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**Basics of English Studies:
An introductory course for students of
literary studies in English.**

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4. Poetry

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4. Poetry

4.1. What is Poetry?

To ask ‘What is poetry?’ is very much like asking ‘What is literature?’ and in fact the answers to both these questions overlap: Poetry is perceived as fictional, it uses specialised language, in many cases it lacks a pragmatic function, it is also ambiguous (see Basic Concepts ch. 1.2).

Key terms:

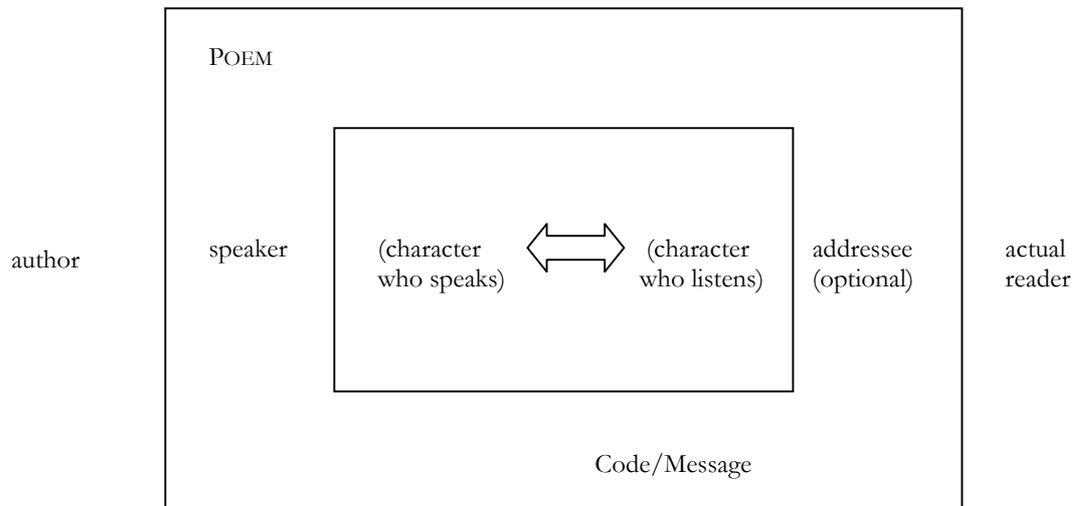
- overstructuring
- communication model

4.1.1. Outward Indications

In addition, there are a number of outward signs that indicate a poem: Most obviously, the individual text lines in poetry do not fill the entire width of the page. Thus, before they have actually started reading, readers of poetry are given an instant indication that what they are going to read is probably a poem. In consequence, a reader’s attention is likely to focus on ‘poetic features’ of the text.

Poetry is often associated not only with specialised language but with a very dense use of such specialised language. Poems usually try to express their meaning in much less space than, say, a novel or even a short story. Alexander Pope once explained that he preferred to write poetry even when he wrote about philosophy because it enabled him to express himself more briefly (Pope, *Preface to An Essay on Man*, 1734). As a result of its relative brevity, poetry tends to make more concentrated use of formal elements, it displays a tendency for structural, phonological, morphological and syntactic **overstructuring**, a concept which originated in formalist and structuralist criticism. It means that poetry uses elements such as sound patterns, verse and metre, rhetorical devices, style, stanza form or imagery more frequently than other types of text. Obviously, not all poems use all these elements and not all verse is poetry, as John Hollander remarks (Hollander 2001: 1). Especially modern poets deliberately flaunt reader expectations about poetic language (see the ‘found poem’ in ch. 1.2.). Nonetheless, most poetry depends on the aesthetic effects of a formalised use of language.

Some people associate poetry with subjectivity and the expression of intense personal experience. While this is true for some poetry, especially lyrical poetry, there are a great number of poems this does not apply to; for example narrative poems like Scott’s *Marmion* or didactic and philosophical poems like Pope’s *Essay on Man* or John Philips’ *Cyder*. Just as it is often misleading to identify the author of a novel with its narrator, one should not assume that the author of a poem is identical with its speaker and thus even lyrical poems cannot be treated as subjective expressions of the author. The two levels of author and speaker should always be kept separate. The communication situation in poetry is very similar to the one in prose, except that poetry very often does not include dialogue, thus the inner box is optional:



Searching for a definition of poetry, other readers look for ‘universal truth’ or some other deeper meaning in poetry more than in prose, the famous nineteenth-century critic Matthew Arnold for instance (see Arnold 1880). Again, while some poetry might very well deal with universal truths, this is probably not the case for all. There is no doubt some poetry which is very lovely and very popular but which, at bottom, is really neither very profound nor the expression of a universal truth. Take these lines by Ben Jonson for instance, one of the most popular love songs in the last 400 years:

To Celia

Drink to me only with thine eyes
 And I will pledge with mine;
 Or leave a kiss but in the cup,
 And I'll not look for wine.
 The thirst that from the soul doth rise,
 Doth ask a drink divine:
 But might I of Jove's nectar sup,
 I would not change for thine.
 [...]

In fact, to expect statements of universal truth from poetry can be rather misleading if one deduces from this that what matters in a poem is somehow what lies behind the language and its use (for this problem see the discussion in Warren/Brooks 1960: 6-20), whereas modern criticism insists that form cannot be separated from meaning (See also Theme ch. 1.5).

It is difficult to answer the question ‘What is Poetry?’ conclusively, though most people are more or less able to recognise poetry when they see it. One recent critic has suggested the following criteria in answer to the question ‘What is Poetry?’ (Müller-Zettelmann 2000: 73-156):

Poetic texts have a tendency to

- relative brevity (with some notable exceptions)
- dense expression
- express subjectivity more than other texts
- display a musical or songlike quality
- be structurally and phonologically overstructured
- be syntactically and morphologically overstructured
- deviate from everyday language
- aesthetic self-referentiality (which means that they draw attention to themselves as art form both through the form in which they are written and through explicit references to the writing of poetry)

With all the difficulties of defining poetry it is worth remembering that poetry, especially in the form of song, is one of the oldest forms of artistic expression, much older than prose, and that it seems to answer – or to originate in – a human impulse that reaches for expression in joy, grief, doubt, hope, loneliness, and much more.

4.2. Types of Poetry

When studying poetry, it is useful first of all to consider the **theme** and the overall **development** of the theme in the poem (see ch. 1.5.). Obviously, the sort of development that takes place depends to a considerable extent on the type of poem one is dealing with. It is useful to keep two general distinctions in mind (for more detailed definitions consult Abrams 1999 and Preminger et al 1993): **lyric poetry** and **narrative poetry**.

Key terms:

- lyric poetry
- elegy
- ode
- sonnet
- dramatic monologue
- occasional poetry
- epithalamion
- narrative poetry
- epic
- mock-epic
- ballad
- descriptive poetry
- dramatic poetry
- didactic poetry
- *prodesse et delectare*

4.2.1. Lyric Poetry

A **lyric poem** is a comparatively short, non-narrative poem in which a single speaker presents a state of mind or an emotional state. Lyric poetry retains some of the elements of song which is said to be its origin: For Greek writers the lyric was a song accompanied by the lyre.

Subcategories of the lyric are, for example elegy, ode, sonnet and dramatic monologue and most occasional poetry:

In modern usage, **elegy** is a formal lament for the death of a particular person (for example Tennyson's *In Memoriam A.H.H.*). More broadly defined, the term elegy is also used for solemn meditations often on questions of death, such as Gray's *Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard*.

An **ode** is a long lyric poem with a serious subject written in an elevated style. Famous examples are Wordsworth's *Hymn to Duty* or Keats' *Ode to a Grecian Urn*.

The **sonnet** was originally a love poem which dealt with the lover's sufferings and hopes. It originated in Italy and became popular in England in the

Renaissance, when Thomas Wyatt and the Earl of Surrey translated and imitated the sonnets written by Petrarch (**Petrarchan sonnet**). From the seventeenth century onwards the sonnet was also used for other topics than love, for instance for religious experience (by Donne and Milton), reflections on art (by Keats or Shelley) or even the war experience (by Brooke or Owen). The sonnet uses a single stanza of (usually) fourteen lines and an intricate rhyme pattern (see stanza forms ch. 4.5.). Many poets wrote a series of sonnets linked by the same theme, so-called **sonnet cycles** (for instance Petrarch, Spenser, Shakespeare, Drayton, Barrett-Browning, Meredith) which depict the various stages of a love relationship.

In a **dramatic monologue** a speaker, who is explicitly someone other than the author, makes a speech to a silent auditor in a specific situation and at a critical moment. Without intending to do so, the speaker reveals aspects of his temperament and character. In Browning's *My Last Duchess* for instance, the Duke shows the picture of his last wife to the emissary from his prospective new wife and reveals his excessive pride in his position and his jealous temperament.

Occasional poetry is written for a specific occasion: a wedding (then it is called an **epithalamion**, for instance Spenser's *Epithalamion*), the return of a king from exile (for instance Dryden's *Annus Mirabilis*) or a death (for example Milton's *Lycidas*), etc.

4.2.2. Narrative Poetry

Narrative poetry gives a verbal representation, in verse, of a sequence of connected events, it propels characters through a plot. It is always told by a narrator (see narrator in narrative prose). Narrative poems might tell of a love story (like Tennyson's *Maud*), the story of a father and son (like Wordsworth's *Michael*) or the deeds of a hero or heroine (like Walter Scott's *Lay of the Last Minstrel*).

