POEMS, POETS, POETRY

An Introduction
and Anthology

SECOND EDITION

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names of different flowers, for instance, in Milton's "Lycidas") or they can be of different sorts: that is, a series of specific nouns like "flood," "earthquake," "fire," and "shipwreck" can all help to construct the single abstract category "catastrophe." There are systematic ways in which these concrete words that some refer to as "images" may be assembled; too: they may be arranged in parallel, or in contrast, or in a ranked hierarchy. See how Sylvia Plath arranges her images in "Metaphors":

SYLVIA PLATH (1932 – 1963)

Metaphors

I'm a riddle in nine syllables,
An elephant, a ponderous house,
A melon strolling on two tendrils.
O red fruit, ivory, fine timbers!
This loaf's big with its yeasty rising.
Money's new-minted in this fat purse.
I'm a means, a stage, a cow in calf.
I've eaten a bag of green apples,
Boarded the train there's no getting off.

In this poem, Plath runs through many parallel images to express her feelings about being pregnant. The first is her ignorance of what her baby will be (boy? girl? placid? temperamental? tall? short?) at the end of nine months: it is a "riddle." Next, she emphasizes (via the elephant) the weight she has gained and (via the house) the difficulty of movement. Next, she emphasizes (via the melon) her new shape and how fragile her legs feel (via tendrils) supporting her abdomen. From the melon, she generalizes to the newborn baby as a "red fruit" — then generalizes further to its precious potential as "ivory" and "fine timbers." The dynamism of the progress of pregnancy is pointed to in the organic "yeasty rising" of bread; but then the dynamism (given its value) is made inorganic, as money is "new minted" (but with a return to her weight in the referral to herself as a "fat" purse).

The next set of metaphors, however, departs from what we could reasonably call "images." I'm a means, a stage. These abstractions — a means to an end, a stage in a process — show the poet generalizing beyond the dynamic images (bread rising, money being newly minted) to dynamism itself, a dynamism that reaches to a foreseen conclusion.

Immediately the poet returns to images. She is a pregnant cow (another reference to her unwieldy size) who has "eaten a bag of green apples" (thought to provoke labor in cows); and she is a helpless and fearful passenger, unable to leave the rushing forward motion of the train that will take her to her unknown destination.

You might ask yourself both why the poet passes from images to abstractions, and equally why she does not end in abstractions but returns to images for closure. Does it seem dehumanizing for the author to call herself a means? a stage? Each of Plath's images has a part-to-whole relation to the theme of the poem. Tied all together, they give the poem its emotional resonance. Which parts are cheerful? Which are triumphant? Which are apprehensive? How would the poem be different if it ended with the elephant? the money? the cow? the stage? Why does Plath end, do you think, with the train?

Exploring a Poem

What follows is a series of things to note when you run through a poem to see what its parts are and how they fit together. Let us use this list on a sonnet by John Keats, called "On First Looking into Chapman's Homer." The anthology will tell us a few things we have to know to understand the references in the poem: Keats did not know Greek, and so he first read Homer's Odyssey in the Renaissance translation by George Chapman; Apollo is the Greek god of poetry; Keats believed mistakenly that it was the Spanish conquistador Cortez who, in exploring Panama ("Darien"), discovered the Pacific Ocean (in reality it was Balboa, but the historical error doesn't matter for the imaginative purposes of the poem). Keats tells us what it is like, even for a reader as experienced in poetry as he, to come across Homer's Odyssean epic (from which he draws his opening travel imagery) for the first time:

JOHN KEATS (1795 – 1821)

On First Looking into Chapman's Homer

Much have I travell'd in the realms of gold,
And many goodly states and kingdoms seen;
Round many western islands have I been
Which bards in fealty to Apollo hold.
Oft of one wide expanse had I been told
That deep-brow'd Homer ruled as his demesne;
Yet did I never breathe its pure serene;
Till I heard Chapman speak out loud and bold:
Then felt I like some watcher of the skies
When a new planet swims into his ken;
Or like stout Cortez when with eagle eyes
He starr'd at the Pacific — and all his men
Look'd at each other with a wild surmise —
Silent, upon a peak in Darien.

How do we go about exploring such a poem? Let us try a series of steps.

1. Meaning

This is the usual sort of information-retrieval reading that we do with any passage of prose or verse. We come up with a summary of greater or lesser length giving the import of the passage as we make sense of it. Here, we might arrive at something like: "The speaker says that he had traveled through a lot of golden terrain — had read a lot of poems — and people had told him about the Homeric domain, but he had never breathed its air till he heard Chapman speak out. Then he felt like an astronomer discovering a new planet; or like the explorer who discovered the Pacific, whose men, astonished by the gaze, guessed at his discovery." This sort of meaning paraphrase is necessary, but less useful in poetry than in prose. In many poems there is rather little in the way of plot or character or message or "information" in the ordinary sense, and that little can be quickly sketched (perhaps initially, especially in the case of a complex poem, by the teacher to the class). Hoping to learn things about the poem that are more interesting than simply "what it says" in prose, we try to construct its

2. Antecedent Scenario

What has been happening before the poem starts? What has disturbed the status quo and set the poem in motion? Here, we know what has happened: the speaker has picked up Homer (in Chapman's translation) for the first time, and has had a revelatory experience. But the antecedent scenario is not always given to us so clearly. If it is not evident right away, one moves on hopefully to

3. A Division into Structural Parts

Because small units are more easily handled than big ones, and because the process of a poem, even one as short as a sonnet, can't be addressed all at once with a single global question like "What's going on here?" we divide the poem into pieces. One way of dividing this poem up is to notice that it falls, by its rhymes, into two large parts: "I never knew Homer till I read Chapman" (abbaabba) and "Then I felt like this"

(added). The first part takes up the first eight lines, connected by the two rhyme-sounds represented by -old (rhyme a) and -een (rhyme b); and the second part takes up the last six lines, connected by a new set of rhyme-sounds, represented by -iet (rhyme c) and -en (rhyme d). There are other ways, besides this 8:6 division, to divide this poem into parts, as we shall see, but let us work first within this 8:6 division-by-rhyme. In order to suggest a meaningful relation of the parts, it is useful to look at

4. The Climax

In Keats's sonnet, the climax seems to come when Cortez starrs at the Pacific — the high point of the poem. What is special about this experience? Why does it replace the image of the astronomer discovering a new planet? In lyric poems, the various parts tend to cluster around a moment of special significance — which its attendant parts lead up to, lead away from, help to clarify, and so on. The climax usually manifests itself by such things as greater intensity of tone, an especially significant metaphor, a change in rhythm, or a change in person. Having located the climax, one can now move back to

5. The Other Parts

About each part, it is useful to ask how it differs from the other parts. What is distinctive in it by contrast to the other members of the poem? Does something shift gears? Does the tense change? Does the predominant grammatical form change? (For example, does the poem stop emphasizing nouns and start emphasizing participles?) Is a new person addressed? Have we left a general overlook for certain particulars? Here, we notice that the first four lines talk in general about states, kingdoms, and islands. The next four lines talk about one special "wide expanse," the one ruled by Homer. The next part says, "I felt like an astronomer discovering a new planet." And the last part produces a new comparison: "I felt like an explorer discovering a new ocean, accompanied by his companions." Some questions immediately arise: Why doesn't the poem end after the poet says, "I felt as though I had discovered a new planet"? Why does he feel he needs a second comparison? And why, in the second comparison, does he need not only a single discoverer comparable to the astronomer, but a discoverer accompanied by a group of companions ("all his men")? Once these four parts (general realms; Homer's expanse; solo astronomer / planet; Cortez and men / Pacific Ocean) have been isolated, one can move on to the game called
6. Find the Skeleton

What is the dynamic curve of emotion on which the whole poem is arranged? "I am much travelled, and have visited [presumably by ship] many islands; however, I had never visited the Homer-expanses till I heard Chapman; then I breathed the air of the Homer-expanses, and it was like finding" — like finding what? The first stab at comparison ("like finding a new planet") isn't quite right — you can't walk on a planet and explore it and get to know the way you get to know islands and states. Well, what would be a better comparison? And the speaker realizes that whereas other poets seemed feudal lords of a given piece of earth — a state, a kingdom, an island — Homer is different not just in degree but in kind. He is, all by himself, an ocean. A new ocean, unlike a planet, is something on one's own plane that one can actually explore; yet it is something so big that it must contain many new islands and realms within it. When we understand this, we can identify the curve of astonishment in the poem when the Homer-expanses (a carefully chosen word that doesn't give away too much) turns out to be not just another piece of land, and not some faraway uninhabitable body in the sky, but a whole unexplorable ocean, hitherto unguessed at. The tone has changed from one of ripe experience ("Much have I travelled") to one of ignorance (the speaker has never breathed the air of the vast Homeric expanses, though others had, and had told him about it), to the revelation of the "wild surprise" — we have found not just another bounded terrain, but an unsuspected ocean! This curve of emotion, rising from an almost comatoscent sense of experience to an astonished recognition, is the emotional skeleton of the poem. We can then ask about

7. Games the Poet Plays with the Skeleton

If "On First Looking into Chapman's Homer," by its content, is a then/now poem ("I used not to know Homer / Now I do"), what is the event bridging the then and the now? It is reading Homer in Chapman's translation. "Reading" is not an "event" in the usual sense: most then/now poems (like "A stunner did my spirit seal") are about some more tangible event (a death, an absence, a catastrophe). Keats plays a game, then, with the then/now poem in making its fulfillment an experience of reading. By saying that reading, too, is an Event, Keats makes the then/now poem new.

If this is a riddle-poem (and it is: "What is Homer-land like?") how is the riddle prepared? It is prepared by a series of alternatives: "I have seen realms, states, kingdoms, islands." Some "expanses" is ruled by Homer, but I have not seen it yet. Will it be a realm? a state? a kingdom?

another island? The first "answer" to the riddle is, "None of the above; Homer-land is a new planet!" But that is the wrong answer (one can't travel to and explore a new planet, and the speaker is exploring Homer), so the poem tries again to answer the riddle, and this time it correctly: "None of the above; Homer-expanses is a new ocean!" The poet has played a game with our sense of the poem as a riddle by answering not in the category we anticipated from his former travels (a piece of land) but in an unexpected one (ocean), thus making the riddle-poem new.

Keats plays another game with the ignorance/discovery skeleton by making his poem a hero-poem. He makes the reward at the end of the emotional curve — the discovery of the new ocean — not a solitary experience (like that of the "watcher of the skies" seeing the planet), but a communal one. We normally think of reading as an uneventful private act. Why did Keats make it heroic? Furthermore, why did he show the heroic discovery being made not by a single explorer but by a company of explorers? Cortez is not alone on the isthmus of Panama, but is accompanied by "all his men / Look[ing] at each other with a wild surprise." When one discovers the Homeric "expanses" one reads alone, but one becomes thereby a member of a company of people who have discovered Homer — those people who had "oft...told" the speaker about Homer. A feat like Homer's writing the Odyssey is as heroic as the exploits of Achilles: mastery of such an intellectual discovery is itself a form of heroic exploration. Such a cultural discovery, Keats implies by the presence of Cortez's men, is collective, not private. Keats thought of himself as a poet among poets; a reader of Homer among readers of Homer; an explorer among explorers. And in this way he made the hero-poem both newly intellectual and newly communal and democratic.

Having seen the generic games that the poet plays with his skeleton — as a then/now poem, a riddle-poem, a hero-poem — one can go on to ask about

8. Language

Of course, we have been looking at language all along, but now we can do it more consciously. How many sentences does the poem have? (Two.) Where does the break between sentences come? (After line 4.) This gives us, as I promised earlier, a new division into parts: not the 8:6 of the then/now structure, but the 4:10 of the knowledge/discovery structure, which locates for us the moment in which traveled complacency turns to longing for Homeric acquaintance. Poems often have several overlapping internal structures. It is one of the signs of a complex poem that its rhymes may be dividing the poem one way, its theme another way, its
action from inception through climax another way, its grammar another way, its sentences yet another way. Each of these divisions has something to tell us about the emotional dynamic of the poem.

