

Harnessing the Power of Poetry

THE INSIGHTS AND TECHNIQUES
NOVELISTS CAN LEARN FROM POETS



StoryEmbers.org



Chapter One – Why Novelists Need to Stop Ignoring Poetry

By Daeus Lamb, Community Manager

Every fiction writer has fallen in love with stories and dreams of engaging readers the same way. Few, however, are interested in poetry. In our modern age, this art form fights a losing battle against flashier entertainment. For some, poetry is overly emotional and uncomfortably personal. For others, it's less exciting than the latest film from their favorite franchise. Does this describe you?

You're missing a tremendous opportunity. If you write with intention, you can pack so much wisdom and wonder into a poem's small confines—and you'll stretch your storytelling skills in the process.

Since we value poetry at Story Embers, we wanted to examine *why* it's worth our time through a dedicated article series, and this is the first part. I'll be showing you how poetry can help you grasp theme, improve your prose, and explore new realms of thought. Then, Graham Jackson will share poetic techniques you can imitate to spice up the imagery in your stories and Cindy Green will take you on a tour of the elements that poems and novels have in common.

By the end of this series, we hope you'll have a newfound appreciation for poetry and possess tools you can apply to your stories. Let's jump in!

1. Poetry Expands Your Understanding of Theme

As one of the poetry editors here, I play a role in accepting and rejecting submissions. One of the critical factors that influences my decision is how the author handles theme. If it's blatant, generic, predictable, or unemphatic, those are signs of weakness.

A poem should deliver its theme subtly and cleverly, seek to understand and portray the nuances of a truth, use careful wording to make hard topics palatable, and highlight the ordinary with paradoxes. Here are three poems we've published that display those characteristics:



- “I Am Love” lists the many facets of love, both familiar and rare. This is much more profound than a poem that abstractly praises the idea of love.¹
- “Evangelism” emphasizes the importance of spreading the gospel without eschewing the struggle to speak openly as a flawed human. It tells the full story, the glorious and the dark.²
- “Hidden Words” exalts heart-to-heart conversations, but you don’t recognize you’re being taught, because the poem wets your appetite for the lesson it dishes out.³

These and many other aspects of theme overlap poetry and fiction. The advantage of poetry is that it involves a much shorter turnaround time for feedback and revisions. Those who love and practice poetry hold it to a high standard, so they won’t hesitate to warn you that you’ve failed to grab their attention. Hence, if you have solid critique partners, poetry forces you to wrestle with a theme until you’re able to communicate it uniquely and breathtakingly. Then you can adapt what you’ve learned to the larger scope of a novel.

2. Poetry Enhances Your Prose

People define excellent prose according to one and/or two criteria: 1) Specificity, conciseness, and clarity. 2) Poetic quality.

Perhaps you’re confused about the latter. How can prose be poetic when it and poetry are separate categories? If that’s your assumption, you need to study poetry, because it’s actually kissing cousins with prose. While prose doesn’t follow a strict pattern or rhyme like poetry, it does employ *most* of the same techniques.

- Assonance contributes to smooth flow.
- You won’t write fiction in meter, per se, but how you arrange accented and unaccented syllables affects pacing.
- Similes and metaphors are the lifeblood of emotion-evoking descriptions.
- The reader’s interpretation hinges on individual words. A forest where *animals* roam paints an entirely different picture than one with *beasts*.

¹ Anne of Lothlorien, “I am Love,” Story Embers, May 15, 2019, last accessed January 30, 2020, <https://storyembers.org/i-am-love/>.

² Cainon Leeds, “Evangelism,” Story Embers, May 27, 2019, last accessed January 30, 2020, <https://storyembers.org/evangelism/>.

³ Cindy Green, “Hidden Words,” Story Embers, February 13, 2019, last accessed January 30, 2020, <https://storyembers.org/hidden-words/>.



Consider this legendary excerpt from *Name of the Wind* by Patrick Rothfuss. Aren't the words delicious? You can't deny that he's a master of metaphor.

