



## Discerning major qualities of English poetry

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### Abstract

This article attempts to highlight some major qualities of poetry, basic modes of expression in poetry and its features. A number of poetic lines from multifarious poems composed by varied poets have been presented as a sample to discern the diverse qualities of English poetry. The major objective of this article is to familiarize the readers with the qualities of poetry for pleasure and better understanding of its themes and intended messages. Presentation, illustration and explanation of poetic lines that hint at the main qualities of poetry of English are executed as a method for discerning the major qualities of poetry. This article is considered to be useful to those who are interested in studying English poetry. It is concluded that better understanding of qualities of poetry leads the readers to the better understanding of poetry.

**Keywords:** features, literature, modes, poetry, qualities

### 1. Introduction

Literature is a unique asset of human being. It is an artistic expression of feelings, emotions, ideas or subject matters with the help of language. Hudson (2002) <sup>[15]</sup> asserts that literature is fundamentally an “expression of life through the medium of language” (p.10). For Sidney (1907) <sup>[30]</sup>, literature is an art of imitation for a specific purpose. It imitates to “teach and delight” (p.10).

Poetry is one of the most popular forms of literature. It has been taught as a major subject at the bachelor and master levels in the faculties of education and humanities at campuses affiliated to Tribhuvan University in Nepal. Most of the teachers conceive it as a difficult subject to teach their students and most of the students also find it difficult to learn and understand.

Difficulty in understanding poetry lies on flexibility of forms, complexity of structures, multiplicity of meanings, variety of musicality and playfulness of words. Poetry maintains an artistic arrangement of different sounds and senses which create particular feelings, emotions and moods in the audience or readers. It reveals mystery, beauty, feeling, emotion, sentiment etc. of a poet through the artistic language colored with imagination. It is a composition in verse or metrical language. It can be defined as an expression of elevated thought, imagination and feeling in rhythmic language of metrical composition. It is rich in the use of figures of speech.

Poetry has rich diction which may involve formal words, informal words, abbreviations, phrases, slangs, archaic words, colloquial words, jargon words, foreign words, idioms, proverbs, figures of speech, sometimes coined words etc. If the teachers teach poems with the full understanding of its qualities, they won't only enjoy teaching poems, but they will also be able to teach their students well. If the students have a clear understanding of the qualities of poetry, they will be interested to learn and study it well. This article will be beneficial not only to the teachers and the students of English

literature for academic enhancement, but also to the persons who desire to study poems for pleasure.

### 2. Literature Review

Literature review embraces definition of poetry, major qualities of poetry, modes of expression in poetry and features of literary universal.

#### 2.1 Poetry as a genre of literature

Poetry is a genre of literature. It is different from other genres because it is more musical, more imaginative and more figurative. There are different forms of poetry. Some of them are lyric, ballad, sonnet, elegy, ode, dramatic monologue, epic etc. Johnson (1965) <sup>[17]</sup> defines poetry as the art of “uniting pleasure with truth by recalling imagination to the help of reason” (p.57). Hudson (2002) <sup>[15]</sup> considers poetry as an “interpretation of life through imagination and feelings” (P.80). Poetry is a musical thought for Carlyle (1956, p. 317) <sup>[6]</sup>. Poetry is a type of literature in which sounds and meanings of language are combined to create ideas and feelings. For Wordsworth (1800), poetry is the “spontaneous overflow of powerful feeling; it takes its origin from emotion recollected in tranquility” (p.213). Poetry is not an “assertion of truth, but the making of that truth more fully real to us” (Eliot, 1951, p.22). Robert Frost (1957) <sup>[11]</sup> assumes that poetry provides the one “permissible way of saying one thing and meaning another” (p. v). Poetry does not normally follow a traditional way of grammar. It accepts new forms. Widdowson (1984) <sup>[35]</sup> views poetry to be characterized as “deviating from the norms of language.” (p.146). It has been argued that poetry frequently breaks the rules of language, but by doing so, it “communicates with us in a fresh, original way” (Lazar, 1993, p.99) <sup>[19]</sup>.