What parts of speech predominate in the poem? (For a further explanation of these, see the appendix “On Grammar.”) In Keats’s sonnet, the chain of nouns of space — “realms,” “states,” “kingdoms,” “islands,” “expanses,” “demesnes,” “planets,” “Pacific” — stands out as one unifying link.

What other words, regardless of whether they are different parts of speech, make a chain of significant relations? You might notice how words of seeing and watching — “seen,” “watcher,” “ken,” “eagle eyes,” “stared,” “looked at” — connect the parts of the poem as do the nouns of space.

What contexts are expressed in the diction? (We notice traveling, sailing, exploring, astronomical observation, feudal loyalty, and so on.)

Is the diction modern or ancient? (Keats uses archaic words like “realms of gold,” “goodly,” “bards,” “fealty,” “demesne,” “pure serene,” and “ken,” which help us sense how long Homer has been alive in our culture.) A close look at language always leads to

9. Tone

The calm beginning, in the voice of ripe experience (“Much have I travelled”) mounts to the excitement of the “wild surprise,” which then suddenly is confirmed by the breathless “silent” of the last line, and by the image of the “peak,” corresponding to this heightened moment. Reading a poem aloud as if it were your own utterance makes you able to distinguish the various tones of voice it exhibits, and to name them. At this point, we can turn to

10. Agency and Speech Acts

Who has agency in this poem? We notice that the main verbs are all governed by the “I” who speaks the poem: “I have travelled . . . and seen . . . [and] have been . . . [and] have been told . . . yet [never] did I breathe . . . I heard . . . Then felt I.” But we notice that in the subordinate clauses a great many other subagencies are present. Bards hold islands, Homer rules an expanse, Chapman speaks out, the new planet swims into ken, Cortez stares at the Pacific, and his men look with wild surprise at each other. It is by the interpretation of the rather colorless main verbs denoting the sedentary activity of reading, and the other more public or active actions of the other agents, that Keats draws his new acquaintance with the Odyssey into large realms of cultural activity. The speech act of this poem is a single long narration of the speaker’s

more remote and recent pasts. The unusual thing about the speech act (narration) and agency (a single main agent) is that they stop so soon: the last narrative verb by the agent is “Then felt I” in line 9. After that, the attention of the poem never comes back to the speaker, but instead expands out to the most exalted sorts of cultural discovery — that of an astronomer, that of explorers.

11. Roads Not Taken

What are the roads not taken in the poem? The sonnet might have ended with the comparison of the self to an astronomer. Would this have been as satisfactory? Or the expanse ruled over by Homer might have been shown as a new continent rather than as a new ocean. Would this have been equally revealing? Or the poem might have been written in the third person instead of the first person:

Many have travelled in the realms of gold,
And they have goodly states and kingdoms seen;
Round many western islands have they been
Which bards in fealty to Apollo hold.

Is this as dramatic as the first person? Or the poem might have begun with the reading of Chapman’s Homer, instead of leading up to it:

I once heard Chapman speak out loud and bold;
He told me of a wide expanse unseen,
(Better than other states and realms of gold)
That deep-brow’d Homer ruled as his demesne.
Then felt I like stout Cortez on his peak,
When with his eagle eyes he saw the sea . . .

We can see how presenting the climax in line 5, as in this rewriting, creates a very different structural shape from the 4:1 knowledge/discovery structure building up to the Pacific. It is useful to think of plausible roads not taken by a poem, because they help to identify the roads that were taken. With a clear idea of the function of each piece of the poem within the whole, and of the dynamic curve of emotion governing the order in which the pieces appear, we can then pass on to

12. Genre, Form, and Rhythm

What is the content genre of the poem? A dramatic change between then and now; a poem about reading; a poem about a hero; a poem about collective experience. (It can be compared to other poems about newness, about reading, about heroes, about collectivity.)
What is the speech act genre of the poem? A narrative in the first person is significant event making one life-period off from another; and an asking-as-a-riddle: "What is reading Homer like?" (It can be compared to other first-person narrations and to other riddle-poems.)

What is the formal genre of the poem? A sonnet (using the usual five-beat rising-rhythm line found in sonnets) rhyming abbaabccdcdec. (It can be compared to other sonnets rhyming the same way.) About form, we always need to ask how it has been made vivid; see below for remarks on Keats's rhythm. We can then move on to the last issue, which is always

13. The Imagination

What has the poet's imagination invented that is striking, or memorable, or beautiful? We can tell, from the metaphors of sailing, that before writing his poem Keats had been reading Homer's Odyssey. And had been thinking about what Odysseus had discovered as he sailed from realm to realm, from island to island. Wanting to describe his own first reading of Homer, Keats imaginatively borrows from the very book he has been reading, using the image of travel, saying that reading poetry in general is like voyaging from Shakespeare-land to Milton-kingdom to Spenser-state, but that reading Homer is not like finding just another piece of land to visit: it is like finding a new world, or, even better, a whole unexplored new ocean to sail in. Keats imagined these large analogies — sailing, astronomical observation, discovering an ocean — for the act of reading in general, and for reading Homer in particular; they enliven the sonnet. What makes the poem touching is the imagined change from the complacency of the well-traveled speaker to the astonishment of the discoverer of Homer, and the poet's realization that in reading Homer he has joined a company of others who have also discovered the Homeric ocean, sharing his "wild surprise." It is characteristic of Keats to see poetry as a collective act: he said in a letter, "I think I shall be among the English poets after my death," not "I think I shall be famous after my death."

But the imagination is not invested in themes and images alone. The imagination of a poet has to extend to the rhythms of the poem as well. What the imagination has invented here that is rhythmically memorable is the change from the stately first ten lines — because even the astronomer doesn't have to do anything but look through his telescope — to the strenuous broken rhythms of the heroic last four lines, with their four sharply differentiated parts:

1. Or like stout Cortez when with eagle eyes he stared at the Pacific —
2. And all his men look'd at each other with a wild surmise —
3. Silent,
4. Upon a peak in Darien.

The intent, piercing stare of "stout Cortez"; the amazed mutual conjecture of his men; the sudden, short, transfigured silence of the whole group; the summit of foreign experience on which the action takes place — each of these four facts is given its own rhythmically irregular phrase, so different from the undisturbed and measured pentameter narration in "Then felt I like some watcher of the skies / When a new planet swims into his ken." A poem needs imaginative rhythms as well as imaginative transformation of content.

You will, of course, read most poems without investigating them in this detailed way for their inner processes. But as soon as you want to know how a poem works, as well as what it says, and why it is pregnant or compelling, you will find yourself beginning to study it, using methods like the ones sketched here. Soon, it becomes almost second nature for you to notice sentences, tense-changes, speech acts, tonal variants, changes of agency, rhythms, rhymes, and other ingredients of internal and outer structure. Just as an archaeologist studies ruins, while the rest of us simply walk through Pompeii not understanding much of what we see, a student of poetry becomes more than simply a reader. You become more like a conductor who studies the musical score before conducting the piece in performance.

You can experience a poem with great pleasure as a general reader; or you can also learn how to explore it, to gain the more experienced pleasure that a student of architecture feels inside a Renaissance palace, or that an engineer feels looking at the San Francisco Bay Bridge. In every case, study adds to what you are able to perceive. Poems — because they are short and written in your own mother tongue — are very rewarding things to study as well as to read, to learn by heart as well as to study. They keep you company in life.

Exploring a poem under the broad headings given above will almost always lead you to a deeper understanding of the poem as a work of art, constructed in a dense and satisfying and surprising way. Though we almost always respond first to the quickly sensed "message" of a poem, the reason for our response (even if we do not at first know this) is the arrangement of the message (on many intersecting planes) into a striking and moving form. To give a poem its due as a work of art, we need to be able to see it as an arranged message. Looking through the poem thoroughly helps us realize the kind of work the poet puts into constructing this urgent expression of life as it is seen, sensed, and reflected on. Even the simplest of short poems will show imagination and architectural construction.
In Brief: Describing Poems

When you are looking for useful ways to describe a poem, this checklist of questions can guide your exploration:

1. **Meaning:** Can you paraphrase in prose the general outline of the poem?
2. **Antecedent scenario:** What has been happening before the poem begins? What has provoked the speaker into utterance? How has a previous equilibrium been unsettled? What is the speaker upset about?
3. **Division into parts:** How many? Where do the breaks come?
4. **The climax:** How do the other parts fall into place around it?
5. **The other parts:** What makes you divide the poem into these parts? Are there changes in person? In agency? In tense? In parts of speech?
6. **Find the skeleton:** What is the emotional curve on which the whole poem is strung? (It even helps to draw a shape—a crescendo, perhaps, or an hourglass-shape, or a sharp ascent followed by a steep decline—so you’ll know how the poem looks to you as a whole.)
7. **Games with the skeleton:** How is this emotional curve made new?
8. **Language:** What are the contexts of diction; chains of significant relation; parts of speech emphasized; tenses; and so on?
9. **Tone:** Can you name the pieces of the emotional curve—the changes in tone you can hear in the speaker’s voice as the poem goes along?
10. **Agency and its speech acts:** Who is the main agent in the poem, and does the main agent change as the poem progresses? See if the main speech act of the agent is, and whether that changes. Notice oddities about agency and speech acts.
11. **Roads not taken:** Can you imagine the poem written in a different person, or a different tense, or with the parts rearranged, or with an additional stanza, or with one stanza left out, conjecturing by such means why the poet might have wanted these pieces in this order?
12. **Genre:** What are they by content, by speech act, by outer form?
13. **The imagination:** What has it invented that is new, striking, memorable—in content, in genre, in analogies, in rhythm, in a speaker?

Reading Other Poems

If you were to give a genre-name by **content** to each of the poems below, you could begin, “Shakespeare: lust-poem”; “Herbert: prayer-poem”; “Marvell: solitude-poem,” and go on through the list down to “Alexie: decline-poem.” If you were to give a genre-name by **form** to each one, you could begin, “Shakespeare: sonnet”; “Herbert: shaped poem”; “Marvell: poem in 8-line couplet-stanzas”; down to “Alexie: poem in tercets,” and so on. If you were to group them according to person, you could say, “Shakespeare: third person”; “Herbert: third person and first person”; “Marvell: third person and first person,” and so forth. If you were to name them by principal speech act, you could say, “Shakespeare: definition”; “Herbert: apostrophe”; “Marvell: description”; down to “Alexie: narration.” Try making such a list, and see how each question—content? form? person? speech act?—gives you a different purchase on the poem. You can expand that purchase by expanding the number of questions you put to the poem. For instance, where is the climax? Does the poem have a happy ending? From what position—participant, observer, judge—does the speaker operate? The following are merely some sample questions.

- What is the emotional curve traced by Shakespeare in his speaker’s feelings about lust? By Eara Pound in the young wife’s feelings? Can you see how the tones of voice change with the feelings?
- How many different emotional responses to the fact of his blindness does Milton express? Can you suggest why Bradstreet’s poem begins and ends in “we,” while the middle uses other pronouns?

Consider how the poet’s imagination has worked on the material.

