

## ETERNAL LINES: POETRY AS TIME TRAVEL

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### Abstract

*This article explores the timeless nature of poetry, positioning it as a vehicle for transcending temporal boundaries. Through a detailed analysis of poetic structures, metaphors, and philosophical underpinnings, we examine how poetry operates as a form of time travel. Poems link past experiences to present consciousness and project future imaginings, allowing both poets and readers to traverse eras, emotions, and existential reflections. By invoking Shakespeare's concept of "eternal lines," we explore the continuity of human thought through verses, comparing this with scientific theories of time, and offering insights into how poetry collapses the linear progression of time.*



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## Introduction

The connection between poetry and time has always been a rich and fascinating subject. Poetry, by its very nature, compresses experiences into tight verses and constructs, allowing for the simultaneous experience of multiple temporal realities. Whether it is Shakespeare immortalizing his beloved in the sonnet *Shall I Compare Thee to a Summer's Day* or T.S. Eliot mapping the fragmentation of time in *The Waste Land*, poetry demonstrates a unique ability to break free from linear chronology.

Time travel is often seen as the domain of science fiction, yet it is deeply embedded in the heart of human creativity and expression. Poetry, with its capacity for invoking memories, preserving cultural moments, and speculating on futures yet unwritten, operates as a bridge across temporal boundaries. By closely examining the linguistic and structural elements of poetry, this article posits that poems are the original—and most profound—time machines of the human spirit.

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### Poetry as Time Travel: The Framework

Poetry engages with time in ways that go beyond simple reminiscence or future projection. It interacts with time through three key mechanisms:

1. **Memory and Nostalgia**
  2. **Temporal Juxtaposition**
  3. **Futurity and Prophecy**
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#### 1. Memory and Nostalgia

Poetry is an unparalleled vessel for memory. In *Ode to a Nightingale*, John Keats writes:

*"Thou wast not born for death, immortal Bird!  
No hungry generations tread thee down."  
In these lines, Keats transports both himself and the reader back into a distant mythological past, a time when the nightingale's song was eternal and untouched by the ravages of history.*

By crystallizing moments in linguistic form, poets offer a means to relive experiences otherwise lost to the flow of time. In this way, poetry captures what philosopher Henri Bergson referred to as *la due*, or "real duration"—the qualitative, felt time that cannot be quantified by clocks or calendars. This enables readers to participate in the timelessness of poetic moments, suspending the temporal separation between past and present.

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#### 2. Temporal Juxtaposition

Unlike narrative prose, which often follows a linear progression, poetry frequently employs temporal juxtaposition to create layered experiences. T.S. Eliot's *The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock* offers an exemplary case of this technique:

*"I have measured out my life with coffee spoons..."*

Here, Eliot places the daily and trivial (measuring life by coffee spoons) alongside the existential and eternal, suggesting a dissonance between the ordinary passage of time and the deeper currents of human existence.

Poetry, therefore, allows for the coexistence of multiple temporalities within a single moment. Past, present, and future can be braided together in one image or line. Consider Shakespeare's *Sonnet 18*, where the speaker ensures the immortality of his subject:

*"So long as men can breathe, or eyes can see,  
So long lives this, and this gives life to thee."*

The sonnet's final couplet collapses time entirely: the poet's subject will live on in the future through the preservation of the poem

itself. This intertwining of time periods, past into future, is a hallmark of poetic temporality.

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### 3. Futurity and Prophecy

While memory anchors poetry to the past, it also looks toward the future. Poets often assume the role of prophets, articulating futures that extend beyond their lived realities. In Percy Bysshe Shelley's *Ode to the West Wind*, the poet ends with an urgent invocation: "*O Wind, If Winter comes, can Spring be far behind?*"

This rhetorical question propels the reader beyond the present moment of suffering and decay (winter) into the possibility of renewal (spring). It is not merely a prediction but a promise, extending a thread from the current moment into the infinite future.