#### 2.2 Major Qualities of Poetry

Poetry is a special kind of word game which includes a

blending of musical and linguistic dimensions. Sounds and senses move together in poetry. Some major qualities of poetry are given below.

### 2.2.1 Musical Quality

Poetry is a kind of musical word game. Musical quality in poetry can be realized through alliteration, assonance, consonance, rhythm, rhyme, onomatopoeia and so on.

#### 2.2.1.1 Alliteration

Wales (2001) <sup>[33]</sup> asserts that alliteration is the “repetition of the initial consonant in two or more words” (p.14). It is the repetition of the same consonant sound at the beginning of the stressed words in the same line or adjacent lines of verse:

Full fathom five thy father lies. (1)  
(William Shakespeare: The Tempest)

In the above poetic line, the consonant sound / f / is repeated at the beginning of the words “full”, “fathom”, “five”, and “father”. Alliteration does not only link related words, but it also provides musical effects. It reinforces the meaning and makes the expression emphatic and emotive.

#### 2.2.1.2 Assonance

Abrams (1993) <sup>[1]</sup> defines assonance as “the repetition of identical or similar vowel sounds –especially in stressed syllable in a sequence of nearby words” (p.7):

He clasps the crag with crooked hands,  
Close to the sun in lonely lands;  
Ringed with the azure world, he stands. (1-3)  
(Tennyson: The Eagle)

In the above poetic line, the same vowel sound /æ / is repeated in the words “clasps”, “crag” and “hands”. Similarly, there is a repetition of the diphthong / əv / in the words “close” and “lonely”. Assonance produces a particular effect of euphony. It is usually used within a line of poetry for unity and a rhythmic effect.

#### 2.2.1.3 Consonance

Cuddon (1999) <sup>[8]</sup> considers consonance as the “close repetition of the identical consonant sounds before and after different vowel sounds” (p.176). Consonance is the repetition of the consonant sound in the words before or after different vowel sounds, and such a repetition often occurs in the middle or at the end of the words:

So tired, so thirsty, so hungry and so sad,  
Ten lean boys sat on a bench under a fan. (1-2)  
(Sharma: Boys under a Fan)

In the above poetic, the consonant sound /n / is repeated at the end of the words “ten”, “lean” and “fan” with their different vowel sounds / e /, / i / and / æ / respectively.

Life is not a blank slide,  
It falls down heavily. (1-2)  
(Sharma: Life’s fall)

In this line, the consonant sound / l / is repeated in the words “blank” and “slide” before different vowel sounds / æ / and / a / respectively.

#### 2.2.1.4 Rhythm

Rhythm is the pattern of the stressed and unstressed syllables which make the flow of pleasing sound in prose or verse line. Wales (2001) <sup>[33]</sup> considers rhythm as “the perceptual pattern of accented and unaccented syllables in a language” (p.348). Regular rhythm is created by the regular appearance of the stressed and unstressed syllables:

U—U—U—U—U—

We think our fathers fools so wise we grow;

U—U—U—U—U—

Our wiser sons, no doubt, will think us so. (438-439)  
(Alexander Pope: An Essay on Criticism)

In the above poetic lines, the unstressed syllable is followed by the stressed syllable to form an iambic meter that intensifies the sadness. It makes the readers meditate.

#### 2.2.1.5 Rhyme

Harmon (2009) <sup>[12]</sup> opines rhyme as “the identity of terminal sound between accented syllables, usually occupying corresponding positions in two or more lines of verse” (p.449). Rhyme refers to the identical sounds generally at the end of verse lines:

Tyger! Tyger! Burning bright  
In the forest of the night. (1-2)  
(William Blake: The Tyger)

In the above poetic lines “bright” and “night” are the rhymed words. It supports meanings and creates harmonious effect. It makes the readers easy to memorize the poems.