- As Jorie Graham sees Piero della Francesca’s painting of the young but majestic standing Virgin, pregnant and unbuttoning her dress before she goes into labor, how does the poem’s imagination respond to the painting?
- As Mark Strand imagines courtship, how does he make it comic?
- As Heaney imagines that the anxiety of writing is like confronting police at a border checkpoint, how does he make that confrontation vivid?
- As Sherman Alexie imagines the decline of life on an Indian reservation, through what example does he convey it?
The Play of Language

Language is the principal raw material out of which poets construct their experiments (rhythmic patterns are the other chief raw materials). By the single word "language" we mean many things:

**Sound Units**

The sound units of a poem are its syllables. The word "enemy" has three successive sounds, en-e-mi. Readers are conscious of a sound effect when they hear two end-words rhyme; but poets are conscious of all the sounds in their lines, just as they are of the rhythms of a line. Poets "bind" words together in a line by having them share sounds, whether consonants (alliteration, as in "broken bread") or vowels (assonance, as in "when...sessions"). This makes the words sound as if they "belong" together by natural affinity. Note how Shakespeare uses the vowel sounds *eh* and *uh* and the consonant sounds *wh*, *n*, *t*, *th*, and *s* in this line from Sonnet 20: "When to the sessions of sweet silent thought..." Good poets tend to bind together words that have an important meaning-connection, as Robert Frost does in this line from "Birches": "When I see birches bend to left and right..." and as Sylvia Plath does in these lines from "Ariel":

Stasis in darkness.
Then the substanceless blue
Pour of tor and distances...
Word Roots

These are the pieces of words that come from words in earlier languages, often Greek, Latin, or Anglo-Saxon. Poets usually are aware of the roots of the words they use. Many of these roots are preceded by prefixes, which also retain their original meanings. These prefixes change their spelling sometimes to “blend” with the root that follows:

re- (“again”): return, revolve, repair, represent, etc.
ex- (“out of”): explain, expire, exhaust, etc.
pre- (“in front of”): precede, prefer, preclude, etc.
com- (”together”): compare, commemorate, combine, colloquium, etc.
de- (“away from”): delete, defer, delay, defend, etc.
in- (“not”): inexplicable, innocent, immiscible, etc.

We have two main streams of language in English: our basic short words generally come from Anglo-Saxon, and our more complicated words come from Latin (often through French). In the past, English was closer to Latin and French than it is today (during the Renaissance, for example, educated people usually knew several languages), and poets drew on that closeness. In Sonnet 15, Shakespeare wrote:

When I consider everything that grows
Holds in perfection but a little moment,
That this huge stage presenteth naught but shows
Wherein the stars in secret influence comment;
When I perceive that men as plants increase,
Cheerèd and checked even by the selfsame sky,

Then the conceit of this inconstant stay
Sets you most rich in youth before my sight ...

Here, he expected his readers to know that “consider” comes from a root (which we also find, for instance, in the word “sidereal”) meaning “stars” — a word that appears in line 4. He also expected them to notice that the word “consider” is composed of two parts, com- and -side, and that the next “I”-verb (“perceive”) is followed by a noun (“conceit”) which combines the com- of “consider” with the -side of “perceive.” Perhaps he also expected at least some of his readers to see how the com- of “consider” and “conceit” is repeated in “inconstant” (and that the word “you” is contained in “youth”).

Words

We now live in an age when most readers are not schooled in Latin and therefore are less likely to recognize the Latin implications in English words. Still, we can easily find this information, especially for a word that seems unusually important in a poem, by consulting a dictionary.

1. themetic (or meaning) relation — as we would connect “stars” and “sky” in the quotation above;
2. phonetic relation — as we would connect “stage,” “stars,” “secret,” “selfsame,” “sky,” and “stay” in the quotation above by their initial s’s and s’s;
3. grammatical relation — as “cheerèd” and “checked” (already linked phonetically by their sounds, and thematically by their being antonyms of each other) are both verbal adjectives modifying “men”;
4. syntactic relation — as “When I consider” and “When I perceive” introduce dependent clauses in “I,” both modifying the main clause, “Then the conceit . . . sets you.”

Each word, then, exists in several “constellations” of relation, all of which the reader needs to notice in order to see the overlapping structures of language in the poem.

Sentences

When we think about a poem, it's useful to write out its sentences in ordinary prose order, and then see what has been done to them in verse. For each sentence, it's indispensable to identify the grammatical subject — the person, place, or thing in charge of the verb, so to speak — and the predicate — the verb telling what the grammatical subject is or does (present tense), was or did (past tense), or will be or will do (future tense). In the course of a poem, subjects can change (the poet can say, “I love you” and then say “You love me”), predicates can change (the poet can say, “I love you” and then, “I hate you”), and tenses can change (the
Writing about Poems

Basic Principles

In writing about a poem, the most important thing to remember is that a poem is not an essay or a "message," it is a thing imagined, an artwork like a piece of music or a painting or a dance. Your first task is to see how the theme of the work is being imagined: how the literal statement of the poet's feeling has been transformed. After that, you can experience the poem as you hear a piece of music or see a dance, as something unfolding itself in time, with a beginning, middle, and end. Or, you can see it from afar in the way you see a painting (or from above as you might see a terrain from an airplane) — as a space full of things and "colors" set in relation to each other. Both of these ways of seeing are indispensable.

Considered as pieces extending themselves over time, poems have a "plot" — not so much one of events as one of feelings. A poem might begin in despair and rise toward hope; or might begin in hope and end in despair. A good question to begin with, when reading a poem as a series of events in time, is how the place you find yourself in at the end is different from the place you found yourself in at the beginning. If you take stock of Z, where you end up, and A, where you began, you are likely to be able to plot the B, E, O, and W that lie between.
And considered as a space where parts are arranged in relation to each other, poems have a configuration, just as paintings do: the poet may contrast one part to another (as painters put light against shade), or set one part above another in a hierarchy, or may create an imbalance by which twelve lines are “outweighed” by a closing couplet. A good question to begin with, when reading a poem as a spatial arrangement, is what parts it falls into and how they relate to each other in size, feeling-tone, and language.

A Brief Example

Let us take a brief lyric by Robert Herrick as an example of how we might approach a poem. We must of course read it whole before saying anything, since we can’t really estimate the beginning until we have seen the end. And reading it whole means thinking about the title as well:

ROBERT HERRICK (1591 – 1674)

Divination by a Daffodil

When a daffodil I see
Hanging down his head towards me,
Guess I may what I must be:
First, I shall decline my head;
Secondly, I shall be dead;
Lastly, safely buried.

We can say, at first reading, that the poet compares himself, in his mortality, to a transient natural object. This is not a new idea. What has Herrick done to turn it into a poem? How has he newly imagined this theme?

He has, first of all, made the commonplace act of seeing a flower into an act of “divination.” In classical times, priests “divined” the future by examining the entrails of a sacrificed animal. Herrick transfers this bloody act to something light and beautiful and glancing when he chooses, as his symbolic object, the daffodil (with its characteristic drooping head). Second, Herrick doesn’t begin with the comparison of his fate to that of the daffodil, he might have said, “When a daffodil I spy, / I know that I, like it, shall die.” Instead, he divides his poem into two parts: he reserves the comparison to the second half of the single-sentence poem, leaving us to guess, as we read the first half, what he might be going to divine from his daffodil.

When you note the general metrical scheme of this poem—“strong weak / strong weak / strong weak / strong” — you can see that the author wanted the first word of the line to bear emphasis, but not really for the purposes of the first half (which could equally well have read “weak strong / weak strong,” etc.: “A daffodil appears to me: / His head is hanging down, and we / Can guess from that what we must be”). The real purpose of the meter is clear when we arrive at the second half of the poem: it is to give weight to “First . . . / Secondly . . . / Lastly,” which ring with inexorable emphasis in summoning up the last stages of life: illness, death, and burial. When you examine the rhyme (aaabbb) you see that it possesses the same inevitability in the second half: the relatively uninteresting rhymes of the first half (see, me, be) are supplanted by the death-knell of head, dead, buried.

Once you have studied the symbolic imagination, the words, the syntax of the sentences, the poem’s division into parts, and the rhyme and rhythm, you are prepared to make a sketch of the “drama” of the poem, that is, to see its beginning, middle, and end as elements in an unfolding of human emotion. Someone is speaking the words of the poem, and that someone is now you; lyrics are designed as scripts for performance (not by an actor; by the reader). Speak the poem as if it were you who had been compelled into speech by something that had upset your equilibrium—otherwise you would have had no reason to break into words. Then try to imagine the “backstory” behind your utterance. What was happening to you before the poem began that makes you speak in this way? This is where you must use your imagination. Presumably Herrick has often seen daffodils, but something has recently happened—a sense of aging or of approaching death—that makes this daffodil into an emblem he uses to divine his future. Interestingly, though Herrick was a clergyman, he makes no mention in this poem of an afterlife, choosing to see himself in purely material terms, as another living being on a par with an unremarkable flower. On the other hand, his method in the poem—divining a message from a natural object—is very much a religious method (as his title suggests), by which man reads messages from God in the works of God’s creation. Seventeenth-century poetry is full of such “messages” drawn from natural things and events.

To sum up: Herrick has made his theme—man’s mortality—into a poem by imagining that one can divine one’s fate from a flower; by arranging a perfect spatial symmetry (three lines each) to flower and man; and by letting us hear, after the inoffensive first three lines, the heavy tread of his own death announcement.
A Longer Example

When you have seen one way of treating a flower, it puts other ways — especially those from other centuries — into sharper relief. Suppose that, having seen Herrick’s poem on daffodils, you now turn to study a poem on daffodils by William Wordsworth, “I Wandered Lonely as a Cloud.”

William Wordsworth (1770 – 1850)

I Wandered Lonely as a Cloud

I wandered lonely as a cloud
That floats on high o’er vales and hills,
When all at once I saw a crowd,
A host, of golden daffodils;
Beside the lake, beneath the trees,
Fluttering and dancing in the breeze.
Continuous as the stars that shine
And twinkle on the Milky Way,
They stretched in never-ending line
Along the margin of a bay:
Ten thousand saw I at a glance,
Tossing their heads in sprightly dance.
The waves beside them danced; but they
Outdid the sparkling waves in glee;
A poet could not but be gay,
In such a jocund company;
I gazed — and gazed — but little thought
What wealth the show to me had brought:
For oft, when on my couch I lie
In vacant or in pensive mood,
They flash upon that inward eye
Which is the bliss of solitude;
And then my heart with pleasure fills
And dances with the daffodils.

After you have spent some time studying the poem, your notebook might look like this:

I wandered lonely as a cloud       a
That floats on high o’er vales and hills... b
When all at once I saw a crowd, a
A host, of golden daffodils; b
Beside the lake, beneath the trees, c
Fluttering and dancing in the breeze, c
Continuous as the stars that shine
And twinkle on the Milky Way,
They stretched in never-ending line
Along the margin of a bay:
Ten thousand saw I at a glance,
Tossing their heads in sprightly dance.
The waves beside them danced; but they
Outdid the sparkling waves in glee;
A poet could not but be gay,
In such a jocund company;
I gazed — and gazed — but little thought
What wealth the show to me had brought:
For oft, when on my couch I lie
In vacant or in pensive mood,
They flash upon that inward eye
Which is the bliss of solitude;
And then my heart with pleasure fills
And dances with the daffodils.

Everyone’s first notebook jottings are somewhat idiosyncratic. If you decide to think first about words, several in the poem would send you to a dictionary to check out etymologies and different connotations. Poets — since words are their stock in trade — always have a very specific sense of the aura around each word. Here are some roots and meanings relevant to this poem, taken from the American Heritage Dictionary.

Speaker lonely: why is he like a cloud?
Natural scene stretched out, hills and valleys
Crowd: word generally used of people
Host: armies, but here flowers
Closer focus than vales and hills
Can flowers dance? aren’t they rooted?