Sub-categories of narrative poetry are for example: epic, mock-epic or ballad.

Epics usually operate on a large scale, both in length and topic, such as the founding of a nation (Virgil's *Aeneid*) or the beginning of world history (Milton's *Paradise Lost*), they tend to use an elevated style of language and supernatural beings take part in the action.

The **mock-epic** makes use of epic conventions, like the elevated style and the assumption that the topic is of great importance, to deal with completely insignificant occurrences. A famous example is Pope's *The Rape of the Lock*, which tells the story of a young beauty whose suitor secretly cuts off a lock of her hair.

A **ballad** is a song, originally transmitted orally, which tells a story. It is an important form of folk poetry which was adapted for literary uses from the sixteenth century onwards. The ballad stanza is usually a four-line stanza, alternating tetrameter and trimeter (see also ballad stanza ch. 4.5.).

4.2.3. Descriptive and Didactic Poetry

Both lyric and narrative poetry can contain lengthy and detailed descriptions (**descriptive poetry**) or scenes in direct speech (**dramatic poetry**).

The purpose of a **didactic poem** is primarily to teach something. This can take the form of very specific instructions, such as how to catch a fish, as in James Thomson's *The Seasons* (*Spring* 379-442) or how to write good poetry as in Alexander Pope's *Essay on Criticism*. But it can also be meant as instructive in a general way. Until the twentieth century all literature was expected to have a didactic purpose in a general sense, that is, to impart moral, theoretical or even practical knowledge; Horace famously demanded that poetry should combine **prodesse** (learning) and **delectare** (pleasure). The twentieth century was more reluctant to proclaim literature openly as a teaching tool.

4.3. Prosodic Features: Metre and Rhythm

Prosody is the study of speech rhythms and versification. Most poetry is a rhythmical utterance, that is to say, it makes use of rhythmic elements that are natural to language: alternation of stress and non-stress, vowel length, consonant clusters, pauses and so on. Various rhythmical patterns have different effects on those who read or hear poetry. The central question for the analysis of metre and rhythm is to determine the function which these rhythmical elements perform in each poem. Unfortunately, there are no general rules about these functions. Once a specific pattern has been identified, its function needs to be determined for each text and context individually (see also **isotopy** ch. 1.5.).

Key terms:

- prosody
- metre
- accentual metre
- accentual-syllabic metre
- syllabic metre
- free verse
- scansion
- nursery rhymes
- Old English Poetry
- sprung rhythm
- rap
- Haiku
- foot
- iamb
- trochee
- dactyl
- anapaest
- spondee
- alexandrine
- scansion
- metric foot
- maximisation principle
- metrical grid
- interplay

4.3.1. Metre

Metre is the measured arrangement of accents and syllables in poetry. In any kind of utterance we stress certain syllables and not others. For instance most people would probably stress the phrase 'And how are you this morning' something like this: And HOW are YOU this MORNING? Or possibly: And how ARE you this MORNING? Poetry employs the stresses that occur naturally in language utterance to construct regular patterns.

There are various possibilities for metrical patterns in poetry.

1. **Accentual metre** each line has the same number of stresses, but varies in the total number of syllables
2. **Syllabic metre** each line has the same number of syllables but the number of stresses varies
3. **Accentual-Syllabic metre** each line has the same number of stressed and non-stressed syllables in a fixed order. This is by far the most common metrical system in English verse
4. **Free verse** irregular patterns of stress and syllables

The visual representation of the distribution of stress and non-stress in verse is called **scansion**. In the following the notation suggested by Helmut Bonheim (1990) will be used: **1** to mark a stressed, **o** to mark a non-stressed syllable.

4.3.1.1. Accentual Metre

In **accentual metre** each line has the same number of stresses, but varies in the total number of syllables. It is found in **nursery rhymes** and it was commonly used in **Old English poetry**. In the late nineteenth century Gerard Manley Hopkins developed the so-called **sprung rhythm**, in which again only stresses are central. A system of accentual metre very similar to the medieval pattern has recently re-emerged in **rap poetry**.

Nursery rhyme: In this example there are six stresses in each line and a varying number of non-stressed syllables between the stresses.

There was a crooked man and he went a crooked mile	o1o1o1oo1o1o1
He found a crooked sixpence beside a crooked stile	o1o1o1oo1o1o1
He had a crooked cat which caught a crooked mouse	o1o1o1o1o1o1
And they all lived together in a little crooked house	oo1oo1ooo1o1o1

(From: Christie, *Crooked House*)

Old English poetry usually has between two and four marked stresses in each line and a marked pause (caesura) in the middle, indicated by the gap in the printed line. Alliterations emphasise the stress pattern (alliterations are underlined):

Nu sculon <u>h</u> erigean	<u>h</u> eofonrices Weard
Now we must praise	heaven-kingdon's Guardian
<u>M</u> eotodes <u>m</u> eahte	and his <u>m</u> odgeƿanc
the Measurer's might	and his mind-plans,
<u>w</u> eorc <u>w</u> uldor-Fæder	swa he <u>w</u> undra gehwæs
the work of the Glory-Father,	when he of wonders of every one,
<u>e</u> ce Drihten	<u>o</u> r onstealde
eternal Lord,	the beginning established

(From: *Cadmon's Hymn*, seventh century, text and translation Abrams et al. 1986)

The system has been memorably explained in modern English by John Hollander:

The oldest English	accented meter
Of four, unfailing	fairly audible
Strongly struck	stresses seldom
Attended to anything	other than
Definite downbeats:	how many dim
Unstressed upbeats	in any line
Mattered not much;	motion was measured
With low leaps	of alliteration
Handily harping on	heavy accents

(Echoing equally all vowels
 Consonant cousins coming together)
 (Hollander 2001: 22)

Rap music relies on a similar pattern: four heavy beats with a marked pause in the middle of the line. Apart from alliterations, rap tends to rely on rhyme patterns to mark the line and provide a kind of climax on the fourth beat (see Attridge 1995: 90-94). The following example uses internal rhyme (axe / Max / Tracks / Cadillacs / Wax), t-alliteration and m-alliteration, assonances on ‘a’ and the short German ‘i’ sound. The main stresses are underlined:

T-T-T-Trick-Texts, Battle-Axe, Gauner 's Max – Wollt Ihr Tracks
 fett wie Cadillacs oder wollt Ihr Airbag-Raps auf Wax?

Trick-Tracks, Battle-Raps – Gauner am Mikrofon.
Mick Mac Tizoe Rap – Du steppst in die Battle Zone.
 Da machst dick Wind, bist blind, mehr Plastik als Synthetik.
Trick-Tracks, Battle-Raps, schlachten Dich, Du Rindvieh!
 (©Gauner)

Hopkins’ **sprung rhythm** has a varying number of syllables but an equal number of stresses in each line. In this example each line is supposed to be read with five stresses. Obviously, there is some room for interpretation. The scansion provided is a suggestion:

As a dare-gale skylark scanted in a dull cage	oo1o1o1ooo11
Man’s mounting spirit in his bone-house, mean house, dwells-	11o1ooo1o1oo
That bird beyond the remembering his free fells;	o1o1oo1ooo11
This in drudgery, day-labouring-out life’s age.	oo1oo1ooo111
[...] (From: Hopkins, <i>The Caged Skylark</i>)	

4.3.1.2 Syllabic Metre

Syllabic metrical systems have a fixed number of syllables in each line, though there may be a varying number of stresses. They are named, quite simply, according to the number of syllables in each line, using Greek numbers. A line with seven syllables is called heptasyllabic and so on.

seven syllables	heptasyllabic
eight	octosyllabic
nine	enneasyllabic
ten	decasyllabic
eleven	hendecasyllabic
twelve	dodecasyllabic

William Blake, for instance, liked the so-called fourteener, a line with fourteen syllables:

‘Twas on a Holy Thursday, their innocent faces clean,
 The children walking two & two, in red & blue & green,
 Grey headed beadles walkd before with wands as white as snow,

Till into the high dome of Paul's they like Thames' waters flow.
(From: Blake, *Songs of Innocence: Holy Thursday*)

This, it may be noted, is also iambic. Pure syllabic verse is comparatively rare in English and what there is, is imported from foreign forms of poetry, such as the Japanese **Haiku**. The Haiku, in its conservative definition, has three lines, the first and the last line have five syllables, the middle line has seven, as in the following example:

Printer not ready
Could be a fatal error
Have a pen handy?
(*Error-Message Haiku*,
<http://users.bestweb.net/~bkoser/marnen/email/errorhaiku.html>)

4.3.1.3. Accentual-Syllabic Metre

By far the largest number of poems in English use **accentual-syllabic metre**. In this metrical system both the number of stresses and the number of syllables between the stresses are regular. Each single unit of stress and non-stress is called **foot**. Strictly speaking, the number of syllables should be identical for each line, but it is very often the case that a line leaves one metrical foot incomplete, thus varying the number of syllables as a whole.

