**Elements of Poetry**

**POETRY ASSUMPTIONS**

Readers of poetry often bring with them many related assumptions:

* That a poem is to be read for its "message,"
* That this message is "hidden" in the poem,
* The message is to be found by treating the words as symbols which naturally do not mean what they say but stand for something else,
* You have to decipher every single word to appreciate and enjoy the poem.

There are no easy ways to dispel these biases. Poetry is difficult because very often its language is indirect. But so is experience - those things we think, feel, and do. The lazy reader wants to be told things and usually avoids poetry because it demands commitment and energy. Moreover, much of what poetry has to offer is not in the form of hidden meanings. Many poets like to "play" with the sound of language or offer an emotional insight by describing what they see in highly descriptive language. In fact, there can many different ways to enjoy poetry; this reflects the many different styles and objectives of poets themselves.Finally, if you are the type to give up when something is unclear, just relax! Like we just said, there can be many different approaches to examining poetry; often these approaches (like looking for certain poetic devices or examining the meaning of a specific phrase) do not require a complete and exhaustive analysis of a poem. So, enjoy what you do understand!

**FIRST APPROACHES**

Read the poem (many students neglect this step). Identify the speaker and the situation. Feel free to read it more than once! Read the sentences literally. Use your prose reading skills to clarify what the poem is about.Read each line separately, noting unusual words and associations. Look up words you are unsure of and struggle with word associations that may not seem logical to you.Note any changes in the form of the poem that might signal a shift in point of view. Study the structure of the poem, including its rhyme and rhythm (if any). Re-read the poem slowly, thinking about what message and emotion the poem communicates to you.

**STRUCTURE and POETRY**

An important method of analyzing a poem is to look at the stanza structure or style of a poem. Generally speaking, structure has to do with the overall organization of lines and/or the conventional patterns of sound. Again, many modern poems may not have any identifiable structure (i.e. they are free verse), so don't panic if you can't find it!

**STANZAS**: Stanzas are a series of lines grouped together and separated by an empty line from other stanzas. They are the equivalent of a paragraph in an essay. One way to identify a stanza is to count the number of lines. Thus:

* couplet (2 lines)
* tercet (3 lines)
* quatrain (4 lines)
* cinquain (5 lines)
* sestet (6 lines) (sometimes it's called a sexain)
* septet (7 lines)
* octave (8 lines)

 **FORM**: A poem may or may not have a specific number of lines, rhyme scheme and/or metrical pattern, but it can still be labeled according to its form or style. Here are **the three most common types of poems**according to form:

**1. Lyric Poetry:** It is any poem with one speaker (not necessarily the poet) who expresses **strong thoughts and feelings**. Most poems, especially modern ones, are lyric poems.

**2. Narrative Poem:** It is a poem that **tells a story**; its structure resembles the plot line of a story [i.e. the introduction of conflict and characters, rising action, climax and the denouement].

**3. Descriptive Poem:** It is a poem that **describes the world** that surrounds the speaker. It uses elaborate imagery and adjectives. While emotional, it is more "outward-focused" than lyric poetry, which is more personal and introspective.

In a sense, almost all poems, whether they have consistent patterns of sound and/or structure, or are free verse, are in one of the three categories above. Or, of course, they may be a combination of 2 or 3 of the above styles! Here are some more types of poems that are subtypes of the three styles above:

Ode: It is usually a **lyric** poem of moderate length, with a serious subject, an elevated style, and an elaborate stanza pattern.

Elegy: It is a **lyric** poem that mourns the dead. [It's not to be confused with a [eulogy](http://www.diffen.com/difference/Elegy_vs_Eulogy).]It has no set metric or stanzaic pattern, but it usually begins by reminiscing about the dead person, then laments the reason for the death, and then resolves the grief by concluding that death leads to immortality. It often uses "apostrophe" (calling out to the dead person) as a literary technique. It can have a fairly formal style, and sound similar to an ode.

Sonnet: It is a **lyric** poem consisting of 14 lines and, in the English version, is usually written in iambic pentameter. There are two basic kinds of sonnets: the Italian (or Petrarchan) sonnet and the Shakespearean (or Elizabethan/English) sonnet. The Italian/Petrarchan sonnet is named after Petrarch, an Italian Renaissance poet. The Petrarchan sonnet consists of an octave (eight lines) and a sestet (six lines). The Shakespearean sonnet consists of three quatrains (four lines each) and a concluding couplet (two lines). The Petrarchan sonnet tends to divide the thought into two parts (argument and conclusion); the Shakespearean, into four (the final couplet is the summary).