Poetry thus holds the power to traverse time not only by reflecting on history but by invoking and shaping the future. This prophetic element, seen in visionary poets from Blake to Whitman, emphasizes poetry's role as a catalyst for transformation, both individually and culturally.

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### Poetic Structures as Temporal Devices

Beyond thematic content, poetry's formal elements—rhyme, meter, and lineation—serve as temporal devices. The very act of reading a poem demands that the reader navigates the poem's temporal structure. For example, in Emily Dickinson's distinctive use of dashes, the reader is forced to pause, recalibrate, and reflect on each line, creating a rhythmic experience that mimics the interruptions of thought over time.

Shakespeare's use of iambic pentameter in the sonnets mirrors the heartbeat, an internal metronome that reflects both the constancy and finitude of human life. Each foot, each syllable,

is a unit of time that the reader moves through at a regulated pace, echoing the larger metaphysical dance between time and eternity.

This formal manipulation is one of poetry's most profound tools for collapsing the linear progression of time. Just as quantum physics suggests that time is more fluid and interconnected than it appears, poetry reveals the elasticity of human temporal experience.

Poetry has long been considered one of the most expressive forms of literature, capable of capturing the essence of time, emotion, and experience in ways that other literary forms may not. One of the key reasons for this ability lies in the structure of poetry itself, which often functions as a temporal device. Poetic structures, including meter, rhyme, and stanza arrangement, are carefully crafted to manipulate the perception of time within a poem, either by slowing it down, speeding it up, or creating a sense of timelessness. Through these structural elements, poets can guide readers through different emotional and temporal experiences, making the passage of time in a poem feel malleable and deeply connected to its thematic core.

One of the most evident ways in which poetic structures serve as temporal devices is through meter. The rhythm of a poem, whether iambic pentameter, free verse, or another form, establishes a pace that either mirrors or contrasts the emotional tempo of the subject matter. A regular, steady meter can create a sense of continuity and calm, while an irregular or fragmented rhythm may evoke a sense of disruption or urgency, reflecting the passage of time as unstable or unpredictable. By controlling the flow of rhythm, poets not only manipulate time but also draw attention to moments of importance, creating pauses or accelerations that correspond to the emotional peaks and valleys within the poem.

Rhyme schemes also function as temporal devices by creating patterns of repetition that

guide the reader's experience of time. A regular rhyme scheme can offer a sense of closure or predictability, making the passage of time within the poem feel cyclical or contained. In contrast, irregular or shifting rhyme schemes can disorient the reader, stretching or compressing time by disrupting their expectations. These structural choices often mirror the thematic concerns of the poem—whether it deals with inevitability, the passage of seasons, or the unpredictability of human life—and give the reader a visceral experience of the temporal landscape being depicted.

Stanza structure plays an equally important role in shaping temporal perception. The arrangement of lines into stanzas can create distinct temporal sections within a poem, allowing for shifts in mood, tone, or focus. A poem with long, continuous stanzas may evoke a sense of time flowing smoothly and uninterrupted, while a poem with short, fragmented stanzas may give the impression of time moving in fits and starts. The breaks between stanzas, like the pauses in a musical composition, can serve as moments of reflection or anticipation, drawing the reader's attention to transitions in both time and thought.

In addition to these structural elements, the use of enjambment is a particularly effective way of manipulating time in poetry. By allowing a sentence or thought to flow over the end of a line and into the next, poets can stretch out a moment, prolonging its emotional or thematic significance. This can create a sense of suspended time, as the reader is drawn across the line break, waiting for the completion of a thought or image. Enjambment often introduces a temporal tension within the poem, as it disrupts the natural rhythm of reading, making the reader pause and consider the relationship between what has come before and what is still to come.

Whether of sounds, words, or phrases, is another key element in how poetic structures shape time. Repeated elements can evoke a sense of time as

cyclical, looping back on itself in ways that reflect memory, tradition, or ritual. This technique is often used in poems that deal with themes of loss, nostalgia, or historical continuity, where the repeated language serves as a reminder of the persistence of certain experiences or emotions over time. Through repetition, poets can collapse the boundaries between past, present, and future, making the experience of time within the poem feel layered and multifaceted.

