
WRITING ESSAYS
ABOUT LITERATURE

A Guide and Style Sheet
SIXTH EDITION

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Interpreting Poetry

Poetry shares many elements with its sister genres, drama and fiction. And indeed, many works of drama and fiction are written in the form of poetry. Plays by Shakespeare, Goethe, Molière, Marlowe, Maxwell Anderson, and T. S. Eliot; narrative works by Homer, Chaucer, Dante, Longfellow, Milton, Spenser, Tennyson, and Browning are examples. But poetry usually differs from prose drama and fiction in several key ways. In general, it is more concentrated—that is, poetry says more in fewer words. Poets achieve this concentration by selecting details more carefully, by relying more heavily on implication (through figurative language, connotation, and sensuous imagery), and by more carefully organizing the form of their poetry (through rhythmic speech patterns and “musical” qualities such as rhyme). Because of the relative shortness of poetry and because of its greater concentration, it demands a more complete unity than prose fiction; nearly every word, sound, and image contributes to a single effect.

Poetry is a complex subject. The following is a *brief* survey of its elements, with questions and exercises that should help you generate interpretations of individual poems.

The Elements of Poetry

Characterization, Point of View, Plot, Setting, and Theme

Some poems—“narrative” poems—are very similar to prose fiction and drama in their handling of characterization, point of view, plot, and

setting. Thus many of the same questions one asks about a short story, novel, or play are relevant to these poems. Most poems, however, do not offer a "story" in the conventional sense. They are usually brief and apparently devoid of "action." Even so, a plot of sorts may be implied, a place and time may be important, a specific point of view may be operating, and characters may be dramatizing the key issues of the poem. In any poem there is always one "character" of the utmost importance, even if he or she is the only character. This character is the speaker, the "I" of the poem. Often the speaker is a fictional personage, not at all equivalent to the poet, who may not be speaking to the reader but to another character, as is the case in Marvell's "To His Coy Mistress" and Browning's "My Last Duchess." The poem might even be a dialogue between two or more people, as in ballads such as "Edward" and "Lord Randal" and in Frost's "The Death of the Hired Man." Thus the poem can be a little drama or story, in which one or more fictional characters participate. But more typically, one character, the "I," speaks of something that concerns him or her deeply and personally. Such poems are called "lyric" poems because of their subjective, musical, highly emotional, and imaginative qualities. They are songlike utterances by one person, the "I."

Questions about characterization, point of view, plot, setting, and theme In analyzing poetry, your first step should be to come to grips with the "I" of the poem, the speaker. You should answer questions such as: Who is speaking? What characterizes the speaker? To whom is he or she speaking? What is the speaker's tone? What is the speaker's emotional state? Why is he or she speaking? What situation is being described? What are the conflicts or tensions in this situation? How is setting—social situation, physical place, and time—important to the speaker? What ideas is the speaker communicating? Matthew Arnold's "Dover Beach" provides an example of how you can use most of these questions to get at the meanings of a poem.

DOVER BEACH

MATTHEW ARNOLD

The sea is calm to-night.
The tide is full, the moon lies fair
Upon the straits; on the French coast the light
Gleams and is gone; the cliffs of England stand,
Glimmering and vast, out in the tranquil bay.

Come to the window, sweet is the night-air!
Only, from the long line of spray
Where the sea meets the moon-blanch'd land,
Listen! you hear the grating roar
Of pebbles which the waves draw back, and fling,
At their return, up the high strand,
Begin, and cease, and then again begin,
With tremulous cadence slow, and bring
The eternal note of sadness in.

Sophocles long ago
Heard it on the Aegean, and it brought
Into his mind the turbid ebb and flow
Of human misery; we
Find also in the sound a thought,
Hearing it by this distant northern sea.

The Sea of Faith
Was once, too, at the full, and round earth's shore
Lay like the folds of a bright girdle furled.
But now I only hear
Its melancholy, long, withdrawing roar,
Retreating, to the breath
Of the night-wind, down the vast edges drear
And naked shingles* of the world.

Ah, love, let us be true
To one another! for the world, which seems
To lie before us like a land of dreams,
So various, so beautiful, so new,
Hath really neither joy, nor love, nor light,
Nor certitude, nor peace, nor help for pain;
And we are here as on a darkling plain
Swept with confused alarms of struggle and flight,
Where ignorant armies clash by night.