“Go out in the early days of winter, after the first cold snap of the season. Find a pool of water with a sheet of ice across the top, still fresh and new and clear as glass. Near the shore the ice will hold you. Slide out farther. Farther. Eventually, you'll find the place where the surface just barely bears your weight. There you will feel what I felt. The ice splinters under your feet. Look down and you can see the white cracks darting through the ice like mad, elaborate spiderwebs. It is perfectly silent, but you can feel the sudden sharp vibrations through the bottoms of your feet. That is what happened when Denna smiled at me. I don't mean to imply I felt as if I stood on brittle ice about to give way beneath me. No. I felt like the ice itself, suddenly shattered, with cracks spiraling out from where she had touched my chest. The only reason I held together was because my thousand pieces were all leaning together. If I moved, I feared I would fall apart.”⁴

3. Poetry Enriches Your Thoughts

Has a word ever perched on the tip of your tongue, only to be washed away as you realize the idea floating through your mind is inexpressible? When words evade us, poetry fills the void.

I've often stepped back from my laptop with an itch that I'm missing something. The emotions indwelling the scene surpass the sentences I've typed. Truth is hidden in the subtle shadows where readers might not detect it. I have to turn on the poetic side of my brain and pace for several moments before I can condense a complex concept into a few words. I may fall short, but after a couple tries, I can usually identify the phantom feeling. (The above example from *Name of the Wind* demonstrates what the result of this exercise could look like.)

On the fourteenth episode of the Story Embers Podcast, we discussed how to balance Christian orthodoxy while presenting truths that readers either aren't expecting or haven't heard a hundred times before.⁵ I believe these revelations reside exclusively in the recesses of a poet's mind. Poets prefer the road less traveled and search for secrets to bring to light.

⁴ Patrick Rothfuss, *Name of the Wind* (London: Orion, 2017), 404.

⁵ “SE Podcast #14: Balancing Creativity and Orthodoxy as a Christian Storyteller, Part One,” Story Embers, August 3, 2019, last accessed January 30, 2020, <https://storyembers.org/se-podcast-14-balancing-creativity-and-orthodoxy-as-a-christian-storyteller-part-1/>.



I recently started reading *The Descent into Hell* by one of the Inklings. Though I eventually put it down because the style and plot were too dense for my taste, its message that good is terrible fascinated me. This isn't necessarily a new doctrine ("holy" has a similar meaning in Christian theology), but it's one that's rarely conceived without meditation. The rigors of poetry will train you to reach for greater depths that could set your books apart.

Go Forth and Write Poetry

Though strange and wild, poetry is not a medium to get hopelessly tangled in (unless you're passionate about it). It's a path to finding your way forward. Draft a poem this week and let it teach you new insights about story craft. Maybe enter the piece in one of our poetry contests while we're at it.

Get lost in the labyrinths of your imagination. Explore the themes of your heart. And manipulate words into straight lines that ascend to the sublime.



Chapter Two – Four Techniques Novelists Can Steal from Poets to Strengthen Their Own Imagery

By Graham Jackson, Staff Writer

If you've ever toured an art museum, you can't walk far without confronting the power of images. The paintings tell stories of animals, families, wars, and kings, each holding a special significance for onlookers.

As I'm sure you fiction writers know, images *speak*—even if you can't hear or see the words. Images have the same effect in poetry, primarily through allegory. By the standard dictionary definition, allegory is “a story, poem, or picture that can be interpreted to reveal a hidden meaning, typically a moral or political one.” The key phrase here is “hidden meaning.” The hallmark of poetic allegory is that the meaning unravels in layers, all of which are unique. When understood and applied, these layers can be immensely profitable to fiction writers, whether seasoned or beginners.

During Medieval times, writers and theologians argued that allegory has four layers: 1) literal, 2) symbolic, 3) moral, and 4) anagogical. Each of these has traditionally been used to *interpret* literature; however, by studying them, I believe we can also learn strategies for *authoring* works with fascinating imagery.

