



Speculative Poetry

Reading and Writing Workshop

by Alan Vincent Michaels

What is Speculative Poetry?

Speculative fiction poetry is a subgenre of poetry primarily focused on fantastical, science fictional, and mythological themes. Although speculative poetry is defined by its subject matter, the form selected can play a significant role in shaping the meaning, tone, and quality of the poem.

Suzette Haden Elgin, founder of the Science Fiction Poetry Association, defined the subgenre as “about a reality that is in some way different from the existing reality.”

Elizabeth Barrette opens her 2008 essay, *Appreciating Speculative Poetry*, with:

When most people hear “science fiction,” they think of **fiction** and not poetry. Fantasy and horror have a less exclusive phrasing, but still, genre readers are more inclined to forget about poetry. It remains, however, a vital part of speculative literature. A genre is defined more by focus than by form. The speculative field—in all its myriad subdivisions—bases itself on the prime question, “What if?” Speculative poetry is simply exploration of “What if?” in verse.

(source: *The Internet Review of Science Fiction* <http://www.irosf.com/q/zine/article/10426>)

Comparing Poetry and Prose

Poetry and prose are two sides of the same speculative literary coin. They are the methods by which speculative ideas are conveyed from the writer’s mind to her readers.

Although poetry and fiction are related through their subject matter, their forms are indeed different. As Elizabeth Barrette describes in *Appreciating Speculative Poetry*:

- Poetry is more concise than fiction
- Poetry is more memorable than prose
- Poetry is bound by different rules than fiction
- Poetry is intended to call attention to language
- Poetry is more suited to describing the indescribable

(source: *The Internet Review of Science Fiction* <http://www.irosf.com/q/zine/article/10426>)

Speculative fiction poetry, contrary to what you may think, is not just genre fiction told in verse. It is, by definition, poetry. Speculative poems can rely on traditional forms to free verse styles, but it is the content that strives to explore the human condition and the human experience, extrapolating and speculating on what that all means. Among the many metaphoric arrows in the poet’s writing quiver, settings, worlds, beings, mythological creatures, alternative histories, and other speculative fiction elements can be used to share the poet’s vision of what she thinks it means to be human. The arrows often hit the mark, but they can also go astray, which are issues critics raise: “What *is* this?” and “This is just not good poetry.” The former is often subjective; the latter can be improved by practice.



Forms of Poetry

poetry.org (<http://www.poetry.org/whatis.htm>) defines the word “poetry” (from the ancient Greek, meaning “I create”) as “an art form in which human language is used for its aesthetic qualities in addition to, or instead of, its notional and semantic content. It consists largely of oral or literary works in which language is used in a manner that is felt by its user and audience to differ from ordinary prose.”

The typical structural elements of a poem are the line, couplet, strophe, stanza, and verse paragraph.

Traditional poetry forms include (from shortest to longest; various sources):

- **couplet** – two lines of verse that rhyme and form a standalone poem or used as part of a poem
- **haiku** – an ancient Asian form of precise, short poetry, composed of three phrased lines with line 1 (five syllables), line 2 (seven syllables), and line 3 (five syllables). There is a seasonal reference included, usually in line 3.
- **limerick** – a five-line, humorous or witty poem with a distinct rhythm: lines 1, 2, and 5 (the longer lines) rhyme, and lines 3 and 4 (the shorter lines) rhyme
- **sonnet** – A short, rhyming poem with 14 lines. Invented by Dante (Durante degli Alighieri) and Francesco Petrarch (an Italian philosopher), and popularized in later centuries by writers such as William Shakespeare. Sonnets use iambic meter in each line and use line-ending rhymes.
- **prose poem** – a piece of writing in prose having poetic qualities, including intensity, compactness, prominent rhythms, and imagery
- **narrative** – A narrative poem that tells the story of an event in the form of a poem. Similar to prose, there can be narration, characters, and plot.
- **epic** – a lengthy, narrative poem told in high or grand language, celebrating the adventures and accomplishments of a legendary or conventional hero
- **free verse** – Another term for “no rules.” The poet can use any combination of the above forms and styles, invent her own styles, or simply avoid using any form at all to convey her idea.

Forms of Speculative Poetry

Speculative poetry can use any of the traditional poetry forms. Through application of traditional forms, several speculative-specific poetry forms have emerged:

- **scifaiku** – Inspired by haiku, but focused on scientific and speculative fiction themes, such as fantasy or horror (**horrorku**). Often, the Japanese form is followed, but English language deviations are allowed, including changing the syllable structure and ignoring nature references.
- **senryū** – A Japanese short poetry style similar to haiku, but are about human foibles instead of nature. Such speculative poems tend to be similar to scifaiku.
- **haibun** – A Japanese short poetry style combining haiku and prose; can be a type of free verse that helps convey speculative fiction themes



Writing Prompts

Use a short poem style or free verse to explore how one of these prompts (or one of your own) affects you or others that you know or don't know.