#### 2.2.1.6 Onomatopoeia

Onomatopoeia is a figure of speech in which the sounds reflect the sense. Simpson (2004) assumes onomatopoeia to be a feature of sound patterning which is often thought to “form a bridge between style and content” (p.67). The words which imitate the sounds are called onomatopoeic words: Sea nymphs hourly ring his knell;

Ding-dong.  
Hark! now I hear them - Ding-dong, bell. (7-9)  
(Shakespeare: Full Fathom Five Thy Father Lies)

In the above poetic lines, “Ding-dong” is an onomatopoeic word which imitates the sound of the bell.

I heard an owl’s whoo-hoo  
Then a donkey’s hee-haw;  
A dove did make roo-coo,  
A crow did cry caw-caw. (9-12)  
(Sharma: A Strange Night)

In the above lines, “whoo-hoo”, “hee-haw”, “roo-coo” and “caw-caw” are onomatopoeic words which imitate the sounds of three birds and an animal. They create strange environment and provoke awesome feelings in the readers.

### 2.2.2 Playful Quality

The playful quality of poetry involves playing with words and their meanings. Poetry is a means of expressing the poet's feelings in various playful ways as in the following poetic lines:

How frail is our uncertain breath!  
The laundress seems full hale, but death  
Shall her 'last linen' bring;  
The groom will die, like all his kind;  
And even the stable boy will find  
This life no stable thing. (1-6)

(Thomas Hood: Uncertain Breath)

Here, the word “stable” is used in a playful way. It is used twice but it is used for two different meanings. One is “working at a stable” and another is as “constant”.

### 2.2.3 Expressive Quality

Poetry has an expressive quality. Poetry can be used to express the poet's feelings, ideas, emotions, and desire in a fewer words in a better way:

“Beauty is truth, truth beauty.” –that is all  
Ye know on earth, and all ye need to know. (49-50)  
(John Keats: Ode on a Grecian Urn)

In these lines, great ideas are expressed by using a very few words. The things which are beautiful in imagination are true, and that truth is beauty. We all need to know this essence while we are alive on earth. It reminds us of Hindu philosophy “Satyam Shivam Sundaram”.

### 2.2.4 Emotive Quality

The emotive quality of the poetry is its power to produce feelings and emotions in a reader. It is an impulse that stirs the heart of the reader:

Decorated by the beauty of spring  
Velvety as a flower  
Soft as feather  
Your cheeks  
I feel like caressing always.

Your graceful cheeks  
Adorned by rosy-ness and  
the blushes that spring up  
I feel like cupping them with love  
Falling drop by drop into my hands.

And I feel like migrating  
to the mole of your cheek  
popping up like a centre of gravitation  
for the whole of my life  
Oblivious, unconscious.

(Jaya Chhangcha: As Soft as a Flower)

This poem provokes a sort of passionate and emotive feeling in the reader. Such a feeling dwells deep in the young hearts.

### 2.2.5 Meditative Quality

Poetry is rich in a meditative dimension. The meditative quality of poetry makes the reader think deeply on something:  
And you, O my Soul, where you stand,

Surrounded, surrounded, in measureless oceans of space,  
Ceaselessly musing, venturing, throwing, seeking the  
spheres, to connect them;  
Till the bridge you will need, be form'd-till the ductile  
anchor hold;  
Till the gossamer thread you fling, catch somewhere, O my  
Soul. (6-10)

(Walt Whitman: A Noiseless Patient Spider)

The addresses his soul which can't stay still. It is ceaselessly musing, venturing (making effort), throwing (sending filaments) and seeking (looking for) the spheres to connect them. It suggests the quest for meaning of life and knowledge in the vacant vast universe. He desires to create a significant bridge between itself (himself) and something that really matters in the vacant vast universe.