Ballad: It is a **narrative** poem that has a musical rhythm and can be sung. A ballad is usually organized into quatrains or cinquains, has a simple rhythm structure, and tells the tales of ordinary people.

Epic: It is a long **narrative** poem in elevated style recounting the deeds of a legendary or historical hero.

Qualities of an Epic Poem:

* narrative poem of great scope; dealing with the founding of a nation or some other heroic theme requires a dignified theme requires an organic unity requires orderly progress of the action always has a heroic figure or figures involves supernatural forces
* written in deliberately ceremonial style

Other types of poems include:

Haiku: It has an **unrhymed** verse form having three lines (a tercet) and usually 5,7,5 **syllables**, respectively. It's usually considered a lyric poem.

Limerick: It has a very structured poem, usually humorous & composed of five lines (a cinquain), in an **aabba** rhyming pattern; beat must be **anapestic** (weak, weak, strong) with 3 feet in lines 1, 2, & 5 and 2 feet in lines 3 & 4. It's usually a narrative poem based upon a short and often ribald anecdote.

**SOUND PATTERNS**

Three other elements of poetry are **rhyme scheme**, **meter** (ie. regular rhythm) and **word sounds** (like alliteration). These are sometimes collectively called **sound play** because they take advantage of the performative, spoken nature of poetry.

**RHYME**

Rhyme is the repetition of similar sounds. In poetry, the most common kind of rhyme is the **end rhyme**, which occurs at the end of two or more lines. It is usually identified with lower case letters, and a new letter is used to identify each new end sound. Take a look at the rhyme scheme for the following poem :

*I saw a fairy in the****wood****,
He was dressed all in****green****.
He drew his sword while I just****stood****,
And realized I'd been****seen****.*

The rhyme scheme of the poem is **abab**.

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**Internal rhyme** occurs in the middle of a line, as in these lines from Coleridge, "In mist or cl**oud**, on mast or shr**oud**" or "Whiles all the n**ight** through fog-smoke wh**ite**" ("The Ancient Mariner"). Remember that most modern poems do **not**have rhyme.

**NOTE**: **Rhyme** (above) and **rhythm** (below) are two totally different concepts!

**RHYTHM AND METER**

 **Meter**: the systematic regularity in rhythm; this systematic rhythm (or sound pattern) is usually identified by examining the **type** of "foot" and the **number** of feet.

**1. Poetic Foot:** The traditional line of metered poetry contains a number of rhythmical units, which are called **feet**. The feet in a line are distinguished as a recurring pattern of **two or three syllables**("apple" has 2 syllables, "banana" has 3 syllables, etc.). The pattern, or foot, is designated according to the **number** of syllables contained, and the **relationship** in each foot between the strong and weak syllables.Thus:

\_\_ = a stressed (or strong, or **LOUD**) syllable
U = an unstressed (or weak, or quiet) syllable

In other words, any line of poetry with a systematic rhythm has a certain number of feet, and **each foot** has **two or three syllables** with a **constant beat pattern**.

**a.**    Iamb (Iambic) - weak syllable followed by strong syllable. [Note that the pattern is sometimes fairly hard to maintain, as in the third foot.]



**b.**     Trochee (Trochaic): strong syllable followed by a weak syllable.



**c.**    Anapest (Anapestic): two weak syllables followed by a strong syllable.



e.g.
**In her room at the prow of the house
Where light breaks, and the windows are tossed...**

From "The Writer", by Richard Wilbur

**d.**     Dactyl (Dactylic): a strong syllable followed by two weak syllables.

**DD

Here's another (silly) example of dactylic rhythm.
DDDA was an / archer, who / shot at a / frog
DDDB was a / butcher, and / had a great / dog
DDDC was a / captain, all / covered with / lace
DDDD was a / drunkard, and / had a red / face.**

**e.**    Spondee (Spondaic): two strong syllables (not common as lines, but appears as a foot). A spondee usually appears at the end of a line.



