

SOUND EXPERIENCE IN POETRY

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I. Some Definitions

Sound experience: all the heard experience of a poem. It includes perception of all sounds and pauses made when a poem is read aloud.

Rhythm: a perceptible and demonstrable pattern of sounds or pauses in sequence. Any pattern of stresses, rhymes, phrases, sentence and line units, pitch variations, pauses for punctuation or sense or pauses due to omission of metrical stress, assonances, alliterated consonants or vowels, etc.

Movement: the total heard rhythm, the composite of all the separate rhythms.

Meter: the systematic, conventional ordering of stressed and unstressed syllables within a line.

Scansion: a technique of notation, of showing the stresses we make in reading a line of verse and where that order of stresses agrees with or varies from the conventional sequence of meter.

II. Analysis of Sound

1. Read the poem, and listen to it.
2. Jot down impressions of the sound experience.
3. Characterize the movement. Steps:
 - a. Jot down your impression;

b. Note main rhythms by which the movement is built up; scansion comes in here.

c. Correct and define your impression by referring to the rhythms that you have noted (in step b).

4. Select some peculiarities of sound experience, and show how they are appropriate to the poem as you interpret it. After noting some peculiarity that you have heard, take the following steps:

a. Observe and describe the arrangement of words, syllables, or stresses.

b. Show exactly how that arrangement affects the sounds you make and hear.

c. Explain how that heard sound is related to other aspects of the poem (e.g., to what is expressed by means other than sound, to a particular meaning, to a type of organization).

III. Scansion of Iambic Verse

1. Substitutions for iamb: x / / x x x / /

2. Secondary stress: a stress added in addition to the conventional number of stresses in the line.

3. Steps in scansion:

a. Read the poem and determine the basic meter, e.g., iambic pentameter;

b. Read each line with emphasis that fits your interpretation.

c. Write stresses exactly as you have given them, but note:

1. polysyllables: write the normal stress according to dictionary pronunciation.

2. monosyllables: write stress according to emphasis, but be prepared to add stress to an unstressed monosyllable after comparing with meter (see next step).

d. Compare the line as you have written the stresses with the meter:

1. Account for the variations as examples as examples of substitution;

2. Where the line has less than the normal number of stresses, add the missing stresses to unstressed monosyllables.

POETIC TERMS

For more detailed definitions and other illustrations, see the *Norton Anthology of Poetry* appendix, "Versification."

Lyric: Any fairly short poem in the voice of a single speaker, although that speaker may sometimes quote others. The reader should be wary of identifying the lyric speaker with the poet, since the "I" of a poem may be that of a fictionalized character invented by the poet.

Rhythm: A perceptible and demonstrable pattern of sounds and pauses in sequence. What your ear hears.

Meter: If a poem's rhythm is structured into a recurrence of regular--that is, approximately equal--units in a regular pattern, we call it meter. The most common meter in English poetry is iambic pentameter, as in Yeats's "Leda and the Swan" or Keats's "On First Looking into Chapman's Homer," or Frost's "Once by the Pacific."

Foot: the basic metrical unit, a combination of two or three stressed and/or unstressed syllables. The four most common metrical feet in English poetry are iambic, trochaic, anapestic, and dactylic. Less common metrical feet include spondaic and pyrrhic.

Iambic (the noun is "iamb"): An unstressed syllable followed by a stressed syllable, as in "to thee, " or "philosophy," or in the word

I amb ic

This line by Yeats has five successive iambs, hence "iambic pentameter":

u / u / u / u / u /
A tat tered coat upon a stick, unless

Trochaic (the noun is "trochee"): a stressed syllable followed by an unstressed syllable, as in the words "busy," "wherefore," and

Troch ee

Anapestic (the noun is "anapest"): two unstressed syllables followed by a stressed syllable, as in "in a dream," or "to be found," or in

An a pest

Dactylic (the noun is "dactyl"): a stressed syllable followed by two unstressed syllables, as in "mournfully," or "wander and," or in

Dactyl ic

Spondaic (the noun is "spondee"): two successive syllables with approximately equal strong stresses, as in "stand here, old fool" or in

Spon dee

or, in Yeats's line,

u / u / u / / / u /
 "A sud den blow, the great wings beat ing still"

Pyrric (the noun is also "pyrrhic"): two successive unstressed or lightly stressed syllables, as in "of the . . .".