1. The Literal: Paint Pictures, Period

Words matter. And this statement carries more weight when you're trying to craft images in poems and stories. You need to be intentional with your words. Build your vocabulary and diversify. This is a step that must be mastered long before a poem reaches its final draft. Like the phrase “you reap what you sow,” your words are the seeds that will grow into an object of beauty. Only later will a hidden meaning emerge. Wordsworth's “I Wandered Lonely as a Cloud” demonstrates how a poem can *seem* to be about skies and flowers on the surface while conveying a deeper message underneath:

*I wandered lonely as a cloud
That floats on high o'er vales and hills,
When all at once I saw a crowd,
A host, of golden daffodils;*



*Beside the lake, beneath the trees,
Fluttering and dancing in the breeze.*

*Continuous as the stars that shine
And twinkle on the Milky Way,
They stretched in never-ending line
Along the margin of a bay:
Ten thousand saw I at a glance,
Tossing their heads in sprightly dance.⁶*

Notice the presence of topography and color. The landscape in Wordsworth's mind possesses texture and life. The cadence and placement of details evoke a slow and steady sense of "wandering" that extends throughout the stanzas.

Applying This as a Novelist

Think about how to paint vivid imagery in your stories. What feelings does your story stir in readers? Sometimes writers get so lost in the epic sweep of their fictional worlds that they lose sight of the nitty-gritty—the lichen, bugs, and spiny undergrowth in the forest. Words, not plot or characters, can be a writer's greatest and most overlooked asset. If you want to weave a particular theme into your story, start with a moment. What is a painting without its backdrop, or a stage without its props and set materials? Set the scene for readers, even if briefly, and the rest will naturally follow.

2. The Symbolic: Paint Purposeful Pictures

Let's widen the lens a little. For imagery to be imagery, you need to venture beyond the words. The pictures you choose to paint (on the literal level) must point to an abstract concept, such as a butterfly representing a spirit of renewal or rebirth. Or, depending on your goal, the symbols could be much more complex.

To understand this more clearly, return to the first two stanzas of Wordsworth's poem. The speaker refers to himself as a lonely cloud, floating languidly above what appears to be a sea of flowers. The sea of flowers, in turn, is immediately likened to "a crowd, a host," juxtaposing the individual and the collective. The images themselves (in the literal sense) are fine on their own. But, to achieve impact, both the speaker and the reader need to be connected to the scene emotionally.

⁶ William Wordsworth, "I Wandered Lowly as a Cloud," in *The Norton Anthology of Poetry: Third Edition, Shorter* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1970), 290.



Another superb example comes, interestingly, from prose. E. B. White’s *Charlotte’s Web* is a novel containing a wealth of poetic descriptions. Here’s one that caught my eye:

In the hard-packed dirt of the midway, after the glaring lights are out and the people have gone to bed, you will find a veritable treasure of popcorn fragments, frozen custard dribblings, candied apples abandoned by tired children, sugar fluff crystals, salted almonds, popsicles, partially gnawed ice cream cones and wooden sticks of lollipops.⁷

At face value, this short paragraph depicts a deserted carnival-ground littered with rubbish. However, in reading it again with an eye for the allegorical, words and phrases like “fragments” and “abandoned by tired children” stand out as resonant. “Fragments” makes readers think of broken items or relationships they long to fix. Additionally, “abandoned by tired children” triggers memories of days at a fair with loved ones, or a cranky kid having a tantrum.

Applying This as a Novelist

Pictures, though pretty to look at alone, need to be intricately designed and three-dimensional. For instance, the struggling writer and the struggling farmer will view “you reap what you sow” differently. Multifaceted imagery is particularly applicable to fantasy writers—but, regardless, you need to anchor your prose to something relatable.

