

# Poetry as compressed expression essay

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If you have ever read a haiku, then you know that poetry is a powerful way to compress language into a more concentrated form of expression. In just 17 syllables over three lines, a haiku is supposed to take an image from nature and give it a whimsical message for the reader, which can either be emotionally powerful or just simple in nature. In prose, describing a scene from nature can take several paragraphs – instead, a haiku does the job in fewer syllables than the names for some scientific compounds. Because poets do not have to follow the same rules of grammar and style that writers of prose must obey, they can use words as decorative items rather than links in a logical chain. As a result, poetry can turn out to be a work of art in just a few rhetorical units. Emily Dickinson, in “Much Madness is Divinest Sense,” and Mark Strand, in “Eating Poetry,” both exemplify the skills involved in taking a significant point and expressing it in a short burst of words.

“Eating Poetry” takes the love of verse to a metaphorical extension that would shock the reader to see, literally, as it shocks the librarian (and, apparently, the dogs). The eating refers to the reading and processing – but the fact that the speaker does it so voraciously suggests the same vigor with which a dog consumes a beefsteak it happens to capture. The powerful meanings that shoot out of poetry fill the speaker with a “happiness” that is like no other – his conversion to romping “with joy” because of his exposure to poetry speaks to the power of the form far more poignantly than any of the long monologues in “Dead Poets Society.” It would have taken pages and pages to express the passion for poetry that the images of the ink, and the snarling and barking, convey in compressed form.

“ Much Madness is Divinest Sense” takes the idea of compulsory conformity that accompanies the idea of socialization and expresses it powerfully in a mere eight lines. Here, it is the images that provide compressed meaning so powerfully – the discerning eye, which in a synecdoche for the entire person perceiving true reason in what many see as “ madness.” The other powerful image is the chain, whose cold metal links belie the false calmness that “ assent” and “ demur” indicate, in terms of the process of assimilating with society’s demands. The chain might be for confinement, or for corporal punishment; this frightening ambiguity lets the reader know what the costs are for failure to follow through with this assimilation.

Poets tend to be, by and large, creatures of isolation rather than assimilation. They shock, as the passionate reader in “ Eating Poetry,” and they eschew the rules of the majority, as the isolated life of Dickinson bears witness. They also tend to see reality on the basis of image rather than rhetoric, a vision that comes out in the way they use words. The result is a genre of richly vivid ideas and images that soak the reader in their meaning.

## **Works Cited**

Dickinson, Emily. “ Much Madness is Divinest Sense.” Web. Retrieved 16 December 2011 from

<http://www.bartleby.com/113/1011.html>

Strand, Mark. “ Eating Poetry.” Web. Retrieved 16 December 2011 from <http://www.tnellen.com/cybereng/poetry/eating.html>