### 2.2.6 Didactic Quality

Poetry does not only provide us pleasure, but also teaches us or gives us instructions. It retains the didactic quality:

All the world is a stage,  
And all the men and women merely players. (1-2)  
(William Shakespeare: All the World's a Stage)

These lines teach us that the whole world is a stage and all the persons here are players fulfilling their individual roles given to them by their age and circumstances. These lines teach us about life and human roles in different situations in an artistic way.

### 2.2.7 Imaginative Quality

Poetry is the creation of human imagination. It is the expression of imagination. It is close to the heart rather than to the mind. Poetry is more imaginative than other genres of literature:

Heard melodies are sweet, but those unheard  
Are sweeter; therefore, ye soft pipers, play on  
Not to the sensual ear, but more endear'd,  
Pipe to the spirit ditties of no tone. (11-14)  
(John Keats: Ode on a Grecian Urn)

These lines project the imaginative quality of poetry. Melodies heard in imagination are sweeter than real melodies. The melodies which the spirit hears well can't be heard by our sensual ears.

### 2.2.8 Suggestive Quality

Poetry has a suggestive quality. What is said is not so important, but what it means or suggests is important in poetry. Poetry suggests its main message in an implicit way:

What happens to a dream deferred?  
Does it dry up  
like a raisin in the sun?  
Or fester like a sore-  
And then run?  
Does it stink like rotten meat?  
Or crust and sugar over-  
Like a syrupy sweet?  
Maybe it sags  
Like a heavy load.  
Or does it explode?

(Langston Hughes: Harlem)

This poem suggests that a deferred dream is very harmful and dangerous; therefore the dream should be fulfilled. If the dream is deferred, it can be so volatile that it can destroy the human existence. It is a sort of warning to the authority, especially the American Society or Government which does not treat the Afro-Americans well.

### 2.2.9 Visible Shape

Poetry has its own visible shape. It is written in stanzas, Poetry is flexible. It accepts multiple forms, whereas prosaic writings are structured in paragraph forms:

O sweet spontaneous earth how often have the doting fingers of prurient philosophers pinched and poked thee, has the naughty thumb of science prodded thy beauty, how often have religions taken thee upon their scraggy knees squeezing and buffeting thee that thou mightest conceive gods (but true to the incomparable couch of death thy rhythmic lover thou answer rest them only with spring)

(e. e. Cummings: O sweet spontaneous)

By observing its visible shape, we can assert that this poem is written in an eccentric style by using radical poetic language and unique syntactic form. In this sense “O sweet spontaneous” is an experimental poem which is deviated from the normal trend of versification. This poem employs the incorrect use of punctuation and rejection of the rules of English Grammar. This poem which can be reckoned as artistic experimentalism is only for the sophisticated readers.

## 2.3 Basic Modes of Expression in Poetry

Poetry is expressive. There are four basic modes of expression in poetry. They are: dramatic mode, narrative mode, descriptive mode and meditative mode. These different modes are not always clear-cut. They overlap in most of the cases.

### 2.3.1 Dramatic Mode

Dramatic mode of expression in poetry forms dramatic poetry which shares some features of drama. The features are the employment of characters, dialogues, action, setting etc. A dramatic poem presents a fragmentation of an action through the voices of the characters involved in that action:

“Where have you been, my long lost lover,  
This seven long years and more?”

“I have been seeking gold for thee, my love  
And riches of great store.” (1-4)  
(Anonymous: The Demon Lover)

In the above poetic lines, there are two characters the lover and his beloved who speak to each other and their speech is overheard by the audience or reader.

### 2.3.2 Narrative Mode

Narrative mode of expression in poetry makes narrative poetry which shares some elements of story. The elements are character, events, situations and the commentary of the narrator. In a narrative poem, the story is told by a narrator from the perspective outside the action. The narrator tells us about characters, their situations etc.:

As they were walking up the street,  
Most beautiful for to behold,  
He cast a glamour over her face  
And it shone like brightest gold. (29-32)  
(Anonymous: The Demon Lover)

In this piece of ballad, the story is told by a narrator from the perspective outside the action. The narrator describes two characters and their activities. The character ‘He’ seems to have some supernatural power with which he makes his beloved’s face shine like the brightest gold.

