

# Caesura

## Definition of Caesura

Everyone speaks, and everyone breathes while speaking. For instance, when you say, “Maria has taken a break,” you take breath before further saying, “But Adam did not.” Then again you take a little breath and say, “He fell on his ankle.” Such pauses come from natural [rhythm](#) of your speech. Poetry also uses pauses in its lines.

One such pause is known as “caesura,” which is a rhythmical pause in a poetic line or a sentence. It often occurs in the middle of a line, or sometimes at the beginning and the end. At times, it occurs with punctuation; at other times it does not. Poets indicate such a pause with a parallel [symbol](#) thus: ||. Caesura can be medial (occurring in the middle of line), initial (occurring at the beginning of poetic line), or terminal (occurring at the end of a poetic line).

## Types of Caesura

Caesural breaks, or caesura, are of two types in poetry:

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### Feminine Caesura

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A feminine caesural pause occurs after a non-stressed and short syllable in a poetic line. This is softer and less abrupt than the masculine version. For instance:

“I hear lake water lapping || with low sounds by the shore...”

(*The Lake Isle of Innisfree* by William Butler Yeats)

It has two subdivisions:

Epic Caesura

[Lyric](#) Caesura

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## Masculine Caesura

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Masculine pause occurs after a long or accented syllable in a line. It creates a staccato effect in the poem, such as:

“of reeds and stalk–crickets, || fiddling the dank air,  
lacing his boots with vines, || steering glazed beetles”

*(The Bounty by Derek Walcott)*

### Short Examples of Caesura

The headphone explodes, || breaking the mold  
Roses, roses! || Two bucks a bunch! They say  
The boys in the street, || ready to sell you.  
Lilac, || locust, || and roses, || perfuming  
East End, || West End, || wondrously blooming  
From mother earth.  
You’re nobody! || Are you?  
No, || You are somebody, || are you?  
My candle burns  
It may last till mid night;  
Oh but, || my friends, || and ah, || my foes–  
It gives me a shiny light.  
I saw a red cow,  
I assure you, || anyhow,  
I’d again see that one!  
The day is dark and dreary;  
It’s raining, || and the clouds are not weary;  
Often in summer, || the wild bees turn tigers, || their wings  
gathering black in a hole  
Of a rotten tree.  
Tonight the moon rises  
In my window. || Its glazing light  
scattered around the room.  
From my balcony, || I see the stars  
Blistering in the river water much brighter.  
Love the rain, || the seagull dives  
Love the rain, || it will bring more rain.  
The rain, || falls in my backyard where I see it,  
Coming down slowly at different rates.

I saw you, || she says-  
But whom she saw? ||-is it  
That right-handed schoolboy?  
Meow, || meow in my ears,  
A little cat follows me everywhere.  
We gather, || we shout,  
Then we gossip together on festivities.

## Examples of Caesura in Literature

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### Example #1: *The Winter Tales* (William Shakespeare)

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It is for you we speak, || not for ourselves:  
You are abused || and by some putter-on  
That will be damn'd for't; || would I knew the villain,  
I would land-damn him. || Be she honour-flaw'd,  
I have three daughters; || the eldest is eleven

This passage is an instance of feminine caesura, which occurs immediately after an unstressed syllable like “speak,” the second syllable “bused,” in *abused*, “him,” and “ters” in word *daughters*.

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### Example #2: *Mother and Poet* (By Elizabeth Barrett)

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Dead ! One of them shot by the sea in the east...  
What art can a woman be good at? || Oh, vain !  
What art *is* she good at, || but hurting her breast  
With the milk-teeth of babes, || and a smile at the pain ?  
Ah boys, // how you hurt! || you were strong as you pressed,  
And I proud, || by that test.

This poem presents a perfect example of masculine caesura. Look at the pauses occurring after stressed syllables including “at,” “babes,” “boys,” “hurt,” and “proud.” You can see the first line uses initial caesura, at “Dead,” followed by a pause at the beginning of line.

### Example #3: *Eloisa to Abelard* (By Alexander Pope)

Alas, how chang'd! || what sudden horrors rise!  
A naked lover || bound and bleeding lies!  
Where, where was Eloise? || her [voice](#), her hand,  
Her poniard, || had oppos'd the dire command.  
Barbarian, stay! || that bloody stroke restrain;...  
Death, || only death, can break the lasting chain;

Pope has frequently used caesural pauses in his poems to bring depth. Mostly he has used masculine caesura happening in the middle of the lines. However, sometimes initial caesura occurs, such as in the sixth line, it comes after "Death." This variation clears the meaning of the text.

**Example #4: *I'm Nobody! Who Are You?* (By Emily Dickinson)**

I'm nobody! || Who are you?  
Are you nobody, too?  
Then there's a pair of us || – don't tell!  
They'd banish || – you know!

Dickinson has used masculine caesural pauses in the middle of verses. These breaks create a staccato effect, an uneven rhythm in the flow of sound, conveying the depth of an idea.

**Example #5: *Walking Wounded* (By Vernon Scannell)**

The mud and leaves in the mauled lane  
smelled sweet, || like blood. || Birds had died or flown...  
Their heads were weighted down by last night's lead  
And eyes still drank the dark. || They trail the night  
Along the morning road. || Some limped on sticks;

This [couplet](#) uses both caesura and [enjambment](#). Enjambment appears in the first line. In the second, fourth, and fifth lines, the periods cause readers to pause for a while and create a caesura.

**Example #6: *My Last Duchess* (By My Last Duchess)**

E'en then would be some stooping; || and I choose

Whene'er I passed her; || but who passed without  
Much the same smile? || This grew; || I gave commands  
Then all smiles stopped together. || There she stands  
As if alive. || Will't please you rise? || We'll meet  
The company below, || then...

The caesuras in this example tell readers that the [speaker](#) is hiding something and stopping to think. Through these pauses, the Duke is trying to distract the attention of his readers from his own [persona](#).

### **Example #7: *Ozymandias* (By Percy Bysshe Shelley)**

Who said— "Two vast and trunkless legs of stone  
Stand in the desert ... || Near them, || on the sand ...  
My name is Ozymandias, || King of Kings; ||  
Look on my Works, || ye Mighty, || and despair!  
Nothing beside remains. || Round the decay ...

The poet has broken up all the lines rhythmically by using punctuation. The use of multiple caesuras serves to make lines more interesting. In the third and fourth lines, they emphasize the pride of Ozymandias' works, while the fourth line has used initial and medial caesuras.

### **Function of Caesura**

A caesural break creates various effects, depending upon the way it is used. Sometimes it breaks the monotonous rhythm of a line and forces readers to focus on the meaning of the phrase preceding the caesura. In some other cases, it might create a dramatic or ominous effect. Normally, it happens in the middle of a sentence, or phrase in poetry. It also adds an emotional and theatrical touch to a line, and helps convey depth of the sentiments.

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