

Lesson 1

What a Poem Looks Like

You may have noticed that poems are very different from “regular” kinds of writing—chapter books, modern plays, essays, newspaper articles and stories. One difference is that regular writing, called *prose*, looks different from poetry. One kind of poem, called a *shape poem*, illustrates this fact very well. A shape poem, also called *pattern poetry*, is shaped into a recognizable object, such as the wings of a bird or an altar of sacrifice, as in the poems “Easter Wings” and “The Altar,” both written by an English priest named George Herbert (1593–1633). Shape poems, however, are rather rare in English poetry.

A more commonly noticed difference in appearance between prose and poetry is that the one is divided into paragraphs, while the other is divided up into *stanzas*. Paragraphs in prose are divided by indentations, or spaces before every first line. There is one main idea for each paragraph. When a writer begins a new idea, he must begin a new paragraph. Stanzas of poetry, however, are not divided by indentations, but are separated by spaces between them. Look at the following poem by the American poet Emily Dickinson (1830–1886), titled “Dawn.” There are two stanzas in the poem.

DAWN BY EMILY DICKINSON

When night is almost done,
And sunrise grows so near
That we can touch the spaces,
It’s time to smooth the hair

And get the dimples ready,
And wonder we could care
For that old faded midnight
That frightened but an hour.

You will notice that after the fourth line of the poem’s first stanza there is a space to separate it from the second. You will also notice that the lines of the poem do not extend to the very right of the page as they do in prose. Although some lines of poetry may be longer than the lines

in this poem, they are generally much shorter than the width of a page. The American poet Oliver Wendell Holmes (1841–1935) once said that the length of a line is the length of what the poet may naturally say without taking a breath. Read Emily Dickinson’s poem out loud yourself and see if he is right!

In addition to stanzas and line length, poems are different from prose works in that they often are much shorter and sometimes contain unusual punctuation. One twentieth-century American poet named E. E. Cummings (1894–1962) made his trademark in the placement of commas, periods and words as well as his use of lower case letters (he didn’t use capitals). Some believe that these strange aspects of his poetry forced the reader to pay closer attention to what he was trying to communicate. Others believe it was a gimmick or trick that did not serve much use. Whatever the case, it certainly has made him stand out from other poets. But there are more important differences than how the poem appears on the page that we will discuss later.

One of the most famous poems written by the modern American poet William Carlos Williams (1883–1963) is “This Is Just to Say.” Although it is written as a three-stanza poem, it really reads like a hastily written note that would be taped on the door of a refrigerator. It consists of three separate sentences, in which the speaker says that he has taken some plums out of the “icebox,” or refrigerator, and eaten them and then says that he is sorry with an explanation that he could not stop himself from taking them, as they were so “sweet” and “cold.” If it had been written out as prose, extending to the right end of the page, “This Is Just to Say” would seem like an ordinary note. However, as it is written out in stanzas with very short lines and unusual punctuation, the reader is encouraged to think beyond the poem’s obvious meaning. Do the plums represent something else? What does the speaker mean when he says the plums were *sweet* and *cold*? Is he saying stolen pleasures are sweet? Is the speaker calling the person that he is writing the note to sweet but “cold”?

One of the most remarkable aspects of “This Is Just to Say” is what happens when a reader reads it. Basically, three common sentences are put into stanzas with short lines and *voilà*, the work becomes a poem—and one of the most popular and talked about poems of the twentieth

century! Williams' poem is a good illustration of the common understanding of poetry's power to suggest something other than what it says on the surface—to go beyond the obvious. While prose is direct and says what it means, readers expect poetry to be *suggestive*. “This is Just to Say” may not be the most beautiful poem, but it is a clever poem. Williams was able to use the readers' expectations regarding poetic form to transform his ordinary, nothing-special-about-it refrigerator note into poetry!

Exercise 1.1

Write ‘T’ if the statement is true and ‘F’ if it is false.

1. ___ A fantasy story is one example of prose.
2. ___ Emily Dickinson was an English poet who lived in the 1700's.
3. ___ One difference between prose and poetry is that prose is more suggestive—it often does not mean what it says.
4. ___ E. E. Cummings did not obey the rules of punctuation in his poems.
5. ___ George Herbert was an English priest who lived and wrote in the 1600's.
6. ___ The poet George Herbert wrote pattern poetry.
7. ___ Oliver Wendell Holmes believed that the length of a line is the length of what the poet may naturally say without taking a breath.
8. ___ William Carlos Williams wrote the poem “This Is Just to Say.”
9. ___ “Easter Wings” is called a shape poem because it is shaped like bird's wings.
10. ___ A “paragraph” of a poem is called a stanza.

Exercise 1.2

Be able to answer the following questions orally.

1. Mention specific differences between prose and poetry as it appears on the page.