### 2.3.3 Descriptive Mode

Descriptive mode of expression in poetry forms descriptive poetry in which a vivid description is employed with descriptive words. Description is the element in poetry closest to painting and sculpture which use persons, animals, or things, their shapes, colors, textures, qualities and decorations. The poet presents visual pictures and scenes or the descriptions of persons, animals, or objects their shapes, colors, movements, textures and qualities with the help of words:

Visible, invisible  
a fluctuating charm  
and amber-tinctured amethyst  
inhabits it, your arm  
approaches and it opens  
and it closes; you had meant  
to catch it and it quivers;  
you abandon your intent.  
(Marianne Moore: A Jellyfish)

It is an excellent descriptive poem in which the poet describes a jellyfish with its colour, shape, movement, beauty and nature.

### 2.3.4 Meditative Mode

Meditative mode of expression in poetry forms meditative poetry in which meditation is a pivotal element. During the meditation, the speaker speaks to himself or thinks aloud for us to hear. Meditative poetry is rich in symbols. Normally serious and religious poems are meditative:

Brute beauty and valour and act, oh, air, pride, plume, here  
Buckle! And the fire that breaks from thee then, a billion  
Times told lovelier, more dangerous, O my Chevalier. (9-11)  
(Gerard Manley Hopkins: The Windhover)

“The Windhover” is a religious poem which begins with the description of the bird “falcon” and ends in meditation about Christ, his beauty, greatness and grace.

### 2.3.5 Narrative and Dramatic Mode

A poem may have a combination of the narrative mode of expression and the dramatic mode of expression. Narrative is almost always then and drama is almost always now. The compactness and brevity characteristic of poem often moves narration into the direction of drama as in the following stanza:

She took her eldest son into her arms  
And sweetly did him kiss;  
“My blessings go with you and your father too  
For little does he know of this?” (25-28)  
(Anonymous: The Demon Lover)

The first two lines of the stanza have the narrative mode of expression that the story is told by a narrator from the perspective outside the action and the last two lines have the dramatic element that presents a fragmentation of action through the voice of a character involved in the action.

### 2.3.6 Descriptive and Meditative Mode

Meditative poetry is rich in an expression of subjective thoughts and feelings on something or someone. The meditative dimension in poetry usually comes together with the descriptive dimension. These dimensions or modes work together to suggest and express ideas and feelings of the poet. There is a strong tendency of the descriptive poem to move from description to overt meditation:

The woods are lovely, dark and deep,  
But I have promises to keep,  
And miles to go before I sleep,  
And miles to go before I sleep. (13-16)  
(Robert Frost: Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening)

In this stanza, the first line is a description about the woods and the last three lines have the meditative mode of expression that focuses on the importance of fulfilling promises.

## 2.4 Features of Literary Universals

Literary universals are the general qualities of literature which make literature a universal work of art. All those features in literature that are common in all times and places are called literary universals. I consider that poetry is a perfect genre of literature for it retains all the major features of literary universals.

### 2.4.1 The formal Feature

The formal feature of literature simply refers to the organizational shape or the existing shape of literary genre. It is the visible shape of literary form and can be broadly

classified into two forms: verse form and prose form. Poetry is composed in verse form. Stories, novels, essays, letters, biographies etc. are written in prose form. Dramas can be written in both prose and verse forms.

### 2.4.2 Rhetorical Feature

Rhetoric is the art of effective use of words in writing or speaking. The rhetorical feature of literature involves the special use of language such as the special arrangement of words and the employment of figures of speech like metaphor, simile, personification etc. The rhetorical feature makes language expressive and elevated.