The system of accentual-syllabic metre derives from metrical patterns of classical (Greek and Roman) poetry, even though it cannot easily be transferred from classical languages into English, since in classical languages metre depends on syllable length, whereas in English it depends on word stress. There are a large number of different types of metrical foot measurements but the most common ones are the following (for a more comprehensive list see Fussell 1967: 26):

iamb	o1	da-DUM	A man put on his hat And walked along the strand And there he met another man Whose hat was in his hand (Samuel Johnson's example of bad poetry)
trochee	1o	DUM-da	Hark, the hour of ten is sounding Hearts with anxious fears are bounding Hall of Justice crowds surrounding Breathing hope and fear (Gilbert and Sullivan, from: <i>Trial by Jury</i>)
dactyl	1oo	DUM-da-da	Cannon to right of them Cannon to left of them Cannon in front of them Volley'd and thunder'd (From: Tennyson, <i>Charge of the Light Brigade</i>)

She comes, and straight therewith her shining twins do move
Their rays to me, who in her tedious absence lay
Benighted in cold woe; but now appears my day,
The only light of joy, the only warmth of love.
(From: Sidney, *Astrophil and Stella*)

SO WHAT?

Metre must be suitable for the theme of the poem. Otherwise it leads to more or less ridiculous contradictions and thematic **in**coherence (see theme and isotopy ch. 1.5.). Paul Fussell (1967) cites Cowper's poem on the felling of poplar trees as an example of a particularly unsuitable metrical choice:

The poplars are fell'd, farewell to the shade
And the whispering sound of the cool colonnade,
The winds play no longer, and sing in the leaves,
Nor Ouse on his bosom their image receives.

Twelve years have elaps'd since I last took a view
Of my favourite field and the bank where they grew,
And now in the grass behold they are laid,
And the tree is my seat that once lent me a shade.
(From: Cowper, *The Poplar Field*)

The melancholy topic is directly contradicted by the tendency of the anapaest to assume a playful, skipping rhythm. (For a longer discussion of the metre in this poem see Warren/Brooks 1960: 170-172)

On the other hand, thematic incoherence can of course be used successfully for a specific function. A contradiction between topic and rhythm for instance, can achieve a comic or satirical effect as in the following excerpt:

Corinna, Pride of Drury-Lane,
For whom no Shepherd sighs in vain;
Never did *Covent Garden* boast
So bright a batter'd, strolling Toast;
No drunken Rake to pick her up,
No Cellar where on Tick to sup;
Returning at the Midnight Hour;
Four stories climbing to her Bow'r;
Then, seated on a three-legg'd Chair,
Takes off her artificial Hair:
Now picking out a Crystal Eye,
She wipes it clean, and lays it by.
Her Eye-Brows from a Mouse's hyde,
Stuck on with Art on either Side,
Pulls off with Care, and first displays 'em,
Then in a Play-Book smoothly lays 'em.
Now dextrously her Plumpers draws,
That serve to fill her hollow Jaws.
Untwists a Wire; and from her Gums
A Set of Teeth completely comes. [...]
(From: Swift, *A Beautiful Young Nymph Going to Bed*)

The smoothness of the metre (iambic tetrameter), rhythm and rhyme smooth over and suppress the squalid circumstances Corinna lives in. The incoherence between prosodic form and the poem's topic actually develops a coherence on another level: It satirises the merely superficial smooth cover over a (physically) rotten core.

4.3.1.4. Free Verse

Free Verse does not use any particular pattern of stress or number of syllables per line. It is a type of verse that has been widely used only since the twentieth century. Although without regular metre, it is not without rhythmic effects and organisation. Free verse can be organised around syntactic units, word or sound repetitions, or the rhythm created by a line break.

Some quick to arm,
some for adventure,
some from fear of weakness,
some from fear of censure,
some for love of slaughter, in imagination,
some learning later ...
some in fear, learning love of slaughter;
(From: Pound, *Hugh Selwyn Mauberley*)

Pound uses anaphora, rhyme (adventure/censure), word repetitions and the effects of pauses created through line breaks to organise his verse.

4.3.1.5. Maximisation Principle and Metrical Grid

It is not always easy to determine a metrical pattern. In fact, quite frequently a series of syllables allows for more than one arrangement of accents. Consider the phrase

Nature in her then err'd not but forgot.

This could be scanned 1o o 1 o 1 o 1 o1 (NAture in HER then ERR'D not BUT forGOT). But with similar justification it could be scanned 1o o 1 o o 1 o o1 (NAture in HER then err'd NOT but forGOT). In fact, the second possibility seems rather better since it would appear to be regular dactyl.

When such an ambiguous line (ambiguous as to metrical pattern) occurs in a poem, the lines around this problem line need to be taken into consideration when deciding on the metre. The basic rule to go by is that unless there are insurmountable arguments against it, any line should be scanned so it fits the pattern of the lines around it. Consider our troublesome line in context:

'Yet Cloe sure was form'd without a spot -'
Nature in her then err'd not but forgot.
'With ev'ry pleasing, ev'ry prudent part,
Say, what can Cloe want?' – she wants a Heart.
She speaks, behaves, and acts just as she ought;

But never, never, reach'd one gen'rous Thought.
Virtue she finds too painful an endeavour,
Content to dwell in Decencies for ever.
(From: Pope, *Epistle to a Lady*, 157-164)

The lines surrounding our problematic line are all very clearly iambic (except maybe the line “Say, what can Cloe want? [...]” which seems to be iambic with one spondee at the beginning). Because we have a tendency to continue a particular rhythm once it has been started – change is always unsettling – we almost automatically continue to scan according to the pattern that has already been set. Decisions about the metrical pattern of a poem are thus governed by what Rulon Wells has called the **maximisation principle**, the dominant metrical pattern is the one that has to make the least exceptions (see Ludwig 1990: 55). In our example above, rather than saying the first line is iambic, the second dactylic, the third iambic, etc., we say the poem is iambic with two irregularities in initial position (lines 158 and 160).

On the basis of the maximisation principle we tend to establish a **metrical grid** (term from Fowler 1968, see also the discussion in Ludwig 1990: 47) in our heads, that is, we form the expectation of a certain pattern and once it is established, we expect it to continue. The whole poem is read against this metrical grid and it is on this basis that deviations are noted.

4.3.1.6. Metrical Deviations

A poem that scanned with absolute regularity would more than likely jingle on in insufferable tedium. This danger is circumvented by little deviations that break the regular pattern of the metrical grid. Metrical deviations are created by **substitution** and in **recitation**.

Because metrical deviations go against our expectations (they break the metrical grid we have formed in our minds), such places are more noticeable than others. The tension that is created between the abstract metrical grid and the actual linguistic and metrical realisation is called **interplay** (the term was introduced by Wimsatt and Beardsley 1959, see discussion in Ludwig 1990: 38). Places of interplay deserve special attention in analysis because they usually have a definite function in conveying the meaning of a poem.

4.3.1.7. Substitutions

To break the monotony of regular metre poets often substitute one metrical foot from a regular pattern with another. For example in a series of iambic feet one might find a spondee or a trochee as in the following example:

What dire Offence from am'rous Causes springs,
What mighty Contests rise from trivial things,
I sing – this Verse to *Caryll*, Muse! is due;
This ev'n *Belinda* may vouchsafe to view:
Slight is the Subject, but not so the Praise,
If She inspire, and He approve my Lays.
(From: Pope, *Rape of the Lock*, 1-6)

These lines are fairly regular iambic pentameter except the beginning of line 5 “Slight is”, which is a trochaic foot. This not only breaks the monotony of the iambic pentameter (broken once before by the caesura in line 3) but it is also rather witty because it puts an unexpected emphasis on “Slight”, which semantically indicates that it deserves little emphasis.

4.3.1.8. Recitation

It is important to remember that a person reciting a poem is most likely to deviate from the regular metrical pattern – at least, one would hope so. Most notably, a division into two types of stress (stressed and not stressed) is an extreme simplification of what actually happens. In regular speech and recitation there are not merely stressed and non-stressed syllables but a number of gradations between the two: specially stressed, normally stressed, half-stressed, little stressed, etc. Sometimes the stress placed by the metrical pattern will be ignored for certain effects, pauses are made or not made, etc. Consider the following example:

Of man’s first disobedience, and the fruit
Of that forbidden tree whose mortal taste
Brought death into the world, and all our woe,
With loss of Eden, till one greater Man
Restore us, and regain the blissful seat,
Sing Heavenly Muse [...]
(From: Milton, *Paradise Lost*, Bk. I)

This poem is written in blank verse but it is almost impossible to recite it with a regular iambic pattern. The first line could be more easily read like this: Of MAN’s FIRST (half-stress) disoBEDience (pause) and the FRUIT of that forBIDD’n TREE (pause) whose MORTal TASTE etc. There are obviously other possibilities. A recitation is always an interpretation of the poem and there is no one possible recitation, though metre and rhythm set certain limits within which individual interpretations can operate (see discussion under Modulation and audio example further down).

SO WHAT?

Places of interplay focus the reader’s or audience’s attention on certain aspects of a poem and can serve as a starting point for interpretation. Consider this poem by Jonathan Swift on the death of the Duke of Marlborough (whom Swift obviously disliked heartily).

A Satirical Elegy on the Death of a Late Famous General

His Grace! impossible! what dead!
Of old age too, and in his bed!
And could that mighty warrior fall,
And so inglorious, after all?
Well, since he’s gone, no matter how,
The last loud trump must wake him now;
And, trust me, as the noise grows stronger,
He’d wish to sleep a little longer.

