Royal Fireworks Language Arts by Michael Clay Thompson

POETRY *and humanity*

Second Edition

Michael Clay Thompson

Royal Fireworks Press
UNIONVILLE, NEW YORK

Sir, I admit your general rule,
That every poet is a fool,
But you yourself may serve to show it,
That every fool is not a poet.

– Samuel Taylor Coleridge, "Epigram"

1

Poetry and Humanity

Almost all art is about humanity.

Human beings are the seeking species. We seek to understand what is outside of ourselves, and we seek to look within ourselves.

We want to know who we are. What we are. Why we are. We want to understand the sources of joy, and sadness, and meaning. We want to understand what it means to be alive.

We want to understand love. And sorrow. And courage. And loss. We want to understand how to reach our dreams, and how to find out what our dreams should be, and how to bring happiness to our family and our friends.

We want to understand what it means to be good. We want to know how to know the right thing. We want to care about something important, something greater than ourselves.

We want to see the humanity of all humanity and to understand those things that all of us, everywhere, have in common.

Like other artists, poets have turned their attention to human existence, pushing language to its maximum in order to express those things about humanity that are most true, or difficult, or subtle.

2

Sounds of the Voice

Different artists use different materials
to express what they see and think.
Painters use color and texture, shadow and form.
Composers use notes, rhythm, and harmony.
Sculptors use stone, metal, wood, balance, and shape.

Poets use their own good materials.
They use the materials of language—of the voice.
They use words, but within the words,
they use sounds.

A poet might use a fluty sound, like
the *oo* sound in the word *lute*.

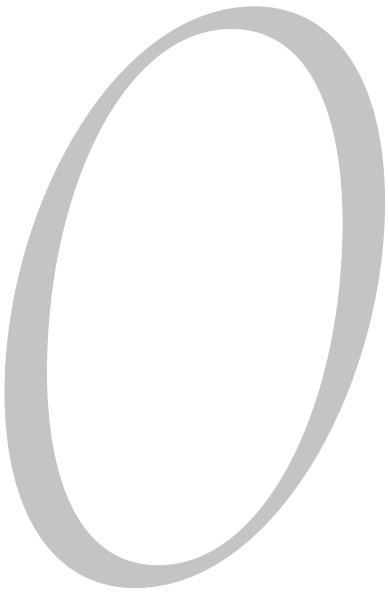
oooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooo

Or a soothing, hummy consonant, like the murmuring *m* in *Mary*.

mmmmmmmmmmmmmmmmmmmmm

Or a scratchy, spiky sound, like the harsh *k* sound
in the word *bleak*.

kkkkkkkkkkkkkkkkkkkkk



Look, for example, at how British poet Thomas Hardy used the scratchy *k* sound, and its good friends the hard *g*, *b*, *d*, *p*, and *t* sounds, to suggest the severity of the winter, and by extension a form of profound pessimism, in his 1902 poem "The Darkling Thrush":

I leant upon a coppice gate
  When Frost was spectre-gray,
And Winter's dregs made desolate
  The weakening eye of day.
The tangled bine-stems scored the sky
  Like strings of broken lyres,
And all mankind that haunted nigh
  Had sought their household fires.

The land's sharp features seem'd to be
  The Century's corpse outleant,
His crypt the cloudy canopy,
  The wind his death-lament.
The ancient pulse of germ and birth
  Was shrunken hard and dry,
And every spirit upon earth
  Seem'd fervourless as I.

At once a voice arose among
  The bleak twigs overhead
In a full-hearted evensong
  Of joy illimited;
An aged thrush, frail, gaunt, and small,

In blast-beruffled plume,
    Had chosen thus to fling his soul
Upon the growing gloom.

So little cause for carollings
    Of such ecstatic sound
Was written on terrestrial things
    Afar or nigh around,
That I could think there trembled through
    His happy good-night air
Some blessèd Hope, whereof he knew
    And I was unaware.