 **2. The Number of Feet**: The second part of meter is the number of feet contained in a line.

Thus:
one foot=monometer
two feet=dimeter
three feet=trimeter
four feet=tetrameter
five feet=pentameter
six feet=hexameter (when hexameter is in iambic rhythm, it is called an alexandrine)

Poems with an identifiable meter are therefore identified by the type of feet (e.g. iambic) and the number of feet in a line (e.g. pentameter). The following line is iambic pentameter because it (1) has five feet [**pent**ameter], and (2) each foot has two syllables with the stress on the second syllable [iambic].

That **time** | of **year** | thou **mayst** | in **me** | be**hold**

Thus, you will hear meter identified as iambic pentameter, trochaic tetrameter, and so on.

 **3. Irregularity:** Many metered poems in English avoid perfectly regular rhythm because it is monotonous. Irregularities in rhythm add interest and emphasis to the lines. In this line:



The first foot substitutes a trochee for an iamb. Thus, the basic iambic pentameter is varied with the opening trochee.

  **4. Blank Verse:** Any poetry that **does have** a set metrical pattern (usually iambic pentameter), but**does not have** rhyme, is blank verse. Shakespeare frequently used unrhymed iambic pentameter in his plays; his works are an early example of blank verse.
 **5. Free Verse:** Most modern poetry no longer follows strict rules of meter **or** rhyme, especially throughout an entire poem. Free verse, frankly, has no rules about meter **or** rhyme whatsoever! [In other words, blank verse **has** rhythm, but **no** rhyme, while free verse has **neither** rhythm **nor**rhyme.] So, you may find it difficult to find regular iambic pentameter in a modern poem, though you might find it in particular lines. Modern poets do like to throw in the occasional line or phrase of metered poetry, particularly if they’re trying to create a certain effect. Free verse can also apply to a lack of a formal verse structure.

**How do I know if a poem has meter? How do I determine the meter?**

To maintain a consistent meter, a poet has to choose **words that fit**. For example, if a poet wants to write iambic poetry, s/he has to choose words that have a naturally iambic rhythm. Words like be**tray**and per**suade** will work in an iambic poem because they are naturally iambic. They sound silly any other way. However, **can**dle and **mus**cle will work best in a trochaic poem, because their natural emphasis is on the first syllable. (However, a poet can use trochaic words if s/he places a one syllable word in front of them. This often leads to poetic feet ending in the middle of words - after one syllable - rather than the end.) It's not surprising that most modern poetry is not metered, because it is very restrictive and demanding.

Determining meter is usually a process of elimination. Start reading everything in **iambic** by emphasizing every second syllable. 80 to 90% of metered poetry is iambic. If it sounds silly or strange, because many of the poem's words do not sound natural, then try trochaic, anapestic or dactylic rhythms. If none of these sounds natural, then you probably do not have metered poetry at all (ie. it's free verse).

If there are some lines that sound metered, but some that don't, the poem has an **irregular** rhythm.

**WORD SOUNDS**
Another type of sound play is the emphasis on individual sounds and words:

Alliteration: the repetition of initial sounds on the same line or stanza - **B**ig **b**ad **B**ob **b**ounced**b**ravely.
Assonance: the repetition of**vowel** sounds (anywhere in the middle or end of a line or stanza) - T**i**lting at w**i**ndm**i**lls
Consonance: the repetition of consonant sounds (anywhere in the middle or end of a line or stanza) - And a**ll** the air a so**l**emn sti**ll**ness ho**l**ds. (T. Gray)
Onomatopoeia: words that sound like that which they describe - **Boom! Crash! Pow! Quack! Moo!Caress...**
Repetition: the repetition of entire lines or phrases to emphasize key thematic ideas.
Parallel Stucture: a form of repetition where the order of verbs and nouns is repeated; it may involve exact words, but it more importantly repeats sentence structure - "I came, I saw, I conquered".

**MEANING and POETRY**

I said earlier that poetry is not always about hidden or indirect meanings (sometimes called **meaning play**). Nevertheless, if often is a major part of poetry, so here some of the important things to remember:

**CONCRETENESS and PARTICULARITY**

In general, poetry deals with particular things in concrete language, since our emotions most readily respond to these things. From the poem's particular situation, the reader may then generalize; the generalities arise by implication from the particular. In other words, a poem is most often concrete and particular; the "message," if there is any, is general and abstract; it's implied by the images.

