

Literary Terms: A Guide

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Metre

Metre refers to the rhythmic structure of lines of verse. The majority of English verse since Chaucer is in **accentual-syllabic metre**, which consists of alternating stressed and unstressed syllables within a fixed total number of syllables in each line. The metrical rhythm is thus the pattern of stressed and unstressed syllables in each line. Groups of syllables are known as metrical **feet**; each line of verse is made up of a set number of feet. Thus:

Monometer: one foot per line

Dimeter: two feet per line

Trimeter: three feet per line

Tetrameter: four feet per line

Pentameter: five feet per line

Hexameter: six feet per line

Heptameter: seven feet per line

Octameter: eight feet per line

Each foot usually consists of a single stressed syllable – though there are some important variations – therefore these patterns correspond to the number of stressed syllables in a line; thus tetrameter has four, pentameter five, etc.

There are two types of metrical feet in English accentual-syllabic metre: **duple metre**, consisting of disyllabic (2-syllable) feet, in which stressed syllables (**x**) and unstressed syllables (**o**) alternate in pairs; and **triple metre**, consisting of trisyllabic (3-syllable) feet, in which single stressed syllables are grouped with a pair of unstressed syllables. Duple metre is the metre most commonly found in English verse.

The following metrical feet make up the most common rhythmical patterns:

Duple metre:

Iamb (iambic foot): **o x**

Trochee (trochaic foot): **x o**

Spondee (spondaic foot): **x x**

Pyrrhus / dibrach (pyrrhic foot): **o o**

Triple metre:

Dactyl (dactylic foot): **x o o**

Anapaest (anapaestic foot): **o o x**

Amphibrach: **o x o**

Molossus: **x x x**

Note that the spondee, pyrrhus and molossus do not usually form the basis for whole lines of verse, but are considered forms of **substitution**: that is, when a foot required by the metrical pattern being used is replaced by a different sort of foot. A frequently-found example of substitution is the replacement of the initial iamb in an iambic line by a trochee, e.g. (underlined syllables represent stressed syllables):

In me thou seest the twilight of such day
As after sunset fadeth in the west,
Which by and by black night doth take away,
Death's second self, that seals up all in rest.

– Shakespeare, sonnet 73

(The first three lines of this quatrain are perfectly iambic; the initial foot of the fourth line is an example of trochaic substitution, also known as **inversion**.)

Other variations in metrical rhythm include: **accephalexis**, in which the first syllable of a line that would be expected according to the regular metre of the line, is lacking; and **catalexis**, in which a line lacks the final syllable expected by its metrical pattern. A **masculine ending** is a line that ends on a stressed syllable, while a **feminine ending** is a line that ends on an unstressed syllable.

Free verse is poetry that does not conform to any regular metre.

Examples of different meters and metrical substitutions:

Iambic pentameter:

We few, we happy few, we band of brothers.
For he today that sheds his blood with me

Shall be my brother; be he ne'er so vile,
This day shall gentle his condition.
And gentlemen in England now abed
Shall think themselves accursed they were not here,
And hold their manhoods cheap whiles any speaks
That fought with us upon Saint Crispin's day.

– Shakespeare, *Henry V*, IV.iii

An example of perfect iambic pentameter. Note the feminine ending in l.1 (in iambic metre a feminine ending adds an extra syllable to the line), and how the stresses follow the sense of the lines.

Trochaic tetrameter:

In what distant deeps or skies
Burnt the fire of thine eyes?
On what wings dare he aspire?
What the hand dare seize the fire?

– Blake, 'The Tyger'

The first two lines exhibit masculine endings, and thus are catalectic according to the regular pattern of trochaic metre; that is, they lack their final syllable. Arguably, the second foot in l.4 could be read as a spondaic substitution (if 'dare' is stressed).

Spondaic substitution in iambic pentameter (l.3):

Or if thy mistress some rich anger shows,
Emprison her soft hand, and let her rave,
And feed deep, deep upon her peerless eyes.

– Keats, 'Ode on Melancholy'

Pyrrhic substitution in iambic tetrameter (l.2):

The woods are lovely, dark and deep.
But I have promises to keep,
And miles to go before I sleep,
And miles to go before I sleep.

– Frost, 'Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening'

Dactylic dimeter:

Theirs not to make reply,
Theirs not to reason why,
Theirs but to do and die

– Tennyson, 'The Charge of the Light Brigade'

Anapaestic metre:

There was an Old Lady of Chertsey,
Who made a remarkable curtsey;
She twirled round and round,
Till she sunk underground,
Which distressed all the people of Chertsey.

– Edward Lear, 'There was an Old Lady of Chertsey'

As is common in limericks, this example includes multiple iambic substitutions, here in the initial syllables of lines 1-3.

Amphibrach:

And now comes an act of enormous enormance!
No former performer's performed this performance!