Poetic structures can also convey a sense of timelessness, where time seems to stand still or cease to matter. This is often achieved through the use of free verse or unconventional forms that resist the traditional markers of time, such as regular meter or rhyme. By eschewing these formal constraints, poets can create a sense of fluidity or expansiveness, where the reader is invited to experience the poem as a moment outside of time. This timeless quality is particularly common in poems that explore themes of nature, spirituality, or deep personal reflection, where the usual measures of time seem inadequate to capture the depth of experience being described.

Poetic structures serve not only as vehicles for conveying meaning but also as powerful tools for shaping the reader's experience of time. Whether through the manipulation of rhythm, rhyme, stanza arrangement, or other formal elements, poets have the ability to stretch, compress, or suspend time in ways that heighten the emotional and thematic impact of their work. By engaging with the temporal possibilities of structure, poets invite readers to step outside of the linear progression of time and experience the fluid, dynamic nature of existence through the lens of language.

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### Case Study: Shakespeare's "Eternal Lines"

Perhaps the most iconic expression of poetry as a form of time travel is Shakespeare's *Sonnet 18*. In this poem, the speaker grapples with the inevitability of time's decay, only to triumphantly declare that the poem itself will transcend these limitations: *"Nor shall Death brag thou wander'st in his shade, When in eternal lines to time thou grow'st."*

The phrase "eternal lines" operates on multiple levels. It refers not only to the physical lines of verse but also to the lineage of memory, love, and beauty that the poem secures against the ravages of time. By writing these lines, the poet ensures that the subject of the sonnet will live on in perpetuity, effectively bending time to his will.

In doing so, Shakespeare turns the written word into a kind of time machine, enabling both poet and subject to traverse centuries. His declaration that the poem will outlast physical life forms a bold assertion of the power of art to transcend temporality.

William Shakespeare's sonnet "Shall I compare thee to a summer's day?" (*Sonnet 18*) is one of the most famous poems in the English literary canon. In this sonnet, the speaker explores the theme of immortality through verse, suggesting that the beauty of the beloved can transcend time through the permanence of poetry. The phrase "eternal lines" in the poem refers to these immortalizing qualities of verse. Shakespeare's argument is that while physical beauty fades, art—specifically poetry—has the power to preserve the essence of beauty and memory forever. This case study focuses on the concept of "eternal lines" as a form of literary immortality.

The sonnet's structure is a quintessential example of the Shakespearean form: 14 lines of iambic pentameter, organized into three quatrains and a closing couplet. This formal structure supports the poem's central theme. In the first quatrain, the speaker compares the

beloved to a summer's day, only to quickly dismiss the comparison because summer is fleeting, subject to rough winds and the eventual dimming of its golden glow. The second quatrain expands on this idea by emphasizing that all natural beauty fades with time, reinforcing the inevitable decline that nature, and by extension, humans face.

In the third quatrain, Shakespeare introduces the concept of the "eternal lines," where the speaker confidently claims that the beloved's beauty will not fade because it will be preserved in the poem itself. This shift introduces the sonnet's core argument: that poetry can defy the ravages of time. The closing couplet cements this idea by asserting that as long as people can read, the beloved's beauty will live on through the "eternal lines" of verse. The power of poetry, therefore, lies in its ability to capture and immortalize the essence of its subject, shielding it from the decay of time.

This concept of literary immortality was revolutionary in the Renaissance period. During Shakespeare's time, the notion that poetry could grant a form of eternal life was a novel but increasingly popular idea. Writers and poets were beginning to explore the idea that their work could outlast physical monuments and even human memory. In this way, Shakespeare's "eternal lines" echo the broader Renaissance humanist belief in the enduring power of human creativity. His sonnet suggests that while everything in nature is subject to time, art remains a defiant and eternal force.