Much further focus — up to stars
Difference between shine and twinkle?
Exaggeration, “never-ending” like stars
First “beside” the lake; now entire margin
Exaggeration again; and saw becomes a grace
Daffodils = people, having “heads” they “toss”
Waves now like people too, dancing
Flowers have feelings: glee
Wasn’t he lonely when he started?
Company: he’s not alone any more
That > grace > gazed and gazed
Golden (1+4) = wealth, show, not company now
Oft: past anecdote over, now present tense
Difference between vacant and pensive
Flash: not dance or flutter or toss; why?
Solitude: different from first lonely?
Earlier, eye (outward and inward); now heart?
Same rhyme-sound as in stanza 1
lonely: derived from alone
crowd (Old English crūdan, to hasten): generally used of the common people
host (Latin hostis, army, enemy)
daffodil: from asphodel (Greek asphodelos), a yellow flower
shine (Old English seeman, to shine): beams, emit light, reflect light, gleam, glisten
twinkle (Old English twinklan, to twinkle): to flicker, glimmer, sparkle
glance (Middle English glāsan, to strike obliquely): to direct the gaze briefly
sprightly (Latin spiritus, spirit): buoyant, animated, full of life, with briskness, gaily
glee (Middle English gle, entertainment): jubilant gaiety, joy
gay (French gai): exuberant, merry, bright
jovial (Latin iuvendus, delighted, <juvere, to delight): cheerful, merry
gaze (Middle English gēs, to gaze): prolonged and studied looking, often indicative of wonder, fascination, awe, or admiration
vacant (Latin vacare, to be empty): expressionless, blank, not filled with activity
pensive (Latin pensare, to think, <pendere, to weigh): engaged in deep, often melancholy thoughtfulness
flash (Middle English flashen, to splash): to burst forth into or as if into flame; to appear or occur suddenly; flash refers to a sudden and brilliant but short-lived outburst of light
bliss (Old English blīs): extreme happiness, joy, the ecstasy of salvation, spiritual joy
solitude (Latin solus, alone): the state of being alone or remote from others; isolation

We can notice — without yet doing much with the fact — that there are “families” of words evident here, just as there were in the Herrick poem:

• glee, gay, and jovial (a family of being happy, in terms of both meaning and — in the case of the first three — alliteration);
• glance, glee, gay, gaze (words connected by alliteration, joining looking and happiness);

• saw, glance, gaze (a family of looking);
• float, flutter, dance, shine, twinkle, toss, flash, fill (a family of verbs of motion)

Something will have to be said about these families, which help to organize the poem. And something should be said about the balance between words coming from the German side of English (Anglo-Saxon) and words coming from the Latin-French side. Wordsworth seems to be balancing Latinate words (jovial, vacant, pensive, solitude) with Germanic words (glee, bliss, shine, twinkle).

So much for words. What about sentences? The first sentence is the first stanza. The second sentence is the second stanza. What do we expect next? That the third sentence will be the third stanza. But that is not what happens: the third and fourth stanzas together make up the third sentence, and the “hinge” that joins the third and fourth stanzas is the couplet, “I gazed — and gazed — but little thought / What wealth the show to me had brought.” This couplet leads into the exemplification of the “wealth” in stanza 4. The third sentence is twice as long as the other two (and therefore bears twice the weight).

We have our preliminary findings about words and sentences. What about rhyme and rhythm? The stanzas rhyme ababcc: that is, there is a quatrains followed by a couplet — a rhyme-scheme that implies: “I have something to say (my quatrains), and then I have something to add (my couplet).” There are 4 beats per line, and the basic meter is: weak strong, weak strong, weak strong, weak strong. We can see that this meter is more or less kept in the first five lines of the poem, but that in line 6, to emphasize the unexpected motion of the flowers, Wordsworth changes the first two syllables to read “strong weak”: “Fluttering.” A careful reader will see that for his concluding rhyme (“fills / daffodils”) Wordsworth has reused one of the rhyme-sounds from his first stanza (“hills / daffodils”), giving us a strong sense of the end coming back to the beginning.

We’ve now done a fair amount of looking at the poem in terms of words, sentences, rhyme and rhythm. Now, suppose we look at the poem temporally, to see what changes we can observe in it as it goes along? Let us look at A, where the speaker is when the poem opens: he is alone, feeling lonely, feeling as unconnected to the world as a cloud is when floating high above the earth. Let us look at Z, where the speaker is when the poem ends; he is still alone, but he is no longer lonely; now he feels the bliss of solitude. What has made the difference? By the end, he has had, often, involuntary experiences of delight; alone in his room, he has perhaps been thinking of nothing, or reflecting in a slightly melancholy
way about life, when suddenly, unasked, the daffodils flash into his mind so vividly that he sees them with his "inward eye." The experience makes that empty container, his heart, fill with pleasure, recapturing his previous pleasure on that apparently forgotten day.

Because the speaker in this poem doesn't differentiate himself (by gender, occupation, or age) from the author, we can refer to him as "Wordsworth," while remembering that he is a fictive creation, who speaks in verse—as the real Wordsworth, in real life, would not have done. We must ask how the poet has succeeded in conveying the earlier pleasure of his speaker so that we are convinced that the daffodils have indeed lasted intensely in his mind, without any conscious effort on his part. If we have seen A and Z, we now have to decide what goes on between lines 1–2 (A) and lines 19–24 (Z). All the verbs of motion, all the verbs of seeing, all the verbs of delight (those "families" of words we saw earlier) help to explain how we move from A to Z.

Now let us look at the poem spatially, "from above," so to speak, as if we were looking at a map spread out at our feet. We notice that there are three descriptions of the daffodils, three "glances" at the same phenomenon. The first glance ("I saw") shows us the daffodils as many (a crowd, a host), in a landscape (lake, trees), and in motion (fluttering, dancing). The second glance ("at a glance") shows us the daffodils as many (stars . . . on the milky way, ten thousand), in a landscape (margin of a bay), and in motion (tossing their heads in sprightly dance). The third glance ("I gazed—and gazed") shows us the daffodils as many (company), in a landscape (waves beside them), and in motion (outdid the sparkling waves in gleam). We would draw distinctions about these three descriptions if we were considering them temporally (the distinction between seeing, glancing, and gazing, for instance), but in considering them spatially, as three versions of "the same thing," we notice that the important things about the daffodils (reiterated by the speaker each time he looks at them) is that they are not alone since there are many of them; that they feel at home in nature, beside the lake and beneath the trees and on the margin of a bay next to the waves; that they are not gloomily rigid but in joyous motion responsive to the waves and the breeze. We would not be so sure why the daffodils were so important to Wordsworth unless he had shown us, three times, the very same qualities in them. What may seem repetition in a poem is often intensification.

Again, as we look at the poem spatially, we notice that it is divided into two parts: outdoors (stanzas 1–3) and indoors (stanza 4). The outdoor part, phrased in the past tense, tells of one particular day when the poet saw the daffodils; the indoor part, phrased in what we call the habitual present tense (representing something that happens often), removes the daffodils from a physical scene (in nature) to a virtual scene (in the mind). Wordsworth makes explicit, at the end, the connection between what the eye has seen, glanced at, and finally gazed at (imprinting the scene firmly) and what the heart feels. Just as Herrick uses his second stanza to alter the perspective from the daffodils to human beings ("we"), so Wordsworth uses his last stanza to bring the daffodils indoors: in each case, something has changed so that we recognize that the poem has been brought to closure.

We haven't yet said how Wordsworth makes credible the interaction between the speaker and the flowers that made the scene so important. If we look at the subjects of the sentences in our spatial overview, we see that the speaker governs the first sentence ("I wandered lonely") and the daffodils are the objects of his observation ("I saw a crowd, a host, of golden daffodils"). But the daffodils govern the first part of the second sentence: (They stretched), while the speaker governs the second part ("ten thousand saw I"). The daffodils, along with the waves, govern the first part of the third sentence ("The waves . . . danced; but they outdid the sparkling waves"), while the speaker governs the second part ("A poet could not but be gay. . . . I gazed—and gazed"). Finally, in the last stanza's continuation of the third sentence, the daffodils govern the first main clause ("They flash") while the speaker governs the second ("my heart with pleasure fills"). What we see, then, is an antithetical structure of alternation (A; B / A; B) in which the poet and the daffodils engage in a "syntactic dialogue," as first one predominates, then the other. We "believe in" the speaker's interaction with the daffodils because the poem shows it happening. As Herrick paralleled daffodils with human beings, so Wordsworth shows them interacting.

Finally, we might notice that Wordsworth has put the word dance, in one or another of its variants, in each stanza. Dancing; dance; danced; dances. And we notice that the word dance alliterates with the word daffodils, making them "belong" together phonetically.

Getting It Down on Paper

Now, suppose you are to write a paper about how Wordsworth's poem "works." Remember that your readers probably will not have the poem at hand. When you are discussing a poem as briefly as "Daffodils" (or any poem that is but a page or so in length), it is a courtesy to your
readers to reproduce it early in your paper. Nonetheless, as you discuss the poem, you are still responsible for "tucking in" any information your readers need in order to understand what you are talking about. You don't want them to be flipping back and forth between your analysis and the poem.

Indeed, you should always write as if your readers cannot see the poem (as will be the case with longer poems you discuss, anyway), being careful to explain how the poem looks on the page — its stanzas, its rhymes. And you have the responsibility, as the speaker's surrogate, of explaining to your readers why the daffodils that day had the power over you that they did (even if you only realized it later). And you have the responsibility, as the poet's surrogate, of explaining how you set up your artifact in order to make it not only clear but beautiful.

**Begin with a Question**

A good way to begin a paper on a poem is to put before your reader some of the questions that occurred to you as you were studying the poem:

Wordsworth writes a poem about the importance, to him, of a day in which he came upon a bed of daffodils next to a lake and watched them as they seemed to dance because of the breeze passing through them. Why would a bed of flowers become of lasting importance? What was it about them that later impelled the poet into speech? Does he seem to write the poem immediately after seeing them — was it the beauty of the sight that made him want to record it? Or was the poem written much later — and if so, what was it, at that later time, that made him write about the daffodils he had seen perhaps months before?

A paper that begins with your genuine questions about a poem draws your reader into the subject in a way a set of conclusions would not. Besides, the reader is not yet ready to hear your conclusions; conclusions are interesting only after the questions to which they are the answers have been first made compelling to the reader. It is not a good idea, then, to start your paper by saying:

Memory was important to Wordsworth. Often, experiences were more significant to him a long time after they had happened, and that is why he wrote a poem about daffodils he had seen long before.

Such a beginning, in addition to being a bit solemn, takes all the suspense out of the poem. One of the effects of the poem — and you are responsible for evoking those effects in your reader — is to make you wonder why the poet is emphasizing three times something so common in England as an extended bed of daffodils.

In evoking the effects of the poem, you might say:

The speaker is concerned to set himself before us as someone lonely, disconnected from the human world, until he comes upon the daffodils. How do they seem to him when he first sees them? He is impressed first by their sheer number, next by the way they fit into the landscape, and third by their motion. Although this motion is really imparted to them by the breeze, the speaker prefers to think of them as engaging in both involuntary (fluttering) and voluntary (dancing) actions. Strange as it may seem, we learn nothing more, basically, about the daffodils when the speaker sees them again (at a glance) in stanza 2, and again (with a double gaze) in stanza 3: they are many, they are an intimate part of the landscape, and they dance. Why is it that these three qualities of the daffodils so strike the speaker, and what do we learn from the slight difference in the poem's representations of them as it returns to them for a second and a third time?

This makes your reader

* notice the three repetitions;
* notice what they have in common;
* wonder what distinguishes them from each other; and
* see how they emphasize the power of this scene to move the speaker.

As you go on, you can ask further questions. Are we surprised, after seeing this scene three times, that the poem suddenly goes on fast-forward, to a future experience (often repeated) of the daffodils, this time in virtual vision rather than real vision? How does the poet connect this anomalous last stanza to his three previous visions of the daffodils? And so on. The more questions you ask, the more interested your reader will be to see what answers you will provide.

**Present Your Case**

You may be thinking at this point, "How do I work in the facts about the rhyme and meter?" It is useless just to name the rhyme and
meter; nobody learns anything from a sentence that says, "The poem, in iambic tetrameter, rhymes ababcc." Such a sentence is true, but uninformative. It is, of course, easier to talk about rhyme and meter once you have acquired a sense of how set forms are used over time by different poets; but anyone can see that blank verse ("Of man's first disobedience, and the fruit / Of that immortal tree whose mortal taste / Brought death into the world, and all our woe") sounds very different, in its solemnity, from the dance-meter of "And then my heart with pleasure fills, / And dances with the daffodils." So somewhere along the way — when you are emphasizing the repetition of the word dance, perhaps — you might add that Wordsworth has very naturally written the poem in a meter — iambic tetrameter — that suggests lightness, the same meter that Milton used for his poem on happiness, L'Allegro: "Then come, thou goddess fair and free, / In heaven yecept Euphrosyne." As for the rhyme, you can point out that in a poem that keeps coming back to the same scene, the appearance of a refrain in the recurrent couplets is appropriate. Imagine the last stanza if it had no break into quatrain and couplet, if it rhymed ababab:

For off, when on my couch I lie
In vacant or in pensive mood,
They dance upon that inward eye
Which is the bliss of solitude;
And then I feel the pleasure nigh
Of daffodils on which I brood.