3. The Moral: Paint *Practical* Pictures

Layer three is, admittedly, similar to layer two, yet it still bears mentioning. Images need to tell stories *and* teach lessons. Again, Wordsworth illustrates this in his poem about wandering. Here are the final two stanzas:

*The waves beside them danced; but they
Out-did the sparkling waves in glee:
A poet could not but be gay,
In such a jocund company:
I gazed—and gazed—but little thought
What wealth the show to me had brought:*

*For oft, when on my couch I lie
In vacant or in pensive mood,
They flash upon that inward eye
Which is the bliss of solitude;
And then my heart with pleasure fills,*

⁷ E. B. White, *Charlotte’s Web* (New York: HarperCollins, 1999).



*And dances with the daffodils.*⁸

Toward the end, the speaker moves away from the image, and we find him on a couch, “in vacant or in pensive mood.” What seems to be the takeaway of this poem? Perhaps Wordsworth is implying that we fail to appreciate small blessings, like flowers dancing in the wind. We need to capture and treasure these miracles so they can act as lights in darker times, spiritually or socially. Or perhaps the speaker is an introvert who delights in what Wordsworth calls “that inward eye.”

Whatever the case, readers can draw their own conclusions, because the poet forges a suitable path with his words. All imagery should have direction. Whether or not readers relate to the destination (that’s ultimately outside your control), they’ll have a new perspective to mull over and pass on to others.

Applying This as a Novelist

Set a scene, breathe purpose into it, *and then* create real situations. Leave your characters’ interactions open for interpretation, and give them plenty of opportunities for dialogue. You don’t always need to force an agenda on them—once a story is in motion, sometimes characters will make choices themselves. That’s okay. Characters are often the best conduit for communicating morals if you allow them to move independently and suffer the consequences or rewards.

4. The Anagogical: Paint *Prophetic* Pictures

Anagoge (pronounced roughly an-ah-gaw-jee) is the “mystical or spiritual interpretation of a text.” I’ll preface this conclusion by stating that not all poetry needs to be overtly spiritual, even from a Christian standpoint. I am of the firm belief that God’s truths ultimately speak for themselves, often in spite of frail human expression. That said, acknowledging the spiritual in everyday life is important.

The “inward eye” Wordsworth mentions is a classic example of anagoge. By extension, he could be referencing the existence of the human soul. Or perhaps he’s emphasizing that humans need to cultivate a strong and healthy “inner life” in a world rife with distractions and conflict. But no matter what angle you approach the poem from, it alludes to a larger story unfolding, and a correspondingly larger experience.

⁸ Wordsworth, 290.



Applying This as a Novelist

Whether you should be implicit or explicit in your portrayal of Christianity is not the question of this article. However, your faith should somehow show up in the story, even subtly. Sometimes a glimpse, in dialogue or a beam of sunlight, can be the most impactful.

This fourth layer, as a culmination of the previous three, exhibits the enduring nature of poetry and the images it contains. We all have a mind's eye, and in many cases we're eager to share what it beholds—especially God's grace. But in the writing arena, the sharing needs to be strategic. Playing a game without rules lacks a certain zest, just like running a race without a course and a goal.

Utilizing Powerful Imagery

As you write, hopefully you can incorporate these methods. Whether or not you're planning to author the next great work of Western literature, imagery can transform a story from bland to compelling.

Watch for ways you can study these four layers of imagery in poetry. Fortunately, you don't have to employ them simultaneously—because writing a story or poem, like life, is a process.

So, discover the process that will best draw readers into your word-crafted worlds.



Chapter Three – Three Unique Lessons Novelists Can Learn from Poets

By Cindy Green, Publication Manager

When you think of poetry, what comes to mind? Language strung together that you don't understand but somehow exemplifies the standard of literary beauty? Sentences that drop off in the middle and flow onto the line below?

If your only experience is browsing the front page of *Hello Poetry* or the three-sentence version on Instagram, poetry may seem like a mediocre art form. Aren't you trying to hone your fiction? Why would you devote time to a new format if you're already busy developing emotion, characters, and theme?

