Elements of Poetry

- **Meter:** the pattern of stressed (accented, long) and unstressed (unaccented, short) syllables in poetry.
- **Cadence:** rhythm not truly regular.
- **Scansion:** the analysis of meter and its variations in poetry.
- **Foot:** a unit of meter with two or three syllables of which one is usually stressed.
  - *iambic foot* - a two-syllable foot with the stress on the second. It is the most common foot in English poetry
  - *trochaic foot* - a two-syllable foot with the stress on the first: /- Trochees are often used to suggest evil, as in the trochaic tetrameter of Shakespeare's witches in Macbeth:

    "Double, double, toil and trouble," or in the trochaic octameter of Poe's "Raven": "Once upon a midnight dreary, while I pondered, weak and weary."
  - *anapestic foot* - a three-syllable foot with stress on the third
  - *dactylic foot* - a three-syllable foot with stress on the first
  - *spondaic foot* - a spondee is two stressed syllables: // pyrrhic foot: two unstressed syllables, --. Rare.
  - *dipodic foot* - a four-syllable foot consisting of an unaccented, lightly accented, unaccented, and heavily accented syllable.
- **Anacrusis:** prefixing an unstressed syllable to a line of which it forms no metrical part: Sport that wrinkled Care derides / And Laughter holding both his sides.
- **Feminine ending:** a final unstressed syllable appended to an iambic or anapestic line. To be or not to be, that is the question.
- **Catalexis:** dropping one or two unaccented syllables from the end of a line-- necessarily a trochaic or dactylic line. Dust thou art to dust returnest / Was not spoken of the soul.
- **Metrical lines:** monometer, dimeter, trimeter, tetrameter, pentameter, hexameter, heptameter, octameter.
- **Sprung rhythm:** Gerard Manley Hopkins's term for variable meter combining a stressed syllable with any number of unstressed syllables.
- **Stanza** - a division of a poem based on thought or form. Stanzas based on form are shown by their rhyme scheme.
  - *Verso - a line of a poem.*
  - *Arte Menor - 1-8 syllables per line of poetry.*
  - *Arte Mayor - 9 or more syllables per line of poetry.*
  - *Couplet - a two-line stanza, aa.*
  - *Triplet - a three-line stanza, aaa.*
  - *Quatrain - a four-line stanza, aaaa, abab, abba, aabb, abac.*
  - *Quintet - a five-line stanza.*
  - *Sestet - a six-line stanza.*
  - *Septet - a seven-line stanza.*
  - *Octave - an eight-line stanza. nine-line, ten-line, etc., stanzas:*
  - *Heroic Couplet - Also called closed couplet. Two (2) successive rhyming verses with a complete thought within the two (2) lines. Usually iambic pentameter.*
  - *Terza Rima - a three-line stanza with an interwoven rhyme scheme: aba, bcb, cdc, ded, etc. Usually iambic pentameter. Shelley's "Ode to The West Wind" limerick: a five-line nonsense poem in anapest, aabba. Lines 1,2, and 5 have 3 feet; lines 3 and 4 have only two.*
  - *Ballad - four lines, abcb, lines 1 and 3 are iambic tetrameter, and lines 2 and 4 are iambic trimeter. ode: a complex, long lyric poem, in formal style, on a sublime subject. Shelley's "Ode to the West Wind" is an example.*
  - *Elegy - a poem mourning the death of someone.*
  - *Allegory - a story in which characters represent abstract values or ideas, such as John Bunyan's Pilgrim's Progress. There is a meaning below the surface of the story.*
  - *Rime Royal - seven (7) lines of iambic pentameter, ababbcc. Named because King James I of Scotland used it.*
  - *Ottava Rima - eight (8) lines of iambic pentameter, abababcc. From the Italians.*
  - *Spenserian Stanza - a nine-line stanza consisting of eight (8) iambic pentameter lines followed by an alexandrine, ababbcbcc. Named for Edmund Spenser, who invented this form for his "Faerie Queene."*

