The Poetry of Literature

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About the front and back covers: This house in Amherst, Massachusetts, is where Emily Dickinson lived for almost all of her life. Photographs by Dr. Thomas Milton Kemnitz.
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Herman Melville (1819-1891)
was the author of *Moby Dick*, one of the great American novels.
He also wrote poetry, including this poem
about the Civil War.
In the Prison-Pen

Listless he eyes the palisades
And sentries in the glare;
’Tis barren as a pelican-beach
But his world is ended there.

Nothing to do; and vacant hands
Bring on the idiot-pain;
He tries to think—to recollect,
But the blur is on his brain.

Around him swarm the plaining ghosts
Like those on Virgil’s shore—
A wilderness of faces dim,
And pale ones gashed and hoar.

A smiting sun. No shed, no tree;
He totters to his lair—
A den that sick hands dug in earth
Ere famine wasted there,

Or, dropping in his place, he swoons,
Walled in by throngs that press,
Till forth from the throngs they bear him dead—
Dead in his meagreness.

Herman Melville
Days, weeks passed, and under easy sail, the ivory Pequod had slowly swept across four several cruising-grounds; that off the Azores; off the Cape de Verdes; on the Plate (so called), being off the mouth of the Rio de la Plata; and the Carrol Ground, an unstaked, watery locality, southerly from St. Helena.

It was while gliding through these latter waters that one serene and moonlit night, when all the waves rolled by like scrolls of silver; and, by their soft, suffusing seethings, made what seemed a silvery silence, not a solitude; on such a silent night a silvery jet was seen far in advance of the white bubbles at the bow. Lit up by the moon, it looked celestial; seemed some plumed and glittering god uprising from the sea. Fedallah first descried this jet. For of these moonlit nights, it was his wont to mount to the main-mast head, and stand a look-out there, with the same precision as if it had been day. And yet, though herds of whales were seen by night, not one whaleman in a hundred would venture a lowering for them. You may think with

Herman Melville  
*Moby Dick*
The Poetry of Literature

Ever since Aristotle (384-322 B.C.) labored to organize and classify all knowledge in ancient Greece, we have, as loyal Aristotelians, focused on what makes things different from each other. In biology, we sort living things into a vast array of categories, contrasting vertebrates and invertebrates, insects and arachnids. In astronomy, we sort heavenly bodies into planets, asteroids, stars, black holes, nebulae, brown dwarfs, and so forth, and when a new object zips across the cosmos, we try to define its proper category. We are the category-makers.

Much of the time, separating the phenomena of the world into categories is beneficial. It clarifies our understanding. It organizes chaos. Of course, the things classified within the categories are like each other, but the risk is that by emphasizing differences between categories, we miss connections.

In school, we separate the elements of language arts into discrete units: one on vocabulary, one on grammar, one on poetry, one on literature. We study poetry and prose at different times, in separate units. We think of poetry as a genre in itself, contained, a secret art that is not like non-poetic prose.

We read a poem, and we expect to see the standard elements of poetry such as rhyme, alliteration, meter, and so forth. When we read a novel, by contrast, we think of it as prose, as unpoetic, and our concentration is on the plot and the characters and the symbols and the underlying theme. We do not read the paragraphs of a novel with our minds attuned to poetry. We imagine that words are chosen only for their definitions, not their sounds. We do not expect poetic techniques in paragraphs. If they are there, we do not notice.

The truth is that most great novelists are poets also, and they use poetic devices in their novels to create a soundtrack for the story. In Moby Dick, possibly the greatest American novel, Herman Melville wove poetry into his paragraphs, giving proof to poet Percy Bysshe Shelley’s profound comment that sounds have a relationship to what they represent. When Melville wanted to summon the magic of a serene, silent, moonlit night at sea, he resorted to poetry, using alliteration and consonance (techniques we will discuss later) to weave the consonant s through the passage like a silver thread, and the effect was a silvery sound for the silvery scene that the silvery words represent.

Writing in 1850 to Richard Henry Dana, the author of Two Years Before the Mast, Melville said, “the poetry runs as hard as sap from a frozen maple tree.”
Kenneth Grahame (1859-1932) was the author of *The Wind in the Willows*. He wrote poems that he wove into the text of his novel.
Mr. Toad

The world has held great Heroes,
As history-books have showed;
But never a name to go down to fame
Compared with that of Toad!