And could he be indeed so old
 As by the newspapers we're told?
 Threescore, I think, is pretty high;
 'Twas time in conscience he should die!
 This world he cumbered long enough;
 He burnt his candle to the snuff;
 And that's the reason, some folks think,
 He left behind so great a stink.
 Behold his funeral appears,
 Nor widows' sighs, nor orphans' tears,
 Wont at such times each heart to pierce,
 Attend the progress of his hearse.
 But what of that? his friends may say,
 He had those honours in his day.
 True to his profit and his pride,
 He made them weep before he died

Come hither, all ye empty things!
 Ye bubbles raised by breath of kings!
 Who float upon the tide of state;
 Come hither, and behold your fate!
 Let pride be taught by this rebuke,
 How very mean a thing's a duke;
 From all his ill-got honours flung,
 Turned to that dirt from whence he sprung.

This poem scans very regularly as iambic tetrameter. The few exceptions that would probably demand a slight irregularity in stress when reading the poem out loud are in line 1 (spondee "what dead?"), line 19 ("Wont at such times", 1 o o 1, initial trochee) and line 32 ("Turned to that dirt", 1 o o 1, initial trochee).

There are a few more places that invite, rather than demand, a divergence from the iambic pattern – though these are a matter of interpretation rather than an absolute necessity: "Well" at the beginning of line 5, "The last loud trump" in line 6 (o 1 1 1, one iambic, one spondee), the initial "And, trust me" in line 7 (1 1 1), the frequent third person pronoun in initial position (especially lines 8, 14, 22, 24: "**He**'d wish ...", "**He** burnt", "**He** had...", "**He** made ...") and the word "True", also in initial position, in line 23.

Two main effects are produced by this use of interplay: The irregularities of line 1 ("what dead?"), line 5 ("Well") and line 7 ("And, trust me") effectively help to reproduce the conversational tone of gossip (compare audio file).

The emphasis on the initial words "He" (lines 8, 14, 22, 24), "True" (line 23) and "Turned" (line 32), drawn to the audience's particular notice through the interplay, brings out a particular aspect of the poem's satire: It creates a link between the dead duke, truth, and "turned". On one level, the poem expresses a certain amount of triumph that the fortunes of the duke have turned, and the duke himself, despite his high place in the world, will now turn to dust (the poem significantly uses the more negative "dirt" rather than the more neutral 'dust') like everyone else. On another level, the repeated inversion to stress the word 'he' in the first part of the poem, might be taken to indicate that the duke 'turned' values on their heads: he is 'true' not to beautiful principles but to selfish "profit" and "pride", he caused grief in his family not

when he died but when he was alive, his supposed “friends” actually say negative things about him, and so on. Thus the formal elements of metre and interplay make the same point (i.e. have a common semantic denominator, see isotopy ch. 1.5.) as the description of the duke’s past and present situation does.

4.3.2. Rhythm

All languages make use of rhythm, and poetry exploits these rhythms to create additional meaning. **Rhythm** generally is “a series of alternations of build-up and release, movement and counter-movement, tending toward regularity but complicated by constant variations and local inflections.” (Attridge 1995: 3).

While poetic metre and metrical deviations contribute to the rhythm of a poem, rhythm itself is a more general phenomenon, relating mainly to the variations of speed in which a poem is likely to be read. This speed is influenced particularly by

- pauses
- elisions and expansions
- vowel length
- consonant clusters
- modulation

Key terms:

- end-stopped lines
- run-on-lines (enjambment)
- caesura
- elision
- expansion
- catenation

4.3.2.1. Pauses at the End of Lines

The fact that poems are presented in lines which do not fill the space on the page, coupled frequently with rhymes at the end of the line, invites the reader – and often also the performer – to pause for a moment at the end of each line. Such pauses are especially pronounced for **end-stopped lines**, lines where a syntactical unit comes to a close at the end of the line. These pauses at the end of a line cause a poem to have a different rhythm than prose. They also encourage the reader to dwell on individual words and sounds more than he or she would in prose; they promote a perception of the text in question as poetry. Compare the effect of the following text excerpt, once written as continuous prose, once as poetry (best to read it aloud!):

The sea is calm to-night. The tide is full, the moon lies fair upon the straits; on the French coast the light gleams and is gone; the cliffs of England stand, glimmering and vast, out in the tranquil bay. Come to the window, sweet is the night air! Only, from the long line of spray where the sea meets the moon-blanchèd land, listen! you hear the grating roar of pebbles which the waves draw back, and fling, at their return, up the high strand, begin, and cease, and then again begin, with tremulous cadence slow, and bring the eternal note of sadness in.

The sea is calm to-night.
The tide is full, the moon lies fair
Upon the straits; on the French coast the light
Gleams and is gone; the cliffs of England stand,

Glimmering and vast, out in the tranquil bay.
 Come to the window, sweet is the night air!
 Only, from the long line of spray
 Where the sea meets the moon-blached land,
 Listen! you hear the grating roar
 Of pebbles which the waves draw back, and fling,
 At their return, up the high strand,
 Begin, and cease, and then again begin,
 With tremulous cadence slow, and bring
 The eternal note of sadness in.
 (From: Arnold, *Dover Beach*)

One tends to pause in mid-sentence at a line break which considerably slows down the speed of reading and thus brings the individual words more to the notice of the reader. When the lines are written as prose, the effect of the rhyme words is almost completely lost (fair/air, to-night/light, stand/land, bay/spray, fling/bring, begin/in) and also the fact that the “grating roar” remains without a rhyme word in this section (it is actually taken up further down in the poem), which creates a situation where “roar” is literally “grating”, because it does not blend in harmoniously with the rhyme scheme. Further, the effect of the framing (redditio) with the word “begin” in line 12, which visually – and through the pauses at the end of each line also audibly – emphasises the return of the new beginning, is also reduced in the prose version.

The additional effect achieved through the line break in this example is increased because many of the lines are not end-stopped but **run-on-lines (enjambment)**, that is, the syntactical unit carries over into the next line. On the one hand, run-on-lines tend to diminish the pause one naturally makes at the end of a line. In this sense they speed up the rhythm of the poem. On the other hand, the slight pause that often remains despite the run-on-line – especially when the poem is read silently, since the eyes have to travel from the end of one line to the beginning of the next – introduces a pause one would not normally make. Such pauses can be employed for surprising effects. Consider the following excerpt from a poem where an African, looking for a flat, is talking to a potential landlady on the telephone. He is momentarily confused when the landlady asks him for details about his skin colour:

“ARE YOU DARK? OR VERY LIGHT?” Revelation came.
 “You mean – like plain or milk chocolate?”
 Her assent was clinical, crushing in its light
 Impersonality. Rapidly, wave-length adjusted,
 I chose. “West African sepia” – and as afterthought,
 “Down in my passport.” [...]
 (From: Soyinka, *Telephone Conversation*)

The run-on-line “crushing in its light / Impersonality” puns on several possible meanings of the word “light”, both as noun and as adjective. At first he does not understand what she means by the question “Are you dark?”, then he realises what she is asking (“Revelation came”). He reformulates her question and in the line “Her assent was clinical, crushing in its light”, the word “light” first appears to be a noun, repeating the meaning of “revelation” two lines earlier. It is easy to imagine a glaring and unkind (“crushing”) light in the context of “clinical”, as in the lights of an operating theatre. For a brief

moment, the line means that the speaker is crushed because he fully realises the extent of the landlady's colour-prejudice. As the sentence is completed in the next line, "light" actually becomes the adjective modifying "impersonality". In this grammatical context it could mean the opposite of 'heavy'. It could also be taken to refer to **her** skin colour, which is presumably white. The pun on "light", mainly effective through the run-on-line, thus contrasts the way she treats a question which affects him on an intensely personal level with the impersonal detachment of someone who has the light skin colour which is here given preference. The simple fact that the words are arranged in lines achieves additional meaning.

4.3.2.1. Pauses within Lines

A pause can also occur within lines and then it is called **caesura**. A caesura can serve simply to break the monotony of the metrical pattern but usually it emphasises particular words or a contrast within the line. Consider another excerpt from Soyinka's *Telephone Conversation*:

[...] "Madam," I warned,
"I hate a wasted journey – I am African."
Silence. Silenced transmission of
Pressurized good-breeding. [...]

The caesura after "I hate a wasted journey" creates a moment of suspense, one is waiting to hear what he has to tell her. The caesura after "Silence" in fact acts out the meaning of the word 'silence' and thus intensifies its effect.

SO WHAT?

As with any other formal device, the function of a caesura varies according to the context in which it is used. Consider the following example:

Macavity's a Mystery Cat: he's called the Hidden Paw –
For he's the master criminal who can defy the law.
He's the bafflement of Scotland Yard; the Flying Squad's despair:
For when they reach the scene of crime – *Macavity's not there!*
(From: Eliot, *Book of Practical Cats*)

Here the caesura achieves two effects: First, though the lines are iambic heptameter, the caesura in each line breaks them into a first part with four and a second part with three accents. Thus, the poem has the rhythm of the ballad stanza and indeed, there is a tradition of street ballads about the deeds of criminals to which Eliot alludes here. Second, the caesura in the last line operates rather like a fanfare, leading up to the triumphant "Macavity's not there" which is repeated throughout the poem as a sort of refrain.

