

## THE ART OF SPEAKING POETRY

Poetry defies definition. It appeals to the senses as much, or may be more, as to the intellect. Poets through the ages have attempted to define poetry:

*Poetry is what gets lost in translation* **Robert Frost**

*Poetry is a subject as precise as geometry* **Gustave Flaubert (letter)**

*Poetry is at bottom a criticism of life* **Matthew Arnold**

*Poetry is a way of taking life by the throat* **Robert Frost**

*Poetry (is) a speaking picture, with this end; to teach and to delight*  
**Sir Philip Sidney**

*All that is not prose is verse; and all that is not verse is prose* **Moliere**

*Poetry is something more philosophical and more worthy of serious attention than history* **Aristotle**

The speaking of poetry is an art where the voice and text should marry. One is mutually dependent on the other for sound and sense. The speaker needs to also marry two clear tensions in the text: the overall structure and style of the writing and your very own personal association to words and images.

## THE STRUCTURE OF VERSE

Verse needs the structure it chooses in order to hold up the words it uses. The patterns are signalled in a number of ways:

Rhythm

The length

Rhyme

Alliteration

Assonance

Repetition

Punctuation

Antithesis

Emphasis

Onomatopoeia

Metre

Echoism

## **VERSE FORMS**

There are many types of verse form which include:

### **LYRIC**

There is a great deal of variety of form, style and subject matter in the simple lyric. It was originally spoken to the accompaniment of the musical instrument, the lyre. It is the poetry of thought, description, reflection and subjective emotion. It describes feelings, not actions. A lyrical poem is usually written in stanzas and should be marked by the continuity of thought.

- the speaker must capture the **poet's** thoughts and feelings
- no gesture or movement should distract from the stillness
- speaking a lyric is not a **performance**
- the speaker needs to study the poet's life and other works in relation to the lyric being spoken

## **ODE**

The ode is a simple lyric of one basic thought that is developed, the theme is more lofty .

## **ELEGY**

This is a subjective poem written on the death of someone

## **SONNET**

A sonnet is a compact piece of poetic writing (literally meaning ‘little sound’ or ‘short poem’) that intensely explores a theme both intellectually and emotionally. The writing marries head and heart. It is never long enough to bore a listener. It normally has 14 lines of iambic pentameter. There are 2 main structures of sonnets: **Italian and Shakespearean**. The Italian form comprises of an octet and a sestet. The Shakespearean form has 3 quatrains and usually ends with a rhyming couplet. Its intellectual progress follows the basic rules of classical thinking:

- first line of thought opens up a debate
- the idea is then explored in the next 11 lines
- a resolution or conclusion is reached in the final two lines

The basic argumentative structure you find in the sonnet is followed by any reasoned speech-maker, judge, lawyer, or business executive selling an idea. You make a proposition, gather the reasons or evidence to make it acceptable, and then cap the argument with a punch that irrefutably rings of truth.

## **NARRATIVE**

A narrative poem tells a story; there is plot and characters. There is an introduction, climax and conclusion. Language, rhythm, metre, rhyme, plot and portrayal of character must be in complete harmony.

## **BALLAD**

A ballad was originally a story in legend or history or of local interest spoken often with a musical instrument. It wasn't written down but was handed down from memory.

In speaking a ballad:

- gesture may be used to reinforce the story
- it is audience centred
- it requires bolder modulation
- it has dramatic shape

## **LIGHT VERSE**

There are 3 elements of Light Verse:

- 1 poetry written specifically for performance
- 2 poetry having for its subject matter everyday social life of its period
- 3 nonsense poetry with its properties and techniques

An essential ingredient is that it is written to **Entertain**.

It also included parodies, satire and occasional verse.

(occasional verse *(poetry written in commemoration of an event)*)

Light verse::

- usually tells a story
- probably contains dialogue
- has vivid imagery especially in use of adjectives
- is enhanced by use of gesture (movement may also be appropriate)
- requires flexible voice
- has dramatic shape
- is audience centred

## FREE VERSE

Free verse is poetry which does not necessarily follow a particular structure or form. It may still have a structure or form but not necessarily a traditional or conventional one. What it does set out to do is to have a regular rhyme or rhythm but uses such elements much more freely and creatively.

In speaking free verse the key is to look at how the poem is set out on the page. Notice how the poet uses short and long lines. The speaker should take approximately the same amount of time for each line. The punctuation will also be a guide in interpreting a poem. The poet will often take a phrase from one line to the next. This means the speaker must be skilled in the technique of suspensive pause. This gives the speaker a vital clue as to where to place the emphasis.

The speaker must constantly explore and experiment, always in search of the right levels and balances. You can break all the rules of verse in order to find words and images. Equally you can play the text for all its power in terms of verse structure or iambic line ending, temporarily suspending fine connections to the word, before the two processes come back together. But in the final analysis the writer's text and the speaker's text should sound as equal as can be.

Adrian Mitchell, in his poem **The One About Fred Astaire** used free verse to capture the tap dancing Fred Astaire was famous for. His structure mimics the movements of Astaire dancing.

*No*

*it's*

*not so much*

*how*

*he*

*moves so much*

*so much*

*as how he*

*stops*

*and then moves so*

*much again all*

*over*

*every*

*anywhere*

*all over*

*so much*

*thank you*

*Mister Astaire*

*so much*

Notice how this is just one sentence. Look at how the words are spaced on the page so that the stanzas build a little more in verses one, two and three and then there are just two lines, then a substantial pause before the last two words. You might try speaking the poem as you dance around, fitting the phrases to your movement.

To faithfully render the poet's words and thoughts takes time and skill but the rewards are immeasurable.