The clever men at Oxford
Know all that there is to be knowed.
But they none of them know one half as much
As intelligent Mr Toad!

The animals sat in the Ark and cried,
Their tears in torrents flowed.
Who was it said, ‘There’s land ahead’?
Encouraging Mr Toad!

The army all saluted
As they marched along the road.
Was it the King? Or Kitchener?
No. It was Mr Toad.

The Queen and her Ladies-in-waiting
Sat at the window and sewed.
She cried, ‘Look! Who’s that HANDSOME man?’
They answered, ‘Mr Toad.’

Kenneth Grahame
CHAPTER 1. The River Bank

After all, the best part of a holiday is perhaps not so much to be resting yourself, as to see all the other fellows busy working.

He thought his happiness was complete when, as he meandered aimlessly along, suddenly he stood by the edge of a full-fed river. Never in his life had he seen a river before—this sleek, sinuous, full-bodied animal, chasing and chuckling, gripping things with a gurgle and leaving them with a laugh, to fling itself on fresh playmates that shook themselves free, and were caught and held again. All was a-shake and a-shiver—glints and gleams and sparkles, rustle and swirl, chatter and bubble. The Mole was bewitched, entranced, fascinated. By the side of the river he trotted as one trots, when very small, by the side of a man who holds one spell-bound by exciting stories; and when tired at last, he sat on the bank, while the river still chattered on to him, a babbling procession of the best stories in the world, sent from the heart of the earth to be told at last to the insatiable sea.

As he sat on the grass and looked across the river, a dark hole in the bank opposite, just above the

Kenneth Grahame  
*The Wind in the Willows*
Melville captured the moonlit sea with the s consonant, but Kenneth Grahame, in the first chapter of *The Wind in the Willows*, used a warbly group of musical alliterations, followed by a long strand of s’s, for a magical passage about a river. If we inspect the page, we see resonant sound pairs, such as full/fed, sleek/sinuous, chasing/chuckling, gripping/gurgle, a-shake/a-shiver, glints/gleams, and others. The passage then settles on a description of the river, at which point Grahame orchestrates a concerto of whispering s sounds to capture the majestic movement of the river past the bank where Mole stands.

In Melville and Grahame we see two authors writing novels, both incorporating techniques that we associate with poetry. Melville was an American author who was born in 1819 and died in 1891. He published *Moby Dick* in 1851. Kenneth Grahame was a British author born in 1859, eight years after Melville published *Moby Dick*, and he died in 1932. He published *The Wind in the Willows* in 1908, shortly before World War I.

1800 1825 1850 1875 1900 1925 1950

Melville---------x-------------------------]
Grahame---------------------x-------------]

Melville was a writer of the nineteenth century, versed in its traditions. Grahame, writing in the twentieth century and on a different continent, used poetic techniques in his prose in much the same way that Melville did. Clearly, writing prose to this poetic standard is difficult—even extraordinarily difficult—and so the question is why? Why did these authors go to these extremes to include such poetic passages in their novels? We begin to see how great books are different from potboilers.

Without knowing more about the poetics of prose, we might adopt a beginner’s derision and say that it is ridiculous or foolish. We might ask, “What’s the point?” But as we read back over these passages and consider that famous novelists probably know more about writing than people who have never written a novel, we realize that the extraordinary writing does cast its spell. The carefully written waves of sound affect us, with the passages sounding right, sounding like themselves. Painters do not paint their skies green, and great writers do not paint their peaceful scenes with harsh k’s or g’s. Calm seas and sleek rivers get painted in s’s. The soundtrack of prose is written in poetry.
CHAPTER 1. The Old Sea-dog at the Admiral Benbow

Squire Trelawney, Dr. Livesey, and the rest of these gentlemen having asked me to write down the whole particulars about Treasure Island, from the beginning to the end, keeping nothing back but the bearings of the island, and that only because there is still treasure not yet lifted, I take up my pen in the year of grace 17... and go back to the time when my father kept the Admiral Benbow inn and the brown old seaman with the sabre cut first took up his lodging under our roof.

