Chapter 5

Poetry

The imaginative, artistic forms of poetry are rooted in ancient ballads and chants. Many people consider poetry to be the highest form of literature. It is literature in its most intense, imaginative, and rhythmic form, expressing and interpreting the essence of experience through language. The rich imagery of poetry permits a far greater concentration of meaning than is found in prose.

Young children have a natural affinity for poetic language. They are intrigued with the sounds of language and enjoy the unusual combinations of words found in poetry, responding to its musical, rhythmic qualities. Poets use language in ways that not only re-create the rhythms of oral language children hear daily in conversation and play, but extend language to include novel and unusual applications. Childhood songs and nursery rhymes are natural springboards into poetry. These initial poetry experiences are followed a little later with jump rope rhymes and nonsense verse. As children mature, they especially enjoy chanting simple, rhythmic conversational poems as they go about daily activities. This kind of language play is a natural activity for young children, who relish inventing words and rolling them over their tongues.

Poetry can be categorized according to various criteria: poetic form, content, theme, and audience appeal. Developing a broad acquaintance with poetry that appeals to children will help nurture children's appreciation for poetry, and experimenting with various ways of sharing poetry will help build children's responses to poetry.

The Nature of Poetry

Poetry allows readers to perceive objects, experiences, or emotions in new and unique ways. Poets use rhythm, rhyme, sound, imagery, and figurative language to capture the very essence of life experience in words. Poets share their inner life through poetry. It is a more complex form of literature than can be easily defined or described. Poetry, however, must be distinguished from mere verse: "The best poetry is a union of beauty and truth…. The best poets speak to us with beauty that we can appreciate and in truths we can understand" (Russell, 1991, p. 77). Putting words to feelings makes them visible to the rest of the world so that many readers can recognize and identify with the feelings and images expressed. Recognizing these shared emotions helps us appreciate and express our own feelings.

Poetry is the simplest form of literature, according to Peek (1979). Its simplicity is deceptive, however: the language may be unpretentious and the number of words limited, but each word is carefully chosen to imply a range of ideas, images, and feelings. "You can't say anything much more briefly than a poem or folktale says it, nor catch a fact or feeling much more expressively" (Hearne, 1991, p. 107). Imagery enables poets to create dense meaning with a few words. They use words economically, choosing and polishing each one like a gem to create associations in readers' minds.

Elements of Poetry

Poets use words in melodious combinations to create its singing, lyric qualities. The sound patterns, figurative language, and emotional intensity contribute to poetry's uniqueness among the literary genre. Poets use sound patterns and **figurative language** *to connote sensory images appealing to sight, sound, touch, and smell.* These types of images build on children's experiences and relate to their lives, as shown in "Poem to Mud" by Zilpha Keatley Snyder,

which addresses a subject with which children are well acquainted in language that is natural to them. All of this enables them to appreciate poetry.

Poetic Language

Poetic language is compact—each word infers and suggests more than it says. Poetic language builds rich metaphors that stimulate readers by summoning hundreds of associations. Readers' individual connotative understandings are based on their emotional responses to words or concepts. In writing, poets concentrate greater meaning in individual words, relying heavily on imagery to convey meaning and on readers to associate sensations with those images.

One way of stimulating these associations in readers involves the use of sensory language, language that will arouse the senses of the readers and remind them of concrete experiences. Poets are always searching for fresh imagery to arouse the senses, a sample of which are shown below.

Sense	***Imagery***
vision	*fire-engine red, gigantic, elongated*
touch	*soft, hard, rough*
sound	*crunch, rumble, squeak*
smell	*rotting leaves, wet dog, rice cooking*
movement	*hop, skip, trudge*
taste	*sweet, salty, bitter*

Sound Patterns

Children learn the sound patterns of language before they learn words; in fact, it appears that sound patterns are instrumental in children's acquisition of language. The sounds of poetry attract young children, who realize early on that words have sounds as well as meanings. "They love to rhyme words, to read

alliterative tongue twisters, to laugh at funny-sounding names" (Fleischman, 1968, p. 553). Sound patterns are a delight to the ear of everyone, young and old. Rhyme, alliteration, onomatopoeia, and assonance are several devices commonly used by poets to achieve these sound patterns, and are often combined to give sound effects to a poem.

