

B.A. SECOND YEAR PAPER THREE

Types of Poetry

When studying poetry, it is useful first of all to consider the **theme** and the overall **development** of the **theme** in the poem. Obviously, the sort of development that takes place depends to a considerable extent on the type of poem one is dealing with. It is useful to keep two general distinctions in mind (for more detailed definitions consult Abrams 1999 and Preminger et al 1993): lyric poetry and narrative poetry.

Lyric Poetry

A **lyric poem** is a comparatively short, non-narrative poem in which a single speaker presents a state of mind or an emotional state. Lyric poetry retains some of the elements of song which is said to be its origin: For Greek writers the lyric was a song accompanied by the lyre.

Subcategories of the lyric are, for example elegy, ode, sonnet and dramatic monologue and most occasional poetry:

In modern usage, **elegy** is a formal lament for the death of a particular person (for example **Tennyson**'s *In Memoriam A.H.H.*). More broadly defined, the term elegy is also used for solemn meditations, often on questions of death, such as **Gray**'s *Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard*.

An **ode** is a long lyric poem with a serious subject written in an elevated style. Famous examples are **Wordsworth**'s *Hymn to Duty* or **Keats**' *Ode to a Grecian Urn*.

The **sonnet** was originally a love poem which dealt with the lover's sufferings and hopes. It originated in Italy and became popular in England in the Renaissance, when **Thomas Wyatt** and the **Earl of Surrey** translated and imitated the sonnets written by **Petrarch** (**Petrarchan sonnet**). From the seventeenth century onwards the sonnet was also used for other topics than love, for instance for religious experience (by **Donne** and **Milton**), reflections on art (by **Keats** or **Shelley**) or even the war experience (by **Brooke** or **Owen**). The sonnet uses a single stanza of (usually) fourteen lines and an intricate rhyme pattern (see **stanza forms**). Many poets wrote a series of sonnets linked by the same theme, so-called **sonnet cycles** (for instance **Petrarch**, **Spenser**, **Shakespeare**, **Drayton**, **Barrett-Browning**, **Meredith**) which depict the various stages of a love relationship.

In a **dramatic monologue** a speaker, who is explicitly someone other than the author, makes a speech to a silent auditor in a specific situation and at a critical moment. Without intending to do so, the speaker reveals aspects of his temperament and character. In [Browning's](#) *My Last Duchess* for instance, the Duke shows the picture of his last wife to the emissary from his prospective new wife and reveals his excessive pride in his position and his jealous temperament.

Occasional poetry is written for a specific occasion: a wedding (then it is called an **epithalamion**, for instance [Spenser's](#) *Epithalamion*), the return of a king from exile (for instance [Dryden's](#) *Annus Mirabilis*) or a death (for example [Milton's](#) *Lycidas*), etc.

Narrative Poetry

Narrative poetry gives a verbal representation, in verse, of a sequence of connected events, it propels characters through a plot. It is always told by a narrator. Narrative poems might tell of a love story (like [Tennyson's](#) *Maud*), the story of a father and son (like [Wordsworth's](#) *Michael*) or the deeds of a hero or heroine (like [Walter Scott's](#) *Lay of the Last Minstrel*).

Sub-categories of narrative poetry:

Epics usually operate on a large scale, both in length and topic, such as the founding of a nation ([Virgil's](#) *Aeneid*) or the beginning of world history ([Milton's](#) *Paradise Lost*), they tend to use an elevated style of language and supernatural beings take part in the action.

The **mock-epic** makes use of epic conventions, like the elevated style and the assumption that the topic is of great importance, to deal with completely insignificant occurrences. A famous example is [Pope's](#) *The Rape of the Lock*, which tells the story of a young beauty whose suitor secretly cuts off a lock of her hair.

A **ballad** is a song, originally transmitted orally, which tells a story. It is an important form of folk poetry which was adapted for literary uses from the sixteenth century onwards. The ballad stanza is usually a four-line stanza, alternating tetrameter and trimeter.

Descriptive and Didactic Poetry

Both lyric and narrative poetry can contain lengthy and detailed descriptions (**descriptive poetry**) or scenes in direct speech (**dramatic poetry**).

The purpose of a **didactic poem** is primarily to teach something. This can take the form of very specific instructions, such as how to catch a fish, as in [James Thomson](#)'s *The Seasons* (Spring 379-442) or how to write good poetry as in [Alexander Pope](#)'s *Essay on Criticism*. But it can also be meant as instructive in a general way. Until the twentieth century all literature was expected to have a didactic purpose in a general sense, that is, to impart moral, theoretical or even practical knowledge; [Horace](#) famously demanded that poetry should combine **prodesse** (learning) and **delectare** (pleasure). The twentieth century was more reluctant to proclaim literature openly as a teaching tool.