Images, in turn, suggest meanings beyond the mere identity of the specific object. Poetry "plays" with meaning when it identifies resemblances or makes comparisons between things; common examples of this "figurative" comparison include:

* ticking of clock = mortality
* hardness of steel = determination
* white = peace or purity

Such terms as connotation, simile, metaphor, allegory, and symbol are aspects of this comparison. Such expressions are generally called **figurative** or metaphorical language.

**DENOTATION AND CONNOTATION**

Word meanings are not only restricted to dictionary meanings. The full meaning of a word includes both the dictionary definition and the special meanings and associations a word takes in a given phrase or expression. For example, a tiger is a carnivorous animal of the cat family. This is the literal or denotative meaning. But we have certain associations with the word: sinuous movement, jungle violence, and aggression. These are the suggestive, figurative or connotative meanings.

**FIGURATIVE/CONNOTATIVE DEVICES**

1. **Simile** is the rhetorical term used to designate the most elementary form of resemblances: most similes are introduced by "like" or "as." These comparisons are usually between dissimilar situations or objects that have something in common, such as "My love is like a red, red rose."
2. A **metaphor** leaves out "like" or "as" and implies a direct comparison between objects or situations. "All flesh is grass."
3. **Synecdoche** is a form of metaphor, which in mentioning an important (and attached) part signifies the whole (e.g. "hands" for labour).
4. **Metonymy** is similar to synecdoche; it's a form of metaphor allowing an object closely associated (butunattached) with a object or situation to stand for the thing itself (e.g. the crown or throne for a king or the bench for the judicial system).
5. A **symbol** is like a simile or metaphor with the first term left out. "My love is like a red, red rose" is a simile. If, through persistent identification of the rose with the beloved woman, we may come to associate the rose with her and her particular virtues. At this point, the rose would become a symbol.
6. **Allegory** can be defined as a one to one correspondence between a series of abstract ideas and a series of images or pictures presented in the form of a story or a narrative. For example, George Orwell's *Animal Farm* is an extended allegory that represents the Russian Revolution through a fable of a farm and its rebellious animals.
7. **Personification** occurs when you treat abstractions or inanimate objects as human, that is, giving them human attributes, powers, or feelings (e.g., "nature wept" or "the wind whispered many truths to me").
8. **Irony** takes many forms. Most basically, irony is a figure of speech in which actual intent is expressed through words that carry the opposite meaning.
	* Paradox: usually a literal contradiction of terms or situations
	* Situational Irony: an unmailed letter
	* Dramatic Irony: audience has more information or greater perspective than the characters
	* Verbal Irony: saying one thing but meaning another
		+ Overstatement (hyperbole)
		+ Understatement (meiosis)
		+ Sarcasm

Irony may be a positive or negative force. It is most valuable as a mode of perception that assists the poet to see around and behind opposed attitudes, and to see the often conflicting interpretations that come from our examination of life.

**POETRY AS A LANGUAGE OF INDIRECTION**

Thus, if we recognize that much of the essential quality of our experience is more complex than a simple denotative statement can describe, then we must recognize the value of the poet's need to search for a language agile enough to capture the complexity of that experience. Consider this four-line stanza:

*O Western wind, when wilt thou blow
That the small rain down can rain?
Christ, that my love were in my arms,
And I in my bed again!*

The center of the poem is the lover's desire to be reunited with his beloved (lines 3 and 4). But the full meaning of the poem depends on the first two lines also. Obviously, the lover associates his grief with the wind and rain, but the poet leaves to implication, to indirection, just how the lover's situation and the wind and rain are related. We note that they are related in several ways: the need for experiencing and manifesting love is an inherent need, like nature's need for rain; in a word, love, like the wind and rain, is natural. Secondly, the lover is living in a kind of drought or arid state that can only be slaked by the soothing presence of the beloved. Thirdly, the rising of the wind and the coming of the rain can neither be controlled nor foretold exactly, and human affairs, like the lover's predicament, are subject to the same sort of chance.

Undoubtedly, too, there are associations with specific words, like "Western" or "small rain" that the reader is only half aware of but which nonetheless contribute to meaning. These associations or connotations afford a few indirections that enrich the entire poem. For example, "small rain" at once describes the kind of rain that the lover wants to fall and suggests the joy and peace of lover's tears, and "small" alone might suggest the daintiness or femininity of the beloved.