

The Closed Form Survival Manual

Lit 120

Triple quatrain	AABA
Double couplet (elagic) quatrain	AABB
Straight Four Quatrain	AAAA

Chaucerian Stanza (rhyme royal) ABABBCC

*The double sorwe of Troilus to tellen,
That was the king Priamus sone of Troye,
In lovinge, how his adventures fellen
Fro wo to wele, and after out of Ioye,
My purpos is, er that I parte fro ye,
Thesiphone, thou help me for tendyte
Thise woful vers, that wepen as I wryt*

The Ottava Rima ABABABCC

*Before those cruel twins whom at one birth
Incestuous Change bore to her father Time,
Error and Truth, had hunted from the earth
All those bright natures which adorned its prime,
And left us nothing to believe in, worth
The pains of putting into learn*d rhyme,
A Lady Witch there lived on Atlas mountain
Within a cavern by a secret fountain.*

The Spenserian Stanza. 8 iambic pentameter lines, followed by a hexameter line.

ABABBBCBBC

*A gentle knight was pricking on the plaine,
Ycladd in mightie armes and silver shielde,
Wherein old dints of deepe woundes did remaine,
The cruell markes of many a bloody fielde;
Yet armes till that time did he never wield:
His angry steede did chide his foaming bitt,
As much disdayning to the curbe to yield:
Full jolly knight he seemed, and faire did sitt,
As one for knightly jousts and fierce encounters fitt.*

Terza Rima. 3 line iambic verse, with alternating rhyme schemes: ABA, BCB, CDC, DED, etc.

*Midway on our life's journey, I found myself
In dark woods, the right road lost. To tell
About those woods is hard--so tangled and rough*

*And savage that thinking of it now, I feel
The old fear stirring: death is hardly more bitter.
And yet, to treat the good I found there as well*

*I'll tell what I saw, thought how I came to enter
I cannot well say, being so full of sleep
Whatever moment it was I began to blunder*

There are a number of additional forms and formats for closed form poems:

From the Craft of Poetry

The Epic A long narrative poem, told in a formal, elevated style, that focuses on a serious subject and chronicles heroic deeds and events important to a culture or nation. The oldest piece of literature is the Epic of Gilgamesh. Homer's *Iliad* and *Odyssey* are epics. In English literature, John Milton's *Paradise Lost* is an epic.

The Ode A relatively lengthy lyric poem that often expresses lofty emotions in a dignified style. Odes are characterized by a serious topic, such as truth, art, freedom, justice, or the meaning of life; their tone tends to be formal. There is no prescribed pattern that defines an ode; some odes repeat the same pattern in each stanza, while others introduce a new pattern in each stanza. Some of the oldest odes are probably those written by the Greek poet, Pindar (Victory Odes). A couple of my favorites are written by two 19th century English poets, both romanticists -- John Keats' "Ode to A Nightingale" and Percy Bysshe Shelley's "Ode to the West Wind" (p. 723).

The Ballad Traditionally, a ballad is a song, transmitted orally from generation to generation, that tells a story and that eventually is written down. As such, ballads usually cannot be traced to a particular author or group of authors. Typically, ballads are dramatic, condensed, and impersonal narratives, such as "Bonny Barbara Allan" or "House Carpenter." A literary ballad is a narrative poem that is written in deliberate imitation of the language, form, and spirit of the traditional ballad, such as "Ballad of Birmingham" by Dudley Randall or "Ballad of the Landlord" by Langston Hughes (p. 828).

The Sonnet A fixed form of lyric poetry that consists of fourteen lines, usually written in iambic pentameter. There are two basic types of sonnets, the Italian and the English. The Italian sonnet, also known as the Petrarchan sonnet, is divided into an octave, which typically rhymes abbaabba, and a sestet, which may have varying rhyme schemes. Common rhyme patterns in the sestet are cdecde, cdcdcd, and cdccdc. Very often the octave presents a situation, attitude, or problem that the sestet comments upon or resolves, as in John Keats's "On First Looking into Chapman's Homer." The English sonnet, also known as the Shakespearean sonnet, is organized into three quatrains and a couplet, which typically rhyme abab cdcd efef gg. This rhyme scheme is more suited to English poetry because English has fewer rhyming words than Italian. English sonnets, because of their four-part organization, also have more flexibility with respect to where thematic breaks can occur. The several sonnets we'll study are "My Mistress Eyes Are Nothing Like the Sun" (p. 712), "Ozymandias" (p. 903); "The World is Too Much with Us" (p. 710), and "Unholy Sonnet" (p. 714).