When the stanza is not broken in two, marked off by rhyme as a quatrain plus a couplet, one doesn't feel the sense of afterthought, of add-on, so important to the poem, which is itself all about the "add-on" of subsequent mental reference to earlier physical experience — Wordsworth's great theme. In brief, insert your reflections on rhyme and meter where they best fit with your discussion of the poem's theme and manner, just as, in considering Herrick's poem, you might mention the effect of the strong first syllables when you are treating the speaker's conviction of his coming death.

**Draw Your Conclusions**

At the end of your paper, after integrating all you've noticed about the words, sentences, and rhyme and rhythm of the poem; after working out how to describe the poem's emotional evolution in time and the pattern you see in it from a spatial overview, posing questions for your reader all the way, you are entitled to tell the reader your conclusions. You might say:

Wordsworth must convince his reader of the continuing importance, to him, of a single experience — his coming across a bed of daffodils. The poem, it turns out, is not only about seeing daffodils; it is about the "bliss" and wonder of memory — the fact that our memory unconsciously stores phenomena to which we have deeply responded and can make those phenomena "flash" into view long afterward, when we are unoccupied and alone.

In his first loneliness, the speaker — a person alienated from the earth as much as a high-floating cloud would be, a wanderer who lacks company, a destination, and delight — comes upon the beautiful daffodils and is struck by the contrast between his state and theirs because they are at home in nature, they do have company, and they seem content to respond in sheer delight to the breeze that sets them in motion, so as even to "outdo" the dancing waves beside them. Lost in their sheer number and extent, in their beauty, naturalness, and freedom, the poet — expressing their happiness in a "dance-rhythm" of iambic tetrameter — is unable to tear himself away (as we see from his repeating the original scene twice more, each time with small but significant differences).

The poet's perception alternates between his own agency and that of the daffodils: he sees, they act, he sees, they act, he gazes, and we begin to understand what it means to impress a scene on the mind by constant internal dialogue with it. All the time, the little stanza, which is composed of a basic statement and then an afterthought, acts out the way the mind frames a notion, and then adds to it, decoratively or reminiscently.

The poet turns both to simple Anglo-Saxon words (shine, twinkle, gleam, flash) with their familiar commonness, and to less familiar Latinate words (continuous, joyous, radiant, pensive), with their overtones of learning, to suggest that the flowers bring out all the parts of his sensibility, from childlike perception to literary response. By the end, the poet has found not only "company" in the "never-ending line" of daffodils, but nourishment for the future: his outward eye, brought into company and into nature and into delight, has, unbeknownst to him, stored up the daffodils as nurture for the "inward eye" that now makes solitude not "lonely" but "bliss[full]."
No one paper can say everything about even a short poem. "I Wandered Lonely as a Cloud" can be set into larger frames: among other Wordsworth poems; among other daffodil poems; among other loneliness poems or nature poems; among other Romantic poems; among poems in iambic tetrameter; among poems about memory; and so on. Each "frame" shows the poem somewhat differently and gives one a better handle on the special idiosyncrasy of this poem.

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**Keeping Your Readers in Mind**

What you chiefly want readers to feel, if they turn back from your paper to read the poem, is that you haven't left out anything important. A reader might say, reading an imperfect paper, "I would never have known that Wordsworth does the initial scene three times!" (This might be the reader's reaction if your discussion had essentially turned this into a poem that has two parts: "Wordsworth saw daffodils and liked them; Wordsworth remembers daffodils later.") Or a reader might say (if you had neglected to talk about vocabulary), "It sounded like such an artless poem in your paper; I never would have guessed that it had Latinate words like *sprightly* and *seeam* and *vacant* and *solitude* in it." Or, "You never said it had such a dance-like rhythm!" Or, "I had no idea that it was organized by 'see; glance; gaze' or that there was all that alliteration linking all those 'g' words together — *golden*, *glance*, *glee*, *gay*, *gazed*, *gazed* — or that there was *dance* in every stanza." Or, "But how could you have left out the difference between *lonely* at the beginning and the *bliss of solitude* at the end? It really sums up the whole difference between the poet's mood before he sees the daffodils and after!" A good paper leaves the readers, when they come back to the poem, feeling, "Oh, yes! And yes! Of course!" It makes readers see aspects of the poem they may not have noticed themselves, in their more cursory reading of the poem, but now see clearly because you have showed them those things.

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**Organizing Your Paper**

You do not have to "go through" the poem inch by inch, line by line. "In the first line the author says... In the second line the author adds... In line three, the poet goes on to observe..." etc. Your reader would die of boredom. There is nothing wrong with starting a paper — as a means of posing some of your initial questions, perhaps — by looking at the ending.

Wordsworth ends his poem with the speaker enjoying "the bliss of solitude" — the very same speaker who complained, at the beginning, that he was "wandering," with no company, "as lonely as a cloud," alienated from both man and nature. How did this melancholy person translate himself into a state of bliss?

Or your paper can begin in the middle of the poem:

"I Wandered Lonely as a Cloud" is a poem divided between a single day in the past and many days in the present — the past day when the speaker "saw a crowd / A host, of golden daffodils" and the present days when the daffodils "flash upon [his] inward eye." The hinge between these two parts of the poem comes at the end of the third stanza:

I gazed — and gazed — but little thought
What wealth the show to me had brought:

What is that "wealth"? and how did the common spectacle of "golden" daffodils become transmuted into a different sort of gold, the "wealth" of involuntary memory?
Or your paper can begin with a feature of the poem:

We might expect that a poem beginning “I wandered” would keep to this format throughout, with the speaker as the subject of all the verbs: “I saw,” “I gazed,” “I thought,” and so on. But we notice that Wordsworth’s poem on the daffodils offers a peculiar grammatical alternation between the poet as subject and the flowers as subject: it is almost as if they are engaging in a dialogue. The poet notices; then the flowers do something; then the poet notices; then the flowers do something else; then the poet notices yet again. Wordsworth is teaching us, so to speak, how to look so that the scenes we see can have lasting meaning for us. We need to be willing to receive the impress of the phenomena around us; but we also need to see, to glance, to gaze — and GAZE, with increasing intensity. And this is not necessarily a solemn process: in every stanza of the poem, some thing or person “dances” in this dialogue of the eye with nature.

In short, your paper can begin anywhere, as long as it is well organized and somehow includes all the main features of the poem.

_A Note on Well-Ordered Paragraphs_

One of the chief features of a well-organized paper is the internal arrangement of its paragraphs. A well-ordered paragraph has a point of view, and a subject that does not change markedly as the paragraph evolves. Here is an example of a badly organized paragraph, in which every sentence jumps to a different grammatical subject:

Wordsworth is writing about seeing a bed of daffodils. The speaker has been wandering in a lonely mood, but then he glimpses the flowers. The 6-line stanza is written with a rhyming couplet at the end, in which we see the daffodils “fluttering and dancing in the breeze.” Nature is the poet a source of refreshment and solace. Often the Romantic poets found a recourse in nature that they could not find in urban life. Metaphors from nature are important to the Romantics; this is seen in Wordsworth’s comparison of his loneliness to that of a cloud. The daffodils represent to Wordsworth the happiness and company to be found in nature.

The grammatical subjects of the successive sentences of this paragraph are _Wordsworth, the speaker, the stanza, Nature, the Romantic poets, metaphors_, and _daffodils_. A reader feels seasick as the paragraph jolts from focus to focus. The writer should choose one focus: the paragraph should be about Wordsworth, the composer of the poem; or about the speaker who utters the poem; about the scene in the poem (daffodils); about the technique of the poem (the stanzas, sentence-forms, rhymes); about Romantic poets and their relation to nature; or about metaphors in the poem.

A new paragraph is the place to change the focus. After a paragraph on Wordsworth as poet, it might be fine to have a paragraph about the speaker, followed by a paragraph about the metaphors in the poem — providing logical transitions are found to get from one topic to the next. For instance, if you had opened with a brief summary of the plot of the poem, telling about the speaker’s loneliness and his seeing the daffodils first with his outward eye and then with his inward eye, you could bring that paragraph to a close by saying, “Yet behind this speaker, with his interest in the psychology of memory-imprinting, we find Wordsworth the author, who is constructing this speaker, and these stanzas, and these metaphors.” Then you could have a paragraph about the author and how he has arranged the poem scenically, rhythmically, metaphorically, and so on.

Ideally, in a well-organized paper, you ought to be able to delete, from each paragraph, the follow-up sentences supporting the topic sentence, and be left with a “skeleton” consisting of nothing but the topic sentences for each paragraph. That skeleton would make sense by itself, would proceed logically, and would contain all the main points of your paper. Some writers like to do a sentence-outline of this sort after taking notes on the poem and seeing what the notes add up to in general terms. Then all they have to do is to fill in the evidence supporting the topic sentence for each paragraph. This is a sturdy and logical way of ordering a paper. In rereading and revising your paper, you might try typing out what you consider the topic sentence of each paragraph and seeing how well those sentences hang together as a logical sequence. Often you discover that something you have noticed late, and written down late, really belongs somewhere earlier in the paper, or that an earlier sentence properly should be brought down into the conclusion.

**Checking Your Work**

Three serious defects can mar a paper on a poem. One such defect is having made the poem boring to your reader. Ask yourself why it was important to the poet to write this poem, and then you will make it
urgent to your reader, too. Another defect is to have misrepresented the poem, so that the reader will say, "Well, I never understood from your paper that the speaker was lonely when he came across the daffodils!" And perhaps the worst defect is to have treated the poem as though it is simply a message, rather than an artifact — something arranged by a writer to be beautiful, patterned, coordinated, musical, and memorable. To avoid these defects, read your paper over, saying to yourself:

- Have I made my reader see the urgency of the poem?
- Have I noticed all the important points about words, sentences, rhyme and rhythm, emotional curve over time, spatial patterning, and memorable language?
- Have I treated this as an artwork and not merely as a statement?

By the time you finish your paper, if you have done your work well, you will almost know the poem by heart, because you will have seen how it fits together. Your reader should see that, too.

It is important that your paper offer no typographical or grammatical obstructions to your reader:

- Messiness is an obstruction;
- Misspelling is an obstruction;
- Misquotation of your text is an obstruction;
- Mistakes in grammar and syntax are obstructions.

The paper has obligations to the poem: it should be almost as beautiful as the poem is, almost as interesting as the poem is, almost as memorable as the poem is.

There may be a part of the poem that you simply can’t fit into your overview. If so, admit it and go on. Sometimes just writing about your difficulty solves it, and in going back, you see how the stanza fits in or why that metaphor was used. But even if you don’t see how to solve your difficulty, you can leave it as a problem for your reader; there’s nothing readers like better than being asked to think about an enigma that you have left open for their reflection.

11

Studying Groups of Poems

Sometimes you will want to assemble a group of poems by a single author in order to write in depth about that author’s practice. The best way to do this is to find a group of poems about a single theme or a group of poems concerning a single problem. To illustrate this process, we reprint, first, four poems written by Walt Whitman (1819–1892) about Abraham Lincoln after Lincoln was assassinated, with some information found in books about the assassination; and second, a number of poems by Emily Dickinson that consider the problem of how we mark off and describe events as they take place in time.

Walt Whitman: Poems on Lincoln

What are some of the ways Whitman might choose to write about his murdered president? Lincoln was shot by the Confederate sympathizer John Wilkes Booth, one of a group of conspirators, on Good Friday, April 14, 1865, shortly before the end of the Civil War. The assassination was dramatic: Lincoln was shot in his box at the theater, in full sight of his wife and the audience; he died several hours later. It was decided that he would be buried in Illinois, his home state, rather than in Washington. After a funeral service in Washington, a ceremonial train, decked in black and bearing the coffin, would traverse the states in a long trajectory across
Appendices

Appendix 1. On Prosody

Prosody concerns the measure in which poems are written. There are three kinds of poems, prosodically speaking:

- poems in counted lines (where lines have a regular number of beats);
- poems in free verse (where lines have an irregular number of beats);
- poems in prose (usually a short symbolic paragraph).

