



Poetry Rocks!

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Tool 13

The Bard

WHAT IS POETRY MADE OF?
SOUND
Repetition

PURPOSE

To work (and play) with Sound in your poems through the repetition of words, phrases, lines, and/or stanzas.

BACKGROUND

As we focused on consonant and vowel sounds in our last tool, we were making use of the music of repetition. Today, we'll play with the repetition of words, phrases, lines, sentences, and/or stanzas. These are all elements that can be repeated to good sound effect.

Repetition is a powerful memory aid, and it's also very pleasing—so pleasing in fact, that in medieval Gaelic and British culture, monarchs and noblemen often employed their own professional poet, called a bard, to commemorate the patron's ancestors and to praise the patron's own activities, using repetition and rhyme.

I'm sure it was the repetition of the word *wonderful*—as well as the rhyme and message of the poem—that had my seven-year-old self remember by heart through the years most of this poem in my third grade reader:

Great, Wide, Beautiful, Wonderful World

Great, wide, beautiful, wonderful World,
With the wonderful water round you curled,
And the wonderful grass upon your breast—
World, you are beautifully drest.

The wonderful air is over me,
And the wonderful wind is shaking the tree,
It walks on the water, and whirls the mills,
And talks to itself on the tops of the hills.

You friendly Earth! how far do you go,
With the wheat-fields that nod and the rivers that flow,
With cities and gardens, and cliffs, and isles,
And people upon you for thousands of miles?

Ah, you are so great, and I am so small,
I tremble to think of you, World, at all;
And yet, when I said my prayers to-day,
A whisper inside me seemed to say,
"You are more than the Earth, though you are such a dot:
You can love and think, and the Earth cannot!"

~ William Brighty Rands

WHAT TO DO

Write a poem in which you use repetition as a poetic device to increase its musicality. Keep in mind that you need to repeat an element enough so that the reader "hears" it—three is a good minimum number—yet not overdo your repetition and tire or exasperate your reader. (It's possible for multiple repetitions to be humorous or clever, but it takes a deft hand. Unless, that is, you are writing a *litany*. See below.)

Here are the elements at your disposal for repetition:

- Words: Any word you love will do, as in "Great, Wide, Beautiful, Wonderful World." If you want a challenge, one poetic form that uses repetition of words in a particular pattern at the end of lines is the [sestina](#).
- Phrases: Try a litany, which is, according to *Dictionary of Poetic Terms* by Jack Elliott Myers and Don C. Wukasch, "...a chant-like list meant as an incantation or highly emotional catharsis." My poem below is one example. There are many others, including Billy Collins's "[Litany](#)." You can listen to Billy's hilarious live rendition of it [here](#).
- Lines: A refrain is one example of a repeated line, as in my poem "Eat a Peach, Amanda" that served as an example of The Sprint in Tool 5. And

think of the power of the final repeated line in Robert Frost's "[Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening](#)."

Your graduate level challenge, should you want one, is to try a [villanelle](#) or a [pantoum](#), two poetic forms utilize repetition of entire lines.

- Stanzas: A repeated stanza is a longer form of refrain.

You may want to incorporate more than one of these repeated elements in your poem.

EXAMPLE

In one of the first poetry classes I ever took, our teacher, Judy Goldman, read us a sentence by Edward Hirsch and asked us to write in response. A litany to my mother came flowing out. The result became one of my first published poems.

The Color of Crushed Strawberries

*My mother is dressed in a dress
the color of crushed strawberries.*

~ Edward Hirsch

My mother is dressed in a flannel nightgown
the color of faded morning glories, on her knees
on the hardwood floor of her bedroom
mumbling Hail Mary's, begging forgiveness
for the sin of not wanting
five children's worth of work.

My mother is dressed in an apron
the color of ashes, by the stove
frying sugared parsnips, spearing chunks
of city chicken, serving salted complaints
about our not appreciating her.

My mother is dressed in corduroy pants
the color of sodden newspapers, on a stepladder,
the smell of ammonia strong, the window
panes squeaking, the streaks meekly disappearing
in the face of her furious rubbing.

My mother is dressed in a raveled sweater
the color of old snow, scrubbing socks
on a washboard. She is not dressed
in her wedding rings. They hang
on the Virgin Mary's white ceramic hands,
the palms together, pointing upward in supplication.

How I longed to see her in
lipstick the color of crushed strawberries,
humming as she dressed in blue watered silk.

But summer upon summer, after we'd bruised
our knees on the packed soil of the fields,
bent over the sink hulling
entire afternoons away, she let me
wield the potato masher
in the copper-bottomed pot filled
with the makings of next winter's jam.

REFLECTION

As you play with musicality and repetition, you are probably noticing an increased rhythm or perhaps movement emerging in your poems. Consider the relationship between poetry and music: How are they similar? How are they different?

HONE YOUR CRAFT

Take note of how writers you admire include repetition of words, phrases, lines, and stanzas in their work.

Continue to write poems based on "The Bard," playing with Sound through repetition in your own poems. And try using repetition in your prose as well. The prose equivalent of repeating a line is repeating a sentence, by the way.

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