



Here we are again, searching for that ever-elusive definition that will make this whole business seem simple. Let's review what we've learned so far: Poetry can be rhymed or unrhymed. Its lines can stick to a set syllable count (or not, if you want to write free-form). Also it can include a repeating refrain. In addition to this, poetry can have a set rhythm which can be altered to add interest. And you can insert pauses at the end or in the middle of the lines.

We have also established that poetry can adopt no formula at all -- with lines of varying length, no rhyme and no rhythm (except the natural rhythm of the language). And sometimes, by adopting the guise of prose, poetry can skirt the very boundaries of what poetry is.

We have learned that it can be profound, beautiful and emotionally intense and it can also be frivolous, silly, and fun. It can parody other poetry, be used as a memory aid or be an expression of self-awareness. It can be made to follow set formulas of nouns, verbs and adjectives. And its very words can be used to form a visual picture.

Basically, it can be a lot of things. But whatever form you choose, you will struggle with that age-old problem: how do I make my meaning clear, without exerting too much control over the poem? How can I loosen my grip a bit and trust my reader to get the point? How can I stop over-explaining everything?

Clarity, indeed, poses its own challenges. If you try to control what the reader thinks about your message too much, your poetry becomes stiff. Yet, if people can't understand what you are saying, you've lost them. So how do you do it? How do you reach that happy medium between clarity and subtlety?

The answer ... now this is important so pay close attention and heed my words, grasshopper, is ... "Don't know." Practice, growth, maturity, experimentation, reading and discussing your verses with other poets, studying the works of the greats -- all of this helps, but ultimately poetry is an ongoing process and it may take a while for you to find your feet. In the meantime, have fun with it and keep writing. And take a look at this...



It is a time-honoured tradition: to write stuff that makes no ruddy sense. And so we pause here to look at nonsense poetry, for even the silliest of the silly has something to teach us. Nonsense verse comes in all shapes and sizes from

Edward Lear's "Owl and the Pussy Cat" to Lewis Carroll's "Jabberwocky." However it may be said that it can be divided into two categories...

Category One consists of those poems in which the language is perfectly clear, but the meaning is absurd. For instance, take this children's rhyme:

Old Dan Tucker was a fine old man,  
Washed his face in the frying-pan,  
Combed his hair with a wagon-wheel,  
And died of toothache in his heel.

Likewise, the American folksong, "Oh, Susanna!" gives us this example:

It rained all day the night I left --  
The weather, it was dry,  
The sun so hot I froze to death  
Susanna, don't you cry!

As you can see, they're weird. I am a firm believer, however, that weird is not totally without merit. There is a freshness to nonsense

verse that is born out of its stubborn insistence not to be logical. It is anarchic and hence, you don't have to concentrate on being deep and meaningful and getting some profound message across. You can just play and this may help you relax your grip on what your reader is thinking. Here are my own efforts, which conveniently I was able to whip up in a few minutes:

Said Bird to Tree, "Where are your leaves?  
The cold, cold rain is lashing me."  
Said Tree to Bird, "The answer's clear,  
This is my naked time of the year."

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Old Miss Swinton of Hampstead Heath  
Awoke in such a dither,  
She brushed her hair and combed her teeth  
And then began to shiver.  
"The heat of June, it chills me so,"  
She wraps a shawl around her,  
"Oh how I pine for nice warm snow  
And grey rain clouds up yonder."  
She rode her bike across the street  
Then walked ten miles to town.  
But had put her shoes on the wrong feet  
And so kept tumbling down.

You get the idea. There is, however, another type of nonsense poem that is even more useful in terms of getting you to relax. I call it "Category Two" and it consists of words that have no meaning whatsoever. I can hear you even now saying, "What!?! How can a word have no meaning? Is that not the very definition of what a word is?"

Read on and all will become clear...

Mean Song

by Eve Merriam

Snickles and podes  
Ribble and grodes:  
That's what I wish you.

A nox in the groot,  
A root in the stoot  
And a gock in the forbeshaw, too.

Keep out of sight  
For fear that I might  
Glom you a gravely snave.

Don't show your face  
Around any place  
Or you'll get one flack snack in the bave.

Now you've got to admit -- that's just fun. And what better way to practice not taking yourself too seriously than to write about snickles and podes. But I can hear your objection: surely, you say, this is gibberish and nothing like this is ever going to make an impact on the literary world. Really? Well, how about this famous ode by Lewis Carroll?

Jabberwocky

`Twas brillig, and the slithy toves  
Did gyre and gimble in the wabe;  
All mimsy were the borogoves,

And the mome raths outgrabe.

“Beware the Jabberwock, my son!  
The jaws that bite, the claws that catch!  
Beware the Jubjub bird, and shun  
The furious Bandersnatch!”

He took his vorpal sword in hand:  
Long time the manxome foe he sought --  
So rested he by the Tumtum tree,  
And stood awhile in thought.

And as in uffish thought he stood,  
The jabberwocky, with eyes of flame,  
Came whiffling through the tulgey wood,  
And burbled as it came!

One, two! One, two! And through and through  
The vorpal blade went snicker-snack!  
He left it dead, and with its head  
He went galumphing back.

“And has thou slain the jabberwocky?  
Come to my arms, my beamish boy!  
Oh frabjous day! Callooh! Callay!”  
He chortled in his joy.

This poem, featured in Through the Looking Glass, is one of Lewis Carroll's most famous. It would seem a bit of gibberish did him no harm at all. And what apt gibberish it is! Is there a better way to express happiness than “Oh frabjous day! Callooh! Callay!”? Personally, I think not. But much more to the point: here we have an excellent

example of a confident writer. He gets his point across very neatly: you can vividly see and hear the young hero “galumphing” on his horse. And yet Carroll relinquishes the lion’s share of the control to the reader. Many of his words are not found in the dictionary and have no accepted definition. They merely suggest meaning through their sound. But it is up to us, as the readers, to ultimately decide what “brillig, and the slithy toves” describes.

This is the exact opposite of concrete poetry. Here it doesn’t matter at all what the poem looks like. Sound is evocative and, ultimately, is everything. With Carroll’s example firmly in mind I’ll try my hand at it....

Um....

Got nothing yet...

(45 minutes later) Oh for goodness sake...

Okay, how hard can it be to make up gibberish?...

Aha! I’ve got it!

The fellig laves of brust and gold  
Did flitter to the ground  
And tinall creatures forathered nuts  
And snuggly hunkered down.  
For the droul storm was looming nigh  
With fusting bitold winds  
And fricing rain and blaying skies  
And thunder’s crackle-dins.

It battered burroles, pounded nairs  
And flattened flowants low  
It laid the trees all stark and bare  
Then came the icensnow.  
Then o'er this ravaged landscape,  
The sun began to gline  
And whispered "life" to creatures here  
With celestial lirmth sublime.

I have finally found the starting point if you want to write poems like "Jabberwocky." Think of what you want to say and often two or more ways to say it will pop into your head. For instance, my brown or rust-colored leaves became "brust", foraged and gathered became "forathered" and dread and foul became "droul". You get the idea. And boy is it fun! Why not give it a go?