Villanelle A type of fixed form poetry consisting of nineteen lines of any length divided into six stanzas: five tercets and a concluding quatrain. The first and third lines of the initial tercet rhyme; these rhymes are repeated in each subsequent tercet (aba) and in the final two lines of the quatrain (abaa). Line 1 appears in its entirety as lines 6, 12, and 18, while line 3 reappears as lines 9, 15, and 19. Dylan Thomas's "Do not go gentle into that good night" is a villanelle.

Haiku A style of lyric poetry borrowed from the Japanese that typically presents an intense emotion or vivid image of nature, which, traditionally, is designed to lead to a spiritual insight. Haiku is a fixed poetic form, consisting of seventeen syllables organized into three unrhymed lines of five, seven, and five syllables. Today, however, many poets vary the syllabic count in their haiku.

Source: <http://brainstorm-services.com/wcu-2002/poetry-structure.html>

Meter and Verse

Closed form poems frequently use meter. Meter refers to the rhythmic “beat” created by the use of syllabic groups (feet) in a line. Each foot contains one or more stressed (long) and unstressed (short) syllable(s). There are 4 major types of meter used in English language poetry:

Iamb: a short syllable, followed by a long syllable (2 syllables per foot).

Trochee/choree: a long syllable, followed by a short syllable (2 syllables per foot).

Anapest: 2 short syllables, followed by a long syllable (3 syllables).

Dactyl: 1 long syllable followed by 2 short syllables (3 syllables).

The length of a line is determined by the number of feet per line, as follows:

Dimeter: 2 feet per line.

Trimeter: 3 feet per line.

Tetrameter: 4 feet per line.

Pentameter: the most common length in English closed form poetry.

Heptameter: 6 feet per line.

Septameter: 7 feet per line.

Octameter: 8 feet per line.

Some lines may end with a half foot.

A line is thus measured by its length and meter: iambic pentameter, anapestic dimeter, trochaic octameter, dactylic tetrameter, etc. The process used to determine the length and meter of a line is known as scanning.

To scan a poem, read the line naturally to determine the “beat,” the syllables naturally stressed (don’t over-emphasize this when reading the poem out loud). This should determine the pattern of stresses. Take the following line from Byron’s “She Walks in Beauty”:

She walks in beauty, like the night

You should count the number of syllables per line. In this case, there are 8 syllables, which rules out anapestic and dactylic meters (these have 3 syllables per foot). Now separate the feet with slashes between each two syllables:

She walks/in beau/ty, like/the night

Ideally, you should identify the stresses when you read the poem, but now that you have the line broken up, you can identify the stresses:

She *walks*/in *beau*/ty, *like*/the *night*

In this case, I highlighted the stressed syllables in italics. The stresses fall in the second syllable, and there are four feet in the line, which identify the line as written in iambic tetrameter.

Here’s another example, the opening line from Poe’s “The Raven”:

Once upon a midnight dreary, while I pondered, weak and weary,

In this case, it's important to try to identify the meter as soon as possible (this is the best way of working with any closed form poem). If we identify the stresses, we see this:

Once up/on a *midnight dreary*, *while* I *pondered*, *weak* and *weary*,

The stressed syllable at beginning of each foot, and the fact that every other syllable is stressed, indicates that the poem uses trochaic meter. Simply count the feet:

Once up/on a/midnight/dreary/, while I/pondered/, weak and/weary,

Eight feet= octameter.

So why bother with this? First, the explication requires a technical reading of the poem. More importantly, rhyme and meter play an important role in setting the poem's tone, mood and overall "feel." The English language lends itself well to iambs, but the trochee is an appropriate choice for "The Raven," as that meter's plodding beat conveys a sense of doom.

While a poem's technical elements are obviously important, it's still important to enjoy the work as a piece of art. Oh, and don't get too wrapped up in the idea that a rhyme involves two words with similar sounds: "good" and "blood" can be considered rhymes, as could walked and biked, simply because they share the same letters in the latter part of each word.