- *Alexandrine - a line of iambic hexameter. The ninth line of a Spenserian stanza is an alexandrine.*
- *Haiku - a three-line poem of 5, 7, and 5 syllables, unrhymed, concerning nature, and presenting juxtaposed images which are uninterpreted.*
- *Sonnet - a fourteen-line stanza in iambic pentameter.*
- *Italian or Petrarchan Sonnet - a sonnet with an octave and a sestet, abbaabba and cdecde or cdcdcd. The octave makes a statement or states a problem, and the sestet makes a summary of gives a solution.*
- *English or Shakespearean Sonnet - three quatrains and a couplet, abab cdcd efef gg.*
- *Villanelle - a poem of five (5) tercets, all rhyming aba, and a concluding quatrain, rhyming abaa. Lines 6, 12, and 18 repeat line one; lines 9, 15, and 19 repeat line 3. Theodore Roethke's "The Waking" is a nearly perfect villanelle. Dylan Thomas's "Do Not Go Gentle into That Good Night" is a villanelle.*
- *Tercet - a three-line stanza in which all lines rhyme either with each other or with the lines of an adjoining tercet. Shakespeare concluded "The Phoenix and the Turtle" with five tercets. Sestets rhyming cdecde contain two (2) tercets.*
- *Rondel - a fourteen-line poem rhyming abbaababababbaab. Lines 7 and 8 and lines 13 and 14 repeat lines 1 and 2.*
- *Distich - a couplet.*
- *Canto - a section or division of a long poem, such as the cantos of the Divine Comedy or Don Juan.*

Rhyme and Sound

- *Rhymed Verse* - verse with end rhyme and usually regular meter.
- *Blank Verse* - iambic pentameter without end rhyme.
- *Free Verse* - verse with no regular meter and no end rhyme.
- *Rhyme* - a similarity of sound between two words. True rhyme is identical sounding stressed syllables in which the letters before the vowel sounds are different.
- *End Rhyme* - rhyme at the ends of the lines in a stanza.
- *Internal Rhyme* - rhyme within a line of poetry.
- *Masculine Rhyme*: one-syllable rhyme.
- *Feminine* or *Double Rhyme*: two-syllable rhyme.
- *Leonine Rhyme* - a scheme in which the word preceding a caesura rhymes with the last word of the line: I bring fresh showers // for the thirsting flowers.
- *Rhyme Scheme* - the pattern of end rhyme. Sounds are identified by letters, aabb, abab, abc abc, etc.
- *Reversal* - sense/madness, Emily Dickinson
- *Alliteration* - repetition of the initial letter or sound.
- *Assonance* - repetition of a vowel sound.
- *Consonance* - repetition of a consonant sound.
- *Onomatopoeia* - word imitation of natural sound. The words whippoorwill and bang are examples.
- *Repetition* - reiterating of a word or phrase in a poem.
- *Incremental Repetition* - the repetition of a line or lines, but with a variation each time that advances the narrative.
- *Refrain* - repetition of one or more phrases or lines at intervals.
- *Elision* - running together of vowels in adjacent words in order to eliminate a syllable: th'eternal.
- *Eye-Rhyme* - words or syllables spelled alike but pronounced differently: some and home.
- *Approximate Rime* - near rime, imperfect rime, slant rime, oblique rime.
- *Enjambment* - running of one line into another.
- *End-Stopped* - lines not enjambed.
- *Caesura*: a break in the middle of a line of five (5) or more feet. Represented by the syllable //. To err is human, // to forgive, divine. Shakespeare's Sonnet 29: Haply I think on thee—.

Ideas

- *Figure of Speech* - nonliteral expression
- *Simile* - a like or as comparison. He swims like a fish.
- *Epic Simile* or *Homeric Simile* - a simile as found in Homer's Iliad, in which the poet compares something in his poem to an elaborately described scene, such as hunters and dogs in pursuit of a lion or stag.

- *Metaphor* - an implied comparison. He is a fish. Whitman's poem about the death of Lincoln refers to Lincoln as Captain.
- *Extended Metaphor* - an elaborate comparison; much longer than the typical one-phrase or one-clause metaphor.
- *Personification* - describing inhuman things in human terms. The sad fish.
- *Synecdoche* - letting a part represent the whole. All hands on deck.
- *Metonymy* - letting a related object represent something. payment to the crown.
- *Hyperbole* - exaggeration, also known as overstatement.
- *Litotes* - emphasis through opposite statement. Calling a fat boy Skinny.
- *Antithesis* - balancing or contrasting terms. Fair is foul, and foul is fair.
- *Apostrophe* - addressing someone absent as though present. O Captain!
- *Symbol* - a word or image that represents something else. The cross.
- *Epithet* - a descriptive name such as Catherine the Great, or the wine-dark sea.
- *Oxymoron* - a figure of speech that combines opposite ideas, such as living death or sweet sorrow.
- *Allusion* - a reference to something in literature or history. Yeats's "No Second Troy," or Keats's "Chapman's Homer" contain examples.
- *Cacophony* - bad-sounding sounds.
- *Juxtaposition* - stark side-by-side contrast of two different voices, elements, or phenomena, as in "After Taught Me."
- *Voice* - the personality adopted by the poet for the speaking tone of the poem.
- *Trope* - a figure of speech, or figurative language.