Because poetry contains those same core elements, it can help you practice on a smaller, less overwhelming project than an 80,000-word novel. Tolkien himself was a poet, and he even mingled his poetry with his fiction. Maybe, while experimenting with this wonderful art form, you'll craft a piece that will become lore your characters recite on their journey. But even if you don't, I promise that you'll make new discoveries about compelling writing.

1. Evoking Emotion

Emotion binds reader to story, reader to poem, reader to writer. Each word, syllable, and phrase is intentionally chosen to stir the reader. In the "Song of Beren and Luthien," Tolkien draws out the romance with his imagery and diction:

*Enchantment healed his weary feet
that over hills were doomed to roam;
and forth he hastened, strong and fleet,
and grasped at moonbeams glistening.
Through woven woods in Elvenhome
she lightly fled on dancing feet,
and left him lonely still to roam
in the silent forest listening.⁹*

⁹ J.R.R. Tolkien, *The Lord of the Rings* (Boston: Mariner Books, 2004), 192.



Is enchantment enough to heal weary feet? Can the speaker truly grasp a moonbeam? I've never attempted it, and I hate to be a pessimist, but probably not. Tolkien strategically uses figures of speech and words like *enchantment* and *moonbeams* to show how Beren views Luthien. She's so captivating that he hardly feels his aching feet.

Poetic language saturates every page of Tolkien's works. He is a master at setting the emotional stage with imagery, and this was cultivated through both fiction *and* poetry. The more poetic your prose, the more your descriptions will come to life—and the more you'll touch readers.

Applying This as a Novelist

Study poetry closely! Choose a poem that handles emotion expertly and note the specific words that convey the desired intent, then crack open a thesaurus and write your own version. Since nonfiction is harder for me than poetry, this trick helped me when I drafted my first article. I rewrote a popular article from the site in my own voice, considering each of the points and how they fit into the structure. You can do this with poetry too.

Poetry has no room for glossed-over generalizations. You're forced to pay attention to the impression of every word. Copy a poem this week, or even better, write your own—and spend time weighing the impact of the emotional language. This exercise will bring your prose to a level that enhances your novel's pivotal scenes.

2. Crafting Characters

Considering the vast number of narrative poems written in third person, this commonality between poetry and stories is unsurprising. Mary Howitt's children's poem "The Spider and the Fly" is a prime example, and it also employs personification.¹⁰ But the characters in poetry can be even more intimate. You, as the speaker, can become the star of your poetic story. A portrayal of positive character development can be found in Rachel Rogers' "Overflow":

*I was built deep and hungry,
with a heart that wanted to be filled with
so much beauty and emotion
and love.
I thought that was my gift,
my blessing—*

¹⁰ Mary Howitt, "The Spider and the Fly," FamilyFriendPoems, last accessed January 30, 2020, <https://www.familyfriendpoems.com/poem/the-spider-and-the-fly-by-mary-howitt>.



*being able to contain it all.*¹¹

Kynet, the protagonist in Hope Ann's novella *Healer's Bane*, reflects the voice of the above poem. She longs for the suffering of others to cease. With her newfound powers after encountering the Poisoner, Kynet seeks to relieve all the pain she can. "I can heal them," she insists, distraught by her brother's concerned confrontation. "I can let them fight another day. How can you refuse that?" To her, this is her gift, her blessing.

By the end of the story (spoilers!), we've walked through Kynet's character arc and watched her grow. While she must do what she can for others, she realizes she cannot take their pain, because it shapes them into stronger human beings. The final lines of Rachel's poem displays a similar shift in perspective.

*What if
I overflow all this love
and beauty instead of holding it inside?
What if I refract it all outward,
bigger and more beautifully,
through the prism of my tears?*¹²

Applying This as a Novelist

Exploring a character's struggles through poetry will familiarize you with her arc, and writing reflective poetry from your heart will clarify your own. I've often sat down to hash out unknown feelings through poetry and understood myself better with each passing line. What are you currently going through? Turn your confusion into a poem and see the conclusions it leads you to.