This appendix is concerned with poems in counted lines and poems in free verse. Since free verse is a relatively recent form (Walt Whitman is the earliest significant American poet of free verse), we will take up counted poetry first.

Poems in Counted Lines

Poems in counted lines are written in units we call feet. A foot consists of one stressed syllable (one “beat,” to use the musical term), usually accompanied by one or two unstressed syllables. We represent a stressed syllable by an accent (') and an unstressed syllable by a symbol called a breve (').
Here is an example of a line with four feet:

Whose woods / these are / I think / I know

The number of feet in a line gives the line its (Greek-derived) name, and tells you how wide the line is. Natural intonation makes you stress some words and leave others unstressed, helping you to see how many beats are in the line. We characterize a line by how many stresses (beats) exist in it: the word “meter” (meaning measure) is the general name for the length of a counted line:

- one beat per line = monometer (from Greek meaning “one,” as in “monologue”);
- two beats per line = dimeter (from Greek meaning “two,” as in “dialogue”);
- three beats per line = trimeter (from Greek meaning “three,” as in “triangle”);
- four beats per line = tetrameter (from Greek meaning “four,” as in “tetrahedron”);
- five beats per line = pentameter (from Greek meaning “five,” as in “Pentagon”);
- six beats per line = hexameter (from Greek meaning “six,” as in “hexagram”);
- seven beats per line = heptameter (from Greek meaning “seven,” as in “heptathlon”);
- eight beats per line = octameter (from Greek meaning “eight,” as in “octopus”).

Most poems written in English have lines four or five beats wide. Shakespeare wrote all of his plays in pentameter lines five beats wide (though he also inserted prose and short songs from time to time).

When you are looking to see how many beats are in a line, it helps sometimes to see how many syllables are in the line. Ten-syllable lines tend to have five beats each; eight-syllable lines tend to have four beats each. But it is still natural intonation that tells you where to put the stresses:

When I / see bir / ches bënd / to léft / and right [ten syllables, five beats]
Gölden / lads and / girls all / must [seven syllables, four beats]

Here are samples of all the line-widths. It helps to read these aloud, so that you can hear the beats.

1. **Monometer** (*one beat per line, a rare meter*), as in the little poem called “Fleas”:
   
   Adam
   Had ‘em.

2. **Dimeter** (*two beats*), which is likewise rare:
   
   Take her up tenderly,
   Lift her with care,
   Fashioned so slenderly,
   Young and so fair.
   
   — THOMAS HOOD, “The Bridge of Sighs”

3. **Trimeter** (*three beats*):
   
   It is time that I wrote my will;
   I choose upstanding men
   That climb the streams until
   The fountain leap, and at dawn
   Drop their cast at the side
   Of dripping stone; I declare
   They shall inherit my pride.
   
   — W.B. YEATS, “The Tower”

4. **Tetrameter** (*four beats*):
   
   Whose woods these are I think I know
   His house is in the village though,
   He will not see me stopping here
   To watch his woods fill up with snow.
   
   — ROBERT FROST, “Stopping by Woods”

5. **Pentameter** (*five beats*):
   
   The woods decay, the woods decay and fall,
   The vapours weep their burthens to the ground,
   Man comes and tills the soil and lies beneath,
   And after many a summer dies the swan.
   
   — ALFRED, LORD TENNYSON, “Thanatos”

6. **Hexameter** (*six beats*), which is sometimes called an Alexandrine (from the French usage) and which is rare in English verse:
   
   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”

The common meters (line-lengths) have been trimeter, tetrameter, and pentameter, used singly or in combination.
Rhythm

You have probably noticed that the lits (swings) in each of the above examples of line-length differ. That is because the lines are written in different rhythms. Two dimer poems can sound very different from each other because they are written in two different rhythms. You can see this by comparing Hood's "The Bridge of Sighs," given above as an example of dimer, with Dorothy Parker's satirical poem on suicide, "Résumé," also in dimer:

Táke her up / rënderly,
Lift her with / cáre
Fashioned so / slénderly
Young and so / fär
Rázers / pán you
Rivers are / dämp;
Ácids / xáin you;
And drágs cause / crámp.

To describe the versification of a poem, you have to say not only how wide its lines are, but also what rhythm they are written in. English rhythms are based on stressed and unstressed syllables. Each stressed syllable with its associated unstressed syllable(s) makes a single unit, which we call a foot.

There are two main kinds of rhythm in English: rising rhythms and falling rhythms. In a rising rhythm, a foot consists of one or more unstressed syllables leading up to a stressed syllable: "" or "".

Where the youth / pined away / with desire
And the pâle / virgin shroud / ed in snow
Arisè / from their grâves / and aspire
Where my sün / flower wish / es to go.
— WILLIAM BLAKE, "Ah Sun-flower"

In a falling rhythm, a foot begins with the stressed syllable, which is followed by one or more unstressed syllables: "" or "".

Tyger, / týger, / bûrning / bright
In the / fôrests / of the / night.
— WILLIAM BLAKE, "The Tyger"

Metrical feet are named according to where their stress appears and how many unstressed syllables they possess. Rising rhythms are either iambic (with two syllables, "") or anapestic (with three syllables, ""). We speak of an iamb or an iambic foot when we mean ""; an anapest or an anapestic foot when we mean "". Falling rhythms are either trochaic (with two syllables, "") or dactylic (with three syllables, ""). The corresponding nouns are trochee and dactyl.

When you read a poem in counted lines, try to see whether the general movement is a rising one or a falling one. In the two examples from Blake given above, "Ah Sun-flower" is written in rising anapestic (three-syllable) feet, and "The Tyger" in falling trochaic (two-syllable) feet.

In each line of "Ah Sun-flower" there are three feet (because there are three stressed syllables):

Where the youth / pined away / with desire

In each line of "The Tyger" there are four feet (because there are four stressed syllables):

Tyger, / týger, / bûrning / bright
If you think of each stressed syllable as a musical beat, the lines of "Ah Sun-flower" have three beats each ("and a one and a two and a three"); the lines of "The Tyger" have four beats each ("one and two and three and four").

Feet can shed one or more of their unstressed syllables. You can see that at the end of each line in "The Tyger," an unstressed syllable is "missing." And in "Ah Sun-flower," in the line "Arisè / from their grâves / and aspire," an unstressed syllable is missing in the first foot, which has only two syllables, "Arisè." These irregularities do not occur so often that they destroy the general impression of the metrical scheme underlying the poem.

If you hear these rhythms in your ear as you read, you will soon recognize them. Here are two more examples, to fill our scheme:

I found a dimpled spider, fat and white.
— ROBERT FROST, "Design"

Read aloud, this reveals itself to have five beats (five stressed syllables): "and a one and a two and three and four and five." Each of the five units consists of an unstressed syllable followed by a stressed syllable (iambic foot):

I found / a dimp / led spi / der, fat / and white.

Listen to Longfellow's description of the original American forest:

This is the forest primeval, the murmuring pines and rje hemlocks.
— HENRY WADSWORTH LONGFELLOW, "Evangeline"
Read aloud, this reveals itself to have six beats (six stressed syllables): "one and a two and a three and // a four and a five and a six and." Each foot (except the last, which has shed one unstressed syllable) consists of a stressed syllable followed by two unstressed syllables (dactylic foot):

This is the / forest prim / évil // the / mûrnering / pines and
the / hêmlocks.

These rising and falling feet occur in lines of different widths. We have seen, above, trimeter lines ("Ah Sun-flower") and tetrameter lines ("The Tyger"). We have seen pentameter lines ("Design") and hexameter lines ("Evangeline"). A full description of a line describes its rhythm and then its width. "Ah Sun-flower" is written in anapestic trimeter. "The Tyger" is written in trochaic tetrameter. "Design" is written in iambic pentameter. "Evangeline" is written in dactylic hexameter.

It is less important that you know these names than that you recognize a rhythm by ear. Practice tapping out the rhythms above until they become familiar. Counting out the rhythm and length of a line is called scanning it.

It is often difficult, even impossible, to scan a single line taken by itself. One line can be scanned two or more ways, depending on the intonation we give it. The rule of thumb is to look at the other lines matching it. If they are all five-beat lines, then the dubious line is probably a five-beat line, too. But do not allow the prevailing rhythm, when you read a line aloud, to ride roughshod over the sense; the sense will usually tell you what syllables ought to be stressed.

In all rhythms, some feet are irregular, so that the cadence does not become intolerably inflexible. Feet of comparable length can freely substitute for each other. Shakespeare often begins one of his iambic ("") lines with an initial trochaic foot ("') to give energy to the line:

Why is / my verse / so bar / ren of / new pride?

Each of these metrical schemes is merely a grid underlying a line. The line itself must, by its intonation pattern, indicate the grid (or you cannot know what the basic rhythm is supposed to be), but it can depart from the grid in various ways — by substituting a different foot, by having a light foot called the pyrrhic ("') for unimportant words, or a heavy foot called the spondee ("') for important words, and so on. What you are asked to do in scanning the line is to see the underlying grid, first of all, and then to note any departures from it. Poets enjoy varying their rhythms to accord with dramatic emphasis, tone of voice, and so on. They also enjoy breaking their lines with a pause in the middle, which we call a caesura and represent with a double slash. An iambic pentameter line can be broken one or more times:

I grant I never saw a goddess go;
My mistress, // when she walks, // treads on the ground.
And yet, // by heaven, // I think my love as rare
As any she belied with false compare.

— Shakespeare, Sonnet 130

RHymes and Stanza-Forms

Not all counted poetry is written in rhymes. But because lyric began as song (the name "lyric" comes from "lyre"), simple rhyming stanza-forms such as those found in the ballad or the hymn became important in the English tradition. Gradually, as oral poetry gave way to printed poetry (meant to be read rather than sung), stanza-forms of considerable complexity arose. Here are some of the most common rhyming forms in English. When rhyming units are separated by white space, they are called stanzas.

1. A pair of rhyming lines is called a couplet. Couplets are frequently run together, not separated as stanzas:

While the plowman near at hand,
Whistles o'er the furrowed land,
And the milkmaid singeth blithe,
And the mower whets his scythe,
And every shepherd tells his tale,
Under the hawthorn in the dale.

— John Milton, "L'Allegro"

These couplets are written in trochaic tetrameter. The rhyme scheme of these lines is indicated thus: abab. That is, because the first two lines rhyme ("land" "land"), they can be indicated by aa, and because the next two rhyme, they can be indicated by bb. We indicate the rhyme scheme by these abbreviated lowercase italicized letters.

The heroic couplet is an iambic pentameter couplet that is endstopped (marked by a heavy pause after the second line of the couplet), and frequently pointed and witty. Alexander Pope and John Dryden used it with brio:

Meanwhile, declining from the noon of day,
The sun obliquely shoot his burning ray;
The hungry judges soon the sentence sign,
And wretches hang that jurymen may dine.
— Alexander Pope, “The Rape of the Lock”

2. A stanza of three lines is called a tercet:

Light the first light of evening, as in a room
In which we sit, and for small reason, think
The world imagined is the ultimate good.
— Wallace Stevens, “Final Soliloquy of the Interior Paramour”

Terza rima is a form of pentameter tercet with interlinked rhymes (aba bcb cdc and so on) used by Dante in the Divine Comedy. It is difficult to carry off in English, though Shelley used it for his “Ode to the West Wind.” Many poets intend an allusion to Dante when they use loosely rhymed pentameter tercets.