If we were to delete all of the other letters from the poem, and just look at the harsh *k*, *g*, *b*, *d*, *p*, and *t* consonants, and put a dash to indicate new lines, it would look like this:

gd tpcppgt—tpctg—dtdgddt—kd—
tgdbtcdk—ktgbk—dkdttd—dtd—
dptdb—tcptt—cptcdcp—ddt—tpdb—
kddd—dptp—d—t—bktgd—td—td—
dgtd—btbdp—dt—pgg—ttcc—cttd—
tttt—d—tcdkbd—ppgdt—bdp—d

It is a kind of Morse code, tapped out in tough consonants, to let us know that the scene is serious—cold, sharp, and inhuman. It is quite astonishing; Hardy filled every crack of the poem with severity. Poets often do this—use vowels and consonants as a kind of sound effect, as the music behind the plot.

But wouldn't any group of, say, two hundred words have some *k*'s or *g*'s? Well, that would be likely, but we would not see the defining presence of such sounds. Clearly, Hardy has poetically pushed the harsh sounds to the front, probably tripling or quadrupling the incidence of such sounds and making it impossible to read the poem in a sweet or soothing way.

That is why even though there are also some softer consonants in the poem, they do not cancel out the harsh sounds. The soft ones are overwhelmed by the harsh ones and pushed back into the shadows of our attention. This dominance happens in reverse, too. When a poem is predominately made of pretty and soft vowels and consonants, its few normally scratchy-sounding sounds take on the tone of the overall poem and can even sound pretty because of their context—because of the way they work with the sounds beside them.

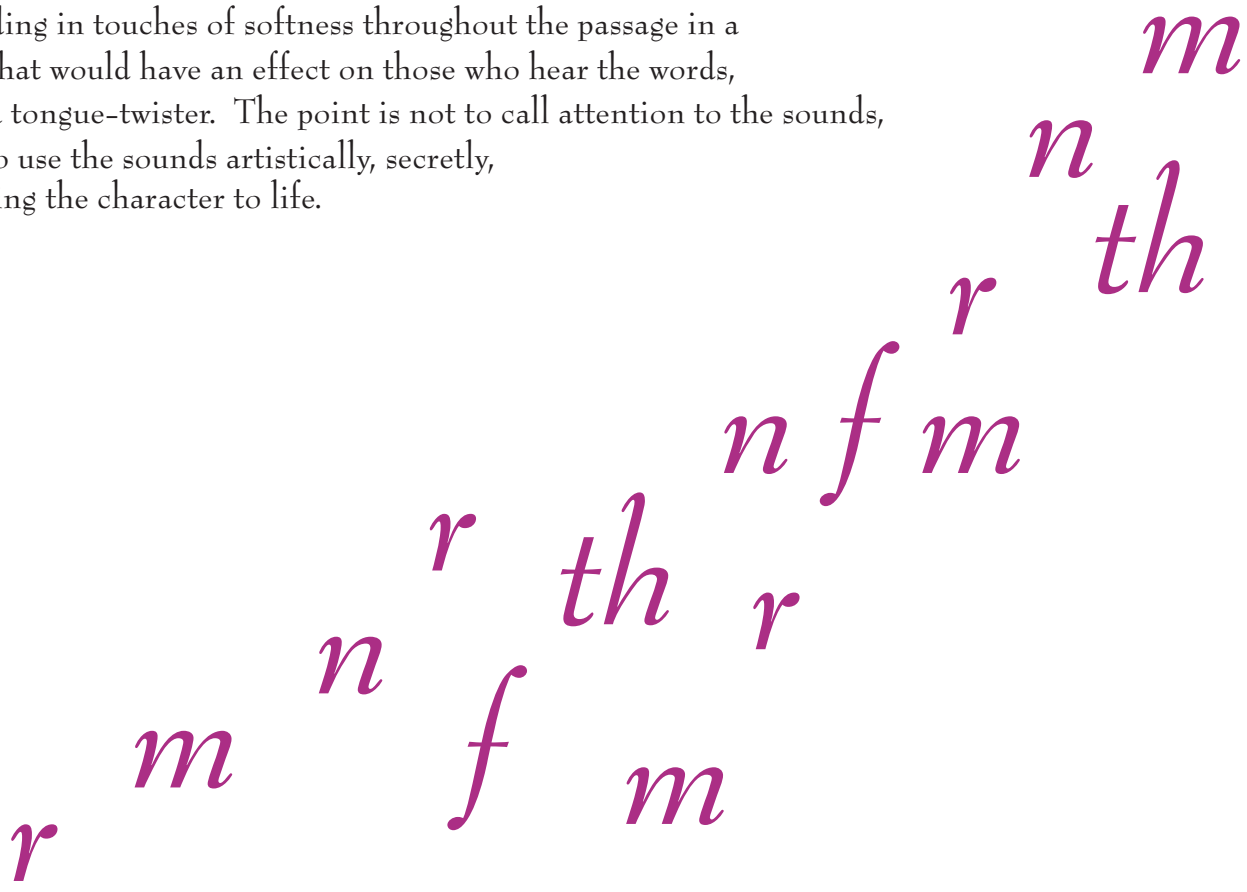
In William Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet*, Shakespeare always gave Juliet beautiful sounds to speak, like *f*'s, *th*'s, *wh*'s, *r*'s, *n*'s, *m*'s, and *o*'s. These are sounds that sing and that blend softly with the sounds next to them.

