

What is Poetry?

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Of all of the creative arts, poetry is the most difficult to define. Indeed, for much of human history, poetry has accompanied humankind as our method of expressing feelings about and reactions to the world around us. It is, perhaps, more useful to define what poetry is not.

Poetry is not something available to only a select few. Poetry is not confined to dusty books in dark corners of large libraries on the campuses of major universities. Poetry is not the business solely of bearded and bespectacled professors encased in their offices. Poetry is not worthless. Poetry is not beyond you, nor is it a waste of your time.

Poetry is the soul's attempt to make a statement in such a way that normal words or sentences simply would not do justice. But, as the annual thousands of rejection letters received by aspiring poets across the nation from poetry journals suggest, not everyone can be a poet. The realm of the professional poet is, perhaps, a space that is beyond most of us. Poetry, however, is not the exclusive purview of the poet. Anyone can write poetry. You can write poetry.

The first thing you should do is read good poetry. You do not need to do this in order to copy, recreate, or even emulate what you read. You need to read good poetry so you can determine for yourself what makes poetry good for you. I personally recommend Seamus Heaney, Langston Hughes, and Robert Penn Warren. Start there, and then see where those poets take you.

In the end, though, all one needs to write a good poem is the ability to see past the expectations held by most people as to what poems must be. Poems do not have to rhyme; I assure you, they do not have to rhyme. Poems do not have to follow a set pattern, but they can. Poems do not have to use the most flowery and artistic language. What poems must do is touch the readers' souls. A good poem reaches its readers in such a way that an image, a sense, or a feeling lingers with that reader for minutes, moments, hours, days, and lifetimes. A reader's mind returns to the idea time and time again that was found in a good poem.

If you can capture these things in just one poem in your entire lifetime, you will find the true definition of poetry. A good poem persuades the reader that it is a good poem through its connection to that reader's mind, body, and soul. A good place to start, however, is your own soul.