

# Some Elements of Poetry

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Those who are not well acquainted with good poetry might imagine that poetry is a spontaneous emotional production, involving perhaps some rhyme, but relying largely on intuition and fortuitous accident, *the muse*, for the details of genius which make great poems great. Actually, poets work in a manner more similar to great composers; there is a current of inspired genius, but this genius is worked out in meticulous professional detail. Just as a composer consciously places each separate note of a symphony on musical staff, so a poet consciously controls each separate vowel and consonant sound, organizing them within the structure of rhythm.

Dylan Thomas's habit was to write each line of a poem at the top of a separate sheet of paper, so that he would have room below to laboriously solve the poetic problems of

the line. Only when he had finished each line did he reassemble the lines into a poem.

Ironically, the one poetic technique that everyone immediately associates with poetry, rhyme, is probably the one that is least used in modern poetry. Instead, most modern poets use far subtler and less obvious techniques to create—and conceal—their art. Many of them are explained below.

## Meter

**meter:** the pattern of stressed (accented, long) and unstressed (unaccented, short) syllables in poetry.

**cadence:** rhythm not truly regular. Walt Whitman wrote in cadences rather than in meters.

**scansion:** the analysis of meter and its variations in poetry.

**foot:** a unit of meter with two or three syllables of which one is usually stressed.

**iambic foot:** a two-syllable foot with the stress on the second. It is the most common foot in English poetry: -/

**trochaic foot:** a two-syllable foot with the stress on the first: /- Trochees are often used to suggest evil, as in the trochaic tetrameter of Shakespeare's witches in *Macbeth*: "Double, double, toil and trouble," or in the trochaic octameter of Poe's "Raven": "Once upon a midnight dreary, while I pondered, weak and weary."

**anapestic foot:** a three-syllable foot with stress on the third: --/

**dactylic foot:** a three-syllable foot with stress on the first: /--

**spondaic foot:** a spondee is two stressed syllables: //

**pyrrhic foot:** two unstressed syllables, --. Rare.

**dipodic foot:** a four-syllable foot consisting of an unaccented, lightly accented, unaccented, and heavily accented syllable.

**anacrusis:** prefixing an unstressed syllable to a line of which it forms no metrical part: Sport that wrinkled Care derides / And Laughter holding both his sides.

**feminine ending:** a final unstressed syllable appended to an iambic or anapestic line. To be or not to be, that is the question.

**catalexis:** dropping one or two unaccented syllables from the end of a line-- necessarily a trochaic or dactylic line. Dust thou art to dust returnest / Was not spoken of the soul.

**metrical lines:** monometer, dimeter, trimeter, tetrameter, pentameter, hexameter, heptameter, octameter.

**sprung rhythm:** Gerard Manley Hopkins's term for variable meter combining a stressed syllable with any number of unstressed syllables.

# Stanza

**stanza:** a division of a poem based on thought or form. Stanzas based on form are shown by their rhyme scheme.

**verso:** a line of a poem.

**arte menor:** 1-8 syllables per line of poetry.

**arte mayor:** 9 or more syllables per line of poetry.

**couplet:** a two-line stanza, aa.

**triplet:** a three-line stanza, aaa.

**quatrain:** a four-line stanza, aaaa, abab, abba, aabb, abac.

**quintet:** a five-line stanza.

**sestet:** a six-line stanza.

**septet:** a seven-line stanza.

**octave:** an eight-line stanza.

**nine-line, ten-line, etc.,**

stanzas:

**heroic couplet:** Also called closed couplet. Two successive rhyming verses with a complete thought within the two lines. Usually iambic pentameter.

**terza rima:** a three-line stanza with an interwoven rhyme scheme: aba, bcb, cdc, ded, etc. Usually iambic pentameter. Shelley's "Ode to The West Wind"

**limerick:** a five-line nonsense poem in anapest, aabba. Lines 1,2, and 5 have 3 feet; lines 3 and 4 have only two.

**ballad:** four lines, abcb, lines 1 and 3 are iambic tetrameter, and lines 2 and 4 are iambic trimeter.

**ode:** a complex, long lyric poem, in formal style, on a sublime subject. Shelley's "Ode to the West Wind" is

an example.

**elegy:** a poem mourning the death of someone.

**allegory:** a story in which characters represent abstract values or ideas, such as John Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress*. There is a meaning below the surface of the story.

**rime royal:** seven lines of iambic pentameter, ababbcc. Named because King James I of Scotland used it.

**ottava rima:** eight lines of iambic pentameter, abababcc. From the Italians.

**Spenserian stanza:** a nine-line stanza consisting of eight iambic pentameter lines followed by an alexandrine, ababbcbcc. Named for Edmund Spenser, who invented this form for his "Faerie Queene."

**alexandrine:** a line of iambic hexameter. The ninth line of a Spenserian stanza is an alexandrine.

**haiku:** a three-line poem of 5, 7, and 5 syllables, unrhymed, concerning nature, and presenting juxtaposed images which are uninterpreted.