– Dr Seuss, *If I Ran the Circus*

Molossus:

Break, break, break,
On thy cold gray stones, O Sea!
And I would that my tongue could utter
The thoughts that arise in me.
– Tennyson, 'Break, break, break'

The first line is an example of a molossus; it is also an example of epizeuxis (see below).

Stanzas

When a poem is divided into sections, each section is known as a **stanza**. Stanzas usually share the same structure as the other stanzas within the poem.

Tercet: a unit or stanza of three verse lines

Quatrain: a unit or stanza of four verse lines

Quintain: a stanza of five verse lines

Sestet: a unit or stanza of six verse lines

Septet or heptastich: a stanza of seven lines

Octave: a unit or stanza of eight verse lines

Decastich: a stanza or poem of ten lines

Note that many of these terms refer to a unit of this number of lines within a larger stanza or within a poem not divided into stanzas (e.g. a Shakespearean sonnet, which consists of three quatrains followed by a couplet).

Refrain: a line or lines regularly repeated throughout a poem, traditionally at the end of each stanza. Very often found in ballads; it was also used to great effect by Yeats (see for example 'The Withering of the Boughs' or 'The Black Tower'). Usually nowadays printed in *italic* to distinguish it from the main body of the poem.

Enjambment: when the sense of a verse line runs over into the next line with no punctuated pause. The opposite is known as an **end-stopped** line. An example of enjambment in iambic pentameter:

A dungeon horrible, on all sides round
As one great furnace flamed, yet from those flames
No light, but rather darkness visible
Served only to discover sights of woe
– Milton, *Paradise Lost*, I

Rhyme

End rhyme: rhyme occurring on stressed syllables at the ends of verse lines. The most common form of rhyme.

Couplet: a pair of end-rhyming verse lines, usually of the same length. E.g.:

Had we but World enough, and Time,
This coyness Lady were no crime.
We would sit down, and think which way
To walk, and pass our long Loves Day.
– Marvell, 'To his Coy Mistress'

Internal rhyme: rhyme occurring within a single verse line.

Crossed rhyme: the rhyming of one word in the middle of a verse line with a word in the middle of the following line.

Half rhyme: also known as **slant rhyme**; an incomplete form of rhyme in which final consonants match but vowel sounds do not. E.g.:

I have heard that hysterical women say
They are sick of the palette and fiddle-bow.
Of poets that are always gay,
For everybody knows or else should know
That if nothing drastic is done

Aeroplane and Zeppelin will come out.
Pitch like King Billy bomb-balls in
Until the town lie beaten flat.

– Yeats, 'Lapis Lazuli'

The first quatrain is an example of full end rhyme; the second quatrain an example of half rhyme.

Para-rhyme: a form of half rhyme; when all the consonants of the relevant words match, not just the final consonants. E.g.:

It seemed that out of battle I escaped
Down some profound dull tunnel, long since scooped
Through granites which titanic wars had groined.
Yet also there encumbered sleepers groaned,
Too fast in thought or death to be bestirred.
Then, as I probed them, one sprang up, and stared
With piteous recognition in fixed eyes,
Lifting distressful hands, as if to bless.
And by his smile, I knew that sullen hall, –
By his dead smile I knew we stood in Hell.

– Wilfred Owen, 'Strange Meeting'

Eye rhyme: a visual-only rhyme; i.e. when spellings match but in pronunciation there is no rhyme, e.g. want/pant, five/give.

Double rhyme: a rhyme on two syllables, the first stressed, the second unstressed. E.g.

I want a hero: – an uncommon want,
When every year and month sends forth a new one,
Till, after cloying the gazettes with cant,
The age discovers he is not the true one

– Byron, *Don Juan*, l.i

The second and fourth lines are double rhymes; the first and third lines are examples of half rhyme / eye rhyme.

Assonance: the recurrence of similar vowel sounds in neighbouring words where the consonants do not match. E.g.:

For the rare and radiant maiden whom the angels name Lenore –
Nameless here for evermore.

– Poe, 'The Raven'

Consonance: the recurrence of similar consonants in neighbouring words where the vowel sounds do not match. The most commonly-found forms of consonance, other than half rhyme and para-rhyme, are **alliteration** and **sibilance**.

Alliteration: the repetition of initial consonants in a sequence of neighbouring words. E.g.:

Hear the loud alarum bells –
Brazen Bells!
What a tale of terror, now, their turbulency tells!

- Poe, 'The Bells'

Sibilance: the repetition of sibilants, i.e. consonants producing a hissing sound. E.g.:

Ships that **p**ass in the night, and **s**peak each other in **p**assing;
Only a **s**ignal **s**hown and a **d**istant **v**oice in the darkness

– Longfellow, *Tales of a Wayside Inn*

Blank verse: metrical verse that does not rhyme. Milton's *Paradise Lost* is an example; the majority of Shakespeare is also in blank verse.

