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# Support Materials: Poetic Forms

# Poetic Form

Poetic forms come with baggage: the associations that they have built up over the years, even centuries. This handout looks at some of the poetic forms that you're likely to meet.

**Ballad metre** has alternating lines of eight and six syllables. Only the shortest lines (the even ones) rhyme, e.g.

When fishes flew and forests walked  
And figs grew upon thorn,  
Some moment when the moon was blood  
Then surely I was born.  
(G.K. Chesterton, 'The Donkey')

Ballad metre is often used in traditional ballads. As it uses fairly short lines, it has quite a fast pace and is useful for telling a story in verse. The Romantic poets (e.g. Wordsworth and Coleridge) were keen on ballad metre because they associated it with the language and poetry of 'ordinary' people.

**Sonnets** are one of the most easily recognisable and long-lasting poetic forms. These are fourteen lines long, and have an intricate rhyme scheme. Usually, particularly in older sonnets (from the sixteenth to nineteenth centuries), each line is also ten syllables long. The commonest form in English is the English or Shakespearean sonnet, e.g.

	My mistress' eyes are nothing like the <b>sun</b> ;	A
	Coral is far more red than her lips' <b>red</b> ;	B
	If snow be white, why then her breasts are <b>dun</b> ;	A
4	If hairs be wires, black wires grow on her <b>head</b> .	B
	I have seen roses damasked, red and <b>white</b> ,	C
	But no such roses see I in her <b>cheeks</b> ,	D
	And in some perfumes is there more <b>delight</b>	C
8	Than in the breath that from my mistress <b>reeks</b> .	D
	I love to hear her speak, yet well I <b>know</b>	E
	That music hath a far more pleasing <b>sound</b> ;	F
	I grant I never saw a goddess <b>go</b> ;	E
12	My mistress when she walks treads on the <b>ground</b> .	F
	And yet, by heaven, I think my love as <b>rare</b>	G
	As any she belied with false <b>compare</b> .	G

(Shakespeare, Sonnet 130)

Each rhyme has been given a letter (A-G). The poem is typical of the English sonnet form, which breaks down into three sets of four alternately-rhymed lines (quatrains), rhyming ABAB CDCD EFEF, and a rhyming couplet, GG. The couplet stands out after all those alternate rhymes: it has a finality at the end of the poem, bringing it to a conclusion. Couplets can also act like sound-bites: memorable chunks of so-called wisdom to take away.

Sonnets are strongly associated with love poetry (as in the example above). However, poets sometimes turn that association on its head. For example, Wilfred Owen's 'Futility' ([englishverse.com/poems/futility](http://englishverse.com/poems/futility)) is a sonnet about a soldier who has died of hypothermia. Some of its power comes from the fact that Owen is using a form associated with love to write about an unnatural death. That poem departs from the sonnet tradition in other ways too: it uses partial rhymes, and doesn't have a neat couplet at the end. Its lines are also shorter than the standard ten syllables, so that it seems more fragile. It's also broken in two, so that it comes as two sets of seven lines.

It's worth keeping an eye out for when poets write against the tradition they're working in, as Owen does in 'Futility'.

**Blank verse** is unrhymed iambic pentameter. Iambic pentameter describes a line of ten syllables, where the beat tends to fall on the even syllables, e.g.

He jests at scars that never felt a wound.  
(Shakespeare, *Romeo and Juliet*)

The stressed syllables are underlined. This is an extremely regular line of iambic pentameter (its regularity may suggest something about Romeo's determined composure at this moment: he's not going to be riled by his friend). If every line was that regular, though, the verse would start to sound very dull and probably a bit ridiculous, so poets do vary it. It's the dominant pattern of unstressed/stressed unstressed/stressed etc. that makes it iambic.

Since blank verse doesn't rhyme, it tends to sound a bit more 'natural' than rhymed verse.

**Free verse** – which doesn't have fixed patterns of rhyme or rhythm – has even fewer constraints than blank verse. Take Langston Hughes poem 'I, Too':

I, too, sing America.

I am the darker brother.  
They send me to eat in the kitchen  
When company comes,  
But I laugh,  
And eat well,  
And grow strong.

Tomorrow,  
I'll sit at the table  
When company comes.  
Nobody'll dare  
Say to me,  
'Eat in the kitchen,'  
Then.

Besides,  
They'll see how beautiful I am  
And be ashamed –

I, too, am America.

Hughes' poem doesn't use rhyme, and has lines and stanzas (groupings of lines) of different lengths. The rejection of constraints of rhyme, rhythm, and strict poetic form is very fitting in a poem about freedom. However, the poem still uses patterning, particularly different types of **repetition**.

Lots of poetic techniques rely on repetition, including rhythm and rhyme. Other types of repetition include:

- **refrains:** a phrase or couple of lines that are repeated at intervals (in songs, this would be called a chorus). In Hughes' poem, 'I, too, .... America' acts like a refrain, but there's a twist, as between the two instances, the speaker changes from singing America ('I ... sing America') to being America ('I ... am America').

Look out for the ways in which refrains can change meaning across a poem. They don't need to alter any words to do this: the context can be sufficient for them to take on new meaning, as in Thomas Wyatt's poem 'In aeternum' (<http://www.shakespeares-sonnets.com/Archive/Wyatt6.htm>) where the refrain 'in aeternum' (which means 'in eternity') shifts from indicating the hope that the speaker has in true and lasting love, to their rejection of that idea.

- **anaphora:** when a phrase or word is repeated at the start of lines which are close to each other (see the use of 'If' in Shakespeare's Sonnet 130; 'And' in Hughes' poem).
- **alliteration:** the repetition of the same sound at the start of nearby words (e.g. 'company comes').