

Royal Fireworks

Language Arts

by Michael Clay Thompson

The Poetry of Literature

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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.

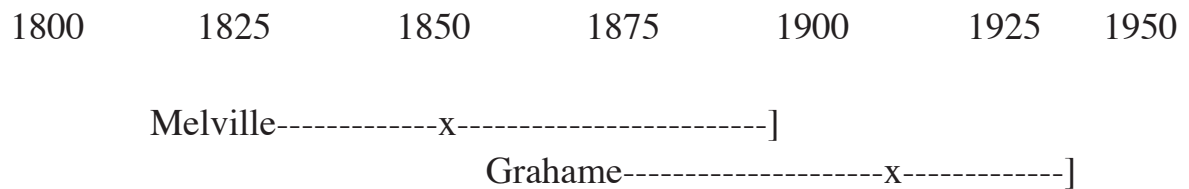
He thought his happiness was complete when, as he meandered aimlessly along, suddenly he stood by the edge of a full-fed river. Never in his life had he seen a river before—this sleek, sinuous, full-bodied animal, chasing and chuckling, gripping things with a gurgle and leaving them with a laugh, to 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/sinuuous*, *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.



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

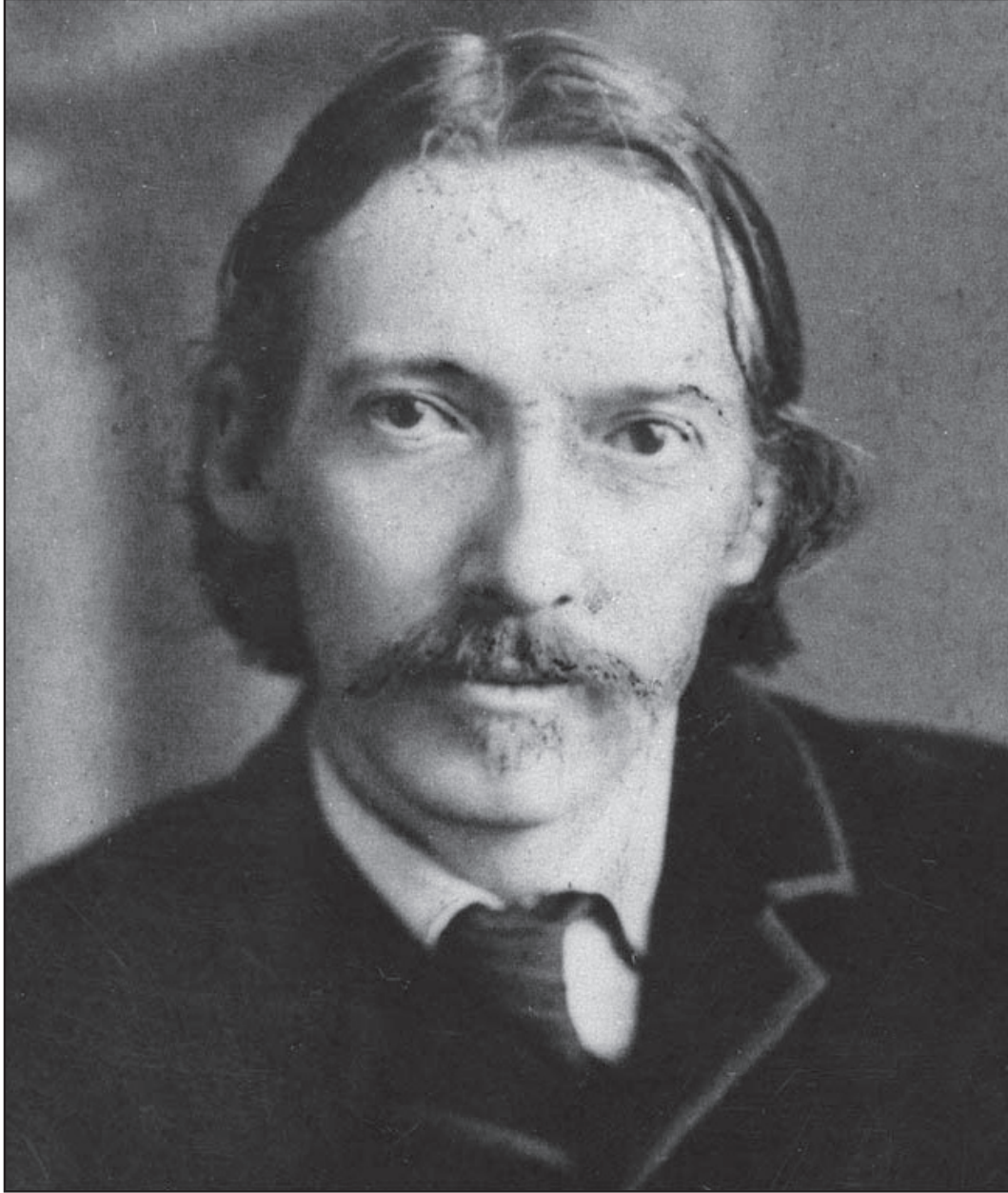
It is easy to imagine someone seeing poetry used in the paragraphs of great prose for the first time and feeling dubious. I can imagine someone doubting that such poetic prose is normal or intentional, asking, “But did he really know he was doing that?” Someone might even hope that the poetics are a 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 conned 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

