

Writeous — by Ray

Per Verse

What is a poem, anyway?

If you research the question, you'll be frustrated. No one seems to have a definition. It's just as well. If you found one, would you accept it? Probably not.

Although we can't define it, we can say a lot of things about what a poem is. We can also say something about what it is not: A poem is not just a fragment of prose that doesn't fit any other category.

A poem is literature's *aristocracy*. This is not to denigrate essays, short stories, novels, plays, news stories, or any other form of writing. But I think a piece of writing has to *earn* the title 'poem.'

To the general public, anything that has a regular meter and rhyme is a 'poem.' That would include Shakespeare's sonnets, Hallmark cards, and some advertising jingles.

But we are writers, so we need to look deeper. We need to see the poem as *creative art*.

Because it is *art*, a poem is not about 'you' or 'me.' It is about 'us.' It must illuminate something of the universal. It must be about our species and our experience. It must speak for — and to — humanity.

Another characteristic is that poetry does not approach through the mind. It is not a rational left-brain argument. No. Poetry assails us through our hearts and our senses. It sneaks under the verbal, and goes directly to the soul. It is intensely concentrated. I think of it as a literary I.V. — a transfusion. Prose gets chewed, swallowed, digested and assimilated. Poetry goes right into the vein.

While the brain is distracted by words, the poem quietly infuses us with mood, nuance, music, associations, repetition, context, and other ingredients in its magic potion.

To accomplish this stunning feat, a poem uses every possible tool: rhythm, rhyme, imagery, connotation, form, layout... the list is long. And the more each part contributes, the better the whole is.

This is not to imply that each poem needs to use *all* of these. But it is meant to say that every element, every syllable, every sound, every bit of punctuation is significant. Each element must contribute in multiple ways.

A poem is far more than the sum of its words. It is a synthesis where each part joins the others in a symbiotic relationship. True synergy. Unlike prose, the changing, or deleting, of any part — no matter how small — changes the entire character of the complete work.

Obviously, poems are composed of words. But each word is carefully chosen, not only for 'meaning,' but for sound, connotation, association. There are huge differences between the words, 'swamp,' 'bog,' 'fen,' 'quagmire' — even though Roget lists them as synonyms.

Look at one of your poems! Pick a word and change it! If the entire character of the poem isn't affected, something's amiss.

So, what kind of poem should you write? And how?

I write many styles and forms of poetry. I can't tell you if I write good poetry. But I can discuss how I go about it.

Every poem I write starts out as free verse — well, more precisely, 'free association.' This is because *the most important part of a poem is 'what' it says — the idea*. Hopefully, the 'how' will reveal itself later.

So it all starts with jotting down phrases, words, about *the idea*. When I have exhausted my store of these, I start to work with them — like a sculptor kneading clay to make it pliable. When things go well, a *gestalt* slowly forms — a concept, a mood, a 'position' — something that unifies all the jottings. Those pieces that don't fit are changed — or filed away for a different poem.

Finally, the poem reveals itself. (Often it is very different from what I'd originally envisioned.) It has now taken on its own life.

When all these elements seem 'right,' I start to organize them into larger blocks — stanzas, sections — putting together the parts that seem to want to be joined.

At this stage, a 'form' may present itself ("This screams to be a sonnet."), or it may not. It doesn't matter. *The form either grows organically out of the content, or it doesn't*. It does no good to hammer the poem into a mold. It will become brittle and shatter.

Finally, when the pieces are together, I start to hone and polish. I consider each word, sound, syllable. (Many times at this stage, I find I was wrong about the form. I try something else. *The poem will reveal its own nature*.)

Finally, I put the poem away. I let it 'steep.' Over the next few days, and weeks, changes will occur to me. When I consistently find that the change I want to make is already there, the poem is acceptable.

Notice I said 'acceptable.' Most poets I ask agree: a poem is never finished; it is simply 'acceptable.' Poets are constantly tinkering, honing, revising poems — even after they've been published. And if they're not, they wish they were.

We've spent three months discussing poetry. I hope some of this has been of use to you — or at least interesting. These are only my opinions. I'm sure you will form your own. I wish you success — but, above all, I wish you the joy of writing. □