

Poetry: The Structural Elements

One major challenge when writing a poem is deciding what structure it should have. The structure of a poem involves many elements, such as the number of lines, the number of syllables in each line, the rhyming of certain words and phrases with others, and much more.

For example, the haiku, a Japanese style of poetry, consists of three lines, with five syllables in the first and third lines and seven syllables in the second line. When written in English, a haiku can also be written as two rhyming lines of approximately ten syllables each. And the sonnet is a fourteen-line poem in which the first line rhymes with the third line, the second with the fourth, the fifth with the seventh, the sixth with the eighth, the ninth with the eleventh, the tenth with the twelfth, and finally, the thirteenth with the fourteenth.

While the sonnet and the haiku are two of the most popular poetic structures, there are many others. And even though a lot of poems don't adhere to any of these structures, they nonetheless incorporate a variety of structural elements. This handout aims to familiarize you with these structural elements and approaches so that you can incorporate them in your own poems.

Making and Breaking Patterns

As you might have noticed, the structures of the haiku and the sonnet involve patterns in line-length and rhyme. However, the effect of these patterns is achieved not only by being made, but also by being broken. This is most apparent in the sonnet: whereas the first twelve lines rhyme alternately, the final two lines are the only two lines that rhyme *and* are adjacent. This subtle deviation from the pattern facilitates what is called the "turn." A turn is any section of a poem that recontextualizes the meaning of the lines that preceded it, or that leads the reader in an unexpected direction. For example, in Wendy Cope's sonnet on the next page, the last two lines surprise the reader by redirecting the poem to find hope in love despite the signs of old age that dominate the previous twelve lines.

Whereas the sonnet usually has one poetic turn, as signaled by making a pattern of rhyming that is broken in the concluding lines, a poem can have multiple turns throughout. By surprising the reader and provoking them to think more deeply, these turns can give the poem more energy and excitement.

Sonnet (inspired by Sonnet 22)

By Wendy Cope

My glass can't quite persuade me I am old—
In that respect my ageing eyes are kind—
But when I see a photograph, I'm told
The dismal truth: I've left my youth behind.
And when I try to get up from a chair
My knees remind me they are past their best.
The burden they have carried everywhere
Is heavier now. No wonder they protest.
Arthritic fingers, problematic neck,
Sometimes causing mild to moderate pain,
Could well persuade me I'm an ancient wreck
But here's what helps me to feel young again:
My love, who fell for me so long ago,
Still loves me just as much, and tells me so.

Activity 1: Identifying Turns in a Poem

So far, we've understood poetic turns as deviations from established patterns. Sometimes, a turn can be achieved by repeating a line, or repeating some of the key words in a line, but with an unexpected shift in meaning. Jericho Brown's "Duplex (I begin with love . . .)" incorporates several turns by way of repetition. As you read this poem on the next page, ask yourself the following questions:

- How does each repetition change the meaning of the words being repeated?
- How do these changes in meaning push the reader forward?
- Where does the poem end, and how is this different from where it begins, in spite of the first and last lines sharing many of the same words?

Duplex (I begin with love . . .)

By Jericho Brown

I begin with love, hoping to end there.

I don't want to leave a messy corpse.

I don't want to leave a messy corpse
Full of medicines that turn in the sun.

Some of my medicines turn in the sun.

Some of us don't need hell to be good.

Those who need most, need hell to be good.
What are the symptoms of *your* sickness?

Here is one symptom of my sickness:

Men who love me are men who miss me.

Men who leave me are men who miss me
In the dream where I am an island.

In the dream where I am an island,
I grow green with hope. I'd like to end there.

Activity 2: Writing a Poem with Repetition

Now that you have analyzed Jericho Brown’s “Duplex (I begin with love . . .),” try writing your own poem that incorporates repetition. Remember that repetition is most effective if the repeated words take on a different meaning or context each time that they are repeated.

Using Lines and Stanzas

The text of a poem can be broken into separate lines and stanzas. A stanza is a group of lines that is separated by an extra space from other groups of lines in a poem. In the poems you’ve read so far in this handout, you can see that the end of a line in a poem is often not the end of that sentence. Where to end each line and begin the next is an important decision that requires care and thought. In making that decision, you can differentiate between “parsed” and “annotated” lines. Parsed lines end intuitively where the reader has grasped a new, coherent piece of information and might expect to take a breath; on the other hand, annotated lines end unexpectedly, often leaving the reader curious and uncertain what word they will find at the start of the next line (“Poetry Terms: The Three Lines”). Consider Ellen Bass’s “Basket of Figs,” which contains multiple stanzas and both parsed and annotated lines.