Shakespeare's use of the term "eternal lines" is not just a metaphor for poetic immortality, but also a commentary on the nature of memory and legacy. He contrasts the transient nature of beauty and life with the permanence of written words. The "lines" of the poem refer both to the literal lines of the sonnet and to the lineage of human memory that the poem is meant to safeguard. In this way, the sonnet functions as a vessel for the preservation of the beloved's

beauty, ensuring that it will be remembered for as long as the poem exists.

The enduring relevance of this theme is evident in the way Shakespeare's work has survived the test of time. Four centuries after its composition, Sonnet 18 continues to be read, analyzed, and cherished, fulfilling the promise of eternal life that the poem makes. The beloved may be long forgotten in history, but the "eternal lines" of the sonnet have ensured that their essence persists in cultural memory. This reflects the success of Shakespeare's endeavor to immortalize beauty through verse.

In a broader context, Shakespeare's "eternal lines" speak to the power of all forms of art to preserve human experiences and emotions. Whether through painting, sculpture, or literature, art serves as a means to capture and extend the life of its subject. This concept continues to resonate in contemporary discussions about legacy, memory, and the role of art in society. In this way, the "eternal lines" of Shakespeare's sonnet are not only a reflection of his era but also a timeless reminder of art's ability to defy the limits of time.

Shakespeare's "eternal lines" are a powerful symbol of the enduring nature of poetry and art. Through Sonnet 18, he offers a poignant meditation on the fragility of life and the timeless power of creativity to transcend it. The sonnet's message is clear: while time may erode physical beauty, the beauty captured in art remains eternal. Shakespeare's confidence in the power of his verse has been validated by the continued reverence for his work, proving that his "eternal lines" have indeed outlasted the summer's day.

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### Time Travel in the Modern Era

Time travel, once the realm of science fiction and imaginative storytelling, has evolved into a subject of serious theoretical investigation in the

modern era. While we are far from mastering the art of traveling through time, advances in physics—particularly in the realms of quantum mechanics, relativity, and cosmology—have led scientists to explore whether time travel is theoretically possible. The concept fascinates because it offers the possibility of bending time in ways that challenge our basic understanding of reality. In this modern era, time travel is no longer confined to novels and movies but is discussed seriously by physicists and philosophers alike.

One of the fundamental theoretical frameworks for time travel comes from Einstein's theory of relativity. According to the theory, time is not a constant; it can stretch, shrink, or warp depending on the speed at which an object moves or the gravitational forces at play. This warping of time forms the basis for many time travel hypotheses. For example, the idea of "time dilation," where time slows down as an object approaches the speed of light, has already been observed with satellites and astronauts who experience time more slowly than people on Earth. While this form of time travel is far from the dramatic jumps into the future or past often depicted in fiction, it shows that time is indeed malleable.

Another intriguing idea stems from the concept of wormholes—hypothetical tunnels in space-time that could theoretically connect two distant points. Wormholes are often mentioned as potential "shortcuts" through both space and time. If one end of a wormhole could be manipulated—by moving it at nearly the speed of light or placing it in a strong gravitational field—there's a possibility that traveling through it could allow a person to move forward or backward in time. Although wormholes have not been discovered or proven to exist, they remain a tantalizing theoretical possibility in the quest for time travel.

Quantum mechanics adds another layer of complexity to the time travel discussion. Some interpretations of quantum theory suggest that

particles can influence events in the past through a process called retro causality. While this idea remains highly speculative, it suggests that the future could, in some sense, influence the past. This notion ties into the multiverse theory, which posits that there are multiple parallel universes. According to this theory, traveling to the past may not affect the present universe but could create or interact with a parallel universe, avoiding the paradoxes associated with changing historical events.

Speaking of paradoxes, one of the biggest challenges to the idea of time travel is the so-called "grandfather paradox." This occurs when a time traveller goes back in time and prevents their own existence by, for example, interfering with their grandparents' meeting. The paradox seems to create logical impossibilities, which have led some scientists and philosophers to argue that time travel is inherently contradictory. However, some modern theories, like the "self-consistency principle," suggest that events in time travel might be constrained in such a way that paradoxes cannot occur, offering a possible resolution to this dilemma.