I remember him as if it were yesterday, as he came plodding to the inn door, his sea-chest following behind him in a hand-barrow—a tall, strong, heavy, nut-brown man, his tarry pigtail falling over the shoulder of his soiled blue coat, his hands ragged and scarred, with black, broken nails, and the sabre cut across one cheek, a dirty, livid white. I remember him looking round the cove and whistling to himself as he did so, and then breaking out in that old sea-song that he sang so often afterwards:

“Fifteen men on the dead man’s chest—

Robert Louis Stevenson Treasure Island
It is easy to imagine someone seeing poetry used in the paragraphs of great prose for the first time and feeling dubious. I can imagine someone doubting that such poetic prose is normal or intentional, asking, “But did he really know he was doing that?” Someone might even hope that the poetics are a happy accident, that great novelists do not use poetic techniques on purpose because if that were true, it would change writing from something that flows naturally out of one’s heart to something that is an exhausting and artificial form of art—or so it would seem to a beginner.

Well, novelists do know that they are using poetic techniques — of course they do — and they do it on purpose because they care so much about their stories. They work harder than normal writers because they care more than normal writers. They do such intense artistic work because it is important to make the story more real for the reader, to make the reading environment complete. A great novelist is an artist of words, and the sound of words is part of the art. Art is difficult. That is the reality. Art is heroic, strenuous, often the result of inconceivable intellectual exertion. It is beautiful.

Let us look at another example: Robert Louis Stevenson’s use in the first chapter of *Treasure Island* of harsh *k* and *g* consonants in his description of the crusty pirate, Billy Bones, who has arrived at the Admiral Benbow inn. These cracked, grating sounds perfectly capture the coarse pirate.

Rather than show you the whole page of Stevenson’s novel, I could simply have quoted the twenty words where the harsh sounds appear, but it is instructive to see the poetic passage in the context of the entire page, to see Stevenson’s artistic judgment. We see that Stevenson did not use such poetics in every sentence or in every paragraph. Rather, Stevenson dabbed poetics into the spots where it made sense. It is not that he was oblivious to sound in other paragraphs; it is more like the soundtrack in a movie: as a shark approaches, there is a thrum of music that was not audible in the previous scene. Shark music. In the pirate page from Stevenson’s novel, we suddenly get pirate music: scratchy *k* and grubby *g* notes. Novelists use poetics when the story requires them.

Of course, the three examples we have seen from Melville, Grahame, and Stevenson are only a small beginning for us, a wake-up moment, a hint of what we need to explore. We have only seen two kinds of poetics, alliteration and consonance, and it is time for us to see much more. We will return to alliteration and consonance later; now let us look at something different: silence.
Robert Louis Stevenson (1850-1894) was the author of *Treasure Island*. He also wrote poetry, including a famous book of poetry for children entitled *A Child’s Garden of Verse*. 
Fragment One

About my fields, in the broad sun
And Blaze of noon, there goeth one,
Barefoot and robed in blue, to scan
With the hard eye of the husbandman
My harvests and my cattle. Her,
When even* puts the birds astir
And day has set in the great woods,
We seek, among her garden roods,
With bells and cries in vain: the while
Lamps, plate, and the decanter smile
On the forgotten board. But she,
Deaf, blind, and prone on face and knee,
Forgets time, family, and feast,
And digs like a demented beast.

Robert Louis Stevenson

*even: evening
CHAPTER 13. How My Shore Adventure Began

All the way in, Long John stood by the steersman and coned the ship. He knew the passage like the palm of his hand, and though the man in the chains got everywhere more water than was down in the chart, John never hesitated once.

“There’s a strong scour with the ebb,” he said, “and this here passage has been dug out, in a manner of speaking, with a spade.”

We brought up just where the anchor was in the chart, about a third of a mile from each shore, the mainland on one side and Skeleton Island on the other. The bottom was clean sand. The plunge of our anchor sent up clouds of birds wheeling and crying over the woods, but in less than a minute they were down again and all was once more silent.

The place was entirely land-locked, buried in woods, the trees coming right down to high-water mark, the shores mostly flat, and the hilltops standing round at a distance in a sort of amphitheatre, one here, one there. Two little rivers, or rather two swamps, emptied out into this pond, as you might call it; and the foliage round that part of the shore had a kind of

Robert Louis Stevenson

Treasure Island
Silence

One of the unsung elements of poetry is silence, the meaningful placement of pauses, stops, hushes. Great novelists are masters of positioned silence, gracefully placing silences in their text at silences in their plot.