The delightful sound patterns of nursery rhymes, combined with their brevity and simplicity, invite children to roll them over their tongues. "Hickory Dickory Dock" is a good example.

Hickory, dickory, dock,
The mouse ran up the clock.
The clock struck one,
and down he run.
Hickory, dickory, dock.

Rhyme is one of the most recognizable elements in poetry, although poetry does not have to rhyme. **Rhyme** is based on *the similarity of sound between two words* such as *sold/mold* or *chrome/foam.*

A good rhyme, a repetition of sounds, pleases readers. It gives order to thoughts and pleasure to the ears. Rhyme gives poetry an appealing musical quality.

The most common form of rhyme in poetry is *end rhyme*, so named because it comes at the end of the line of poetry. End rhyme is illustrated in Rhoda Bacmeister's poem "Galoshes", which appears in May Hill Arbuthnot's collection *Time for Poetry*. *Internal rhyme* occurs within a line of poetry and is illustrated in the poem "Hughbert and the Glue" in Karla Kuskin's *Time for Poetry.* Rhyming patterns in poetry are grouped in stanzas. A common end rhyming

pattern is to rhyme the last word in every other line. The stanzas thus formed have special names depending on the number of lines in the rhyming pattern:

- two lines: couplet
- three lines: tercet
- four lines: quatrain
- five lines: quintet
- six lines: sextet
- seven lines: septet
- eight lines: octave

Alliteration is achieved through *repetition of consonant sounds at the beginning of words or within words.* It is one of the most ancient devices used in English poetry to give unity, emphasis, and musical effect. This technique is also shown in the poem “Galoshes.”

Onomatopoeia gives poetry a sensuous feeling. Onomatopoeia refers to *words that sound like what they mean.* For example, the word *bang* sounds very much like the loud noise to which it refers. The words *splishes, sploshes, slooshes,* and *slosh*es in the poem “Galoshes” create the sounds of walking in slush.

Assonance is *the close repetition of middle vowel sounds between different consonant sounds* such as the long /a/ sound in *fade* and *pale.* Assonance creates near rhymes rather than true rhymes commonly found in improvised folk ballads. Assonance gives unity and rhythmic effect to a line of poetry.

Rhythm

Rhythm is *the patterned flow of sound in poetry* created through combinations of words that convey a beat. Rhythm can set the sense of a story to a beat, but it can also emphasize what a writer is saying or even convey sense

on its own, as in a speaker's gestures. In traditional English poetry, rhythm is based on **meter,** *the combination of accent and numbers of syllables.* Patterns of accented and unaccented syllables and of long and short vowels work together to create meter and rhythm.

Rhythm is natural to children. In the first months of life they wave their arms and legs to the rhythm of nursery rhymes. By 18 months, they enjoy marching in circles to "ring around the rosie, all fall down." In school, primary-grade children use rulers and pencils to tap out the rhythm of David McCord's "Song of the Train" which appears in *Far and Few.* McCord shows his mastery of the rhythms of children's playground activities in "Bananas and Cream." As you read this poem, think about the recurring stress and the repeated words that create a rhythmic pattern.

Figures of Speech

Writers use *figures of speech,* also called *figurative language,* to express feelings and create mental pictures (images). Figures of speech offer writers many possibilities for expressing themselves. One of the major challenges in creating poetry is to choose figures of speech that offer fresh images and that uniquely express the writer. In fact, a poet's facility in using figures of speech is what makes the major difference between pleasant verse and fine poetry. The best known figures of speech are *simile, metaphor,* and *personification.*

A simile is a *figure of speech using* like *or* as *to compare one thing to another.* Most of you will recognize that "white as snow" is a simile, but this one is so timeworn that it has become a cliché. Poets must be acute observers, seeing and hearing in new ways in order to offer fresh figures of speech. Look for similes used by Valerie Worth in "Frog," a poem from her book *Small Poems.* Think about the observations that enabled the poet to create these comparisons.

