

But what does all that really mean? To test drive this definition, let's look at an example. And let's pick a tough one: "Head, Heart," taken from *The Collected Stories of Lydia Davis*, is usually classified as a work of fiction, and it certainly does have the elements of one, including **characters** and some **action** arranged into a **plot** brought to us by a **narrator**. Yet one reviewer of Davis's *Collected Stories* tells describes this one as "a poem of a story." What specific features of the following story might make it work like a poem? Which, if any, of the features essential to poetry might it lack?

LYDIA DAVIS

Head, Heart

Heart weeps.
 Head tries to help heart.
 Head tells heart how it is, again:
 You will lose the ones you love. They will all go. But even the earth will
 go, someday.
 5 Heart feels better, then.
 But the words of head do not remain long in the ears of heart.
 Heart is so new to this.
 I want them back, says heart.
 Head is all heart has.
 10 Help, head. Help heart.

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If difficulty were essential to poetry, "Head, Heart" would not seem to qualify. It's hard to imagine less formal, even less elementary, **diction** or **syntax**. And the whole seems relatively easy to **paraphrase** (often a helpful thing to do when first encountering a poem): When we're sad about losing someone we love, we reason with ourselves that loss is inevitable because everything earthly, even the earth itself, can't last forever. Such rational explanations give us comfort, but that comfort is itself temporary; we still miss those we've lost and have to keep calling on our heads to help our hearts cope.

We do have emotion here, then, as well as a **conflict** between emotion and reason—and even when they lack plots, most poems do explore conflicts, just as stories and plays do. But do we have a poem? Does it matter that "Head, Heart" depends entirely on two **figures of speech**—**metonymy**, the use of the name of one thing for another closely associated thing (here, "head" for "reason," and "heart" for "emotion"), as well as **personification**, the representation of an object or an abstraction (here, "head" and "heart") as a person (capable of weeping and talking, for example)? Though fiction and drama both use figurative language, we often describe such language as "poetic," even when it occurs in a story or play, because poems do tend to depend much more on it (as we discuss further in chapter 14).

Does it matter that "Head, Heart" is short—just 71 words? Though poems come in every size, many poems are short or at least shorter than the typical work of fiction. Brevity is one way that *some* poems achieve the "concentration" and "intensity" the dictionaries take to be essential. Such concentration invites, even requires, ours. As poet Billy Collins puts it, "Poetry offers us the possibility of modulating our pace." The very brevity of a poem can teach us simply to slow down for