4.3.2.2. Elisions and Expansions

There are times when unstressed syllables which are normally pronounced are **not** pronounced in a particular line in order to make the line fit the metre. In such cases one talks of **elision**. Elisions occur mostly when two non-stressed

syllables follow each other in a metrical pattern that demands only one. Sometimes elisions are marked by an apostrophe:

The silenc'd Preacher yields to potent strain,
And feels that grace his pray'r besought in vain,
The blessing thrills thro' all the lab'ring throng,
And Heav'n is won by violence of Song.
(From: Pope, *Imitations of Horace*)

At other times readers themselves have to decide whether or not to elide a syllable. In most cases, however, it comes quite naturally, as one tends to continue in the established rhythmical or metrical pattern. Indeed, one tends to elide syllables in every-day utterance to accommodate certain rhythms of speech (for a more complete discussion of elision see especially Attridge 1995: 126-131). Some syllables are always elided in English, for instance most of the past participle '-ed' endings as in 'turned', 'talked', 'achieved', etc. Other elisions used to be common in everyday speech, and thus also in poetry, but are no longer elisions today, for instance words like 'o'er' (pronounced like 'or') for 'over' or "'tis' instead of 'it is'.

Elisions that occur in verse but do not normally occur in everyday speech create **interplay**. Often, such places of interplay make an additional point. In the following example the words "chariot" and "hurrying" which have three syllables are squeezed into an iambic tetrameter, the second and third syllables are pronounced as one:

But at my back I always hear
Time's wingèd chariot hurrying near;
(From: Marvell, *To His Coy Mistress*)

These elisions are entirely appropriate in this context, since they speed up the rhythm and thus literally convey the hurry of time which worries the speaker.

As can also be seen from this excerpt, syllables that would normally be elided are not always elided in metrical verse ("winged" in this example), partly because that is an older common pronunciation, partly to fit the metre. In such cases one speaks of an **expansion**. Some editors mark such places with an accent mark, but others simply assume that the reader will accommodate the pronunciation of words to the metre.

4.3.2.4. Vowel Length and Consonant Clusters

A change in rhythm and speed can be achieved with a change of metre. Consider the following example:

I have a Gumbie Cat in mind, her name is Jennyanydots;
Her equal would be hard to find, she likes the warm and sunny spots.
All day she sits beside the hearth or on the bed or on my hat:
She sits and sits and sits and sits – and that's what makes a Gumbie
Cat!

But when the day's hustle and bustle is done,
Then the Gumbie Cat's work is but hardly begun.

As she finds that the mice will not ever keep quiet,
She is sure it is due to irregular diet;
And believing that nothing is done without trying,
She sets right to work with her baking and frying.
She makes them a mouse-cake of bread and dried peas,
And a *beautiful* fry of lean bacon and cheese.
(From: Eliot, *Book of Practical Cats*)

The change from a pleasantly sauntering iamb in the first stanza to a more bouncing and bustling anapaest in the second stanza speeds up the rhythm of the poem and adequately conveys the change from the Gumbie Cat's sedate day-life to her active night-life. The increase of speed is supported by the easier **catenation** (the way the words are linked in pronunciation, as in a chain) in the second stanza.

Apart from metre there are other elements that influence the speed of a line of verse. Some critics argue that certain metrical arrangements have a tendency to support certain rhythms and thus certain topics better than others. Dactyl and anapaest, for instance, tend to have a fairly light and playful rhythm. But there is no general rule for the connection between metre and rhythm and there are certainly plenty of examples where dactyl or anapaest have anything but a playful effect (in Tennyson's *Charge of the Light Brigade* for instance). Especially iamb and trochee can be used for a wide variety of rhythms and speeds. Depending on **word choice** and the **arrangement of vowels** and **consonant clusters** they can support very fast as well as very slow rhythms. Consider the following example which describes the effect of heavy rain in eighteenth-century London. The poem begins quite slowly with

Careful observers may foretell the hour
(By sure prognostics) when to dread a shower:
While rain depends, the pensive cat gives o'er
Her frolics, and pursues her tail no more.

As the water begins to flood the streets and washes along various, mostly smelly, items, the rhythm is perceptibly increased:

Now from all part the swelling kennels flow,
And bear their trophies with them as they go:
Filth of all hues and odors seem to tell
What street they sailed from, by their sight and smell.
[...]
Sweepings from butchers' stalls, dung, guts, and blood,
Drowned puppies, stinking sprats, all drenched in mud,
Dead cats, and turnip tops, come tumbling down the flood.
(From: Swift, *Description of a City Shower*)

While in the poem by T.S. Eliot above an iamb was used for a fairly slow rhythm, in Swift's poem, particularly in the last three lines, the iambic is used to convey the speed and chaos with which various items are swirled down the street. The increased speed in the last three lines is achieved through the use of mainly short vowels in: dung, guts, blood, puppies, stinking, sprats, drenched, mud, dead, cats, turnip, tops, etc. (compare the beginning, which still has a number of long vowel sounds and diphthongs as in Careful, foretell, hour,

shower, rain, o'er, more, dine, hire, wine). A series of double consonants (swelling, kennels, puppies) and alliteration with plosives and unvoiced fricatives (sailed/sight/smell, turnip/tops/tumbling, stinking sprats, drowned/drenched/dead/down) increase the impression of quick movement.

A different combination of vowels and consonants can achieve a marked slow-down of rhythm:

For who to dumb Forgetfulness a prey,
This pleasing anxious being e'er resigned,
Left the warm precincts of the cheerful day,
Nor cast one longing lingering look behind.
(From: Gray, *Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard*)

Also in iambic metre, the very long vowels in this passage and in particular the l-alliteration combined with four repetitions of the consonant combination 'ng' ("longing lingering") draw the sounds out into a pensive slowness, as indeed is suitable to the theme of the poem: a meditation in a churchyard. Notice also how the elision "e'er" in this case actually contributes to slow down the rhythm, since it makes the reader dwell on a long drawn-out vowel sound.

4.3.2.5. Modulation

The discussion of rhythm so far should have made clear that simply the metre of a poem does not account for a variety of rhythmical effects. The aspect of **modulation** also deserves some consideration in this context. Compare the following stanzas:

FOR God's sake hold your tongue, and let me love ;
Or chide my palsy, or my gout ;
My five gray hairs, or ruin'd fortune flout ;
With wealth your state, your mind with arts improve ;
Take you a course, get you a place,
Observe his Honour, or his Grace ;
Or the king's real, or his stamp'd face
Contéplate ; what you will, approve,
So you will let me love.
(From: Donne, *The Canonization*)

Come live with me and be my Love,
And we will all the pleasures prove
That hills and valleys, dale and field,
And all the craggy mountains yield.

There will we sit upon the rocks
And see the shepherds feed their flocks,
By shallow rivers, to whose falls
Melodious birds sing madrigals.
(From: Marlowe, *The Passionate Shepherd to His Love*, Palgrave ed.)

Both poems are in iambic metre but they support a very different rhythm. Donne's lines assume an almost conversational tone. If, on the other hand, one tries to read Marlow's lines in such a conversational modulation it is quite obviously wrong. Marlowe's lines seem to demand a reading with a sort of sing-song rhythm which in turn would not suit the Donne stanza (compare audio examples). The concept of metre is obviously insufficient to account for this phenomenon, since both excerpts are in the same metre. Why then is there such a difference?

There appear to be two main reasons: The irregular length of Donne's lines (he alternates between pentameter and tetrameter, the last line is a trimeter) jolts the reader out of any rhythmic pattern he might be tempted to fall into. The frequent caesuras at different positions within the lines further disrupt any regular rhythmical development. The regularity of Marlowe's song on the other hand encourages the emergence of a regular rhythmical pattern, there is almost a danger that the lines start jingling. The second reason for the difference in modulation is probably the choice of diction. Donne's poem starts out with an impatient colloquial expression ("For God's sake!") which immediately asks for a fairly colloquial modulation. Marlowe's cheerful invitation to be unrealistic uses more 'artificial' or poetic expressions ("pleasures prove", "melodious birds sing madrigals") which support a modulation of more amplitude.

Obviously, the difference in rhythm makes a considerable difference in the effect of the two poems. Such rhythmical effects must not be ignored in the analysis of poetry since they constitute an important part of the poem's meaning.

4.4. Prosodic Features: Sound Patterns

It has been said above that much of the effects of literary texts depend on various patterns of repetition (see Theme ch. 1.5.). The kind of repetition that most people associate with poetry is the repetition of sounds, in particular in rhyme. Apart from rhyme, there are other sound patterns in poetry which create additional meaning, such as alliteration, assonance and onomatopoeia. Such sound effects always have a specific function in a poem. It is the task of analysis to explicate such functions, because they, too, are part of what the poem means, its overall and specific effects.

4.4.1. Rhyme

When two words have the same sound (phoneme) from the last stressed vowel onwards, they are considered to **rhyme**. In a **full rhyme**, the consonant preceding the last stressed vowel of the two words is different: **night/delight**, **power/flower** and so on.