Stopped Consonants

Now that we have looked at the devices novelists use to write poetic sound into their stories, we are ready for what is, in a way, a more advanced topic. There is a special group of six consonant sounds called the **stopped consonants** because they stop the breath. The six consonants break into three pairs, with each pair being two forms of the same sound:

PB TD KG

B is a more vocalized form of P, D is a more vocalized form of T, and G is a more vocalized form of K. The sequence intensifies from least to most harsh, with the KG pair expressing the most vocal violence. Examples of words that deploy these sounds are *Pack-Back*, *Toe-Doe*, and *Crate-Grate*. Those happen to be rhymes; we can have the same effect with *Pick-Black*, *Tock-Dove*, and *Crack-Grim*. The critical point is the hard sound that all six consonants share. In literature as in poetry, these sounds are often used to denote death, doom, destruction, damage, evil, bruising, breaking, and other vile phenomena.

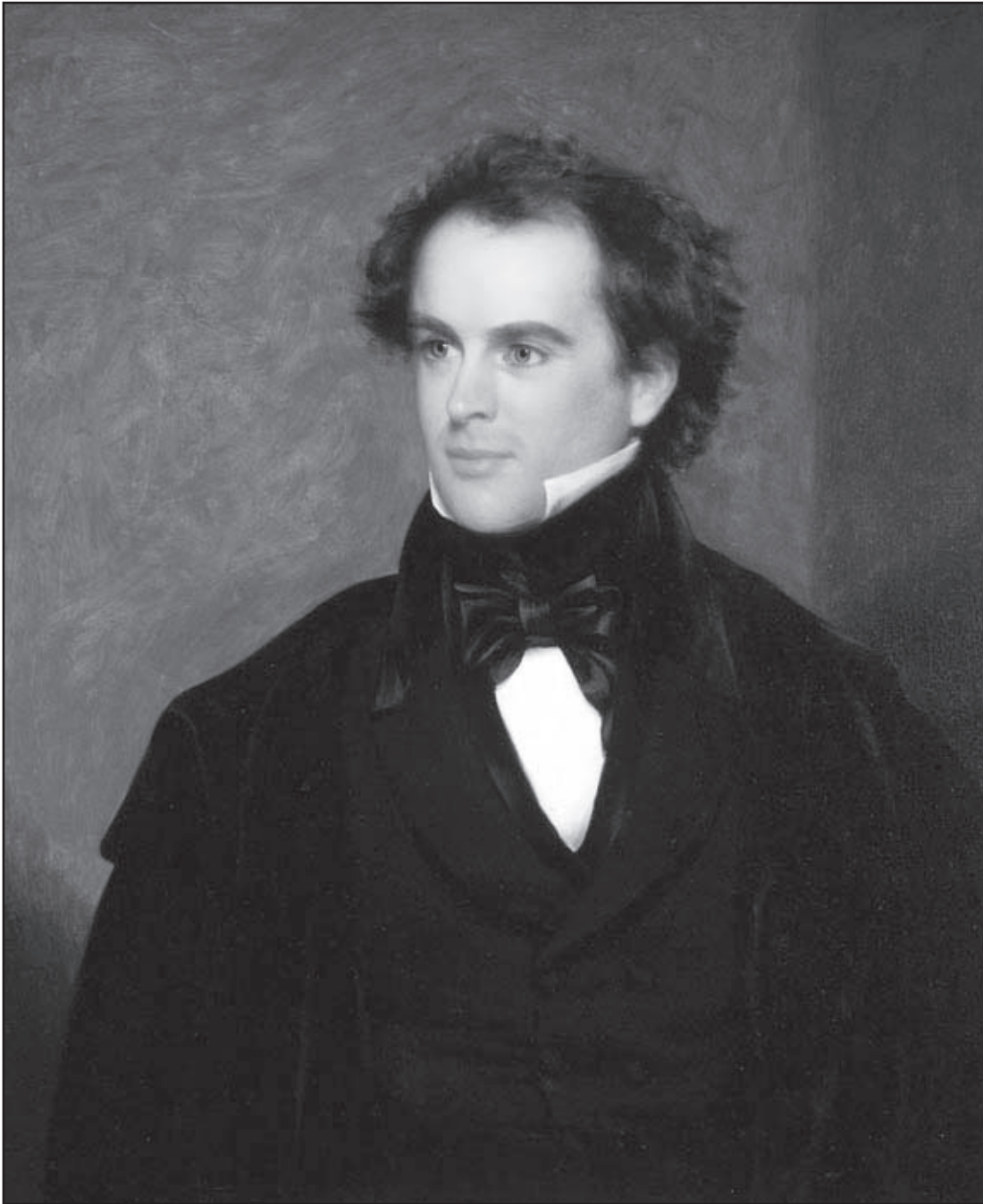
Look at the passage from *The Wind in the Willows* at left. Kenneth Grahame used a series of stopped consonants to capture the sting—his word—of sleet on the animals' skin. With the stopped consonants, we almost feel the sting on our own skin. Grahame chose the harshest of the consonants to increase the bitterness of the sting. Notice the resonance of *sting* and *sleet*.

Lewis Carroll, in *Alice in Wonderland*, used the same device:

It did so indeed, and much sooner than she had expected: before she had drunk half the bottle, she found her head pressing against the ceiling, and had to stoop to save her neck from being broken.

In Mark Twain's *A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur's Court*, we see the odious effect again:

“Fair sir, of your kindness will ye climb the ladder there, and bring me news of what ye find? Be not afraid to report, for times can come when even a mother's heart is past breaking—being already broke.”



Nathaniel Hawthorne (1804-1864)
was the author of *The Scarlet Letter*,
a classic of American literature.
He also wrote poetry, including
this thoughtful meditation.

The Ocean

The ocean has its silent caves,
Deep, quiet and alone;
Though there be fury on the waves,
Beneath them there is none.
The awful spirits of the deep
Hold their communion there;
And there are those for whom we weep,
The young, the bright, the fair.

Calmly the wearied seamen rest
Beneath their own blue sea.
The ocean solitudes are blest,
For there is purity.
The earth has guilt, the earth has care,
Unquiet are its graves;
But peaceful sleep is ever there,
Beneath the dark blue waves.

Nathaniel Hawthorne



CHAPTER I. The Prison Door

A throng of bearded men, in sad-coloured garments and grey steeple-crowned hats, inter-mixed with women, some wearing hoods, and others bareheaded, was assembled in front of a wooden edifice, the door of which was heavily timbered with oak, and studded with iron spikes.

The founders of a new colony, whatever Utopia of human virtue and happiness they might originally project, have invariably recognised it among their earliest practical necessities to allot a portion of the virgin soil as a cemetery, and another portion as the site of a prison. In accordance with this rule it may safely be assumed that the forefathers of Boston had built the first prison-house somewhere in the vicinity of Cornhill, almost as seasonably as they marked out the first burial-ground, on Isaac Johnson's lot, and round about his grave, which subsequently became the nucleus of all the congregated sepulchres in the old churchyard of King's Chapel.