Metaphor, like simile, is a *figure of speech comparing two items,* but instead of saying something is *like* something else, metaphor says that something is something else. Langston Hughes uses metaphor to arouse the reader's feelings and imagination in his poem "Dreams," calling life a "broken-winged bird" and a "barren field/Frozen with snow". These metaphors construct images that clarify the concept of dreams. The reader recognizes, of course, that life is not actually a bird or field, but these comparisons communicate images and feelings that are vivid and unique.

Personification *attributes human characteristics to something that does not actually have these qualities.* Poets have a talent for endowing inanimate objects with life, as Myra Cohn Livingston does in the poems in her book, *A Circle of Seasons.*

> Spring brings out her baseball bat, swings it
> through the air,
> Pitches bulbs and apple blossoms, throws
> them where it's bare,
> Catches dogtooth violets, slides to mead-
> owsweet,
> Bunts a breeze and tags the trees with green
> buds everywhere.

In this instance, the poet endows spring with the attributes of a baseball player, using the words *swings, pitches, throws catches, slides, bunts,* and *tags* to give human characteristics to a season of the year.

Types of Poetry

Free verse has become the popular form for contemporary children's poetry, while older poetry follows traditional forms. Authorities divide poetry into the categories of narrative, lyric, and dramatic, although these elements are often combined in a single poem (Bagert, 1992). Poets choose and combine poetic forms to create a form that best tells their ideas and feelings. This means that attempts to categorize poems by type are usually impossible.

Narrative Poems

Narrative poems tell stories. The story elements—plot, character, setting, and theme—make narrative poems especially appealing, because everyone enjoys a good story. Narrative poems that tell about the adventures of characters who are children or childlike are compelling reading for children. A. A. Milne, who created Winnie the Pooh, also created the narrative poems found in *Now We Are Six* and *When We Were Very Young.* These poems tell stories about children and their experiences.

Narrative poems may be short or long. *Book-length narrative poems are called* **epics.** Byrd Baylor and her illustrator Peter Parnall share their love of nature with readers in their illustrated epics *The Other Way to Listen; Hawk, I'm Your Brother;* and *The Way to Start a Day,* all of which have a desert setting and a Native American ambiance.

Aileen Fisher, the nature poet, immerses herself in the natural world and shares her feelings in narrative poems that tell stories about her observations of animals, insects, and birds. Through her writing, children who may not have thought about the happenings in their natural world prior to reading her poetry become sensitized to the natural world. Her epics *Listen Rabbit, Going Barefoot, Anybody Home,* and *Sing, Little Mouse* encourage all of us to experience nature in extraordinary ways.

Sorche Nic Leodhas's fanciful narrative poem *Always Room for One More* is quite different from Fisher and Baylor's nature poetry. In rhyming language, the poet tells a story about Lachie MacLachlan and his wife and ten children, who live in a tiny house happily until Lachie invites so many guests that the family is crowded out of their own home. Humorous narrative poems like this one are great favorites with children.

Dramatic Poetry

Dramatic poetry often appears in the form of a monologue in which a single character tells about a dramatic situation. The poet sometimes pretends to be something or someone else in a dramatic poem. Poets have pretended to be the wind, bugs, and seashells among other things. Many examples of dramatic form are found in traditional ballads, as well as in the work of Carl Sandburg, T. S. Eliot, and Robert Frost. Dramatic poetry often appears in anthologies of children's poetry.

Some dramatic poems are heard as a dialogue between two characters. An example of dialogue is seen in the dramatic poem in *Stories I Ain't Told Nobody Yet,* by Jo Carson. Others, like "A Bug Sat in a Silver Flower" by Kuskin are narrative as well as dramatic.