There are a number of rhyme forms that deviate from the exact observance of the full rhyme: One talks about a **rich rhyme** when the consonant before the last stressed vowel is also identical: **lap/clap**, **stick/ecclesiastic**. When the two rhyme words are in fact the same, it is an **identical rhyme**. When two rhyme words look and sound the same but have different meanings this is called a **homonym**. Both rich rhyme and identical rhyme have at times been considered bad form.

Key terms:

- full rhyme
- rich rhyme
- identical rhyme
- half-rhyme / pararhyme
- end-rhyme
- internal rhyme
- leonine rhyme
- masculine rhyme
- feminine rhyme
- triple rhyme
- rhyme patterns:
- continuous rhyme
- rhyming couplet
- alternate rhyme
- embracing rhyme
- chain rhyme
- tail rhyme
- alliteration
- assonance
- onomatopoeia

Sometimes, only the consonants or only the vowel sounds are identical. In such cases one speaks of **half-rhymes**, **slant rhymes** or **pararhymes**:

reader/rider

(**consonance**: same consonants but different stressed vowel sound)

poppet/profit, forever/weather

(**assonance**: same vowel sounds, different consonants)

opposite/spite, home/come

(**eye-rhyme**: spelling identical but pronunciation different)

The most noticeable rhyme is the rhyme at the end of a line, the **end-rhyme**. But there are also lines within lines, so-called **internal rhymes**.

I've a head like a concertina; I've a tongue like a button-stick
I've a mouth like an old potato, and I'm more than a little sick,
But I've had my fun o' the Corp'ral's Guards: I've made the cinders fly,
And I'm here in the **Clink** for a thundering **drink** and blacking the
Corporal's eye.

(From: Kipling, *Barrack-Room Ballads*)

When a word in the middle of the line (usually before a caesura) rhymes with the word at the end of the line it is a **leonine rhyme**.

The Owl and the Pussy-cat went to sea

In a beautiful pea-green boat.

They took some **honey**, and plenty of **money**

Wrapped up in a five-pound note.

(From: Lear, *The Owl and the Pussy-Cat*)

Rhymes can be on one syllable or on two or three syllables. Rhymes of one identical syllable are called **masculine rhymes**: street/meet, man/ban, galaxy/merrily. Rhymes of two identical syllables are called **feminine rhymes**: straining/complaining, slowly/holy. Very rarely there are rhymes with three identical syllables, so-called **triple rhymes**: icicles/bicycles. The triple rhyme is often used for a humorous effect:

Her favorite science was the mathematical,

Her noblest virtue was her magnanimity,

Her wit (she sometimes tried at wit) was **Attic all**,

Her serious sayings darkened to sublimity;

In short, in all things she was fairly what **I call**

A prodigy – her morning dress was dimity,

Her evening silk, or, in the summer, muslin,

And other stuffs, with which I won't stay puzzling.

(From: Byron, *Don Juan*)

Rhyming lines can be arranged according to different patterns. The same rhymes are marked using small letters of the alphabet:

continuous rhyme *aaaa bbbb ...*

rhyming couplets *aa bb cc ...*

alternate rhyme	<i>abab cdcd ...</i>
embracing rhyme	<i>abba cddc ...</i>
chain rhyme	<i>aba bcb cdc ...</i>
tail rhyme	<i>aab ccb ...</i>

Sound patterns, especially rhyme, help to divide a poem into sections. These sections can help, for instance, to mark various stages of thematic development in a poem: the movement from despair to hope, from description to moral application and so on. This is notably the case in sonnets, where the octet and the sestet or the quatrains and the final couplet often form a contrast (see ch. 4.5., stanza forms).

4.4.2. Alliteration, Assonance, Onomatopoeia

Apart from rhyme, there are other sound patterns that are remarkable in poetry and that are often used to link words which would not otherwise be connected (see also list of rhetorical devices ch. 1.6.3.). These connections create meaning patterns. Three of these sound patterns shall be considered in more detail here: alliteration, assonance and onomatopoeia.

An **alliteration** is the repetition of the same sound, usually a consonant, at the beginning of words or stressed syllables in close proximity.

But my grandest creation, as history will tell,
Was **F**ire**f**rore**f**iddle, the **F**iend of the **F**ell.
(From: Eliot, *Book of Practical Cats*)

An **assonance** is the repetition of the same vowel sound in the stressed syllables of words in close proximity, while the consonants differ:

Rend with tremendous Sound your ears as**u**nder,
With **G**un, **D**rum, **T**rump**u**mpet, **B**lunderbuss & **T**hunder
(From: Pope, *Imitations of Horace, Ep. II.1*)

In these lines Pope also achieves an **onomatopoetic** effect, since the accumulations of the dark and booming u-sound combinations imitate the “tremendous Sound” of gun, drum, etc. It should be noted that onomatopoeia only ever works in conjunction with the meaning of the words used. One cannot recognise onomatopoeia in a language one does not understand. This has been famously demonstrated by John Crowe Ransom who changed Tennyson’s onomatopoetic line “A murmuring of innumerable bees” into “A murdering of innumerable beeves”. Even though only two small changes have been made to the sound, the meaning of the sentence is completely changed and no onomatopoetic effect whatsoever remains (cited in Abrams 1999: 199).

SO WHAT?

Sound patterns can create or emphasise links between words which would otherwise be less noticeable. Consider the following two lines from Pope’s *Imitations of Horace*. Pope is trying to explain that whatever one does, one needs to practice first before one can safely be let loose onto a trusting world. In

these two lines he mentions two examples: A shopkeeper has to serve an apprenticeship first and the famous (or infamous) doctor Ward first tested his medicines before he used them regularly (Ward's medicines were reputed to have some amazing effects):

He serv'd a 'Prenticeship, who sets up shop;
Ward try'd on Puppies, and the Poor, his Drop;

The p-alliteration puts the three words 'Prenticeship', 'Puppies' and 'Poor' on one level, they are all things one can practice on, if one is not proficient in any skill. The alarming aspect is of course, and this represents the satirical element of these lines, that puppies and the poor are treated as though they were rather the same thing, literally a thing one can test medicine on. This effect is further strengthened by the parallel syntax. Whatever one might feel about animal testing, to talk about 'poor-testing' in a casual aside (a hyperbaton here), indicates a cruel disregard of human dignity which Pope criticises here.

4.5. Verse Forms and Stanza Forms

A sequence of lines within a poem are often separated into sub-units, the **stanza**. Two aspects of stanza form are particularly relevant for the analysis of poetry: First, a stanza form is always used to some purpose, it serves a specific function in each poem. There are no general rules about such functions, the student or critic analysing the poem has to decide in each case afresh which is the function in the particular poem he or she is dealing with. (For an example of function see the SO WHAT section below). Second, well-known stanza forms stand in a certain tradition. The sonnet for instance started its career in English poetry as a love poem. When John Donne starts using the sonnet for religious topics he places himself within a tradition of love poetry. The very choice of the form contributes to the intensely personal explorations of the speaker's relation to God in Donne's religious sonnets. It is thus useful to be aware of the origin and history of a stanza form, since this enables one to judge whether a poet makes use of a tradition or writes against it. (See Saintsbury 1923 for a comprehensive and Fussell 1967 for a slightly shorter overview of the historical dimensions of certain stanza forms).

There are a great number of different stanza forms available to a poet writing in the English (and that generally means European) tradition. The main ones are given in the following list.

Stichic verse is a continuous run of lines of the same length and the same metre. Most narrative verse is written in such continuous lines. Lyric poetry, because it is closer to song, usually uses stanzas.

As wreath of snow, on mountain-breast
Slides from the rock that gave it rest,
Poor Ellen glided from her stay,
And at the Monarch's feet she lay:
No word her choking voice commands;
She show'd the ring, she clasp'd her hands.
O! not a moment could he brook,
The generous prince, that suppliant look!

Key terms:

- stanza
- stichic
- blank verse
- couplet
- tercet
- terza rima
- quatrain
- ballad stanza
- rhyme royal
- ottava rima
- Spenserian stanza
- sonnet
- limerick
- villanelle

Gently he raised her; and, the while,
 Check'd with a glance the circle's smile;
 Graceful but grave, her brow he kiss'd,
 And bade her terrors be dismiss'd:
 'Yes, fair, the wandering poor Fitz-James
 The fealty of Scotland claims.
 To him thy woes, thy wishes bring;
 He will redeem his signet ring.
 (From: Scott, *The Lady of the Lake*, Canto VI)

Blank verse is a non-rhyming iambic pentameter, usually stichic. Under the influence of Shakespeare it became a widely used verse form for English dramatic verse, but it is also used, under the influence of Milton, for non-dramatic verse.

[...]
 And now, with gleams of half-extinguished thought,
 With many recognitions dim and faint,
 And somewhat of a sad perplexity,
 The picture of the mind revives again;
 While here I stand, not only with the sense
 Of present pleasure, but with pleasing thoughts
 That in this moment there is life and food
 For future years. And so I dare to hope
 [...]
 (From: Wordsworth, *Lines Written a Few Miles above Tintern Abbey*)

Couplet is the name for two rhyming lines of verse following immediately after each other. The **heroic couplet**, popular in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries consists of two lines of rhyming iambic pentameter. An **octosyllabic couplet** is also sometimes called a **short couplet**. The regular metre and the rhyme pattern of the couplet, usually with end-stopped lines, provides comparatively small units (two lines in fact) in which to make a point. Especially eighteenth-century poets used the form to create satirical contrasts within the couplet. In the following example from Pope's *Imitations of Horace* especially the lines "To prove, that Luxury could never hold; / And place, on good security, his Gold" present a blatant contradiction between words and action in a completely harmonious (regular metre, noticeable rhyme) poetic form. In consequence the reader notices the contradiction somewhat belatedly, almost as an afterthought. The effect is that of thinly disguised satire.

