is the pattern that the end-rhyming words follow. To identify rhyme scheme, assign a letter to each sound, as shown here.
	I will look at cliffs and clouds *d*
	      With quiet eyes, *e*
	 Watch the wind bow down the grass, *f*
	      And the grass rise. *e*

REPETITION
 	
 the use of a word, phrase, line, or sound more than once, such as the repeated use of the phrase *I will*
	And when lights begin to show *g*
	      Up from the town, *h*
	 I will mark which must be mine, *i*
	      And then start down! *h*

ALLITERATION the repetition of consonant sounds at the beginning of words, such as the *m* in *mark*, *must*, and *mine*	
ASSONANCE the repetition of vowel sounds in words that don't end with the same consonant, such as the *ow* sound in *bow* and *down*	

MODEL 1: RHYTHM AND RHYME

Read this traditional poem aloud, listening for its rhythm and rhyme.

Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening

Poem by **Robert Frost**
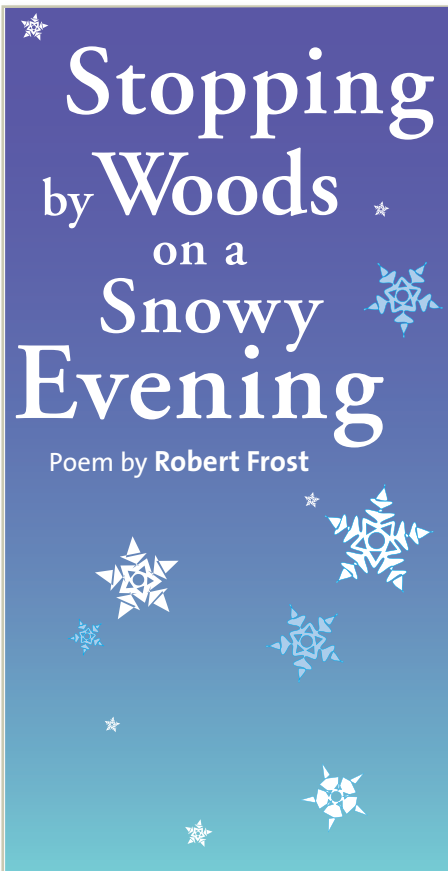
Whose woods these are I think I know.
His house is in the village, though;
He will not see me stopping here
To watch his woods fill up with snow.

5   My little horse must think it queer
To stop without a farmhouse near
Between the woods and frozen lake
The darkest evening of the year.

He gives his harness bells a shake
10   To ask if there is some mistake.
The only other sound's the sweep
Of easy wind and downy flake.

The woods are lovely, dark and deep,
But I have promises to keep,
15   And miles to go before I sleep,
And miles to go before I sleep.

Close Read

1. Stressed (ʹ) and unstressed (˘) syllables are marked in the first stanza. Read the second stanza out loud. Does it follow the same pattern as the first stanza?

2. The end rhymes in the first stanza are highlighted. Examine the end rhymes in the other stanzas to figure out the rhyme scheme.

MODEL 2: ALLITERATION AND REPETITION

This unconventional poem uses alliteration and repetition to help emphasize meaning. Make sure to read the lines all the way across.

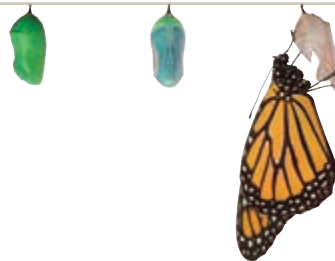# from *Chrysalis Diary*

Poem by **Paul Fleischman**

November 13:

Cold told me
to fasten my feet
to this branch,

5   to dangle upside down
from my perch,

to shed my skin,

                                to cease being a caterpillar
and I have obeyed.   and I have obeyed.

Close Read

1. The alliteration in the boxed line helps to create a sense of the caterpillar's strong grip. Find another example of alliteration.

2. What does the repetition in the last line help emphasize?

3. Who is the speaker of the poem?

IMAGERY AND FIGURATIVE LANGUAGE

In addition to sound devices, poets use **imagery,** or language that appeals to one or more of your senses—sight, hearing, smell, taste, and touch. Vivid images help readers more clearly understand what a poet describes. In "Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening," for example, images like "the sweep / Of easy wind and downy flake" help you visualize the scene and hear the sounds of winter.

One way poets create imagery is by using **figurative language,** or imaginative descriptions that are not literally true. The following are common types of figurative language:

• **Simile:** a comparison of two things using the word *like* or *as*

• **Metaphor:** a comparison of two things that does not include the word *like* or *as*

• **Extended metaphor:** a metaphor that extends over several lines, stanzas, or an entire poem

• **Personification:** a description of an object, animal, or idea as if it has human qualities and emotions

Notice how these examples of figurative language help you picture ordinary things in new ways.

SIMILE

The sun spun like
a tossed coin.
It whirled on the azure sky,
it clattered into the horizon,
it clicked in the slot,
and neon-lights popped
and blinked "Time expired,"
as on a parking meter.

—"Sunset"
by Oswald Mbuyiseni Mtshali

METAPHOR

In the pond in the park
all things are doubled:
Long buildings hang and
wriggle gently. Chimneys
are bent legs bouncing
on clouds below.

—from "Water Picture"
by May Swenson

PERSONIFICATION

When I opened the door
I found the vine leaves
speaking among themselves in abundant
whispers.
         My presence made them
hush their green breath,
embarrassed, the way
humans stand up, buttoning their jackets,
acting as if they were leaving anyway, as if
the conversation had ended
just before you arrived.

—from "Aware"
by Denise Levertov

Part 3: Analyze the Text

In "Lineage," Margaret Walker uses many different poetic elements to describe the speaker's admiration for her ancestors. Using what you've learned in this workshop, analyze the form, sound devices, and language in this poem. Notice how all these elements work together to communicate a powerful message.

LINEAGE

Poem by **Margaret Walker**

My grandmothers were strong.
They followed plows and bent to toil.
They moved through fields sowing seed.
They touched earth and grain grew.
5 They were full of sturdiness and singing.
My grandmothers were strong.

My grandmothers are full of memories
Smelling of soap and onions and wet clay
With veins rolling roughly over quick hands
10 They have many clean words to say.
My grandmothers were strong.
Why am I not as they?

Close Read

1. What is traditional about the form of this poem?

2. One example of alliteration is boxed. Find two more examples.

3. The poem's first line is repeated two more times and helps to emphasize an important message. How is strength defined in the poem?

4. Find four images that help you picture the grandmothers. What sense does each image appeal to?

5. How would you describe the speaker of this poem? Think about the qualities she admires in her grandmothers and how she sees herself in relation to them.