

Lyric

Introduction

When we think of poetry, we often imagine a poem expressing personal emotions such as love, grief, joy, loneliness, or hope. Such poems belong to one of the oldest and most influential literary genres: the lyric.

Unlike the *epic*, which tells the story of heroic actions, or drama, which presents characters through dialogue, the lyric primarily expresses the inner life of a speaker. It explores thoughts, emotions, perceptions, memories, and moments of intense experience. Since the Romantic period, the lyric has been regarded as the quintessential form of poetry.

Etymology

The word lyric comes from the Greek word *lyrikos*, meaning a song sung to the accompaniment of a lyre. The lyre was a stringed musical instrument used in ancient Greece. Originally, lyric poetry was meant to be sung, not merely read. Although modern lyric poems are usually written for reading rather than singing, they retain many musical qualities such as rhythm, melody, and emotional intensity.

Definition

Abrams defines a lyric as a fairly short poem uttered by a single speaker who expresses a state of mind or a process of perception, thought, and feeling. The emphasis is not on telling a long story but on expressing an experience from within.

Essential Characteristics of Lyric Poetry

Lyric poetry generally possesses several important features:

A. Most lyric poems are spoken by one voice. The speaker may reflect, remember, praise, complain, meditate, celebrate, or question. This speaker is called the lyric speaker or persona.

B. The lyric focuses on feelings, thoughts, memories, perceptions, imagination, and meditation. Unlike narrative poetry, external action is usually minimal.

C. Most lyrics are comparatively short. The poem aims to capture one emotion, idea, or moment with great intensity.

D. Lyric language is emotionally charged. The poem seeks not merely to inform but to move the reader. Abrams remarks that lyric speech often has the quality of an epiphany; a sudden moment of emotional or spiritual insight.

E. Because of its origin, lyric poetry often employs rhythm, repetition, sound patterns, rhyme, and melody. These musical qualities distinguish lyric from ordinary speech.

The Lyric Speaker

Many students assume that "I" = the poet. This assumption is often incorrect. The lyric speaker may be the poet, a fictional character, a historical figure, or an invented voice. Therefore, **Poet ≠ Lyric Speaker**. Even when the speaker resembles the poet, the voice may be artistically shaped for literary effect.

Dramatic Lyrics

Abrams discusses a special form called the *dramatic lyric*, which generally have the following characteristics: one speaker, identifiable dramatic situation, usually addresses another person, seeks to persuade, praise, blame, or justify. Unlike the *dramatic monologue*, the emphasis falls primarily on the speaker's argument rather than on revealing character.

Variety within the Lyric

lyric poetry includes an enormous variety of forms.

I. Love Lyrics: express love directly.

Examples include Robert Burns' *My Love is Like a Red, Red Rose*, Elizabeth Barrett Browning's *How Do I Love Thee?*, and Andrew Marvell's *To His Coy Mistress*.

II. Ceremonial Lyrics: written for public occasions. Examples include Ben Jonson's *To the Memory of William Shakespeare*, and Walt Whitman's *O Captain! My Captain!* These poems speak in a public rather than private voice.

III. Meditative Lyrics: the speaker reflects deeply upon memory, nature, mortality, religion, or existence. Examples include Wordsworth's *Ode: Intimations of Immortality*, and Matthew Arnold's *Dover Beach*.

IV. Lyrics of Personal Feeling: brief poems expressing an intense emotional state. Examples include Shelley's *To Night*, and Emily Dickinson's *Wild Nights—Wild Nights!*

V. Lyrics of Moral or Philosophical Reflection: the speaker develops a sustained sequence of observation, meditation, and reasoning. Examples include Yeats' *Sailing to Byzantium*. Such poems often show a process of thought rather than a single isolated emotion.

Lyric and Emotion

Emotion is central to lyric poetry. However, lyric poetry is not merely emotional outburst. The emotions are shaped, ordered, controlled, and artistically expressed. The poet transforms personal feeling into artistic form.

Lyric and Music

The original lyric was sung. Although modern lyrics are generally read, their language often remains musical through metre, rhyme, repetition, alliteration, and rhythm. The adjective *lyrical* is still used to describe language that possesses musical beauty.

Lyric and Romanticism

During the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, critical opinion changed dramatically. Previously, epic and tragedy had been regarded as the greatest literary forms. The Romantic movement elevated the lyric to become the highest and purest form of poetry.

This transformation profoundly influenced modern literary criticism.

J. S. Mill on Lyric

John Stuart Mill wrote, in *The Two Kinds of Poetry* (1833), that Lyric poetry is "more eminently and peculiarly poetry than any other." Mill believed lyric best represented the essence of poetry because of its intimate expression of consciousness.