Time was, a sober Englishman wou'd knock
 His servants up, and rise by five a clock,
 Instruct his Family in ev'ry rule,
 And send his Wife to Church, his Son to school.
 To worship like his Fathers was his care;
 To teach their frugal Virtues to his Heir;
 To prove, that Luxury could never hold;
 And place, on good Security, his Gold.
 (From: Pope, *Imitations of Horace*, Ep. II.i)

A **tercet**, sometimes also called a **triplet**, is a stanza with three lines of the same rhyme (*aaa* or two rhyming lines embracing a line without rhyme (*axa*).

Released from the noise of the butcher and baker,
Who, my old friends be thanked, did seldom forsake her,
And from the soft duns of my landlord the Quaker;

From chiding the footmen, and watching the lasses,
From Nell that burned milk too, and Tom that broke glasses
(Sad mischiefs through which a good housekeeper passes!);

From some real care, but more fancied vexation,
From a life parti-coloured, half reason, half passion,
Here lies after all the best wench in the nation.
(From: Prior, *Jinny the Just*)

The **terza rima** is a variant of the tercet famously used by Dante in his *Divine Comedy*. The terza rima uses a chain rhyme: the second line of each stanza rhymes with the first and the third line of the next stanza (*aba bcb cdc* etc.)

The snow came down last night like moths
Burned on the moon; it fell till dawn,
Covered the town with simple cloths.

Absolute snow lies rumped on
What shellbursts scattered and deranged,
Entangled railings, crevassed lawn.

As if it did not know they'd changed,
Snow smoothly clasps the roofs of homes
Fear-gutted, trustless and estranged
(From: Wilbur, *First Snow in Alsace*)

The **quatrain** is one of the most common and popular stanza forms in English poetry. It is a stanza comprising four lines of verse with various rhyme patterns. When written in iambic pentameter and rhyming *abab* it is called **heroic quatrain**:

The curfew tolls the knell of parting day,
The lowing herd wind slowly o'er the lea,
The plowman homeward plods his weary way,
And leaves the world to darkness and to me.
(From: Gray, *Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard*)

Tennyson used a quatrain rhyming *abba* for his famous poem *In Memoriam A.H.H.* and the stanza form has since derived its name from this poem – the **Memoriam stanza**:

O, yet we trust that somehow good
Will be the final goal of ill,
To pangs of nature, sins of will,
Defects of doubt, and taints of blood;

The **ballad stanza** is a variant of the quatrain. Most commonly, lines of iambic tetrameter alternate with iambic trimeter (also called **chevy-chase stanza** after one of the oldest poems written in this form). The rhyme scheme is usually *abcb*, sometimes also *abab*.

Down dropped the breeze, the sails dropped down,
‘Twas sad as sad could be;
And we did speak only to break
The silence of the sea!

All in a hot and copper sky,
The bloody Sun, at noon,
Right up above the mast did stand,
No bigger than the Moon.

Day after day, day after day,
We stuck, nor breath nor motion;
As idle as a painted ship
Upon a painted ocean.
(From: Coleridge, *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner*)

The **rhyme royal** is a seven-line stanza in iambic pentameter which rhymes *ababbcc*. It is called rhyme royal because King James I of Scotland used it, though he was not the first to do so; Chaucer employed the stanza in *Troilus and Criseyde* much earlier.

A plain without a feature, bare and brown,
No blade of grass, no sign of neighbourhood,
Nothing to eat and nowhere to sit down,
Yet congregated on its blankness, stood
An unintelligible multitude,
A million eyes, a million boots in line
Without expression, waiting for a sign.
(From: Auden, *The Shield of Achilles*)

The **ottava rima** derives from Italian models like the *terza rima* and the sonnet do; it is a stanza with eight lines rhyming *abababcc*. The most famous use of the stanza form in English poetry was made by Byron in *Don Juan*, who skillfully employs the stanza form for comic effect; in the following example the last line renders the slightly pompous lovesickness of the first seven lines quite ridiculous.

“And oh! if e’er I should forget, I swear –
But that’s impossible, and cannot be –
Sooner shall this blue ocean melt to air,
Sooner shall earth resolve itself to sea,
Than I resign thine image, Oh, my fair!
Or think of anything, excepting thee;
A mind diseased no remedy can physic” –
(Here the ship gave a lurch, and he grew seasick.)

The **Spenserian stanza**, famously used by Edmund Spenser in *The Faerie Queene*, has nine lines rhyming *ababbcbcc*, the first eight lines are iambic pentameter, the last line is an alexandrine, which breaks the slight monotony of the pentameters and is often employed to emphasise a point. Here is Spenser's description of the Redcross Knight; the last line emphasises the knight's valour (he feared nothing but everyone feared him):

But on his brest a bloudie Crosse he bore,
The deare remembrance of his dying Lord,
For whose sweete sake that glorious badge he wore,
And dead as living ever him ador'd:
Upon his shield the like was also scor'd,
For souveraine hope, which in his helpe he had:
Right faithfull true he was in deede and word,
But of his cheere did seeme too solemne sad;
Yet nothing did he dread, but ever was ydrad.
(From: Spenser, *The Faerie Queene*)

The **sonnet** is a lyric poem of (usually) fourteen lines in iambic pentameter which became popular in England in the sixteenth century (see Types of Poetry ch. 4.2.). Later sonnet writers sometimes varied the number of lines between ten and sixteen lines, but still called the poem a sonnet (George Meredith for instance in his **sonnet sequence** *Modern Love* used sixteen lines, Gerard Manley Hopkins wrote sonnets that had ten-and-a-half lines).

One distinguishes between two main rhyme patterns in the sonnet: The **Italian** or **Petrarchan sonnet** is divided into an **octave** or **octet** (eight lines) rhyming *abbaabba* and a **sestet** rhyming *cdecde* or some variation (for example *cdccdc*). Very often this type of sonnet develops two sides of a question or a problem and a solution, one in the octave and, after a **turn** often introduced by 'but', 'yet' or a similar conjunction that indicates a change of argument, another in the sestet. In the following sonnet the speaker laments his inability to serve God on account of his blindness in the octave, but in the sestet takes courage again from the thought that God will not expect more of him than he can do and that his best servitude is to bear his lot in patience. Milton varies the form slightly by placing the turn ("but") in the last line of the octave.

When I consider how my light is spent
Ere half my day, in this dark world and wide,
And that one talent which is death to hide
Lodged with me useless, though my soul more bent
To serve therewith my Maker, and present
My true account, lest he returning chide;
"Doth God exact day-labor, light denied?"
I fondly ask; but patience to prevent
That murmur, soon replies, "God doth not need
Either man's work or his own gifts; who best
Bear his mild yoke, they serve him best. His state
Is kingly. Thousands at his bidding speed
And post o'er land and ocean without rest:
They also serve who only stand and wait."
(Milton, *On My Blindness*)

The **English** or **Shakespearean sonnet** usually falls into three **quatrains** and one final **couplet**. The rhyme pattern is most commonly *abab cdcd efef gg*. In the English sonnet the **turn** often occurs in the concluding couplet, which operates rather like a **punch line**, as in the following example. The first twelve lines lament the all-powerful and destructive influence of time, but the couplet ventures to express some hope that writing poetry might in fact overcome this and preserve the poet's love forever.

Since brass, nor stone, nor earth, nor boundless sea
But sad mortality o'er-sways their power,
How with this rage shall beauty hold a plea,
Whose action is no stronger than a flower?
O, how shall summer's honey breath hold out
Against the wreckful siege of battering days,
When rocks impregnable are not so stout,
Nor gates of steel so strong, but Time decays?
O fearful meditation! where, alack,
Shall Time's best jewel from Time's chest lie hid?
Or what strong hand can hold his swift foot back?
Or who his spoil of beauty can forbid?
O, none, unless, this miracle have might
That in black ink my love may still shine bright.
(Shakespeare, *Sonnet 65*)

An important variant of the English sonnet is the **Spenserian sonnet** which links the quatrains with rhymes: *abab bcbc cdcd ee*.

Unrighteous Lord of love, what law is this,
That me thou makest thus tormented be:
The whiles she lordeth in licentious blisse
Of her freewill, scorning both thee and me.
See how the Tyranesse doth joy to see
The huge massácles which her eyes do make:
And humbled harts brings captives unto thee,
That thou of them mayst mightie vengeance take.
But her proud hart doe thou a little shake
And that high look, with which she doth comptroll
All this worlds pride, bow to a baser make,
And al her faults in thy black booke enroll.
That I may laugh at her in equall sort,
As she doth laugh at me and makes my pain her sport.
(Spenser, *Amoretti*, Sonnet 10)

The **limerick** is used mainly for nonsense verse. It consists of five lines, two longer ones (trimeter, one trochaic foot, two anapaests), two shorter ones (anapaestic dimeter) and another trimeter (one trochee, two anapaests). Edward Lear, one of the most famous limerick- and nonsense verse writers, insisted that the first and the fifth line of the limerick should end with the same word, usually a place name.