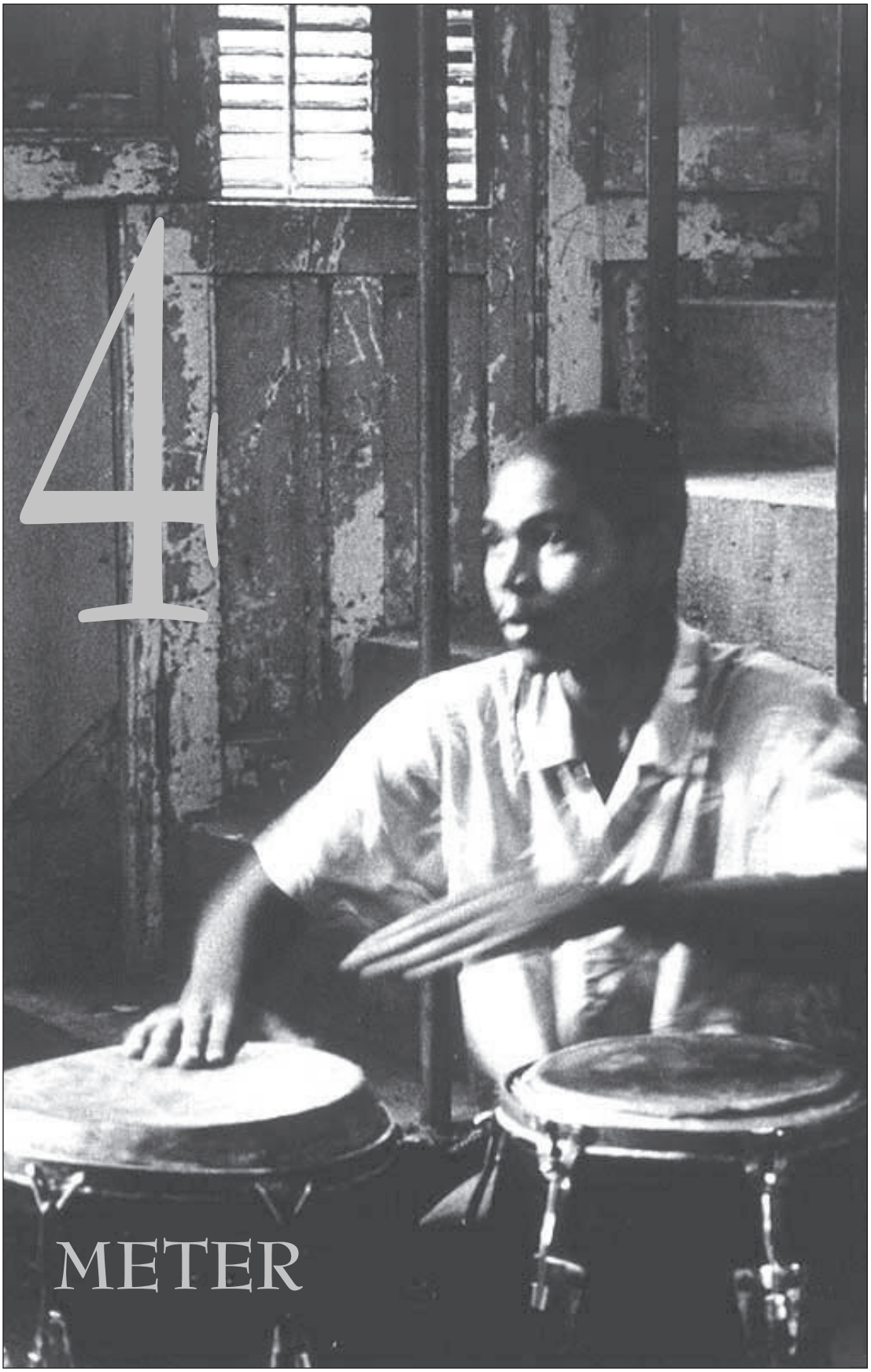
In the famous balcony scene, where the hidden Romeo is listening to Juliet talk about him, she reflects that it is just his name, *Montague*, that is her enemy, since the two families are feuding. Why, she complains, must you be a Montague! Look at the soft and pleasant sounds that Shakespeare gives her lines:

