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Building Poems

We are the builders.
We are the makers.
Human beings make things.

Beautiful things.

We build with wood, glass, concrete, steel—and we build with words.

The things we make—whether they are buildings or poems—have parts, and the parts fit, and they are arranged in a pattern for a purpose.

Like a glass tower that reflects the sky—that almost becomes part of the sky—a poem is built—with poem pieces. A poem is a kind of building.
When the rhymes are inside the lines, that is called **internal rhyme**.

Alfred, Lord Tennyson, used internal rhyme in his poem “The Splendor Falls”:

The splendor **falls** on castle **walls**
And snowy summits old in story;
The long light **shakes** across the **lakes**, And the wild cataract leaps in glory.

**internal rhyme**
William Blake alternated iambic lines and trochaic lines in his poem “A Poison Tree.” If we put the stressed syllables in purple, we see that lines one and three are trochaic, and lines two and four are iambic:

I was angry with my friend:
I told my wrath, my wrath did end.
I was angry with my foe:
I told it not; my wrath did grow.

Notice that Blake dropped the final unstressed syllable of the fourth trochee in lines one and three. By doing this, he could end the line on a stress, creating a rhythm that sounds like

BA da BA da BA da BOOM.

We can see from this that a poem does not have to use the same meter in every line, even though most poems do.
Most poems have from one to eight feet per line. For example, many poems are written with five iamb per line. In William Shakespeare’s play *Romeo and Juliet*, when Romeo first sees Juliet, he exclaims to himself,

O, she doth teach the torches to burn bright!

It is five perfect iamb:

O, she / doth teach / the tor / ches to / burn bright!

The English language is naturally iambic. We tend to speak in iamb naturally. For this reason, poets use iamb for noble characters and good news, and they often use trochees—anti-iamb—for evil and for villains. Shakespeare used trochees for the witches’ chant in *Macbeth* as they danced around the poisoned cauldron (he dropped the final unstressed syllable in the fourth trochee of these lines):

Adder’s / fork, and / blind-worm’s / sting
  Lizard’s / leg, and / owlet’s / wing...
The English word *stanza* comes from the Italian *stanza*, a room. The Italians got *stanza* from the Latin verb *stare*, to stand. The idea is that a stanza is like a room, a part of a larger building, a place where we can stand, stop, stay.

A stanza is a section of a poem. Poets build poems out of stanzas, as architects build buildings out of floors.

Stanzas are sometimes named for the number of lines they contain:

- **couplet**: a two-line stanza
- **triplet**: a three-line stanza
- **quatrain**: a four-line stanza
- **quintet**: a five-line stanza
- **sestet**: a six-line stanza

There is also a *ballad stanza*, which is a quatrain, four lines, abcb, in which lines one and three are iambic tetrameter, and lines two and four are iambic trimeter. Emily Dickinson used the ballad stanza for her poem “LII” (we number Dickinson’s poems with Roman numerals):
LII
Emily Dickinson

New feet within my garden go,
New fingers stir the sod;
A troubador upon the elm
Betrays the solitude.

New children play upon the green,
New weary sleep below;
And still the pensive spring returns,
And still the punctual snow!

New feet / within / my gar / den go,
New fin / gers stir / the sod;
A trou / bador / upon / the elm
Betrays / the sol / itude.
And we understand what Walt Whitman was doing in “Song of Myself” when he used this metaphor:

A child said, *What is the grass?* fetching it to me with full hands; How could I answer the child? I do not know what it is any more than he. I guess *it must be the flag of my disposition*, out of hopeful green stuff woven.
In Shakespeare’s play *Julius Caesar*, written in poetry, Brutus and Cassius plot to assassinate Caesar. In Act I, scene ii, Cassius vents his resentment of Caesar’s power and prestige using a *simile*. A *colossus* is a giant statue, such as the Statue of Liberty.

Why, man, he doth bestride
the narrow world
Like a Colossus, and we petty men
Walk under his huge legs and peep about
To find ourselves dishonourable graves.
END-STOPPED

“Hee,” chuckled the chicken, chomping the cheese, “I’d rather be bubbled in juice.”
“Yes,” stressed the late-o tomato, “but please”— “You shouldn’t be thinking so loose!”

ENJAMBED

The absentee chicken sent seventy-three long letters to animals seeking free manuals. Each was a stab at expressing thoughts clearly—good habit!
Robert Frost used *enjambment* in the first stanza of his 1915 poem “The Road Not Taken.” Notice the quality this gives the poem:

Two roads diverged in a yellow wood,  
And sorry I could not travel both  
And be one traveler, long I stood  
And looked down one as far as I could  
To where it bent in the undergrowth.

As we see from the complete poem on the next page, Frost built the poem from four quintets. He used end rhyme, and most lines are end-stopped. He also avoided perfect regular meter, preferring to give the poem some of the qualities of natural speech. Frost alternated back and forth, enjambing some lines and end-stopping others. How would you describe the effect he achieved by using both endings?
set on fire—but hour by hour faded—and the crackling trunks with a crash—and all was black.

Not only did Byron use alliteration and consonance to amplify the k sound, he also used alliteration in fell and faded to suggest the fffff sound of falling trees, and assonance in and, crackling, crash, and black. Notice the iambic pentameter:

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Ex tin / guished with / a crash / and all / was black
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