

Introduction to **English Poetry**

For First Year Students
Department of English
College of Basic Education

What is literature?

It is an art in which words play an important role. Plays, novels, and poetry are all beautiful works of art.

The Meaning of Literature:

Literature is the art of words. Basil Worsfold defined literature in his 'Judgment of Literature' as 'the brain of humanity' and the record of people's past experiences.

The Value of literature:

Literature is an interpretation of life. Since writers see things in a different way than other people do, they interpret what they see in life through literature.

How words are used in literature

Words in literature are used in two different ways: artistic (connotation) and non-artistic (denotation).

What is connotation?

It is the associations that the word has gained through constant use. It appeals to the feelings, for example, a flower could mean love or beauty and mother is associated with security and warmth.

What is denotation?

It is the meaning of the word in the dictionary (lexical meaning). It appeals to the brain, for example, a flower means a plant in dictionary, and mother is the female parent of an animal.

What are the two kinds of literary composition?

They are 1. Metrical (verse) 2. Non-metrical (prose)

What are the forms of literature? They are 1. poetry 2. Prose
3. drama

What is the definition of English Literature?

It is all literature written in English language, even if it is written by a writer whose native language is not English, for example, Joseph Conrad writes English novels though he is a Pole.

What is poetry?

It is the language of the heart. Through poetry, poets express feelings through meaning, sound and rhythm and address their words to the imagination of the readers.

What is a stanza?

It is a group of lines forming the division of a poem.

The distinction between prose and poetry

The main differences between poetry and prose are:

1.Metre:

Poetry is metrical while prose is not.

2.Use of Archaic words:

Poetry uses archaic words (old-fashioned words) which in prose are considered out of date, such as maid for girl, ire for anger, steed for horse, and trow for believe. On the other hand, technical terms are used in prose, but avoided in poetry.

3. Departure from the normal order of words:

In poetry, words are put off their usual order for the sake of metre or effect, for example, the subject sometimes follows its verb or an adjective follows the noun it qualifies.

4. Grammatical license

Many grammatical constructions which are not allowed to be used in prose are usually used in poetry, e.x., the use of singular for the plural, or an adjective for an adverb.

5. Greater use of figures of speech

Figures of speech are much more freely used in poetry than in prose, e.x., simile, metaphor...etc.

6.The Use of Shorter Words

Unlike prose writers, Poets use shorter words and simpler language. However, sometimes the opposite may happen as in Shakespeare's "The multitudinous seas incarnadine".

7.The Use of Euphony

Poets try to make their language as musical and harmonious as possible, therefore, they study vowel and consonant effects, and use such devices as onomatopoeia and alliteration. Harshness of style is wrong in poetry, because it is unpleasant to the ear.

Break, Break, Break

BY ALFRED, LORD TENNYSON

Break, break, break,

On thy cold gray stones, O Sea!

And I would that my tongue could utter

The thoughts that arise in me.

O, well for the fisherman's boy,

That he shouts with his sister at play!

O, well for the sailor lad,

That he sings in his boat on the bay!

And the stately ships go on

To their haven under the hill;

But O for the touch of a vanish'd hand,

And the sound of a voice that is still!

Break, break, break

At the foot of thy crags, O Sea!

But the tender grace of a day that is dead

Will never come back to me.

-Tennyson is a famous Victorian poet

-The poem is of four stanzas, four lines each.

-This poem is an elegy where the poet mourns his friend, Arthur Hallam, who died young because of sickness. It is about losing someone you love.

Meaning by stanza

Stanza 1:

The poet is addressing the sea, crash into the stones, sea! (do what you always do). He said that he wishes he could say the thoughts that come to his mind. He is so sad that he cannot express his feelings.

Stanza 2:

The poet says that it is all good for the fisherman's boy and his sister, as they are shouting and playing. Also the sailor is singing in his boat. They are happy doing what they usually do everyday. They are expressing their feelings (singing and shouting). They are going on with their life.

Stanza 3:

The huge ships are going to their harbors/shelters under the hill. The poet sees and hears many things but these things do not distract him from the one thought in his mind; he misses the hand and voice of someone dear to him, his dead friend.

Stanza 4:

The poet repeats the first line, but this time the waves have changed , they are breaking at the foot of the crag. The poet says that despite the fact that everything is going on, everything is doing what it usually does, but his friend has gone and will never return back.