Cuddon (1999) <sup>[8]</sup> defines metaphor is a figure of speech in which “one thing is described in terms of another” (p.507):

I am the seed ground. (9)  
(Sandburg: I am the People, the Mob)

Here, the poetic persona compares himself with a seed ground. Wales (2001) <sup>[33]</sup> identifies simile as a figure of speech whereby “two concepts are imaginatively and descriptively compared” (p.358). Simile uses “like” or “as” to make a comparison between two dissimilar entities:

O my love is like a red, red rose  
That’s newly sprung in June,  
O my love is like the melody  
That is sweetly played in tune. (1-4)  
(Robert Burns: A Red Rose)

In the above stanza, the poet has compared his love with a red, red rose and the melody by using a Syntactic marker “like”. A red, red rose suggests freshness that is pleasing to behold and the melody suggests tunefulness that is pleasing to hear.

I wandered lonely as a cloud  
That floats over vales and hills,  
When all at once I saw a crowd  
A host of golden daffodils. (1-4)  
(William Wordsworth: I wandered lonely as a Cloud)

In the above stanza, the poet has compared himself with a cloud by using a syntactic marker “as”. This comparison shows loneliness and wandering nature of the poet.

Wales (2001) <sup>[33]</sup> defines personification as a figure of speech or trope in which “inanimate objects animate non-human or abstract quality is given human attributes” (p.294). Personification can make an expression more compressed, intense and effective:

I bring fresh showers for the thirsting flowers  
From the seas and the streams,  
I bear light shade for the leaves when laid  
In their noonday dreams. (1-4)  
(Shelley: The Cloud)

In these lines “the cloud” has been personified. It has been treated as a person who says that he brings showers for the flowers and bears light shade for the leaves.

### 2.4.3 Prosodic Feature

Prosodic feature refers to the literary devices as rhyme, meter, rhythm, alliteration, assonance, consonance and onomatopoeia which are used very often in literature and particularly in poetry. Musical quality in poetry can be realized through these prosodic features of literature.

### 2.4.4 Symbolic Feature

Symbolic feature of literature refers to the use of symbols in literary writings. A symbol is something that signifies or represents something else. In literature, a symbol is a word or a phrase that signifies an object or person or event or idea. Symbolic use of language makes expressions implicit and suggestive:

Rose thou art sick.  
The invisible worm,  
That flies in the night  
In the howling storm:

Has found out thy bed  
Of crimson joy:  
And his dark secret love  
Does thy life destroy.

(Blake: The Sick Rose)

It is a highly symbolic poem. "Rose" stands for beauty, virginity, innocence, creation, love etc, whereas "worm" stands for destruction, selfishness, experience, masculinity, violence etc. These symbols make imagery of love and destruction.

### 2.4.5 Aesthetic Feature

Aesthetic feature refers to that aspect of literature that makes it beautiful and pleasant. It involves the blending of beauty and mental satisfaction. Beauty depends on the style, diction, presentation of the theme etc.

Lazar (1993) <sup>[19]</sup> writes that poetry does have some "fairly distinctive features which differentiate it from other forms of discourse" (p.96). Poetry reorganizes syntax, invents its own vocabulary, freely mixes registers and creates its own punctuation. Poetry draws creatively on a full range of archaisms and dialects, and generates vivid new metaphor. It patterns sounds and orders rhythms. Lennard (2010) <sup>[20]</sup> assumes that poetic syntax has "additional license and must be more complex still" (p.263).

### 3. Method

After studying several poems of different poets for a long time, remarkable poetic lines that hint at the main features and qualities of poetry of English have been mentioned as the sample of the study. The study method involves presenting, illustrating and explaining poetic lines to focus on the qualities of poetry to attain the main objective of the article.

### 4. Conclusion

Poetry, a popular genre of literature, is pleasing to study, but most of the readers find it peculiar and obscure because they are hardly familiar with the major qualities of poetry. I assume that the readers/students/ teachers will be capable of gaining

pleasure as well as better understanding of poetry if they are well familiar with the varied qualities, basic modes of expression and fascinating features of poetry. A poem can be well explained and examined by exploring its qualities.

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