'Tis but thy name that is my enemy.
Thou art thyself, though not a Montague.
What's Montague? It is nor hand, nor foot,
Nor arm, nor face, nor any other part
belonging to a man. O, be some other name!

Notice that there is not one *k* sound in the passage.
And notice how the words tend to begin with soft sounds that set
the tone: *thou*, *though*, *other*, *nor*, *foot*, and even *Montague*.

When a painter paints a sunset with a red and purple sky,
she does not paint the entire painting only in a two-tone
red and purple style. For the complete painting, there may
be dozens or even hundreds of colors and shades. Poetry is
like that. Shakespeare did not use *m*'s and *r*'s exclusively
for Juliet's language; rather, he worked through the words,
blending in touches of softness throughout the passage in a
way that would have an effect on those who hear the words,
like a tongue-twister. The point is not to call attention to the sounds,
but to use the sounds artistically, secretly,
to bring the character to life.





4

METER

METER

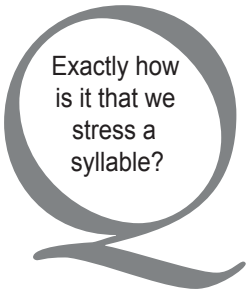
When we talk about rhyme and its variations, we are talking about patterns that we not only hear but in most cases see. Alliteration is usually evident to the eye, and words that rhyme usually look alike.

But there is a fundamental part of poetry that cannot be seen; it can only be heard, and it often takes some practice to learn to hear it. It is called **meter**, the pattern of stressed and unstressed syllables that poets arrange in order to control not only the vowel and consonant sounds but also the rhythm of the sentence, the rise and fall of the **stresses**.

Imagine a sound-effects machine that creates a wave sound; an approaching wave would sound louder, stronger, and then the sound would fade until the next wave came, and then the wave sound would grow louder again.

Our voices are like that. Without even thinking about it, we give more volume and emphasis to some syllables, and not to others. This emphasis is called **stress**. For example, we say CHICKen, not chiKEN; baNAna, not BAnana or banaNA. The word *fruity* sounds like FROOtee, not frooTEE. The name Bobby is pronounced BOBee, not boBEE. We pronounce *misery* MIZZeree, not like *Missouri*.

It is the same in Spanish. Each syllable is either stressed or unstressed. The word for friend, *amigo*, is pronounced ahMEEgo, not ahmeeGO. When we learn the vocabulary of a different language, we have to learn how to stress the words, just as we do when we learn new words in English.