Lyric Poetry

Lyric poems are short, personal poems expressing the poet's emotions and feelings. They speak of personal experience and comment on how the writer sees the world. Originally such poems were written to be sung to the music of a lyre, so it is not surprising that lyric poetry has a feeling of melody and song. Lyric poetry is the most common form for children's poetry. It can be identified through the use of the personal pronouns *I, me, my, we, our,* and *us* or related words. The distinguishing characteristics of these poems are emotion, subjectivity, melodiousness, imagination, and description.

Free Verse

Free verse differs from traditional forms of poetry in that it is *"free" of a regular beat or meter.* Free verse usually does not rhyme, usually does not follow a predetermined pattern, and often contains fragmentary syntax. Free verse incorporates many of the same poetic devices that writers of structured poetry employ, but writers of free verse are more concerned with natural speech rhythms, imagery, and meaning than with rhyme and meter. "Treehouse," by Ted Kooser, appears in *Pocket Poems* by Paul Janeczko.

Whose kite was this?
It must have caught here
summers ago. Winters
have tugged it apart.
Here is its tail,
this piece of knotted rope
is still blowing.

Nonsense Poetry

Nonsense poetry *ordinarily is composed in lyric or narrative form, but it does not conform to the expected order of things. It defies reason. It is playful poetry in which meaning is subordinate to sound.* "Nonsense is a literary genre whose purpose is to rebel against not only reason but the physical laws of nature. It rejects established tenets and institutions, pokes fun at rational behavior, and touts destruction. It champions aberrations" (Livingston, 1981, p. 123).

Writers of nonsense poetry create unusual worlds in which objects and characters are recognizable but do absurd things and become involved in absurd situations. They do not behave in a sensible, reasonable manner. Nothing is impossible in nonsense poetry; perhaps this is the very reason it is so popular

with children. They know cows cannot jump over the moon, but enjoy the very implausibility of the antics:

Hey diddle diddle,
The cat played the fiddle,
The cow jumped over the moon.

Edward Lear, the master of nonsense, wrote poems that appealed to all ages. Although his *The Complete Nonsense Book* was published in 1958, it remains popular today. Lewis Carroll, another skilled writer of nonsense, wrote the delightful poems, “The Walrus and the Carpenter” and “Jabberwocky,” which appear in *Through the Looking Glass.* The popular contemporary poets Shel Silverstein and Jack Prelutsky also have created outstanding nonsense verse.

Nonsense writers use a variety of strategies in their craft. They invent words, as Laura Richards does in “Eletelephony.” Lear frequently uses alliteration, a common technique, in his “Pelican Chorus.” Personification lends itself well to nonsense verse, as animals, objects, even furniture take on human characteristics. Exaggeration is a useful device to writers of nonsense, as Shel Silverstein shows in “Sarah Cynthia Sylvia Stout Would Not Take the Garbage Out,” one of many nonsense poems in his book *Where the Sidewalk Ends.*

Summary

Poetry is compressed language and thought that implies more than it says. Poetry is literature in verse form. The good news about children’s poetry is its plentiful supply. Current poetry addresses contemporary themes and experiences that children can appreciate. Children see poetic language as natural unless they have had negative experiences that turn off their interest in this form. Unfortunately, many adults view poetry with a mixture of awe and insecurity because they believe they must have academic knowledge in order to do justice

to it in the home or classrooms. However, adults can read poetry with and to children as an organic part of their daily experiences and celebrations. Oral read-aloud experiences are the best way to introduce poetry to children.

Adults must carefully choose poetry for children. They need a wide acquaintance with all forms and types of poetry so they can discover that which will entice them to read. Children enjoy the rhyme, humor, rhythm, and movement of poetry; however, response to poetry is more personal than to other literary genre, so a wide-ranging collection of poetry enhances children's opportunities to respond to it. Emphasizing meaning, response, and enjoyment is important in incorporating poetry into children's lives.

Assignment

Read the following poems for class discussion.

Dreams

Hold fast to dreams
For if dreams die
Life is a broken-winged bird
That cannot fly.
Hold fast to dreams
For if dreams go
Life is a barren field
Frozen with snow.

