

Lesson #1 Instructional Guide: General Notes on the Concept of Poetry

Concepts are big ideas or mental constructs that are cognitively formed to aid human beings in understanding the world in which they live. A person's mastery or "attainment" of a concept is developed over time as he or she has experience with examples of the concept. Although a superficial understanding of a concept can be gained through the rote memorization of a definition, true understanding of a concept is best developed through a recognition of the critical (essential) attributes demonstrated in an example of a concept under study.

Poetry is a unique literary form with a distinct value for people, communities and the world. It is expected that the students will attain an understanding of poetry that will endure over time as a result of their experience in this unit. Engagement with poetry's critical attributes across the unit's lesson will promote this.

Poetry is a unique form of expression that has both critical (essential) and variable (optional) attributes. For the purposes of this unit, the critical attributes of poetry include:

- a. it is a unique type of literary work,
- b. it communicates a concentrated, imaginative experience,
- c. it uses carefully chosen and arranged language,
- d. it has a distinctive form and structure,
- e. it provokes a specific emotional response in the reader.

Variable attributes of poetry include, but are not limited to:

- a. the use of rhyme,
- b. use of lines and stanzas,
- c. the capitalization of the first letter of each line.

Poetry is unique as a literary genre; it has similarities with other literary genres, but it has its own critical attributes such as (1) concentrative imaginative awareness of experience (2) in carefully chosen language (3) that is arranged to create a specific emotional response (4) through meaning, sound and rhythm.¹

Poetry is a term given to different forms in which human beings have rhythmically expressed their most intense impressions of the world, themselves, and the relation between the two.² Poetry is distinct from prose in terms of its compressed form, its use of the conventions of meter and rhyme, its structure in line and verse, its evocative diction, and its freedom of syntax. There are many types of poetry including, narrative, dramatic, satirical, and confessional.

¹ "Poetry." *Merriam-Webster's Encyclopedia of Literature*. Springfield, MA: Merriam-Webster 1995, 893.

² Harmon, William, *A Handbook of Literature*, 12th ed. Chapel Hill: Longman, 2012: 370.

³ "Poetry." *Merriam-Webster's Encyclopedia of Literature*. Springfield, MA: Merriam-Webster 1995, 893.

It is difficult for a teacher to give students something he or she does not have. The following notes are intended to provide the teacher with a solid notion of what is meant by these critical attributes.

a. Poetry is a unique type of literary work

Although poetry is similar to other types of literature and shares some distinct characteristics with other fiction literature (in particular novels and short stories), poetry offers distinct and special affordances that enable the exploration of human truths.

b. Poetry communicates a concentrated, imaginative experience.

A poem is concentrated or condensed. This means that a poem has a higher “potency” in its communication than other forms of literature. This attribute should not be confused with word count. Although poems are often shorter (and consist of a smaller word count) than other types of literature, shorter does not necessarily mean concentrated.

A poem is concentrated because it communicates a greater amount of emotion, experience, etc. than other forms of literature of the same length due to the use of certain poetic devices such as simile and metaphor. A poem communicates imaginative experience. This means that the experiences, events, and emotions expressed in a poem though often based on a “real” event, experience or emotion are not an entirely factual representation of this reality. It is commonly understood that the representation of reality in a poem has been creatively infused.

c. Poetry uses carefully chosen and arranged language.

It is widely accepted that the choice and arrangement of language in a poem are directed by an author’s conscious choice. “Language” includes words, phrases, and expressions. The author’s choice and arrangement of language promotes his or her communication of experience, events, and emotion with the reader.

d. Poetry has a distinctive form and structure.

Communication through the language chosen by the author for his or her poem is enhanced through style and rhythm. This attribute distinguishes poetry from prose which does not incorporate such style and rhythm. The term “style” refers to how the author chooses to organize and use the structure of lines and stanzas. The term “rhythm” refers to how the author manipulates the emphasis of words and syllables.

e. Poetry provokes a specific emotional response in the reader.

Literature in general aims to engage the reader in understanding truths about human emotions and experiences. Although intellectual engagement is an important part of poetry, emotional engagement is a key characteristic of the medium. A poet strives to use the medium of poetry to invite a reader to develop empathy for and understanding of the events and individuals that are the subject of a poem.