Forms of Poetry

Acrostic - Any poem in which the first letter of each line forms a word or words. The words formed are often names—the poet's or the dedicatee's. Longer acrostic poems can create entire sentences from the first letter of each line. Acrostic poems are free to rhyme or not rhyme and can be metered or free verse.

Ballad - A short narrative poem with stanzas of two or four lines and possibly a refrain that most frequently deals with folklore or popular legends and is suitable for singing. Ballads are constructed of alternating lines of four and three beats (feet). The lines are usually iambic, but need not be. This accordion-like construction creates a lilting, sing-song style.

An example of a ballad would be Coleridge's "The Rime of the Ancient Mariner" (the first three stanzas are excerpted here):

It is an ancient Mariner,
And he stoppeth one of three.
`By thy long beard and glittering eye,
Now wherefore stopp'st thou me?

The Bridegroom's doors are opened wide,
And I am next of kin;
The guests are met, the feast is set:
May'st hear the merry din.'

He holds him with his skinny hand,
`There was a ship,' quoth he.
`Hold off! unhand me, grey-beard loon !'
Eftsoons his hand dropt he.

Blank verse - is poetry that has no set stanza or line length. It is a common form of poetry seen often in Shakespeare, Milton, Yeats, Auden, Stevens, and Frost. In fact, a great deal of the greatest literature in English has been written in blank verse. Blank verse is unrhymed lines that follow a strict rhythm, usually iambic pentameter.

An example of unrhymed iambic pentameter (Blank Verse) is John Milton's Paradise Lost:

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 the loss of Eden, till one greater Man
Restore us and regain the blissful seat…

Cinquain - Despite the French name, the cinquain is actually an American poem influenced by the Japanese haiku. Cinquains are usually light verse used to express the brief thoughts or moments. This form utilizes few adverbs and adjectives, working best with a profusion of nouns and verbs. Cinquains have a strict syllabic count that must be adhered to. The poem is five lines and 22 syllables long. It need not follow anymetric pattern, though an iambic cinquain is not unusual. The first line of the poem has 2 syllables, the second line 4, the third line 6, the fourth has 8, and the final line has 2.

For an example of a cinquain, we turn to its inventor, Adelaide Crapsy:

These be
Three silent things:
The falling snow... the hour
Before the dawn... the mouth of one
Just dead.

Elegy - A poem of lament and praise and consolation, usually formal and about the death of a particular person. Elegies can also mourn the passing of events or passions. They can be meditative and distressed, such as "Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard" by Thomas Gray (arguably the most famous poem to take this form). Elegies are seldom without form, though the form varies from poem to poem.

Epic - The epic is a long narrative poem that usually unfolds a history or mythology of a nation or race. The epic details the adventures and deeds of a hero and, in so doing, tells the story of a nation. Epic poetry is the oldest form of poetry dating back to classics like Gilgamesh, The Iliad, and Beowulf. Though too long to be excerpted here, any of these works would serve as fine examples of an epic. Epics often follow a recognizable pattern, but there is no set pattern. The form changes from culture to culture, language to language.

Epistle - Poems written in the form of a letter are called epistles. Epistle can adhere to form or can be free of meter and rhyme. The only requirement is that it is in letter for. One of the better-known epistles is Alexander Pope's "Epistle to Dr. Arbuthnot."

Limerick - A short, humorous form known for off-color statements. The limerick is a five-line poem with meter and rhyme. The first, second, and fifth lines are all iambic tetrameter with end rhyme. The third and fourth lines are iambic trimeter and rhyme with each other but not the other three (3) lines. The following is an example of a limerick by Rudyard Kipling:

There was a small boy of Quebec
Who was buried in snow to his neck
When they said, "Are you friz?"
He replied, " Yes, I is —
But we don't call this cold in Quebec"

Ode - Often written in praise of a person, an object, or an event, odes tend to be longer in form and generally, serious in nature. The patterns of the stanzas within an ode follow noprescribed pattern. A well-known example of an ode would be "Ode on a Grecian Urn" by John Keats.

