

Prosody

Definition of Prosody

A literary technique, prosody is the study of [meter](#), intonation, and [rhythm](#) of a poetic work. It is a phonetic term that uses meter, rhythm, tempo, pitch, and loudness in a speech for conveying information about the meanings and structure of an utterance. In addition, prosody is an important element of language that contributes toward rhythmic and acoustic effects in a piece of writing. It includes different elements, such as [scansion](#), sound, pace, and meaning.

Types of Prosody

There are four distinguishable prosodic metrical patterns, which are:

Syllabic Prosody – Syllabic prosody counts a fixed number of syllables in each line, while accent, tone, and quantity play a secondary role.

Accentual Prosody – Accentual prosody measures only the accents or stresses in a line of [verse](#), while the overall number of syllables may vary in a line. It is very common in Germanic, old English, and modern English verses.

Accentual-syllabic Prosody – Accentual-syllabic prosody counts both the number of syllables and accents in each line. We commonly find it in English poetry.

Quantitative Prosody – Quantitative prosody does not measure the number of syllables, rather depending upon duration of syllables. This can be determined by the amount of time used on pronunciation, such as a free-verse poem that consists of unmeasured lines. We find this type of prosody in Roman and classical Greek poetry, and only very rarely in English poetry.

Examples of Prosody in Literature

Example #1: *In My Craft or Sullen Art* (By Dylan Thomas)

“In my craft or sullen art
Exercised in the still night
When only the moon rages
And the lovers lie abed
With all their griefs in their arms,
I labour by singing light ...
But for the common wages
of their most secret heart.”

This extract is an example of syllabic verse, which contains constrained or a fixed number of syllables. Here, in this poem each line consists of seven syllables, except the final line. However, it does not follow a consistent stressed pattern.

Example #2: *what if a much of a which of a wind* (By E. E. Cummings)

“what if a much of a which of a wind
gives the truth to summer’s lie;
bloodies with dizzying leaves the sun
and yanks immortal stars awry?
Blow king to beggar and queen to seem
(blow friend to fiend: blow space to time)
—when skies are hanged and oceans drowned,
the single secret will still be man...”

This poem is presenting a good example of accentual verse, in which the number of stressed syllables remains constant at four. They are underlined above, but the total number of syllables in each line does not remain constant and changes from seven to ten.

Example #3: *To My Dear and Loving Husband* (By Anne Bradstreet)

“If ever two were one, then surely we.
If ever man were loved by wife, then thee;
If ever wife was happy in a man,

Compare with me, ye women, if you can.

I prize thy love more than whole mines of gold ...”

This poem is a perfect example of accentual-syllabic verse, which focuses on both the number of syllables, and the number of accents in each poetic line. This iambic [pentameter](#) poem is one of the best examples of accented syllabic verse, as it contains five iambs in each line, and follows a strictly measured syllabic pattern.

Example #4: *Aeneid* (By Virgil)

“Arma virumque cano, Troiae qui primus ab oris...”

This opening line of Virgil’s *Aeneid* is a classic model of quantitative prosody. Look at the stress pattern which is irregular. As this type of prosody does not have measured syllables, it measures the meter according to duration of time to pronounce a line.

Function of Prosody

Prosody has multiple functions in literature. For example, poets incorporate it in matters like syntactic phrasing, word segmentation, sentence, accentuation, stress, and phonological distinctions. Generally, authors use it to produce rhythmic and acoustic effects in poetry as well as [prose](#). However, it has expressive and pragmatic functions, because a certain sentence in a given [perspective](#) expresses more than just its linguistic meanings.

An expressive content could be an identity of a [speaker](#), his mood, age, sex, and other extra-linguistic features. Pragmatic function of prosody encompasses the [attitude](#) of speaker and listener, and provides relationship between a speaker and his or her [discourse](#). It also reflects different features of a speaker and his utterance, emotional state, form of utterance, presence of [sarcasm](#) or [irony](#), and emphasis.