

Does poetry have rules?

No.

But yes.

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Each generation or new movement breaks away from old routines, habits and restrictions to create a new way of making poetry. That is how we develop and keep it fresh. Often, readers or audiences will not know how to deal with this new wave. They don't know how it works or how to appreciate it. They don't know 'the rules'.

It is, of course, a poet's job to create the taste by which they expect to be appreciated. If they write something strong enough they succeed and the public will learn. Then they fashionable public will demand nothing but the new stuff and in no time at all it becomes the new orthodoxy. So we get bored with the same old stuff and some new radical voice will break away again. Ted Hughes is a school syllabus, Che Guevara is a face on a T-shirt, Johnny Rotten advertises butter and we need something new. Something of our own.

Rules are merely the expectations of the most recent majority. By the time they form a majority they are already out of date. So poetry does not flourish by keeping 'rules' in that sense.

What it does have is discipline.

Some years ago I lent a theatre space to a group of anarchists. They wanted to put on Rob Newman to raise funds for their work and I was happy to see the show (and take a percentage plus the bar profits). The uninformed, associating anarchy with chaos, thought they would wreck the place. In fact, their philosophy was that society would not need to impose rules on us if we behaved with self-discipline and consideration. So they kept order, tidied up afterwards and asked for a dustpan and brush to make the place spotless. Had they been sloppy, lazy, self-indulgent or disorganised it would not have worked.

Poems work by control. They need structure, organisation, editing. What kind of order you impose is up to you. If you use some new principle or style we don't recognise or understand you'll have to show us how to read it. Or wait until you're dead before we come round to it – like G.M. Hopkins. You can borrow a traditional format or genre or set of 'rules' or not. Your choice. What the words must have is some kind of power or tension or interest or effect. A poem is not a diary for your therapist or a jigsaw puzzle with no straight edges. It is not a piece of tired old elastic with no spring in it. If it is just self-indulgent it needs rules to make it behave.