In the passage from Treasure Island at left, you see the method in classic form. At the point that the story says that “all was once more silent,” the sentence ends with a period, and the paragraph ends. The story stops, so the writing stops.

Many novelists use this technique. H.G. Wells did much the same thing in his classic novel The Invisible Man. Look at this passage from Chapter IV:

She stood behind the door, looking at the open door of the parlour. Then she heard the stranger laughing quietly, and then his footsteps came across the room. She could not see his face where she stood. The parlour door slammed, and the place was silent again.

Cuss went straight up the village to Bunting the vicar. “Am I mad?” Cuss began abruptly, as he entered the shabby little study. “Do I look like an insane person?”

Here is a passage from Grahame’s The Wind in the Willows that shows the same technique, using not the adjective silent but other words:

Remembering what he had been engaged upon, he reached down to the floor for his verses, pored over them for a minute, and then looked round for the Mole to ask him if he knew a good rhyme for something or other.

But the Mole was not there.

He listened for a time. The house seemed very quiet.

Then he called ‘Moly!’ several times, and, receiving no answer, got up and went out into the hall.

There are levels of silence, from the pause of a comma, to the stop of a period, to the serene silence of ending both the sentence and the paragraph. In Grahame’s passage we see the full stop after time and the maximum silence after quiet. The silences are not always accomplished by ending paragraphs. Sometimes a series of commas or other punctuated silences can capture an event.
Jack London (1876-1916) wrote *The Call of the Wild* and *White Fang.* He also wrote poetry, including this poetic reflection on the purpose of life.
Credo

I would rather be ashes than dust!
I would rather that my spark
should burn out in a brilliant blaze
than it should be stifled by dry-rot.

I would rather be a superb meteor
every atom of me in magnificent glow
than a sleepy and permanent planet.

The function of man is to live
not to exist.
I shall not waste my days trying to prolong them.
I shall use my time.

Jack London
CHAPTER 9. The Never Bird

He was too far away to hear their doors shut; but every door in the coral caves where they live rings a tiny bell when it opens or closes (as in all the nicest houses on the mainland), and he heard the bells.

Steadily the waters rose till they were nibbling at his feet; and to pass the time until they made their final gulp, he watched the only thing on the lagoon. He thought it was a piece of floating paper, perhaps part of the kite, and wondered idly how long it would take to drift ashore.

Presently he noticed as an odd thing that it was undoubtedly out upon the lagoon with some definite purpose, for it was fighting the tide, and sometimes winning; and when it won, Peter, always sympathetic to the weaker side, could not help clapping; it was such a gallant piece of paper.

It was not really a piece of paper; it was the Never bird, making desperate efforts to reach Peter on the nest. By working her wings, in a way she had learned since the nest fell into the water, she was able to some extent to guide her strange craft, but by the time Peter recognised her she was very

James M. Barrie  

Peter Pan
In the passage from *Peter Pan* at left, James M. Barrie used pauses to capture the indolent pulse of the lagoon. We see eight pauses in thirty-three words, an average of four words between pauses. There are five commas, two semicolons, and a period at the end. The occasion for this cadence of pauses is the rhythm of the lagoon as the waves wash upon the shore. If you examine the adjacent paragraphs, you see nothing resembling this tempo of silences. Think about the sound of waves and the way that the waves are quiet as they move toward the shore but then louder as they reach the shore, and then the pattern repeats.

Sometimes a pulse of pauses captures the actions of a character, almost as if we were seeing an actor stop and start on a stage. Look at how Kenneth Grahame used commas and even strong dashes to capture Mole’s fitful motions in Chapter Five of *The Wind in the Willows*:

> They moved on in silence for some little way, when suddenly the Rat was conscious, through his arm that was linked in Mole’s, of a faint sort of electric thrill that was passing down that animal’s body. Instantly he disengaged himself, fell back a pace, and waited, all attention.
> The signals were coming through!

> Mole stood a moment rigid, while his uplifted nose, quivering slightly, felt the air.

> Then a short, quick run forward—a fault—a check—a try back; and then a slow, steady, confident advance.