3. A stanza of four lines is called a quatrains. The commonest quatrains is the ballad stanza, in which the first and third lines are unrhymed and have four beats, while the second and fourth lines rhyme and have three beats:

It is an ancient Mariner,
And he stoppeth one of three.
“By thy long grey beard and glittering eye,
Now wherefore stopp’st thou me?”
— Samuel Taylor Coleridge, “The Rime of the Ancient Mariner”

Some tetrameter quatrains are rhymed abba, like those in Shakespeare’s “The Phoenix and the Turtle” and Tennyson’s “In Memoriam.” This stanza is generally referred to as the “In Memoriam” stanza:

Ring out, wild bells, to the wild sky,
The flying cloud, the frosty light,
The year is dying in the night;
Ring out, wild bells, and let him die.

The heroic quatrains is an iambic pentameter quatrains, rhyming abab:

I know my life’s a pain and but a span;
I know my sense is mock’d with everything;

And, to conclude, I know myself a man,
Which is a proud and yet a wretched thing.
— Sir John Davies, “Nose Tepum”

4. A stanza of six lines is sometimes called a sestet (its French name) or a sestet. The commonest sestain rhyme-form is ababbc. A pentameter sestain rhyming this way is called the “Venus and Adonis stanza,” from the poem of that name by Shakespeare:

Look how a bird lies tangle in a net,
So fast’n’d in her arms Adonis lies,
Pure shame and awed resistance made him fret,
Which bred more beauty in his angry eyes.
Rain added to a river that is rank
Perforce will force it overflow the bank.

5. The only common seven-line stanza is rime royal (so called because King James I used it) — iambic pentameter rhyming ababbc. This is the meter of many long poems on high themes — Chaucer’s Troilus and Cressyde, for instance. Spenser uses it for his “Four Hymns”:

For love is a celestial harmony
Of likely hearts composed of stars’ consent,
Which join together in sweet sympathy,
To work each other’s joy and true content,
Which they have harbored since their first descent
Out of their heavenly bowers, where they did see
And know each other here beloved to be.
— Edmund Spenser, “Hymn to Love”

6. The best-known eight-line form is ottava rima — iambic pentameter rhyming ababbc. The final couplet can give this stanza epigrammatic point, and Byron used it with notable wit in his long poem Don Juan. Its greatest modern practitioner has been W. B. Yeats:

Labour is blossoming or dancing where
The body is not bruised to pleasure soul,
Nor beauty born out of its own despair,
Nor clear-eyed wisdom out of midnight oil.
O chestnut-tree, great-rooted blossomer,
Are you the leaf, the blossom or the bole?
O body swayed to music, O brightening glance,
How can we know the dancer from the dance?
— W. B. Yeats, “Among School Children”

7. The best-known nine-line form is the Spenserian stanza (so called because Spenser used it in The Faerie Queene). Keats adopted it for “The Eve of St. Agnes.” All its lines are pentameter, except the last, which is a hexameter. It rhymes in a closely linked way: ababbcce.

St. Agnes’ Eve — Ah, bitter chill it was!
The owl, for all his feathers, was a-cold;
The hare limped trembling through the frozen grass,
And silent was the flock in woolly fold:
Numb were the Beadman’s fingers, while he told
His rosary, and while his frosted breath,
Like pious incense from a censer old,
Seemed taking flight for heaven, without a death,
Past the sweet Virgin’s picture, while his prayer he saith.
— John Keats, “The Eve of St. Agnes”

There are many unnamed stanza-forms, some of them common ones. For instance, an extra line or two is often added to the ballad stanza, to make a five- or six-line stanza. Or a refrain (a line repeated after every stanza) can be added to lengthen the ballad quatrains.

**Types of Rhyming Poems**

1. The **sonnet** is a fourteen-line pentameter poem. There are two chief forms:

The **Italian (Petrarchan)** sonnet consists of an octave and a sestet.

The sestet of a Petrarchan sonnet can rhyme in several different ways, but the most common are cdeedc and (as below) cdecde:

Who will in fairest book of Nature know
How Virtue may best lodgen in beauty be,
Let him but learn of Love to read in thee,
Stella, those fair lines which true goodness show.
There shall he find all vices overthrow,
Not by rude force, but sweetest sovereignty
Of reason, from those light those nightbirds fly,
That inward sun in thine eyes shineth so.
And, not content to be Perfection’s heir

There are many variations on the two basic sonnet forms. Spenser wrote sonnets that were composed of linked rhymes: _abab becde ef_. Some poets (Herbert, Yeats) have made hybrid sonnets by attaching Petrarchan sestets to Shakespearean octaves, or vice versa. Others, like George Meredith and Stevens, have written sonnet-like poems with sixteen or fifteen lines. The odes of Keats basically form their stanzas by combining a Shakespearean quatrains with a Petrarchan sestet (they vary the length of line and sometimes double a rhyme, but it is clear that their elements come from the two sonnet traditions).

2. The **setina** is a pentameter poem consisting of six stanzas of six lines plus a three-line coda (known as the _envoi_ or _envue_). The setina “rhymes” on six end-words, which must be repeated in each stanza in a controlled order, whereby the last end-word in each stanza becomes the first end-word of the next stanza: _abedef jaefle gdefa cefjd defag bfeac_. The _envoi_ must employ two of the end-words in each of its three lines. A good setina makes this difficult pattern seem natural. The setina is easier seen than described. Here is one (called “Setina”) by Elizabeth Bishop. The six end-words are “house,” “grandmother,” “child,” “stove,” “almanac,” and “tears.”
It may help to know that Bishop was raised by her grandmother, since her father was dead and her mother was confined to an insane asylum:

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 equinoxial 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.

3. The villanelle is a French form that has been used with notable success by many modern poets, among them Theodore Roethke, William Empson, Dylan Thomas, and Bishop. A villanelle is a poem of five pentameter tercets rhyming aba, followed by a pentameter quatrains rhyming abba. In a villanelle, lines 1 and 3 of the first tercet are repeated alternately at the end of each following tercet, and they close the final quatrains. Again, this is easier seen than described, and in a good villanelle the repetitions are made to seem natural. Here is Dylan Thomas's villanelle "Do Not Go Gentle into That Good Night," a poem he wrote when his father was dying:

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 learned, too late, they cried 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.

There are many other rhymed poem-forms, such as the rondeau, the bal-
lade, the pantoum. A poet using one of the rhymed poem-forms expects
the reader to recall the tradition of such forms.

4. The ode in English is usually a stanzaic poem, but it has no set form.
An ode is defined by its content: it is a poem of a lofty or sublime sort,
often using the figure of speech called *apostrophe*, which is an address to some divine or quasi-divine person or thing. "O wild West Wind," says Shelley; "Thou still unravished bride of quietness," says Keats addressing the Grecian urn.

**Counted Verse That Does Not Rhyme**

The most common form of counted unrhymed verse is *blank verse*, unrhymed iambic pentameter lines. This is the verse of Shakespeare’s plays and of Milton's epic poem, *Paradise Lost*:

- That space the evil one abstracted stood
- From his own evil, and for the time remained
- Stupidly good, of enmity disarmed,
- Of guile, of hate, of envy, of revenge.

Blank verse can also be used in a lyric, as Coleridge uses it in his poem "Frost at Midnight":

- Therefore all seasons shall be sweet to thee,
- Whether the summer clothe the general earth
- With greenness, or the redbreast sit and sing
- Betwixt the tufts of snow on the bare branch.

Most of the unrhymed verse in English is blank verse, though poets have also written unrhymed four-beat poems that imitate Anglo-Saxon meter. Some poets have experimented with stanzas of unrhymed verse in imitation of Greek and Latin verse (which did not rhyme, but depended on a quantitative system contrasting long vowels with short vowels). Here are two stanzas of Thomas Campion’s “Rose-Cheeked Laura,” an imitation of the Greek meter called, after the poet Sappho, *sapphic*. The first three lines have four beats each, the fourth line two beats:

- Róse-cheeked Laura, cóme,
- Sing thou smoothly with thy beauty’s
- Silent músic, either óther
  Sweetly gracing.
- Lovely forms do flow
- From concént divinely framéd;
- Heav’n is músic, and thy beauty’s
  Birth is heavenly.

Every so often a new poet will once again imitate classical unrhymed forms.

**Free Verse**

Free verse—verse in which the lines are of different widths, and which does not rhyme in any regular way—was invented by poets who had been brought up on rhymed and counted verse. Poets like Whitman, Pound, Eliot, Stevens, Williams, Lowell, and Bishop all began by writing conventional verse. Whitman was drawn to free verse because he saw it as a primitive, “bardic” form. Eliot wrote it in imitation of the French poet Jules Laforgue. Pound wrote it in an attempt to achieve poetic effects he thought inhered in the Chinese ideogram. Williams and Stevens adopted it as a way to free themselves from the hold of English poets such as Keats. But behind their free verse there lurked always the shadow of counted verse. Eliot’s “The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock” keeps threatening to turn into regular pentameter. Pound’s largely free-verses “Cantos” include counted and rhymed segments.

The history of free verse is not yet entirely understood. The United States was a more hospitable environment for it than England, and a nativist wish to throw off inherited English forms certainly motivated many American poets. The unit of free verse seems to be the breath: there is a breath limit to the long line of free verse (reached by Whitman and Ginsberg, to give two notable examples). The theoretical appeal of free verse is that it admits an element of chance; it offers a model not of a teleological or providential universe but of an *aleatory* one, where the casual, rather than the fated, holds sway.

Free verse must justify its reasons for breaking a line here rather than there. If we look at a small free-verse poem, William Carlos Williams’s “The Red Wheelbarrow,” we must ask why the lines break where they do:

- So much depends
  upon
- a red wheel
  barrow
- glazed with rain
  water
- beside the white
  chickens

We might notice that in each little “stanza” the second line has only two syllables. This gives symmetry to the poem. The word “depends” literally hangs off the word “depends,” acting out the meaning of something
which depends (Latin: dependere, "to hang from") on something else. The red "wheel" turns into a "wheelbarrow" as we turn the line. Rain turns into rainwater, in the same way. After the inorganic wheelbarrow and rainwater, we may expect an inorganic object to follow the word "white"—say "the white fence." Instead, the scene comes alive with chickens.

This very mannered little poem says that if the eye didn't see something inviting in the landscape (the shiny glaze the rain has put on the redness of the wheelbarrow; the composition of the still wheelbarrow and the living chickens; the contrast of red and white), there would be nothing to write about. "So much depends" on there being something out there to gratify and focus the eye. When we understand the poem, we understand its line-breaks. A free-verse poem that doesn't justify its line-breaks hardly deserves the name "poem."

Summary

When you come across a new poem, look at the way it displays itself on the page. Is it a skinny poem or a wide poem? A short poem or a long one? Are all the lines the same length, or are some shorter than others? Does it rhyme? Does it have stanzas?

Think of the look of the poem as its body. Is it a symmetrical body or a ragged body? A solid-looking body or an emaciated one?

As you read it aloud and listen to its rhythms, feel what it is telling you. Is it serious or even ponderous? Or does it move with a lift and a skip? Does it change its manner of walking, from indolent to hurried? Does it manifest leisure or anxiety in its rhythms?

These are questions to ask even before you begin to note a rhyme scheme or count how many beats there are in a line. After you have done the technical noticing and counting, ask yourself how these formal features match up with the sentiments and emotions that the poem is expressing. Do the formal features align with those sentiments, or do they contradict them? It is always worthwhile to pay attention to the technical work the poet has done on the external form of the poem; it is, after all, the body the poet has chosen to live in for a determined period.


Appendix 2. On Grammar

A familiarity with grammatical terms can help you to analyze and to describe poetry. This appendix provides a brief review of some of the most common and useful grammatical terms.

Noun

A word that names a person, place, thing, or idea. Examples: "Adam," "garden," "chair," "destiny." In short, a noun names an essence.

Adjective

A word that tells you something about that essence. An adjective modifies a noun by limiting or describing it. Examples: "the early bird," "a false alarm." An adjective expresses something present with or connected to a noun, but not essential: "a red wheelbarrow" (not all wheelbarrows are red). Adjectives are the chief resource of descriptive language, as when Shakespeare says (Sonnet 129) that lust is "perjur'd, murderous, bloody, full of blame, / Savage, extreme, rude, cruel, not to trust." The plenitude of nouns is flecked out by adjectives; and the complexity of life is such that poems need a wealth of adjectives to describe their essential nouns.