Sestina - is a complex form relying on the repetition of end-words. As with all poetic forms, the sestina works best when read aloud. A good poet will make the incessant repetition of words, necessary in this form, seem natural.

The form of the sestina is demanding. There are 39 lines in the sestina broken into 6 stanzas of 6 lines each and one final stanza of 3 lines. The last word in each of the first six lines of the poem is repeated as the last word in varying lines throughout the poem. If we assign the last word of each line a letter, the pattern of last words would fall as follows: ABCDEF FAEBDC CFDABE ECBFAD DEACFB BDFECA the final stanza, or the tag stanza, ends with either ACE or ECA. This tag stanza usually includes the other three words. On top of this complex pattern it is not unusual to see sestinas follow a strict metered rhythm (often iambic pentameter).

Despite its complexity, there are several famous poets who have written sestinas including Elizabeth Bishop and Ezra Pound. The following is “Sestina” by Bishop

September rain falls on the house.
In the failing light, the old grandmother
sits in the kitchen with the child
beside the Little Marvel Stove,
reading the jokes from the almanac,
laughing and talking to hide her tears.

She thinks that her equinoctial tears
and the rain that beats on the roof of the house
were both foretold by the almanac,
but only known to a grandmother.
The iron kettle sings on the stove.
She cuts some bread and says to the child,

It's time for tea now; but the child
is watching the teakettle's small hard tears
dance like mad on the hot black stove,
the way the rain must dance on the house.
Tidying up, the old grandmother
hangs up the clever almanac

on its string. Birdlike, the almanac
hovers half open above the child,
hovers above the old grandmother
and her teacup full of dark brown tears.
She shivers and says she thinks the house
feels chilly, and puts more wood in the stove.

It was to be, says the Marvel Stove.
I know what I know, says the almanac.
With crayons the child draws a rigid house
and a winding pathway. Then the child
puts in a man with buttons like tears
and shows it proudly to the grandmother.

But secretly, while the grandmother
busies herself about the stove,
the little moons fall down like tears
from between the pages of the almanac
into the flower bed the child
has carefully placed in the front of the house.

Time to plant tears, says the almanac.
The grandmother sings to the marvelous stove
and the child draws another inscrutable house.

Sonnet - One of the most popular forms, the sonnet has two (2) major styles, English (or Elizabethan or Shakespearean) and Italian (or Petrarchan). Both forms are 14 lines long and are renowned for focusing on love. Often, the first eight lines of the poem (the first two quatrains in an English sonnet) demonstrate the problem to be solved, and the final six lines (the last quatrain and a couplet in the English sonnet) resolve it.

Sonnets are written in iambic pentameter. The English sonnet adheres to this rhyme pattern: ABAB CDCD EFEF GG, or a variation on it. The Italian sonnet usually follows this pattern: ABBA ABBA CDE CDE. Sometimes the tercets (groups of three lines) vary. These variations can look like: CDC DCD or CDC DDC or CDC EDC. Finally, there is a second form of English sonnet known as the Spenserian sonnet. It rhymes ABAB BCBC CDCD EE. It follows the same basic pattern as the Shakespearean sonnet but varies the rhyme.

Shakespeare’s sonnet 18 is one of the most recognized examples of this form:

Shall I compare thee to a summer's day?

Thou art more lovely and more temperate.
Rough winds do shake the darling buds of May,
And summer's lease hath all too short a date.
Sometime too hot the eye of heaven shines,
And often is his gold complexion dimm'd;
And every fair from fair sometime declines,
By chance or nature's changing course untrimm'd;
But thy eternal summer shall not fade
Nor lose possession of that fair thou ow'st;
Nor shall Death brag thou wander'st in his shade,
When in eternal lines to time thou grow'st:
So long as men can breathe or eyes can see,
So long lives this, and this gives life to thee.

Villanelle - borrowed from the French, the villanelle is a poem of heavy repetition made famous by Dylan Thomas's "Do Not Go Gentle Into That Goodnight." In this poem, as in all villanelles, entire lines are repeated. Nineteen lines long, the villanelle not only repeats lines, it rhymes. The pattern is ABA ABA ABA ABA ABA ABAA. The first and third lines of the poem repeat alternatively at the ends of every subsequent stanza. Usually completed in iambic tetrameter or pentameter, the poem has a clear cadence. The villanelle looks like this:

DO NOT GO GENTLE INTO THAT GOOD NIGHT

Do not go gentle into that good night,
Old age should burn and rave at close of day;
Rage, rage against the dying of the light.

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

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

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

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

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

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