

The Elements of Poetry

Dr Robert G. May | Department of English

The Elements of Poetry are *mode, form, voice, diction, articulation, language, rhetoric, sound, and rhythm*. Literary critics analyze poetical works with the Elements of Poetry to reveal the *themes* of those works.

Mode

Mode is sometimes referred to as *kind* or *type*, and is associated with the poem's method, manner, and style. Understanding mode enables literary critics to pinpoint the various conventions the work makes use of, and to perceive the various traditions the author is writing in. There are three main modes of poetry: *lyric, narrative, and dramatic*.

- **lyric poetry:** a short poem expressive of one's thoughts and feelings, appreciated for its aural qualities
- **narrative poetry:** a longer poem that tells a story or stories
- **dramatic poetry:** a poem featuring the voice of an imaginary character, with nothing added by the poet

Form

Form refers to the overall structure of a poem, sometimes perceivable by the way the poem looks on the page. Certain forms are traditionally associated with certain subject matter, so the form of a poem can give hints about its theme. There are two main forms of poetry: *closed* and *open*.

- **closed form:** poems with a fixed, regular, symmetrical pattern of rhymes and/or stanzas (e.g., sonnet, villanelle, haiku)
- **open form:** poems without a fixed, regular, symmetrical pattern of rhymes and/or stanzas (e.g., free verse, prose poetry, concrete poetry)

Voice

Voice refers to what the poem sounds like, specifically what the speaker or poetic persona (not necessarily the poet themselves) sounds like. In this sense, *voice* takes into consideration both the *viewpoint* and the *tone* of the poetic persona.

- **viewpoint:** the poem's speaker or poetic persona; the identity of the "I," "you," or "we" in the poem (not necessarily the poet themselves)
- **tone:** the speaker's attitude, mood, moral outlook, personality, etc. (what the poetic persona sounds like)

Some Frequently Used Types of Accentual Syllabic Verse

Type of Foot	Rhythm
iambic	x /
anapestic	x x /
trochaic	/ x
dactylic	/ x x

Number of Feet	Rhythm
trimeter	3 feet
tetrameter	4 feet
pentameter	5 feet
hexameter	6 feet

Diction

Diction refers to the vocabulary employed or the choice of words made by the poet. Literary critics distinguish between *poetic diction* and *plain diction*.

- **poetic diction:** the decorous, elevated, or artificial diction used by poets until the nineteenth century
- **plain diction:** the more straightforward, less ornamented diction used by poets from the nineteenth century

Articulation

Articulation is another way of considering *diction*. When a poet chooses to use a given word, they may be using that word either *denotatively* or *connotatively*.

- **denotative diction:** the most literal and limited meaning of words, regardless of feelings, suggestions
- **connotative diction:** the suggestion or implication evoked by certain words, over and above what they denote

Language

Language, as an Element of Poetry, refers to the patterns of *imagery* and/or *symbolism* employed in a poem.

- **imagery:** the use or patterning of evocative language to represent objects, ideas, experiences, etc.

Some Frequently Used Rhetorical Devices

- | | | |
|--------------|--------------|-------------------|
| • allusion | • ellipsis | • onomatopoeia |
| • apostrophe | • enjambment | • oxymoron |
| • catalexis | • euphemism | • pathos |
| • chiasmus | • hyperbole | • personification |
| • conceit | • irony | • pun |
| • consonance | • litotes | • simile |
| • dissonance | • metaphor | • synecdoche |
| • elision | • metonymy | • zeugma |

- **symbolism:** the use of language to suggest that one thing stands for or represents another thing, idea, or concept

Rhetoric

Rhetoric, as an Element of Poetry, refers to the various *schemes* and *tropes* employed in a poem. Most literary critics today refer to schemes and tropes collectively as *rhetorical devices*, but it is useful to keep in mind the traditional distinction between the two terms.

- **scheme:** a figure of speech featuring a change in word sound and/or order (e.g., alliteration, chiasmus)
- **trope:** a figure of speech featuring a change of the meaning of a word to extend or alter literal meaning (e.g., metaphor, simile)

Schemes and tropes usually make a distinction between language used in a *literal* sense and language used in a *figurative* sense.

- **literal language:** using language in its usual or primary sense (e.g., a chair in the literal sense is a piece of furniture used for sitting (“I was feeling dizzy, so I sat down in a chair.”))
- **figurative language:** using language in an unusual or emblematic sense (e.g., a chair in a figurative sense is a person in a position of authority in an organization (“The chair of the English Department spoke at the faculty meeting.”))

Please see the box labelled “Some Frequently Used Rhetorical Devices” for more information.

Sound

Sound refers to the sonic qualities of a poem, the way a poem appeals to the ear, or the way the poem might sound if read aloud. Sound is particularly important in the analysis of lyric poetry, but narrative and dramatic poetry also include sonic characteristics. Here is a partial list of sonic characteristics.

- **euphony:** the production of mellifluous sounds
- **cacophony:** the production of dissonant sounds
- **alliteration:** the repetition of consonant sounds
- **assonance:** the repetition of vowel sounds

- **rhyme:** the repetition of identical or similar sounds
- **rhyme scheme:** the pattern of end rhymes in a stanza (indicated in poetic notation with lower-case letters (e.g., *abab*))

Rhythm

Rhythm refers to the pattern of stressed and unstressed syllables in a poem. When this pattern is regular, it is traditionally referred to as *accentual syllabic verse*. The type of accentual syllabic verse in a poem is defined by the *foot* and the *metre*. Sometimes rhythm is irregular (as in *free verse*, for example), but rhythm is rarely entirely absent from a poem.

- **accentual syllabic verse:** rhythm in English poetry is based on a system of stressed (/) and unstressed (x) syllables
- **feet:** combinations of stressed and unstressed syllables (e.g., one unstressed syllable plus one stressed syllable is an iamb, or an iambic foot)
- **metre:** the number of feet in a line of poetry (e.g., five iambs in a line of poetry is iambic pentameter (*penta-* is a prefix meaning five))

Please see the box labelled “Some Frequently Used Types of Accentual Syllabic Verse” for more information.

Theme

Theme refers to the main idea or the overall message of a poem. *Theme* can be defined in various ways, but it is important to remember that theme is never expressed just as a single word or phrase (e.g., “love” is not a theme). Rather, theme should be expressed as a complete thought or as an entire sentence (e.g., “unrequited love is painful, but it is less painful than never having loved” is a theme).

- “not [the] subject [of a work] but rather [the] central idea, which may be stated directly or indirectly (Cuddon 721)
- “an idea about the world, expressed by a literary text, of general importance to people (Headrick 26)
- “an abstract concept that is made concrete” through an analysis of the Elements of Literature (Chalykoff 3)
- “must go beyond naming the concept ... and assert what the work is saying about it” (Chalykoff 4)

Works Cited

- Baldick, Chris. *Oxford Dictionary of Literary Terms*. 4th ed., Oxford UP, 2015.
- Chalykoff, Lisa, et al., eds. *The Broadview Introduction to Literature: Poetry*. 2nd ed, Broadview, 2018.
- Cuddon, J.A. *Dictionary of Literary Terms and Literary Theory*. 4th ed., Penguin, 2014.

© Dr Robert G. May
29 September 2025