From The Rime of the Ancient Mariner

By Samuel Taylor Coleridge

- **The poem is about a sailor who shoots an albatross, (a bird which flies over ocean) and this brings a curse upon the ship . These lines follow the incident of the shooting:**

**The fair breeze blew, the white foam flew,
The furrow followed free;
We were the first that ever burst
Into that silent sea.**

**Down dropt the breeze, the sails dropt down,
'Twas sad as sad could be;
And we did speak only to break
The silence of the sea!**

**All in a hot and copper sky,
The bloody Sun, at noon,
Right up above the mast did stand,
No bigger than the Moon.**

**Day after day, day after day,
We stuck, nor breath nor motion;
As idle as a painted ship
Upon a painted ocean.**

**Water, water, everywhere,
And all the boards did shrink;
Water, water, everywhere,
Nor any drop to drink.**

- 1.Coleridge is a Romantic poet.**
- 2.These lines are taken from a long poem.**

3.The killing of the albatross has brought a curse upon the ship. The above lines show how the ship is not moving and the sailors are thirsty, and how the killing of the bird has brought death to the ship.

Meaning by stanza

Stanza 1:

The poet is describing how the ship enters the Pacific Ocean. The breeze is fine, the foam is flying, the cut made by the ship is like a furrow(a long cut made in the ground by a plough) to suggest speed. The sailors are the first to enter this silent sea, but everything seems fine.

Stanza 2:

In this stanza, the breeze has become weaker, the sails are down, the sea is silent, and everything has changed. Everybody now is sad. The ship is still, because there is no wind to move it, that's why the sails are dropped down.

Stanza 3:

The poet is describing the weather in order to show how silent and still the sea is. The sky is like copper (reddish brown). It is noon, and the sun is like the colour of blood, it stood in the middle of the sky looking like the moon, i.e. small, because of mist. The sailors can't see well. These are the signs of the curse; the sky and the sun are angry (red).

Stanza 4:

The ship is still in the middle of the sea, while time goes on. There is monotony. The ship is stuck, unable to move, and it looks as still as a ship in a picture.

Stanza 5:

The poet repeats the word 'water' to show how vast the sea is, yet the sailors are thirsty, and the boards of the ship have shrunk because of the salty water. This stanza suggests that the sailors are going to die of thirst.

She Dwelt among the Untrodden Ways William Wordsworth

**She dwelt among the untrodden ways
Beside the springs of Dove,
A Maid whom there were none to praise
And very few to love:**

**A violet by a mossy stone
Half hidden from the eye!
—Fair as a star, when only one
Is shining in the sky.**

**She lived unknown, and few could know
When Lucy ceased to be;
But she is in her grave, and, oh,
The difference to me!**

- 1.It is a poem from a group of poems under the same name written by the English poet, William Wordsworth.**
- 2.The poem is about Lucy Grey, an unknown girl.**
- 3. The poem talks about the seclusion of this unloved, unpraised, and unmarried girl who lived unknown and died unknown.**

Meaning by stanza

Stanza 1:

The speaker talks about Lucy who lived in a place where nobody lives (untraveled road beside the river Dove). She is a lonely unmarried girl who nobody loves.

Stanza 2:

The poet likens Lucy to a 'violet', a flower, but this flower is not in a field among many flowers, it is a lonely flower half-hidden behind a stone. He also likens her to a star, but not in the middle of other stars, it is a star when there is only one in the sky which could be the evening star, Venus. All these images suggest the girl's loneliness.

Stanza 3:

The girl is unknown that's why, when she died, only few knew about her death. The speaker is perhaps one of these few and so he expresses his sadness and sorrow for her death. It made a difference to him.

Poetic Devices

Poetry has special qualities that make it delightful and enjoyable to the reader. These qualities are:

1. Sense Devices

These devices are related to sense where two different objects are brought together by comparison. Below are some of the most frequently used sense devices:

1.1. Simile

It is a kind of comparison where the poet compares between two things using the words “as” or “like”.

Simile is found in :

A- ‘The Rime of the Ancient Mariner’

As idle as a painted ship,
upon a painted ocean

The poet compares the real ship to a painted one to show how still and motionless the ship is. The purpose of simile here is to show how the ship is destined to stay in the same place forever.

B- ‘Lucy’

Fair as a star, when only one
Is shining in the sky

The purpose of the simile here is to show the rarity of Lucy’s beauty. Lucy’s beauty is as rare as the beauty of a star when there is only one in the sky.

1.2. Metaphor

It is very much like simile in that it is also a comparison but not direct. It is an implied comparison without the use of as or like.

Metaphor is found in:

A-'Lucy'

**A violet by a mossy stone
Half hidden from the eye**

Lucy is compared to a violet. The purpose of this metaphor is to show how rare her beauty is. It is not seen like a flower that is hidden from the eye.