Figurative, rhetorical & structural devices

Metaphor: when one thing is said to be another thing, or is described in terms normally connected to another thing, in order to suggest a quality shared by both. E.g.

Love, fame, ambition, avarice – 'tis the same,
Each idle, and all ill, and none the worst –
For all are meteors with a different name,
And Death the sable smoke where vanishes the flame.

– Byron, *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage*, IV

Simile: when one thing is directly compared with another thing; indicated by use of the words 'as' or 'like'. E.g.:

I wandered lonely as a cloud
– Wordsworth, 'Daffodils'

Metonymy: when something is referred to by an aspect or attribute of it, or by something associated with it. E.g.:

Now is the winter of our discontent
Made glorious summer by this son of York...
– Shakespeare, *Richard III*, I.i

Here 'winter' and 'summer' are examples of metaphor; 'son of York' is an example of metonymy, being an attribute of Richard's brother, Edward IV, here the person being referred to.

Synecdoche: a form of metonymy in which something is referred to by a specific part of its whole. 'All hands on deck' is an example, in which the crew are being referred to by one specific part – their hands. E.g.:

Take thy face hence.
– Shakespeare, *Macbeth*, V.iii

Personification or prosopopoeia: when inanimate objects, animals or ideas are referred to as if they were human. Similar terms are **anthropomorphism**, when human form is ascribed to something not human, e.g. a deity; and the **pathetic fallacy**, when natural phenomena are described as if they could feel as humans do. Shelley's 'Invocation to Misery' is an example.

Onomatopoeia: a word that imitates the sound to which it refers. E.g. 'clang', 'crackle', 'bang', etc.

Synaesthesia: the application of terms relating to one sense to a different one, e.g. 'a warm sound';

Odours there are... green as meadow grass
– Baudelaire, 'Correspondences'

Oxymoron: the combination of two contradictory terms. E.g.:

Feather of lead, bright smoke, cold fire, sick health,
Still-waking sleep that is not what it is!
– Shakespeare, *Romeo and Juliet*, I.i

Hendiadys: when a single idea is expressed by two nouns, used in conjunction. E.g. 'house and home' or Hamlet's 'Angels and ministers of grace' (*Hamlet*, I.iv).

Anaphora: the repetition of the same word or group of words at the beginnings of successive lines or clauses. E.g.:

Is **this** the region, **this** the soil, the clime,
Said then the lost archangel, **this** the seat
That we must change for heaven...
– Milton, *Paradise Lost*, I

Epistrophe: the repetition of the same word or group of words at the ends of successive lines or clauses. E.g.:

I know **thee**, I have found **thee**, & I will not let **thee** go
– Blake, 'America – a Prophecy'

Epizeuxis: the repetition of a word with no intervening words. E.g. Tennyson's 'Break, break, break', quoted above.

Polysyndeton: use of more than the required amount of conjunctions. E.g.:

Havoc and spoil and ruin are my gain.

– Milton, *Paradise Lost*, II

The opposite of **asyndeton**, which refers to the deliberate omission of conjunctions.

Anachronism: when an object, custom or idea is misplaced outside of its proper historical time. A famous example is the clock in Shakespeare's *Julius Caesar*.

Apostrophe: an address to an inanimate object, abstraction, or a dead or absent person. E.g.:

Busie old foole, unruly Sunne,

Why dost thou thus,

Through windowes, and through curtaines call on us?

– Donne, 'The Sunne Rising'

Hyperbole: extreme exaggeration, not intended literally. E.g.:

Since Hero's time hath half the world been black.

– Marlowe, *Hero and Leander*

Adynaton: a form of hyperbole – a figure of speech that stresses the inexpressibility of something, usually by stating that words cannot describe it. H. P. Lovecraft's short story 'The Unnamable' is essentially a riff on this figure of speech, satirising Lovecraft's own regular use of it in his work.

Meiosis: an intentional understatement in which something is described as less significant than it really is. A well-known example is found in *Romeo and Juliet* when Mercutio describes his death-wound as 'a scratch' (III.iii).

Litotes: a form of meiosis; the affirmation of something by the denial of its opposite, e.g. 'not uncommon', 'not bad'.

Erotosis (rhetorical question): asking a question without requiring an answer, in order to assert or deny a statement. E.g.:

What though the field be lost?

All is not lost...

– *Paradise Lost*, I

In medias res: the technique of beginning a narrative in the middle of the action, before relating preceding events at a later point. *Paradise Lost* is an example (following the convention of epic poetry).

Leitmotif: a phrase, image or situation frequently repeated throughout a work, supporting a central theme. An example is the **personification** of the mine shaft lift as a devouring creature in Zola's *Germinal*, repeated throughout the novel.

Remember! Simply being able to identify the devices and knowing the terms is not enough. They are only a means to an end. You must always consider: **why** they are being used, what **effect** they have, and how they affect **meaning(s)**.

Further reading

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