Pronoun

A word that stands in for a noun. Pronouns can be used as subjects (nominaive case, as in "On a cloud I saw a child") or as objects (objective case, as in "And he laughing said to me"). In what follows I'll give the objective case in brackets after the nominative case.

The first-person singular is "I" [objective: "me"]; the first-person plural is "we" ["us"].

The modern second-person pronoun is "you" in both the singular and plural, nominative and objective, though in the past it was more complex. Then, the second-person singular was "thou" ["thee"], and the plural was "ye." "Thou" was used both in familiar address and in an exalted form of address to God or a monarch; over time, "you" took its place.

The third-person singular pronouns are "he" ["him"]; "she" ["her"]; and "it"; the plural is "they" ["them"].

A change in person ("I" to "you") or in number ("I" to "we") in a poem is always of profound significance, since, on the general principle of inertia, a speaker tends to continue in the same person rather than change, unless the change is somehow provoked. In the poem "In Memory of Eva Gore-Booth and Con Markiewicz," Yeats himself changes
significantly from "I" to "we," as he finally makes common cause with the sisters he had begun by opposing; and his reference to the sisters changes from "one or the other" (third-person, people other than the poet) to "you" (people he addresses) to "we" (part of a group which also contains the poet):

Many a time I think to seek
One or the other out... 

Dear shadows, now you know it all... 

We the great gazebo built... 

A reader who misses the changes in person and number here misses the essential drama of the poem, as the poet changes his mind about the sisters and his relation to them.

Verb

A word that usually conveys either action ("My mother bore me in the southern wild") or state ("And I am black"). Verbs may be

- **Linking verbs**, which join two things that are equivalent ("He seems tired"); "I will become a teacher"; "Mary is a doctor");
- **Transitive verbs**, which take objects both direct and indirect ("I gave him the book"); or
- **Intransitive verbs**, which do not take an object ("The building fell down").

Verbs can appear in two voices:

- **Active**: "I do this."
- **Passive**: "This is done to me."

They can take on different tenses (past, present, future, and so on):

- **Simple present**: "I sing of heaven."
- **Present of habitual action**: "Whenever it rains, I take my umbrella."
- **Present of perpetual truth**: "Water boils at 212°F."
- **Present of state**: "I am a lawyer."
- **Present progressive**: "It is raining."
- **Simple past**: "I knew him, Horatio."
- **Compound past**: "I have known him a long time."

Past progressive: "It was snowing."

Pluperfect: "I had known him for several years before I met his wife."

Simple future: "I will call him tomorrow."

Future perfect: "I will have called him by Wednesday."

Future progressive: "I shall be telling this with a sigh."

They can appear in different moods (statement, question, wish, and so on):

- **Indicative** (states an assertion): "I like him."
- **Interrogative** (asks a question): "Do you like him?"
- **Imperative** (gives a command): "Do this."
- **Subjunctive** (often contrary to fact or hypothetical): "If I were to do this, I would be prosecuted."
- **Optative** (wish): "Oh, if I could only do [have done] this!"
- **Hortatory** (enjoining something): "Let us kiss and part."
- **Conditional**: "I should like to come if you would let me."

Poems can achieve multiple effects by changing tenses and moods as they go along.

Adverb

A word that characterizes (limits or describes) a verb, just as an adjective characterizes a noun. Adverbs answer the questions "Where?" "How?" "In what manner?" "When?" "Why?" and so on. Examples: "Till noon we quietly sailed on"; "my collar mounting firmly to my chin." Since verbs, like nouns, tend to be bare things, the poet uses adverbs to put a halo of circumstance around the verbs of the poem. Verbs are also amplified by adverbial phrases: "From you have I been absent in the spring."
Appendix 3. On Speech Acts

There are numberless speech acts in which a lyric speaker may engage. The list that follows is merely a sampling of common ones in lyric. It is always a good idea to name the successive speech acts in a poem. Does it begin with an apology? Is that followed by a plea? Is that followed by a claim? Is that followed by a boast? This classifying helps you to track the emotions that structure a poem.

**ACKNOWLEDGING**
The darkness drops again, but now I know... .

**ADDRESS**
Old trooper, I see your child's red crayon pass.

**ADMISSION**
Alas, 'tis true, I have gone here and there, And made myself a motley to the view.

**APOLOGY**
Sweet Love of youth, forgive, if I forget thee.

**APOTHEOSIS**
O wild West Wind!

**BANISHING**
Hence, loathed Melancholy!

**BOAST**
Not marble, nor the gilded monuments Of princes, shall outlive this powerful rhyme.

**CELEBRATION**
I celebrate myself, and sing myself.

**CLAIM**
Mine — by the Right of the White Election!

**COMMAND**
Irish poets, learn your trade, Sing whatever is well made.

**CONJECTURE**
Thou mayst be false, and yet I know it not.

**CONSOLOATION**
Fear no more the heat o' the sun.

**DEFINITION**
Remorse — is Memory — awake —

**DESCRIPTION**
No cloud, no relic of the sunken day Distinguishes the West.

**DIALOGUE**
Does the road wind uphill all the way? Yes, to the very end.

**DREAMING**
I dream of a Ledaean body, bent Above a sinking fire.

**EXCLAMATION**
What a piece of work is a man!

**EXHORTATION**
Be shelled, eyes, with double dark And find the uncreated light.

**EXPOSTULATION**
Up, up, my friend, and quit your books!

**GENERALIZATION**
All this the world well knows, yet none knows well To shun the heaven that leads men to this hell.

**IMPRECATION**
For God's sake hold your tongue, and let me love.

**INSTRUCTION**
He who binds to himself a joy Does the winged life destroy.

**INVITATION**
Come live with me and be my love.

**INVOCATION**
But come, thou goddess fair and free.

**LAMENT**
Alas! I have nor hope nor health.

**NARRATION**
It is an ancient Mariner And he stoppeth one of three.

**PAST**
I wandered lonely as a cloud.

**HABITUAL**
For oft, when on my couch I lie... . They flash upon that inward eye.

**HISTORICAL**
Calvert and Wilson, Blake and Claude, Prepared a peace for the people of God.

**OATH**
I will not harm her, by all saints I swear.

**PLEA**
Say, may I be for aye thy vassal blest?

**PRAYER**
Mine, O thou Lord of life, send my roots rain.

**PROPHECY**
Therefore all seasons shall be sweet to thee.

**QUESTION**
Did he who made the Lamb make thee?

**REBUTTAL**
Love's not Time's fool.

**REMNISCENCE**
I was thy neighbor once, thou rugged Pile!

**REQUEST**
 Permit me voyage, love, into your hands.

**RESOLVE**
Despair I will not.

**RETRACTION**
But I am by her death (which word wrongs her) . . .
Appendix 4. On Rhetorical Devices

These devices, sometimes called "figures of speech," appear in all speech and writing (you can find them in advertising, political speeches, and newspapers, as well as in essays, letters, and poems). It helps, if you wish to give a brief description of what a writer is doing at a given moment, to know some of these shorthand terms for frequent practices.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Rhetorical Device</th>
<th>Description</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Alternative Ordering</strong></td>
<td>A man that looks on glass, On it may stay his eye, Or, if he pleaseth, through it pass, And then the heaven espy.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Analogy</strong></td>
<td>No more be grieved at that which thou hast done: Roses have thorns, and silver fountains mud.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Anaphora</strong> (repetition of opening word)</td>
<td>All shuffle there, all cough in ink, All wear the carpet with their shoes, All think what other people think; All know the man their neighbor knows.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Anticlimax</strong></td>
<td>In silk, in crepes, in Garters, and in rags.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Antithesis</strong> (opposition of A and B)</td>
<td>For I have sworn thee fair, and thought thee bright, Who art as black as hell, as dark as night.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Apposition</strong> (list of different formulations of the same thing)</td>
<td>The Mind of Man, My haunt, and the main region of my song.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Catalogue</strong></td>
<td>The leaden-eyed shark, the walrus, the turtle, the hairy sea-leopard.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Chiasmus</strong> (an X-like arrangement)</td>
<td>By brooks too broad for leaping</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Hierarchical ordering
Such sweet neglect more taketh me
Than all th' adulteries of art.

Metaphor
Church bells beyond the stars heard, the
soul's blood,
The land of spices; something understood.

Metonymy
Four beating wings, two beaks, a swirling
mass.

Onomatopoeia
And murmuring of innumerable bees.

Paradox
There is in God, some say,
A deep but dazzling darkness.

Parallelism
These are thy wonders, Lord of Power . . .
These are thy wonders, Lord of Love.

Periphrasis
The Peer now spreads the glittering forfex wide
[= opens scissors]

Personification
Love is swift of foot,
Love's a man of war.

Pun
Therefore I lie with her, and she with me,
And in our faults by lies we flattered be.

Quotation
My flesh began unto my soul in pain,
"Sicknesses cleave my bones."

Simile
Like as the waves make toward the
pebbled shore,
So do our minutes hasten to their end.

Synecdoche
Diadems — drop — and Doges —
surrender

Zeugma
Or stain her honor, or her new brocade.

Appendix 5. On Lyric Subgenres

This is a summary of the kinds of poems that lyric poets return to
most frequently. It is convenient to be able to name a poem by its kind,
because you can then compare it to others of the same kind.

Address to the reader
Pray thee, take care, that tak'st my book.

Ballad
There lived a wife at Usher's well,
And a wealthy wife was she;
She had three stout and stalwart sons,
And sent them o'er the sea.

Child's poem
"The Little Black Boy" (Blake)

Dawn Poem
Get up! get up for shame! the blooming
morn
Upon her wings presents the god unborn.

Deathbed poem
I heard a Fly buzz — when I died —

Debate-poem
Body
O who shall me deliver whole
From bonds of this tyrannic soul? . . .
Soul
What magic could me thus confine
Within another's grief to pine?

Echo-poem
Then tell me, what is that supreme de-
light? Light.
Light to the mind, what shall the will en-
joy? Joy.

Epiphraim
"Ode on a Grecian Urn" (Keats)

Epigram
Felix Randal the farrier, O is he dead
then, my duty all ended?

Emblem-poem
"The Sick Rose" (Blake)
I am his Highness' dog at Kew:
And pray, good sir, whose dog are you?

Underneath this stone doth lie
All of beauty that could die.

And evermore they Hymen Hymen sing,
That al the woods them answer and theyr
eccho ring.

Jerusalem, Jerusalem,
Lift up your gates and sing,
Hosanna in the highest . . .

I the poet William Yeats . . .
Restored this tower for my wife George:
And may these characters remain
When all is ruin once again.

This is my letter to the world
That never wrote to me.

And wilt thou leave me thus?

Lullay, lullay, thou tiny child.

“The Solitary Reaper” (Wordsworth)

‘Tis the year’s midnight, and it is the day’s.

The shepherds’ swains shall dance and sing
For thy delight each May morning.

“Easter, 1916” (Yeats)

Shall I compare thee to a summer’s day?
Thou art more lovely and more temperate.

“The Pilgrimage” (Herbert)

I saw eternity the other night.

“The Eve of St. Agnes” (Keats)

Sumer is icumen in,
Lhude sing cuccu!

I sing of brooks, of blossoms, birds, and
bowers.

“Easter Wings” (Herbert)

It was a lover and his lass,
With a hey and a ho and a hey nonny
no . . .

“The Lamb” and “The Tyger” (Blake)

Adieu, farewell earth’s bliss.

“Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Black-
bird” (Stevens)

There are many other such that one could name: the *bird poem*, the
elegy (a dialogue of shepherds), the *georgic* (a poem on farming), the *tes-
tament* (a poem making a will), the *conversation poem* (a poem of a middle,
or familiar, style recounting a conversation among friends), and so on.
The essential thing is to realize that almost any poem is a repeat of a pre-
ceding genre, perhaps an answer to it, perhaps a revision of it. Thinking
“What kind of a lyric is this?” makes you more aware of its place in a
genre tradition, and of its response to that tradition.