This skill will also equip you to create more realistic characters. Write poems from their perspectives, expressing all their knotty emotions as they wrestle through problems. Many writers build playlists of songs that match a character's personality or situation. This is the same idea, except *you* hold the pen.

But before you rush off to do this for each of your characters, write an introspective poem. You need to sort through your own thoughts about life so you can imagine how your characters might process their circumstances and reveal their humanness.

¹¹ Rachel Rogers, "Overflow," Story Embers, July 25, 2019, last accessed January 30, 2020, <https://storyembers.org/overflow/>.

¹² Ibid.



3. Threading Theme

This is Story Embers! Of course we're going to talk about theme. Poetry can train you in subtlety, as demonstrated by Sarah Spradlin's timeless piece, "Potshards." Each line pulsates with imagery that alludes to the bigger story.

*I'm drawing a line in the sand
with potshards from a place where grown-ups go
and I have visited,
in hands that extend brotherhood, callouses, and push-pin grease.¹³*

Did you catch Sarah's theme? Probably not. Experienced writers know how to gradually set up a theme instead of dumping it all at once. These lines are just hints Sarah leaves along the trail to her theme: childlike wonder in a world that God beautifully designed.

*I find new islands in the uncharted waters
of arms always reaching (often trembling),
only now arriving at this conclusion:
one day I plan to lose myself
in a forest that never stops reaching for its Creator
with gnarled fingers that hold up the sky by day
but let darkness fall by night
and follow the path of stars instead,
veiled elsewhere by spotlights that never reach them.¹⁴*

The language is infused with symbolism—another tool in storytelling that can be strengthened through poetry. Antoine de Saint-Exupery was a poet as well as an author, which is evidenced by one of his most famous works, *The Little Prince*. Near the ending, the Prince and his friend, who are stranded on an island, walk for miles in search of a well. The Prince, naturally flowery in speech, says, "Hear that? We've awakened this well, and it's singing."¹⁵

Throughout the story, Saint-Exupery drops crumbs of his theme. We learn that the Little Prince's flower is important to him because he has invested in it. We learn from the fox that friendship is valuable, despite the goodbyes. And we learn from the Prince that the eyes are blind—you must look with the heart. All of this poetic symbolism is wrapped up in the book's theme: that anything essential is invisible.

¹³ Sarah Spradlin, "Potshards," Kingdom Pen, December 7, 2016, last accessed January 30, 2020, <http://kingdompen.org/potshards/>.

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Antoine de Saint-Exupery, *The Little Prince* (Orlando: Harcourt, Inc., 2000), 69.



Applying This as a Novelist

Poetry approaches themes from various angles. It requires you to thoroughly examine a subject to achieve a smooth rhythm and flow. By nature of its condensed form, any detail that doesn't belong must be removed. Think of poetry as a puzzle. Every piece has multiple sides, but only one will snap into place.

Poetry uses symbolism more than novels do. Again, pick a poem to analyze, this time focusing on symbolism and imagery. How do those aspects accentuate the poem's theme? As you meditate on your observations, you'll begin to grasp concepts you can apply to your novels.

Weaving the Strands Together

Poetry does include devices that fiction doesn't. I doubt you'd get excited about inserting a three-piece alliteration into your novel. But when you treat poetry as simply a *story* in a different form, it will become much more inviting.

Over the past few chapters, Daeus, Graham, and I have shared tips for sharpening your gifts through poetry. But now you must make a decision. Is poetry just an obscure art form that isn't worth the work? Or is it another means God has provided for you to redeem the arts? Can it be a path (not a detour) in your passionate and dedicated pursuit of excellent storytelling? And if you agree with the latter, will you start taking advantage of it?

The choice is up to you, dear image-bearer.