A line of poetry can have any number of feet, usually from one to eight, designated monometer, dimeter, trimeter, tetrameter, pentameter, hexameter, and heptameter. Often in English poetry the line has five feet, which is called pentameter.

Iambic pentameter is the most widely used metrical form in English poetry.

"Now cracks a noble heart. Good night, sweet prince,
 And flights of angels sing thee to thy rest."

Caesura: A natural pause in the speaking voice often signified by a punctuation mark or a break in syntax, within a line, as in these lines by Yeats:

"A tattered coat upon a stick, // unless"

or "That is no country for old men. // The young"

Enjambment: run-on lines, where the thrust of an incomplete sentence carries on to the next verse line, as in Richard Wilbur's

"And the heaviest nuns walk in a pure floating
Of dark habits . . ."

End-stopped: a line of poetry in which the end of the line coincides with the end of the sentence or unit of thought, as in Keats's

"Much have I traveled in the realms of gold,
And many goodly states and kingdoms seen;"

End rhymes: Rhymes appearing at the end of a line, as in Yeats's

"And therefore I have sailed the seas and come
To the holy city of Byzantium."

Internal rhyme: rhyme appearing within a line of poetry, as in Bob Dylan's

"Once upon a time you dressed so fine,
You threw the bums a dime in your prime, didn't you?"

Assonance: the repetition of identical or similar vowel sounds, as in Auden's

"A land laid waste, with all its young men slain"

Onomatopoeia: a combination of words whose sound seems to resemble the sound it denotes, as in Tennyson's

"The buzzing of innumerable bees."

Masculine rhymes: rhymes consisting of a single stressed syllable, as in Browning's

"That's my last duchess painted on the wall,
Looking as if she were alive. I call"

Feminine rhymes: rhyme words in which a stressed syllable is followed by an unstressed syllable, as in "chiming/rhyming"

Off rhyme, also known as half rhyme, near rhyme, or slant rhyme: differs from perfect rhyme in changing the vowel sound and/or the concluding consonants expected of perfect rhyme. This example is from Yeats's "Sailing to Byzantium":

"The salmon-falls, the mackerel-crowded seas,
...
Whatever is begotten, born, and dies"

Blank verse: unrhymed iambic pentameters, as in Tennyson's

"Made weak by time and fate, but strong in will,

To strive, to seek, to find, and not to yield."

Dramatic Monologues: a single speaker (who is not the poet himself) addresses a dramatically defined listener in a specific situation and at a critical moment, as in Tennyson's "Ulysses" or Browning's "My Last Duchess."

Couplet: two lines of verse coupled by rhyme. Closed couplets convey a unit of sense, end-stopped or clearly demarcated, as in Shakespeare's

"This thou perceiv'st, which makes thy love more strong,
To love that well which thou must leave ere long."

Tercet: a stanza of three lines usually linked with a single rhyme.

Quatrain: a stanza of four rhymed lines is the most common of all English stanzaic forms, as in Shakespeare's "Sonnet 73":

"That time of year thou may'st in me behold
When yellow leaves, or none, or few do hang
Upon the bough, and shake against the cold
Bare ruined choirs where late the sweet birds sang."

Sonnet: a poem of fourteen iambic pentameters linked by an intricate rhyme scheme.

The Italian sonnet form is abba abba cde cde. The first eight lines of an Italian sonnet form an octave, and the last six lines comprise the sestet.

The English sonnet form is abab cdcd efef gg. An English or Shakespearean sonnet does not break into an octet and a sestet but does have a final rhymed couplet.

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