Basket of Figs

By Ellen Bass

Bring me your pain, love. Spread
it out like fine rugs, silk sashes,
warm eggs, cinnamon
and cloves in burlap sacks. Show me

the detail, the intricate embroidery
on the collar, tiny shell buttons,
the hem stitched the way you were taught,
pricking just a thread, almost invisible.

Unclasp it like jewels, the gold
still hot from your body. Empty
your basket of figs. Spill your wine.

That hard nugget of pain, I would suck it,
cradling it on my tongue like the slick
seed of pomegranate. I would lift it

tenderly, as a great animal might
carry a small one in the private
cave of the mouth.

In the first two stanzas of this poem, Bass uses parsed lines to ground the reader in comma-separated lists of concrete, vivid details. But she annotates lines 1 and 4 to blur the border between the items in those lists and the person she is addressing. For example, we think for a moment that she is asking the person to “Spread” themselves, only to find out otherwise on the next line; “Show me” introduces even more anticipation because it ends not only a line but an entire stanza with ambiguity. In the next two stanzas, we find more annotated lines than before: “the gold” merges with “your body”; we imagine an “Empty” body, but then find out that the word is functioning not as a description but as a command; and though the short, parsed assertiveness of “Spill your wine” gives the reader a momentary sense of certainty, there is yet another annotated line ending the entire fourth stanza with uncertainty. But the purpose of this uncertainty is to emphasize the resolution that follows on “tenderly,” the word that opens the final stanza and sets the mood for its conclusion.

Activity 3: Deciding Where to End Lines and Stanzas

Below is Patricia Smith’s “The President Flies Over,” written as a single block of text without its original structure of lines and stanzas. As you read through the poem, make your own decisions of where to start new lines and stanzas. If you’ve printed out a physical copy of this handout, you can mark line-endings with a single slash (/) and stanzas with a double slash (//). If you are using a soft copy, you can insert new line spaces on your computer.

The President Flies Over

By Patricia Smith

Aloft between heaven and them, I babble the landscape—what staunch, vicious trees, what cluttered roads, slow cars. This is my country as it was gifted me—victimless, vast. The soundtrack buzzing the air around my ears continually loops ditties of eagles and oil. I can’t choose. Every moment I’m awake, aroused instrumentals channel theme songs, speaking what I cannot. I don’t ever have to come down. I can stay hooked to heaven, dictating this blandness. My flyboys memorize flip and soar. They’ll never swoop real enough to resurrect that other country, won’t ever get close enough to give name to tonight’s dreams darkening the water. I understand that somewhere it has rained.

The Poem's Original Structure

There is no one correct way to divide the lines and stanzas of this poem, but try to compare the effects of your decisions to those of Smith's:

The President Flies Over

By Patricia Smith

Aloft between heaven and them,

I babble the landscape—what staunch, vicious trees,
what cluttered roads, slow cars. This is my

country as it was gifted me—victimless, vast.

The soundtrack buzzing the air around my ears
continually loops ditties of eagles and oil.

I can't choose. Every moment I'm awake,
aroused instrumentals channel theme songs,
speaking
what I cannot.

I don't ever have to come down.

I can stay hooked to heaven,
dictating this blandness.

My flyboys memorize flip and soar.

They'll never swoop real enough
to resurrect that other country,

won't ever get close enough to give name
to tonight's dreams darkening the water.

I understand that somewhere it has rained.

Playing with Structure

Almost every poem goes through several rounds of revision before it reaches its final draft.

When working on a poem, try not to feel pressured to commit to any one structure. If you feel unsure how to improve a draft you have written, don't hesitate to play with its structure. What happens if you end a line a few words earlier or later? If you conclude your poem with an image or phrase from its opening? If you completely reverse the order of sentences in your poem? Have fun with it! Every good poem is an experiment.

References

- Bass, Ellen. "Basket of Figs." *Academy of American Poets*, Academy of American Poets. poets.org/poem/basket-figs. Accessed 12 Apr. 2021.
- Brown, Jericho. "Duplex (I begin with love . . .)." *The Tradition*, Copper Canyon Press, 2019, p. 49.
- Cope, Wendy. "Sonnet (inspired by Sonnet 22)." *The Guardian*, The Guardian. www.theguardian.com/books/2016/feb/13/wendy-cope-simon-armitage-andrew-motion-shakespeare-love-sonnets-21st-century. Accessed 12 Apr. 2021.
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