Certain it is that, some fifteen or twenty years after the settlement of the town, the wooden jail

Nathaniel Hawthorne

The Scarlet Letter

In the opening page of his novel *The Scarlet Letter*, at left, Nathaniel Hawthorne used harsh stopped consonants to describe a crowd of people, painting their portrait in harsh sounds so that we would understand the strict, unsympathetic nature of their spirits. If we were to remove the other letters from this first sentence, leaving only the stopped consonants, the sentence would look like this:

**G-B-D-D-D-C-D-G-T-G-
T-P-C-D-T-T-X-D-D-D-B-D-D-
D-T-D-D-D-T-B-D-
K-D-T-D-D-D-P-K**

Readers who are attuned to the sounds that novelists write into their novels will hear these cruel consonants; it is a kind of cryptography between great authors and great readers, a cipher that writers leave to help us interpret their stories. No reader who can hear these harsh poetics would expect kindness or mercy from people painted with such consonants. It is a powerful, disturbing, even frightening passage—if you hear the terrible sounds. As a gentleman, Hawthorne spared the women the cruel sounds: *with women wearing*.

In *The Call of the Wild*, Jack London used stopped consonants to describe cruel men:

But the saloon-keeper let him alone, and in the morning four men entered and picked up the crate. More tormentors, Buck decided, for they were evil-looking creatures, ragged and unkempt; and he stormed and raged at them through the bars.

In *The Invisible Man*, H.G. Wells combined the *k* sound with *sh*, creating a sound effect similar to one in a movie: *kshh kshh....*

But hardly had I emerged upon Great Portland Street, however (my lodging was close to the big draper's shop there), when I heard a clashing concussion and was hit violently behind, and turning saw a man carrying a basket of soda-water syphons, and looking in amazement at his burden.

STAVE I. Marley's Ghost

Marley was dead: to begin with. There is no doubt whatever about that. The register of his burial was signed by the clergyman, the clerk, the undertaker, and the chief mourner. Scrooge signed it: and Scrooge's name was good upon 'Change, for anything he chose to put his hand to. Old Marley was as dead as a door-nail.

Mind! I don't mean to say that I know, of my own knowledge, what there is particularly dead about a door-nail. I might have been inclined, myself, to regard a coffin-nail as the deadest piece of ironmongery in the trade. But the wisdom of our ancestors is in the simile; and my unhallowed hands shall not disturb it, or the Country's done for. You will therefore permit me to repeat, emphatically, that Marley was as dead as a door-nail.

Scrooge knew he was dead? Of course he did. How could it be otherwise? Scrooge and he were partners for I don't know how many years. Scrooge was his sole executor, his sole administrator, his sole assign, his sole residuary legatee, his sole friend, and sole

Charles Dickens

A Christmas Carol

In the opening sentences of *A Christmas Carol*, at left, Charles Dickens isolated the word *dead* and supported it with a ringing array of *d*'s, some in alliteration and some in consonance. The word *dead* itself appears no fewer than six times and sets the paragraphs ringing with hard, dead *d*'s. By the way, in this novel Dickens did not call his chapters *chapters*, he called them *staves*—a musical term—to make the point that the book is about a carol. But this passage is a good example of how in literature the *d* is often associated with death.

In *The Murders on the Rue Morgue*, Edgar Allan Poe used *d*'s to capture the finality of death. Notice the spondee on *thrust up*.

The body was quite warm. Upon examining it, many excoriations were perceived, no doubt occasioned by the violence with which it had been thrust up and disengaged. Upon the face were many severe scratches, and, upon the throat, dark bruises, and deep indentations of finger nails, as if the deceased had been throttled to death.

When death is not the question, stopped consonants can express bleakness, lifelessness, dreariness. In poetry one of the most famous passages to feature stopped consonants is in Thomas Hardy's "The Darkling Thrush":

I leant upon a coppice gate
When Frost was spectre-grey,
And Winter's dregs made desolate
The weakening eye of day.

In *The Hound of the Baskervilles*, Sir Arthur Conan Doyle used those same sounds to capture the bleak landscape of the moor. A tor is a rocky hill.

...and the jagged pinnacle of a granite tor stood up against the lower curve of its silver disc.