B-'The Rime of the Ancient Mariner'

In 'the furrow followed free', the poet uses metaphor to compare the line made by the fast ship in the ocean to a furrow made in a ploughed field. The purpose of this metaphor is to show the speed of the ship.

1.3 Personification

It is used to give an inanimate object a human form or quality by making it speak for example.

Personification is found in Shelley's 'Ode to the West Wind'

**O wild West Wind, thou breath of Autumn's being,
Thou, from whose unseen presence the leaves dead
Are driven, like ghosts from an enchanter fleeing,**

Autumn is personified. It is shown as breathing, and the wind is its breath.

The wind is also personified as a magician (enchanter) from whom the leaves of trees escape like ghosts (Simile).

The leaves are personified as ghosts (human spirits).

2. Sound Devices

They are related to the musical quality of the poem:

2.1. Alliteration

It is the repetition of the same consonant sound/letter at the beginning of words in a line of verse, e.x.,

-In 'The Rime of the Ancient Mariner':

'the furrow followed free'

The purpose of alliteration in this line is to add music to the line. It suggests speed, because "f" makes the line run quickly.

In 'Day after day, day after day', "d" suggests monotony and immobility.

2.2. Onomatopoeia

It is found in words that imitate the sound made by the object described, e.x.,

Swish - the sound produced by quick movement

Buzz - the sound of bees

Cuckoo- the sound made by the bird Cuckoo

Crush- loud noise like that of thunder

Hum - singing with closed lips.

2.3. Rhyme

It appears in the middle or end of lines in poetry, depending on its type whether end or internal. Words that rhyme end with the same sound/letter. However, for the two words to rhyme, the consonant sounds/letters that come before the vowel should not be the same, e.x., "sight" and "right" rhyme, but "night" and "knight" do not rhyme.

In 'The Rime of the Ancient Mariner', there are two kinds of rhyme, end rhyme (same sound at the end of each line of a poem), and internal rhyme (two rhyming words within the same line). But why does Stanza (1) have six rhyming words, while in stanza (3), there

are only two rhymes? The answer is that the use of many rhymes in stanza 1 suggests the high speed of the ship, but later on to suggest that the ship slows down, the poet uses only two rhymes.

2.4 Assonance

It is the repetition of the same vowel sound in nearby words within a line of verse, e.x., bride..wide..crime

2.5 Eye rhyme

It occurs when two words use the same spelling for a portion of the word, but their pronunciations are different. For example, (Break..speak) and (grind..ground)

2.6 Rhythm

It is the musical succession of sounds. It adds to the meaning of the poem, and expresses the mood of the poet, whether sad or happy. For example,

In the first stanza of 'The Rime of the Ancient Mariner', the rhythm is quick, but after that it becomes slow to suggest the slow pace. In 'Lucy', the rhythm reflects the poet's sorrow and sadness.

3. Structural Devices

They are related to the structure of the poem, i.e., how the poem is built.

3.1 Contrast

It occurs when two opposite pictures are put side by side in the poem. Sometimes the contrast is obvious and sometimes it is implied, e.x., (1)The stillness contrasted with quickness, and (2) motion; "burst into the sea" contrasted with lack of motion, " down dropt the breeze" in 'The Rime of the Ancient Mariner'.

3.2 Illustration

It takes the form of a picture/an image which the poet uses to refer to an idea (to illustrate an idea). In illustration, the poet draws a picture,

e.x.,

- (1) In 'Break, Break, Break', lads playing and ships sailing are images which suggest that life is going on without stop.**
- (2) In 'The Rime of the Ancient Mariner', the last three stanzas are pictures that refer to the idea of a motionless ship.**

3.3 Repetition

The poet repeats a line or a whole stanza, either for musical effect or to emphasize a particular idea which he/she wants to attract our attention to, For Example, in 'The Rime of the Ancient Mariner',

**Water, water, everywhere,
And all the boards did shrink;
Water, water, everywhere,
Nor any drop to drink.**

The repetition of the word "water" makes readers feel (1)How big the ocean is (2) How thirsty the sailors are. Water is everywhere, but at the same time there is no water to drink.

Kinds of Poetry

1. Subjective Poetry

A poet is called subjective when he finds inspiration for his work in his own thoughts, emotions, imagination and experiences, and gives expression to his own personal feelings. The subjective writer dives within himself, he steeps his theme in his own individuality and sensations.

2. Objective Poetry

When a poet describes the actions, sentiments, and experiences of his fellowmen and not his own, without any reference to his own views or feelings, he is regarded as an objective or impersonal artist. The objective artist looks outside himself and treats his facts, scenes, characters, and situations, whether observed or imaginary, without drawing attention to his own emotions, or personality.