> The Rat, much excited, kept close to his heels as the Mole, with something of the air of a sleep-walker, crossed a dry ditch, scrambled through a hedge, and nosed his way over a field open and trackless and bare in the faint starlight.

If we compare the indicated passage—especially the segment with the three dashes—to the longer paragraph above it, we see that though Grahame does use commas elsewhere, they are not always used to reflect the plot. These plot pauses have meaning. Each little step of action is marked by its own comma. We always use commas in standard ways to reflect the orthodox rules of grammar, but great novelists also take commas and other forms of silence to artistic heights that are never mentioned in grammar books. No grammar book says, “If the little animal stops, put a comma.” For great novelists, silences become part of the story, part of the fictional reality of the novel.
Charles Dickens (1812-1870) was the most popular novelist of the Victorian Era. He wrote Great Expectations, A Christmas Carol, A Tale of Two Cities, David Copperfield, and many other famous novels. He also wrote poetry, such as this interesting poem.
Squire Norton’s Song

How beautiful at eventide
To see the twilight shadows pale,
Steal o’er the landscape, far and wide,
O’er stream and meadow, mound and dale!

How soft is Nature’s calm repose
When ev’ning skies their cool dews weep:
The gentlest wind more gently blows,
As if to soothe her in her sleep!

The gay morn breaks,
Mists roll away,
All Nature awakes
To glorious day.
In my breast alone
Dark shadows remain;
The peace it has known
It can never regain.

Charles Dickens
CHAPTER 4. The Last of the Spirits

The Phantom spread its dark robe before him for a moment, like a wing; and withdrawing it, revealed a room by daylight, where a mother and her children were.

She was expecting some one, and with anxious eagerness; for she walked up and down the room; started at every sound; looked out from the window; glanced at the clock; tried, but in vain, to work with her needle; and could hardly bear the voices of the children in their play.

At length the long-expected knock was heard. She hurried to the door, and met her husband; a man whose face was careworn and depressed, though he was young. There was a remarkable expression in it now; a kind of serious delight of which he felt ashamed, and which he struggled to repress.

He sat down to the dinner that had been hoarding for him by the fire; and when she asked him faintly what news (which was not until after a long silence), he appeared embarrassed how to answer.
Here is a passage from Charles Dickens’s story *A Christmas Carol*. For the most part, the punctuation on the page is conventional, following the standard rules to which it is obligated by grammar. In the second paragraph, however, something different occurs, something that reminds us of the way Kenneth Grahame punctuated his passage about Mole. In this passage Caroline is anxious, pacing, halting, starting, and the anxiety that she is suffering is expressed through both the words themselves and the silences that Dickens punctuated. The passage contains fifty-one words, with ten silences—three commas, six semicolons, and a period—an average of five words between silences.

Look at this similar passage from Robert Louis Stevenson’s *Treasure Island*, describing the Captain Billy Bones’s final, staggering agony:

> It was some time before either I or the captain seemed to gather our senses, but at length, and about at the same moment, I released his wrist, which I was still holding, and he drew in his hand and looked sharply into the palm. “Ten o’clock!” he cried. “Six hours. We’ll do them yet,” and he sprang to his feet.

> Even as he did so, he *reeled*, put his hand to his *throat*, stood swaying for a *moment*, and then, with a peculiar *sound*, fell from his whole height face foremost to the *floor*.

> I ran to him at once, calling to my mother. But haste was all in vain. The captain had been struck dead by thundering apoplexy. It is a curious thing to understand, for I had certainly never liked the man, though of late I had begun to pity him, but as soon as I saw that he was dead, I burst into a flood of tears.

In thirty-four doleful words we see six commas and a period, with an average of fewer than five words between silences. Billy Bones reels, silence, grabs his throat, silence, sways, silence.... It makes one fear thundering apoplexy.

We could review more examples of literary silence, but you see how it works. Punctuation is more than the application of grammar rules; it becomes part of the poetics of prose, shifting its silences with the behavior of the characters and the motions of nature. Oscar Wilde once said that he spent the whole morning putting in a comma, and the whole afternoon taking it out. We begin to see why. A device related to silence is rhythm. Let us look at the use of rhythm, the rise and fall of sound and silence, the use of poetic meter in prose.