There was an old person of Dutton
Whose head was as small as a button.

So, to make it look big,
 He purchased a wig
 And rapidly rushed about Dutton
 (Lear, from: *Book of Nonsense Verse*)

The **villanelle** has a rather intricate verse and rhyme pattern. It originated in France and reproduces the circular patterns of a peasant dance. The villanelle has five tercets rhyming *aba* and a final quatrain rhyming *abaa*. The lines of the first tercet provide a kind of **refrain**, a recurring repetition of one or more lines. Thus the first line of the first tercet is repeated as the last line of the second and fourth tercet, the third line of the first tercet is repeated as the last line of the third and the fifth tercet. (One really needs to look at the example to work this out.) Both lines (first and third line of first tercet) form the last two lines of the concluding quatrain. A famous example is Dylan Thomas' poem "Do not go gentle into that good night", where the highly organised and artificial but also playful form of the villanelle at first seems to contrast starkly with the poem's topic: the sick and dying father. But the form, which has to bend language into this disciplined playfulness, effectively helps to express the speaker's overwhelming desire to instil a spirit of resistance and a new passion for living in his father.

Do not go gentle into that good night,	a (line 1)
Old age should burn and rave at close of day;	b (line 2)
Rage, rage, against the dying of the light.	a (line 3)

Though wise men at their end know dark is right,	a
Because their words had forked no lightning they	b
Do not go gentle into that good night.	a (line 1)

Good men, the last wave by, crying how bright	a
Their frail deeds might have danced in a green bay,	b
Rage, rage against the dying of the light.	a (line 3)

Wild men who caught and sang the sun in flight,	a
And learn, too late, they grieved it on its way,	b
Do not go gentle into that good night.	a (line 1)

Grave men, near death, who see with blinding sight	a
Blind eyes could blaze like meteors and be gay,	b
Rage, rage against the dying of the light.	a (line 3)

And you, my father, there on the sad height,	a
Curse, bless, me now with your fierce tears, I pray.	b
Do not go gentle into that good night.	a (line 1)
Rage, rage against the dying of the light.	a (line 3)

Composite and irregular forms: Quite frequently poets combine various forms or employ no regular formal rhyme pattern, though rhyme and metre are nonetheless used. John Milton's poem *Lycidas* for instance is written in an irregular form: The iambic pentameter is at irregular intervals interspersed with a trimeter. John Donne frequently combines various forms into a regular

composite form. For instance *The Canonization*, a poem with five stanzas of nine lines each varies iambic pentameter with iambic tetrameter and a concluding line in iambic trimeter. The speaker is obviously in a temper because people interfere with his love life. The rapid change between pentameter and tetrameter expresses his irritation and the irregular flow of speech is conveyed as he switches between the slightly slower pentameter and the slightly quicker tetrameter. The final trimeter brings the stanza to an emphatic (because notably shorter) conclusion.

For God's sake hold your tongue, and let me love,	(pentameter)
Or chide my palsy, or my gout,	(tetrameter)
My five grey hairs, or ruined fortune, flout,	(pentameter)
With wealth your state, your mind with arts improve,	(pentameter)
Take you a course, get you a place,	(tetrameter)
Observe his Honor or His Grace,	(tetrameter)
Or the King's real, or his stamped face	(pentameter)
Contémpate; what you will, approve,	(pentameter)
So you will let me love.	(trimeter)

SO WHAT?

The question for interpretation is not primarily what is this stanza form called but what does this stanza form do, how does it contribute to the meaning of the poem. Christoph Bode (2001: 85) has pointed out the appropriateness of the five-line stanza in Robert Frost's *The Road Not Taken* since the poem is about two roads, only one of which is taken, the other one is left behind or left over as it were, like the fifth line of the stanza.

Two roads diverged in a yellow wood,
 And sorry I could not travel both
 And be one traveller, long I stood
 And looked down one as far as I could
 To where it bent in the undergrowth;

Then too the other, as just as fair,
 And having perhaps the better claim,
 Because it was grassy and wanted wear;
 Though as for that the passing there
 Had worn them really about the same.
 (From: Frost, *The Road Not Taken*)

Compare this to a poem by A.E. Housman:

White in the moon the long road lies,
 The moon stands blank above;
 White in the moon the long road lies
 That leads me from my love.

Still hangs the hedge without a gust,
 Still, still the shadows stay:

My feet upon the moonlit dust
Pursue the ceaseless way.

The world is round, so travellers tell,
And straight though reach the track,
Trudge on, trudge on, 'twill all be well,
The way will guide one back.

But ere the circle homeward hies
Far, far must it remove:
White in the moon the long road lies
That leads me from my love.

(Housman, from: *The Shropshire Lad*)

Like Frost's poem, this poem is about a traveller on a road. There is only one road in this poem and the speaker focuses on the length of this particular road and on the distance it puts between himself and his love. But the point is also that even the longest road will one day lead back to where it started. The quatrains which are used here present a closed system: On the one hand they lead forward, on the other hand there is always a link to what has come before. The alternating rhyme picks up a previous line (after the distance of another rhyme in between has been put behind), the last stanza repeats the rhyme and even two entire lines of the very first stanza of the poem, it reaches back to its beginning leaving the distance of the poem in between.

4.6. Form and Meaning in Poetry

The central question for analysis and interpretation is: **How does poetic form create or influence meaning?** Consider the following example, a sonnet by Sir Philip Sidney:

Loving in truth, and fain in verse my love to show,
That the dear She might take some pleasure of my pain,
Pleasure might cause her read, reading might make her know,
Knowledge might pity win, and pity grace obtain.
I sought fit words to paint the blackest face of woe;
Studying inventions fine, her wits to entertain,
Oft turning others' leaves, to see if thence would flow
Some fresh and fruitful showers upon my sun-burned brain.
But words came halting forth, wanting Inventions' stay;
Invention, Nature's child, fled step-dame Study's blows,
And others' feet still seemed but strangers in my way.
Thus, great with child to speak, and helpless in my throes,
Biting my truant pen, beating myself for spite,
'Fool!' said my muse to me, 'Look in thy heart and write!'
(Sidney, from: *Astrophil and Stella*)

It is immediately noticeable that this sonnet uses a large number of technical and rhetorical devices; it is in this sense highly artificial (see animation for an illustration of rhetorical devices): The sonnet cleverly combines the Italian and the English form: The rhyme pattern separates the poem into an octet, a

quartet and a couplet rhyming *abababab cdcd ee* indicating an English sonnet, but the syntax actually unites the last line of the quatrain to the couplet, thus syntactically constructing an octet and two tercets. Grammatically the dominance of non-finite constructions until the very last line, which breaks this pattern with a decisive imperative, effectively convey the stasis the writer has fallen into. Elaborate patterns of repetition like polyptoton, reduplicatio, climax, alliteration and parallel, hypotactical sentence structure as well as rhetorical devices such as metaphor and personification demonstrate that the writer of this poem can command the technical aspects of poetic composition.

Now in the face of all these technicalities it is rather curious that the poem appears to argue that such clever technicalities are precisely what hinders the poet from writing a good poem. From this, one might draw the conclusion that the poem is trying to discredit itself as a good poem, though on the whole, that is not very likely.

A more convincing solution of this contradiction takes two aspects of the poem's historical background into account: First, the teachings of rhetoric to which this poem alludes, in particular the meaning of the word invention. Second, the fact that a call for heartfelt and genuine expression rather than formalised convention was so common that it had itself turned into a topos and thus a convention. (For very useful longer interpretations of this poem see Hühn 1995 and Meller 1985: 56-74).

Classical rhetoric, which would have been well known to Sidney and his contemporary readers, recommends a series of steps for text composition. These steps are: *Inventio*, *Dispositio*, *Elocutio*, *Memoria*, *Actio*. The last two are specifically related to the memorisation and delivery of speeches. The first three however relate to any kind of discourse. *Inventio*, the Latin term for 'invention' or 'discovery', suggested a series of techniques to find the right topic. *Dispositio* provided techniques for organising this topic into a coherent discourse. The third step, *Elocutio*, was concerned with style and expression (see Plett, 1991). Thus, when Sidney's speaker deplores his lack of invention ("wanting Invention's stay", i.e. 'help') and calls invention "Nature's child" he does not actually wish for completely artless ideas and expression, but he alludes to an art form (rhetoric is primarily the art of oratory) which in its first step has to rely on the fertility of the artist's mind, but which nonetheless regulates his 'natural' ideas. This poem thus seems to argue in favour of a combination of genuine feeling and artful expression. This is supported by the fact that the very call for heartfelt spontaneity was common enough at the time to be considered a commonplace, i.e. not spontaneous. Unregulated spontaneity and ingenuity was not at all considered an ideal until the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries.

The isotopy which emerges from this brief examination is the constant combination of artless and artful expression. The theme (or one theme) of the poem thus becomes rather more complex than appeared at first sight. It is a poem about the writing of poetry as much as it is a love poem (the change of focus from the adored woman to the writer himself is clearly indicated by the pronouns). It suggests that in fact the combination of genuine feeling and artful expression is the best way to write a good poem.

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