

Abstract Poetry

As you work on your Box of Words project, here's a little something to clarify abstraction (if that's possible).

You may have heard of **abstract art**...think **Jasper Johns**

or **Jackson Pollack**



Abstract poetry may offer a similar impression. Dame Edith Sitwell (1887-1964) used the term abstract to describe the poems in her book, *Facade*. These poems were experiments in “patterns in sound.” They express in words (sound) what abstract painters achieve visually with colors, shapes, and designs that represent no physical objects. It is the paint itself that becomes important. Here are two excerpts of Dame Edith's work. See what you think:

**Nobody comes to give him his rum but the
Rim of the sky hippopotamus--glum**

**Said King Pompey the emperor's ape
Shuddering black in his temporal cape
Of dust, "the dust is everything—
The heart to love and the voice to sing,
Indianapolis
And Acropolis,
Also the hairy sky that we
Take for a coverlet comfortably."**

If you read these aloud a few times, squint your eyes, hold your breath, tap your heels three times (I'm joking now) you might think you just barely begin to understand something or at least get a visual image of something.

In this type of work, however, **the meaning of the words becomes secondary to their sound**. Abstract poetry never became a literary movement, as you might well imagine, but many poets have written poems that might be classified as abstract. Lewis Carroll's "Jabberwocky" is one with which you are probably familiar.

Surrealist poetry with its ubiquitous and often bizarre imagery could also be called abstract as these few excerpted lines from Bill Knott's *Nights of Naomi* illustrate:

...Because of a doublejointedness that glows in the dark/ Like a soliloquy of
walnuts...So the lubriciousness can tower in peace/ Like a buzzsaw trapped in a

perfumery of shrugs/ Lemon/ Or lime/ Only a maze can remember your hair of
battered blowguns

Or from Kenneth Koch's *When the Sun Tries to Go On*:

...Clothing, sing-worms, and fail! my joyous gasoline
And caney stars, O spillwort!" Ape, Ate...

Sound and images are what I want you to focus on as you write and then concretely construct your Box of Words poem. You are, for sure, ironically thinking **outside the box on this one!**

If you think you'd enjoy this, here are three more things to try that, believe it or not, will increase your skill with words:

1. Pick a word and say it aloud over and over until it loses its meaning. That will get your mind focused on sound. Then just write, as quickly as you can, whatever words come to you because of their sounds. Arrange them into an abstract poem if you can.
2. Take a poem by you or someone else and change most of the words. Count the number of nouns in the poem, the number of adjectives, and the number of verbs. Then make a list of an equal number of new nouns, adjectives, and verbs that you choose because you like their sounds (not their meanings) Then use your lists to replace the corresponding words in the poem. Some words will work better than others, and you'll may want to adjust or substitute other nouns, adjectives, and verbs. I've done one of these that I can share with you. It's fun. I also have several "famous" poems that work well for this activity.
3. Take a poem and remove (perhaps with white out) enough of its words so that the remaining words make no sense but sound good together. Sound poetry is abstract poetry written specifically to be read aloud. It came in part from the Dada poetry created around 1920 and has been somewhat popular in Europe since the 1940s.

Language (words) can be so much fun!