**sonnet:** a fourteen-line stanza in iambic pentameter.

**Italian or Petrarchan sonnet:** a sonnet with an octave and a sestet, abbaabba and cdecde or cdcdcd. The octave makes a statement or states a problem, and the sestet makes a summary of gives a solution.

**English or Shakespearean sonnet:** three quatrains and a couplet, abab cdcd efef gg.

**villanelle:** a poem of five tercets, all rhyming aba, and a

concluding quatrain, rhyming abaa. Lines 6, 12, and 18 repeat line one; lines 9, 15, and 19 repeat line 3.

Theodore Roethke's "The Waking" is a nearly perfect villanelle. Dylan Thomas's "Do Not Go Gentle into That Good Night" is a villanelle.

**tercet:** a three-line stanza in which all lines rhyme either with each other or with the lines of an adjoining tercet. Shakespeare concluded "The Phoenix and the Turtle" with five tercets. Sestets rhyming cdecde contain two tercets.

**rondel:** a fourteen-line poem rhyming abbaabababbaab. Lines 7 and 8 and lines 13 and 14 repeat lines 1 and 2.

**distich:** a couplet.

**canto:** a section or division of a long poem, such as the cantos of the *Divine Comedy* or *Don Juan*.

# Rhyme and Sound

**rhymed verse:** verse with end rhyme and usually regular meter.

**blank verse:** iambic pentameter without end rhyme.

**free verse:** verse with no regular meter and no end rhyme.

**rhyme:** a similarity of sound between two words. True rhyme is identical sounding stressed syllables in which the letters before the vowel sounds are different.

**end rhyme:** rhyme at the ends of the lines in a stanza.

**internal rhyme:** rhyme within a line of poetry.

**masculine rhyme:** one-syllable rhyme.

**feminine or double rhyme:** two-syllable rhyme.

**triple rhyme:** three-syllable rhyme.

**leonine rhyme:** a scheme in which the word preceding a caesura rhymes with the last word of the line: I bring fresh showers // for the thirsting flowers.

**rhyme scheme:** the pattern of end rhyme. Sounds are identified by letters, aabb, abab, abc abc, etc.

**reversal:** sense/madness, Emily Dickinson

**alliteration:** repetition of the initial letter or sound.

**assonance:** repetition of a vowel sound.

**consonance:** repetition of a consonant sound.

**onomatopoeia:** word imitation of natural sound. The words *whippoorwill* and *bang* are examples.

**repetition:** reiterating of a word or phrase in a poem.

**incremental repetition:** the repetition of a line or lines, but with a variation each time that advances the narrative.

**refrain:** repetition of one or more phrases or lines at intervals.

**elision:** running together of vowels in adjacent words in order to eliminate a syllable: *th'eternal*.

**eye-rhyme:** words or syllables spelled alike but pronounced differently: *some* and *home*.

**approximate rime:** near rime, imperfect rime, slant rime, oblique rime.

**enjambment:** running of one line into another.

**end-stopped:** lines not enjambed.

**caesura:** a break in the middle of a line of five or more feet. Represented by the syllable //. To err is human, // to forgive, divine.

Shakespeare's Sonnet 29:  
Haply I think on thee—.

## Ideas

**figure of speech:** nonliteral expression

**simile:** a like or as comparison. He swims like a fish.

**epic simile** or **Homeric simile:** a simile as found in Homer's *Iliad*, in which the poet compares something in his poem to an elaborately described scene, such as hunters and dogs in pursuit of a lion or stag.

**metaphor:** an implied comparison. He is a fish. Whitman's poem about the death of Lincoln refers to Lincoln as Captain.

**extended metaphor:** an elaborate comparison; much longer than the typical one-phrase or one-clause metaphor.

**personification:** describing inhuman things in human terms. The sad fish.

**synecdoche:** letting a part represent the whole. All hands on deck.

**metonymy:** letting a related object represent something. payment to the crown.

**hyperbole:** exaggeration, also known as **overstatement**.

**litotes:** emphasis through opposite statement. Calling a fat boy Skinny.

**antithesis:** balancing or contrasting terms. Fair is foul, and foul is fair.

**apostrophe:** addressing someone absent as though present. O Captain!

**symbol:** a word or image that represents something else. The cross.

**epithet:** a descriptive name such as Catherine *the Great*, or the *wine-dark* sea.

**oxymoron:** a figure of speech that combines opposite ideas, such as *living death* or *sweet sorrow*.

**allusion:** a reference to something in literature or history. Yeats's "No Second Troy," or Keats's "Chapman's Homer" contain examples.

**cacophony:** bad-sounding sounds.

**juxtaposition:** stark side-by-side contrast of two different voices, elements, or phenomena, as in "After Taught Me."

**voice:** the personality adopted by the poet for the speaking tone of the poem.

**trope:** a figure of speech, or figurative language.