How do you say *calamity*? Don't you say kaLAMMitee? The second syllable is stressed. What about *refrigerator*? We say reeFRIJerater, not refriJERater. *Leopard* is LEPPerd. *Mushy* is MUSHee, not muSHEE. *Forlorn* is forLORN, and *goofy* is GOOfee.

What if someone came up to you and said,

It SEE bit SEE spy DURR.

Would you understand? Probably not. But if the person said,

IT see BIT see SPY durr

then you would know at once that you were hearing a nursery rhyme.

Itsy bitsy spider.

Look at these two stanzas from a poem by Emily Dickinson.
We will put stressed syllables in purple. What do you notice?

The moon is distant from the sea,
And yet with amber hands
She leads him, docile as a boy,
Along appointed sands.

He never misses a degree;
Obedient to her eye,
He comes just so far toward the town,
Just so far goes away.

A pause like this in the middle of a line of poetry is called a **caesura**.

Every second syllable is stressed. Dickinson carefully arranged all of the words in the poem so that the rise and fall of stresses is perfect, an exact rhythm. The question now becomes: What is the **pattern**? What is the pattern of stresses that repeats in the poem? In this poem, the pattern is a two-syllable group, with the first syllable unstressed and the second syllable stressed. Then that pattern repeats itself all the way through the poem.

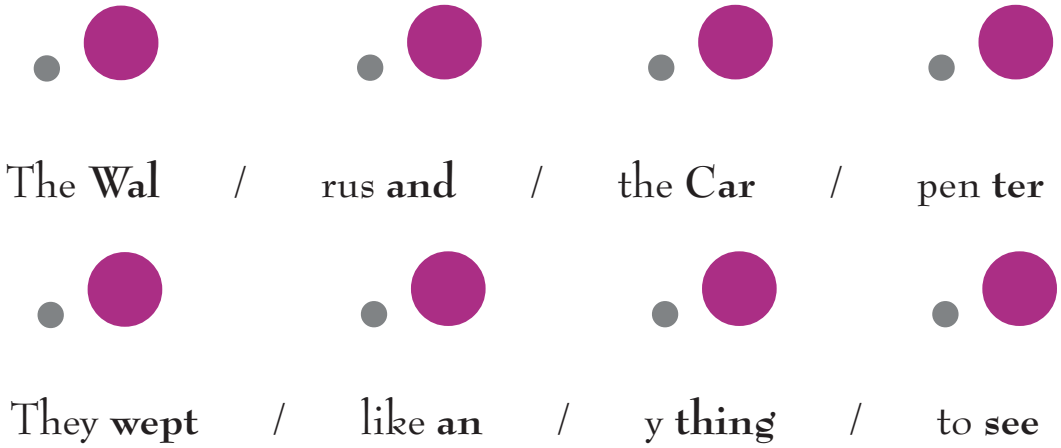
The **moon** / is **dis** / tant **from** / the **sea**

In *Alice and Wonderland*, Lewis Carroll wrote
a poem about the Walrus and the Carpenter at the beach.
The fourth stanza is:

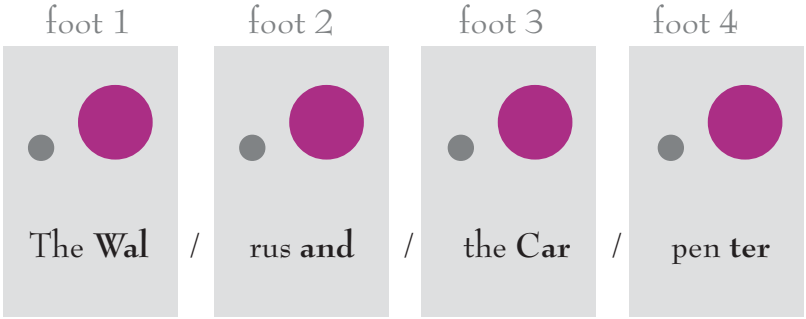
The Walrus and the Carpenter
Were walking close at hand;
They wept like anything to see
Such quantities of sand:
"If this were only cleared away,"
They said, "it would be grand!"

foot

The pattern of stresses is the same as we saw in Emily Dickinson's poem:



Each line has four of these two-syllable patterns, and we would call each one
a **foot**. In other words, each line has four **feet**—four two-syllable **feet**.



