



School
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English.



Support Materials: Poetry

Skills: Reading Poetry

Poetry can seem a bit intimidating, especially when you're encountering a poem for the first time. The language of poetry tends to be more stylized than 'ordinary' speech. This handout gives you some ideas about things you can look out for, as a way into the poems you read.

Another good way of increasing your confidence when reading poetry is to think about the poetry you're hearing most days possibly without even realising that it counts as 'poetry', for example, in the music you listen to, or – if you've got younger brothers and sisters – in children's books, which are often written in verse. That 'everyday' kind of poetry uses, and disrupts, the same patterning techniques (e.g. of rhyme) found in the poetry you study in school.

A pattern only works when people spot it. When we recognise a pattern, there's a connection between author and reader/listener. The patterns of poetry, or song lyrics, are a key part of the pleasure that we get from hearing or reading verse.

Rhyme

How frequent are the rhymes?

The closer rhymes come together, the more noticeable they tend to be.

Couplets are pairs of lines which rhyme, e.g.

Macavity's a Mystery Cat: he's called the Hidden Paw –
For he's the master criminal who can defy the Law.
(T.S. Eliot, 'Macavity')

If three lines rhyme, that's a **triplet**, e.g.

And up and down the people go,
Gazing where the lilies blow
Round an island there below.

(Alfred Lord Tennyson, 'The Lady of Shalott')

In couplets and triplets, the rhymes come more frequently than in **alternate rhyme**, where every other line rhymes, e.g.

Whenever the moon and stars are set,
Whenever the wind is **high**,
All night long in the dark and wet,
A man goes riding **by**.

(Robert Louis Stevenson, 'Windy Nights')

Alternate rhymes are less insistent than couplets or triplets. As you have to wait an extra line before the rhyming pair is complete, alternate rhyme can help propel a poem along. An even more subtle rhyming effect is when only the even lines rhyme, and the odd ones don't, e.g.

'Is there anybody there?' said the Traveller,
Knocking on the moonlit door;
And his horse in the silence champed the grasses
Of the forest's ferny floor.

(Walter de la Mare, 'The Listeners')

Enclosed rhyme stretches one rhyming pair (in lines 1 and 4) over a rhyming couplet (lines 2 and 3), e.g.

Beloved, my Beloved, when I **think**
That thou was in the world a year ago,
What time I sat alone here in the snow
And saw no footprint, heard the silence **sink**.

(Elizabeth Barret Browning, Sonnet 29)

Enclosed rhyme is quite effective for poetry which is reflective or meditative, because the rhyme in line 4 invites us to look back to line 1, three lines earlier.

It's not just the ends of lines which rhyme. Sometimes poets use **internal rhyme**, e.g.

I'm a lean dog, a keen dog, a wild dog and lone,
I'm a **rough** dog, a **tough** dog, hunting on my own!

(Irene Mcleod, 'Lone Dog')

Or: 'Double, double, toil and trouble' (Shakespeare, *Macbeth*).

The two examples above combine rhymes that come very frequently with a strong rhythmic beat. The two things combine to create the sense of a chant.

The **length of the lines of poetry** also affect how frequently the rhymes come: the shorter the lines, the quicker we'll get the rhyme (particularly if the rhymes are couplets). Contrast the two examples below:

Lady, lady, should you meet
One whose ways are all discreet
(Dorothy Parker, 'Social Note')

The wind was a torrent of darkness among the gusty trees,
The moon was a ghostly galleon tossed upon cloudy seas.
(Alfred Noyes, 'The Highwayman')

In the first example, the rhyming pair is completed much more quickly. The rapid rhyming creates a jaunty tone, and is often found in comic verse, or poetry for young children.

However, do watch out for when poets exploit a clash between tone and subject matter: poetry – like Dorothy Parker’s – can sound comic, but deal with dark topics. The contrast between tone and subject is a crucial part of the effect.

Poems don’t necessarily use the same rhyme scheme throughout. They can change, for example between alternate rhymes and couplets. Think about the effect of that. The rhyme of a couplet is quite obvious (because the rhyme pair is close together): it therefore tends to stand out. We’ll look at the effect of changing rhyme schemes in the section on sonnets, in the handout on 'Poetic Forms'.

What type of rhyme is being used?

Most of the examples above are **single rhymes**, i.e. where there’s just one syllable from each word that rhymes (e.g. paw/law). Rarer than single rhymes are **double** and **triple rhymes**, e.g.

Double rhyme:

Through every nook and every <u>cranny</u>	[cran-ny]
The wind blew in on poor old <u>Granny</u> .	[Gran-ny]

(Spike Milligan, 'Granny')

Triple rhyme:

But now comes the <u>reckonin'</u>	[reck-o-nin]
It's me they are <u>beckonin'</u> .	[beck-o-nin]

(Pam Ayers, 'Oh, I Wish I'd Looked after me Teeth')

The effect – particularly of triple rhymes – is often comic, because having so many syllables rhyming is a bit outrageous (and draws attention to the poet’s skill in doing it).

Another type of rhyme usually used for comic purposes is **forced rhyme**, where the usual pronunciation of the word is altered in order to make the rhyme, e.g.

Farewell, farewell, you old <u>rhinoceros</u> ,	
I'll stare at something less <u>preproceros</u> .	[i.e. preposterous]

(Ogden Nash, 'The Rhinoceros')

Nash here combines triple rhyme (o-cer-os) with forced rhyme.

All of the examples so far have been **full** or **perfect rhymes**, because they rhyme exactly. When poets want a more muted rhyming effect, they might choose to use **imperfect** or **partial rhyme**, e.g.

We cringe in holes, back on forgotten dreams, and stare, snow-dazed,
Deep into grassier ditches. So we drowse, sun-dozed.
(Wilfred Owen, 'Exposure')

'Dazed' and 'dozed' have similar sounds, but don't make an exact match. Owen often uses partial rhymes. The fact that they don't chime neatly (like full rhymes do) suits the dissonance of war which he is describing.

What else is happening at the ends of lines?

Lines give poems their structure. At a very basic level, one thing that distinguishes poetry from prose is the fact that – with poems – the lines don't go all the way to the margins of the page. How poets use lineation plays a role in the effect that their poems have.

End-stopped lines are when the unit of sense is contained within the line and there is a natural pause at the end, e.g.

I will arise and go now, and go to Innisfree,
And a small cabin build there, of clay and wattles made.
(W.B. Yeats, 'The Lake Isle of Innisfree')

Poets often disrupt the way that lines of poetry work as units of sense, by running clauses over the line-endings, a technique called **enjambment**, e.g.

Nothing beside remains. Round the decay
Of that colossal wreck, boundless and bare
The lone and level sands stretch far away.
(P.B. Shelley, 'Ozymandias')

In the example above, the way in which the sentence stretches over the ends of line mirrors the way in which the sands 'stretch far away'.

Enjambment can also help create a conversational tone, e.g.

What gets me now is not the idiocy or greed
but the lack of thought for me. Pure selfishness. I sold
the contents of the house and came down here.
(Carol Ann Duffy, 'Mrs Midas')

Enjambment usually works hand-in-hand with **caesura**, which is where there's a strong pause mid-line. You can see that in the examples above. Caesura can have a dramatic effect, as in the Shelley, which brings us to an abrupt stop after 'remains'. In the Duffy, it helps continue that conversational tone, as in real life, we don't tend to talk in full sentences, but little fragments.