Hughes, 1932

Galoshes

Susie's galoshes
Make splishes and sploshes
And slooshes and sloshes,
As Susie steps slowly
Along in the slush.
They stamp and they tramp
On the ice and concrete,
They get stuck in the muck and the mud;
But Susie likes much best to hear
The slippery slush
As it slooshes and sloshes
And splishes and sploshes,
All round her galoshes!

Bacmeister, 1940

Bananas and Cream

Bananas and cream,
Bananas and cream:
All we could say was
Bananas and cream.

We couldn't say fruit,
We wouldn't say cow,
We didn't say sugar—
We don't say it now.
Bananas and cream,

Bananas and cream,
All we could shout was
Bananas and cream.

We didn't say why,
We didn't say how;
We forgot it was fruit,
We forgot the old cow;
We *never* said sugar,
We only said *WOW!*

Bananas and cream,
Bananas and cream,
All that we want is
Bananas and cream!

We didn't say dish,
We didn't say spoon;
We said not tomorrow,
But NOW and HOW SOON

Bananas and cream,
Bananas and cream,
We yelled for bananas,
Bananas and cream!

McCord, 1952

Poem to Mud

Poem to mud—
Poem to ooze
Patted in pies, or coating your shoes.
Poem to slooze…
Poem to crud—
Fed by a leak, or spread by a flood.
Wherever, whenever, wherever it goes,
Stirred by your finger, or stained by your toes,
There's nothing sloppier, slipperier, floppier,
There's nothing slickier, stickier, thickier,
There's nothing quickier to make grown-ups sickier,
Trulier coolier
Than wonderful mud.

Snyder, 1969

Where Have You Been Dear?

Where
Have you been dear?
What
Have you seen dear?
What
Did you do there.?
Who
Went with you there?
Tell me
What's new dear?

What's
New with you dear?
Where
Will you go next?
What
Will you do?
"I do this and I do that.
I go here and I go there.
At times I like to be alone.
There are some thoughts that are my own
I do not wish to share."

Kuskin, 1980

A Bug Sat in a Silver Flower

A bug sat in a silver flower
Thinking silver thoughts.
A bigger bug out for a walk
Climbed up that silver flower stalk
And snapped the small bug down his jaws
Without a pause
Without a care
For all the bug's small silver thoughts.
It isn't right
It isn't fair
That big bug ate that little bug
Because that little bug was there.
He also ate his underwear.

Kuskin, 1980

Eletelephony

Once there was an elephant,
Who tried to use the telephant—
No! no! mean an elephone
Who tried to use the telephone—
(Dear me! I am not certain quite
That even now I've got it right.)
Howe'er it was, he got his trunk
Entangled in the telephunk;
The more he tried to get it free,
The louder buzzed the telephee—
(I fear I'd better drop the song
of elephop and telephong!)

Richards, 1983

Brachiosaurus

Brachiosaurus had little to do
but stand with its head in the treetops and chew,
it nibbled the leaves that were tender and green,
it was a perpetual eating machine.

Brachiosaurus was truly immense,
its vacuous mind was uncluttered by sense,
it hadn't the need to be clever and wise,
no beast dared to bother a being its size.

Brachiosaurus was clumsy and slow,
but then, there was nowhere it needed to go,
if Brachiosaurus were living today,
no doubt it would frequently be in the way.

Prelutsky, 1988

Dinosaur Dances

When the lights went low
Over prehistoric plains,
And the music beat
In rhythm with the rains,
All the mud and ooze
Showed the scientist remains
Of a prehistoric party.

Here's Tyrannosaurus
Dancing on his toes.
Here is Stegosaurus
In a ballet pose.
And with airy Pterodactyls
Anything goes
At a prehistoric party.

Brontosaurus sits
And waits this number out.
But here's Allosaurus
Doing "Twist and Shout"

And seven little coelurosaurs
Hopping all about
At the prehistoric party

“Goodness gracious,
It’s Cretaceous
Party time again!”