I really can smell dark matter.

A civilization faces annihilation after one of its moons breaks up in orbit around its planet.

A flock of birds, a swarm of insects, or a congress of baboons follows you everywhere.

An alien chooses to make first contact with a young child with autism,
because the child's brain has pathways perfect for telepathy.

You, like every other child, has a monster living under your bed. Your society has a coming of age ceremony designed to kill that monster. This is the morning of the day you become an adult...

Fairies and sprites are real and they are everywhere!

A small, strange-looking spider in your backyard spins an unbelievably large web,
but when you touch the web something happens that's even more unbelievable.

If I were locked in a cage, I'd reach out for you...

Selected References

- **Suzette Haden Elgin** (born Patricia Anne Wilkins; November 18, 1936 – January 27, 2015). An American science fiction author, linguist, and founder of the Science Fiction Poetry Association. She is also considered an important figure in the field of speculative fiction constructed languages. (Wikipedia.org)
- The **Science Fiction & Fantasy Poetry Association (SFPA)** was established as the Science Fiction Poetry Association in 1978 by Suzette Haden Elgin to unite poets and readers interested in science fiction poetry. Organization publications include:
 - the journal *Star*Line* since 1978
 - online magazine *Eye To The Telescope* since 2011
 - the *Rhysling Anthology* (and its *Rhysling Award*, named for a character in Robert A. Heinlein's short story, "The Green Hills of Earth") annually since 1981, and
 - the *Dwarf Stars* anthology annually since 2006. (Wikipedia.org)
- **Who writes speculative fiction poetry?** Many well-known science fiction, fantasy, and horror authors, such as Ray Bradbury, Lin Carter, L. Sprague de Camp, Joe Haldeman, C.S. Lewis, H.P. Lovecraft, Edgar Allan Poe, and Jane Yolen, have written poems included in their novels or have release collections of their poems.

Other lesser-known speculative poets include Mike Allen, Bruce Boston, Geoffrey A. Landis, and Marge Simon.

- https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_speculative_poets
- https://www.goodreads.com/list/show/12348.SciFi_Fantasy_and_Speculative_Poetry



Learn More About Speculative Poetry

- **About Science Fiction Poetry**, Suzette Haden Elgin: <http://www.sfw.org/members/elgin/SFPoetry.html>
- **Appreciating Speculative Poetry**, Elizabeth Barrette: <http://www.irosf.com/q/zine/article/10426>
- **Examples of Speculative Poetry** <https://www.poetrysoup.com/poems/speculative>
- **Speculative Poetry** https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Speculative_poetry
- **Speculative Poetry: What You Should Know About Science Fiction and Fantasy in Verse**, Robert Lee Brewer: <http://www.writersdigest.com/whats-new/speculative-poetry-know-science-fiction-fantasy-verse>
- **Speculative Poetry: Past, Present, and Future**, Richard H. Fay <http://www.alteredrealitymag.com/speculative-poetry-past-present-and-future-by-richard-h-fay/>
- **What is Speculative Fiction?**, Annie Neugebauer <http://www.annieneugebauer.com/2014/03/24/what-is-speculative-fiction/>

Selected Speculative Poetry Magazines or Collections

- **Elemental haiku**, Mary Soon Lee
(online: http://vis.sciencemag.org/chemhaiku/?utm_source=newsfromscience&utm_medium=facebook-text&utm_campaign=chemhaiku-14534)
- **Eye To The Telescope** (online: <http://www.eyetothetelescope.com>)
- **Goblin Fruit** (online: <http://www.goblinfruit.net>)
- **Pedestal Magazine** (online: <http://www.thepedestalmagazine.com>)
- **Star*Line** (print: <http://www.sfpoetry.com/starline.html>)
- **SciFaiku** (online: <http://www.scifaiku.com>)
- **scifaikuest** (online and print: <http://albanlake.com/scifaikuest/>)
- **Strange Horizons** (online: <http://strangehorizons.com>)

Speculative Poetry Markets

- **SFPA: Speculative Poetry Markets** (<http://www.sfpoetry.com/markets.html>)
- **Speculative Literature Foundation** (<http://speculativeliterature.org>) **Magazines** list (<http://speculativeliterature.org/readers/magazines/>) for speculative fiction and poetry markets