Once we understand that a **foot** is a stress pattern that is repeated in a poem and that this foot-based rhythm is called **meter**, we begin to wonder, "What are the possibilities?" Wouldn't it be possible to make lots of different rhythms in poems? Couldn't we create beats in poems, similar to drum beats? Yes. Just as we saw that poets have deep understandings of the intricate possibilities of rhyme, we will see that they also have deep understandings of the possibilities of meter.

Even though, in truth, there are shades of stress, with some stressed syllables being even more stressed than others, we think of syllables as either/or: they are either stressed or not. This means that we create our stress patterns with a sharp sense of clarity, like the dots and dashes of Morse code.

What does this imply?

Well, it means, for example, that there is no one-syllable foot. A line of poetry in which every syllable were stressed or unstressed would have no repeating pattern. It is the combination of stresses and unstresses that makes the pattern.

The next possibility is that a foot would have two syllables, as we have seen. Yet all of the examples we saw were of two-syllable feet with the second syllable stressed. Can the first syllable be stressed instead?

And is there such a thing as a three-syllable foot?

Let's look at the four most common types of foot in traditional poetry. On the following pages, we will have an overview, and then we can explore in detail afterward.

The Two-Syllable Foot

IAMB, iambic

An iamb is a two-syllable foot with the stress on the second syllable.
The iamb is the most common foot in English poetry. It has a natural sound.
Examples: *below*, *maliciousness*, *a never-ending night*, *Mine eyes have seen the glory of...*

TROCHEE, trochaic

A trochee is a two-syllable foot with the stress on the first syllable. It is also common.
The trochee is an anti-iamb; it often has an evil feel.
Examples: *mustard*, *happy*, *chicken fingers*, *lurking menace*, *double trouble*

SPONDEE, spondaic

A spondee is a two-syllable foot with both syllables stressed.
Spondees are often used for emphasis in a line of iambs. They are not unusual, but unlike iambs and trochees, there are no poems made entirely of spondees.
Example (italicized): And suddenly ahead there was a *huge wave*.

The PYRRHIC FOOT

A pyrrhic foot is a two-syllable foot with both syllables unstressed. Poems are not written entirely in the pyrrhic foot; it is used for rhythmic variation to break up the too-regular sound that may occur with perfect iambs or trochees.
Example (italicized): And sudd*enly* ahead we saw the wave. Appar*ently* it worked.

The Three-Syllable Foot

DACTYL, dactylic

A dactyl is a three-syllable foot with the stress on the first syllable.
Many poems are written in dactyls.
Examples: *Hand him the, happily, whether the, Onward and onward and onward...*

ANAPEST, anapestic

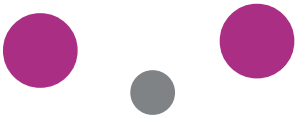
An anapest is a three-syllable foot with the stress on the third syllable.
Examples: *On the top, analytical tree, If an elephant's trunk was as long...*
'Twas the night before Christmas when all through the house...

AMPHIBRACH (AM-fih-brack) (RARE; listed for scholarly interest)

An amphibrach is a three-syllable foot with the middle syllable stressed.
The adjective *fantastic* is a natural amphibrach. The Greek
stem *brachy* means short, and *amphi* means both. An amphibrach is a foot
that is short at both ends! *aMOEba*, *gaLOSHes*, *exPLOsion*

AMPHIMACER (am-FIH-mah-sir) (RARE; listed for scholarly interest)

An amphimacer is also a three-syllable foot, but in this case the middle syllable is short,
and the first and third are long. *ANoDYNE*, *ULtraLIGHT*, *MACerATE*



English poems are traditionally written in iambs, trochees, dactyls, or anapests, though many modern poets use loose cadence rather than regular meter.