Yolen, 1990

Miss Mary Mack

Miss Mary Mack, Mack, Mack
All dressed in black, black, black
With silver buttons, buttons, buttons
All down her back, back, back.
She asked her mother, mother, mother
For fifteen cents, cents, cents,
To see the elephant, elephant, elephant
Jump the fence, fence, fence.
He jumped so high, high, high
That he touched the sky, sky, sky
And never came back, back, back
Till the Fourth of July, July, July.

Hubbell, 1991

Bedtime

Hop away
Skip away
Jump away
Leap!
Day is all crumpled
And lies in a heap.

Jump away
Skip away
Hop away
Creep!
Night comes and coaxes
The world to sleep

Hubbell, 1991

Inside a Poem

I doesn't always have to rhyme,
but there's the repeat of a beat, somewhere
an inner chime that makes you want to
tap your feet or swerve in a curve;
a lilt, a leap, a lightning split:—

Eve Merriam

The Swing

How do you like to go up in the swing,
Up in the air so blue.
Oh, I do think it the pleasantest thing
Ever a child can do!

Up in the air and over the wall,
Till I can see so wide,
Rivers and trees and cattle and all
Over the countryside—

Till I look down on the garden green,
Down on the roof so brown—
Up in the air I go flying again,
Up in the air and down!

Robert Louis Stevenson

Lost

Desolate and lone
All night on the lake
Where fog trails and mist creeps
The whistle of a boat
Calls and cries unendingly,
Like some lost child
In tears and trouble
Hunting the harbor's breast
And the harbor's eyes.

Carl Sandburg

Days

Some days my thoughts are just cocoons—
all cold, and dull and blind,
They hang from dripping branches in the grey
woods of my mind;
And other days they drift and shine—such free
and flying things!
I find the gold-dust in my hair left by
their brushing wings.

Karle Wilson Baker

Southbound on the Freeway

A tourist came in from Orbitville,
parked in the air, and said:

The creatures of this star
are made of metal and glass.

Through the transparent parts
You can see their guts.

Their feet are round and roll
on diagrams—or long

measuring tapes—dark
with white lines.

They have four eyes.
The two in the back are red.

Sometimes you can see a 5-eyed
one, with a red eye turning

on the top of his head.
He must be special—

the others respect him,
and go slow,
when he passes, winding
among them from behind.

They all hiss as they glide,
like inches, down the marked

Tapes. Those soft shapes,
shadowy inside

the hard bodies—are they
their guts or their brains?

May Swenson

Whispers

Whispers
tickle through your ear
telling things you like to hear.
Whispers
are as soft as skin
letting little words curl in.
Whispers
Come so they can blow
secrets others never know.

Myra Cohn Livingston

Dream Deferred

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 just sags
like a heavy load.

Or does it explode?

Langston Hughes

Winter has a pencil
For pictures clear and neat,
She traces the black tree-tops
Upon a snowy sheet,
But autumn has a palette
And a painting-brush instead,
And daubs the leaves for pleasure
With yellow, brown, and red.

Eleanor Farjeon

Who has seen the wind?
Neither I nor you;
But when the leaves hang trembling
The wind is passing through.

Christina Rossetti

The moon was but a chin of gold
A night or two ago—
And now she turns her perfect face
Upon the world below—

Her forehead is of amplest blond;
Her cheeks like beryl hewn—
Her eye unto the summer dew
The likest I have known.

Emily Dickinson

The Moon's the North Wind's cooky.
He bites it day by day,
Until there's but a rim of scraps
That crumble all away.

The South Wind is a baker.
He kneads clouds in his den,
And bakes a crisp new moon that . . . greedy
North . . . Wind . . . eats . . . again!

Vachel Lindsay

Discussion Questions

(1) How is poetry different from prose?

(2) What are the major characteristics of poetry?

(3) Why does poetry appeal to children?

(4) Do you think poetry is natural to children? Why or why not?

(5) How should poetry be presented to children? Why?

(6) What are at least three ways of describing poetry?

(7) What are some common misconceptions about poetry?

(8) Who are some of the popular contemporary children's poets?