The implications of time travel extend beyond physics and into philosophy and ethics. If time travel becomes possible, who controls it? What are the moral implications of changing historical events, and how would societies regulate such power? In the modern era, these questions resonate with current concerns about the responsible use of technology. The idea of time travel forces us to consider not just what is possible, but what should be done with that power.

In practical terms, we are still far from achieving anything resembling the time machines of science fiction. The energy requirements alone would be astronomical. Moving an object close to the speed of light, or manipulating space-time through wormholes, requires energy levels that are currently beyond our technological capabilities. Moreover, the instability of such phenomena—like

wormholes—suggests that even if we could create them, maintaining them long enough for human travel might be impossible with our current understanding of physics.

Despite the challenges, time travel remains an inspiring area of study. It encourages us to push the boundaries of what we know about the universe and to explore the limits of human ingenuity. While it may not be achievable in the near future, the modern era has opened up new ways of thinking about time, space, and reality itself. The pursuit of time travel, whether successful or not, promises to deepen our understanding of the cosmos and our place within it.

In the modern era, poets such as Pablo Neruda, Adrienne Rich, and Seamus Heaney continue to explore the intersection of time and poetry. Heaney's *Digging*, for instance, invokes generations of ancestors through the metaphor of digging into the earth, suggesting that the poet's pen can connect him to both the past and the future.

*"Between my finger and my thumb  
The squat pen rests.  
I'll dig with it."*

This line hints at the ability of poetry to bridge temporal gaps. Heaney, in the present, digs metaphorically into the past, while his writing becomes an artefact for the future.

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## Summary

Through the power of metaphor, structure, and thematic content, poetry acts as a form of time travel. It provides a means to explore and collapse the distinctions between past, present, and future. From the "eternal lines" of Shakespeare's sonnets to the layered temporalities in modern free verse, poetry continues to defy the constraints of time. In a world increasingly defined by rapid technological advancements, poetry reminds us

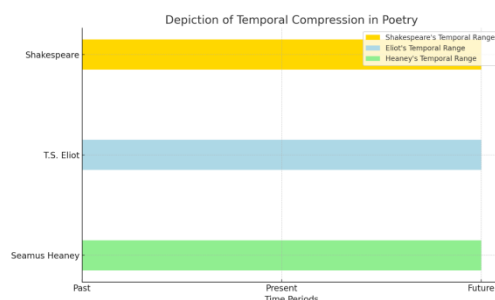
that the most profound time travel occurs within the human mind and the written word.

As we read, write, and reflect on poetry, we find ourselves moving backward to rediscover lost histories, inward to reimagine the present, and forward to envision new possibilities. Poetry, then, is not merely an art form—it is a timeless machine of human experience.

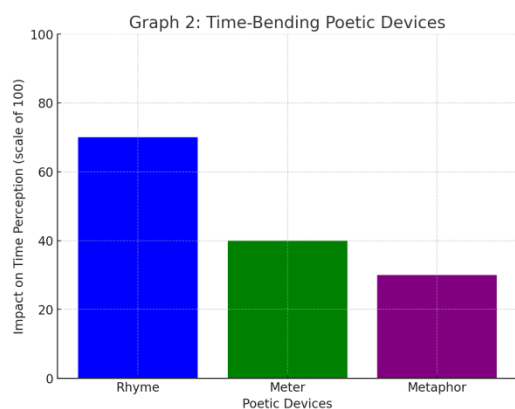
## Inline References

- Henri Bergson's theory of *la due* as a model for temporal fluidity in poetry.
- Shakespeare's *Sonnet 18* as an example of poetry ensuring immortality.
- Modern poets like Seamus Heaney exploring temporal themes through metaphor.

## Graphs



**Graph 1:** Depiction of Temporal Compression in Poetry  
A visual model showing how past, present, and future collapse within a single poem, using examples from Shakespeare, Eliot, and Heaney.



**Graph 2:** Time-Bending Poetic Devices  
A breakdown of various poetic devices (rhyme, meter, metaphor) and how they manipulate time perception during the reading experience.