*beaches covered with pebbles

Because Dover is an English port city, one of several points of departure for the European continent, the speaker has apparently stopped for the night on his way to Europe. As he looks out of his hotel window, he speaks to another person in the room, his "love" (last stanza). Arnold traces the speaker's train of thought in four stanzas. In the first stanza,

the speaker describes what he sees, and his tone is contented, even joyous. He sees the lights on the French coast and the high white cliffs of Dover “glimmering” in the moonlight. He invites his companion to share the glorious view. As he describes the sound of the surf to her, his tone alters slightly; the sound reminds him of “the eternal note of sadness.” This melancholy tone deepens in the second stanza. There the speaker connects the sea sound with a passage in Sophocles, probably the third chorus of *Antigone*, which compares the misery of living under a family curse to the incessant roar of a stormy sea beating against the land.

In the third stanza, the remembrance of Sophocles’s comparison leads the speaker to make a more disturbing comparison of his own. He likens the sea to faith—apparently religious faith, both his own and that of his age. He says that at one time the “Sea of Faith” was full but now has withdrawn, leaving a “vast,” “drear,” and coarse world. By the fourth stanza, the speaker has fallen into near despair. He says that what merely looks beautiful—the panorama seen from his window—is only a false image of the world, which in reality is absurd and chaotic. He has only one hope, his companion, whom he now urges to be true to him as he is true to her. The speaker, in short, is an erudite, thoughtful, but deeply troubled person. The poem takes him from momentary contentedness to near hopelessness. The stimulus for his train of thought is the place of the poem—Dover Beach—and the companion to whom he addresses his remarks. All these elements—thoughts, place, and companion—are interrelated.

■ Thinking on Paper about Characterization, Point of View, Plot, Setting, and Theme

Many of the exercises one does on poetry consist of marking the poem itself. You might, then, photocopy the poem you want to interpret and write on the photocopy rather than the book. Some photocopy machines will enlarge images. Since poems are often published in small print, taking advantage of this feature would allow you to better see the poem and have more space to write. You might want to make more than one copy of the poem. Use different copies for marking different aspects of the poem.

1. Find the subject, verb, and object of every sentence in the poem. Sometimes this will be easy; reading poetry will be like reading

clear prose. But sometimes it will not. Because poetry often conforms to structural requirements and because it is a condensed form of communication, sentence structures are sometimes distorted and words are left out. In such cases, you will have to put the sentence in normal order and insert missing words.

2. Paraphrase the poem. This helps you understand every sentence or, at least, the major sections of the poem. The two paragraphs immediately following “Dover Beach” (pp. 89–90), for example, are a paraphrase of the poem.
3. Identify the speaker of the poem. Underline the words and phrases that help characterize the speaker and bring out the speaker’s concerns. Describe in detail the traits of the speaker and of any other characters in the poem.
4. Describe the situation of the poem: where the speaker is, what time of day it is, what season of the year, what historical occasion, to whom the speaker is speaking, why. List the external and internal conflicts of the poem.
5. State the issues that concern the speaker (what the poem is about). Explain the speaker’s ideas (the themes of the poem). Note any changes in the speaker’s mood or ideas as the poem moves from unit to unit. Explain what the speaker is trying to accomplish.
6. Describe the speaker’s tone (angry, lyrical, hopeful, bitter, nostalgic, sarcastic, compassionate, admiring, sorrowful, amused, and so forth). Note any changes of tone.
7. If the speaker is not the poet, estimate the poet’s attitude toward the speaker and to the issues raised by the poem. Indicate any differences between the poet’s attitude and the speaker’s.
8. Describe important contrasts made in the poem. Explain their relationships to characterization and theme.
9. Relate the poem’s title to its themes.
10. Explain any allusions in the poem. An *allusion* is a reference to historical events and people, to mythological and biblical figures, and to works of literature. Allusions invite comparison between the work at hand and the items referred to. An example of an allusion is Arnold’s reference to Sophocles in “Dover Beach.” Arnold invites us to bring the weight of Sophocles’s tragedies to bear on the subject matter of his poem. An allusion is a compact way of adding meaning to the work. Explain, then, the implications of the allusions.

Diction

Basically, *diction* refers to the poet's choice of words. Poets are sensitive to the subtle shades of meanings of words, to the possible double meanings of words, and to the denotative and connotative meanings of words. As we say in Chapter 2, *denotation* is the object or idea—the referent—that a word represents. The denotation of a word is its core meaning, its dictionary meaning. *Connotation* is the subjective, emotional association that a word has for one person or a group of people. Poets often choose words that contribute to the poem's meaning on both a denotational and a connotational level.

Questions about diction Examine the words in a poem for all their possible shades and levels of meaning. Then ask how these meanings combine to create an overall effect. Note, for example, the effect that connotation creates in William Wordsworth's "A Slumber Did My Spirit Seal."

A SLUMBER DID MY SPIRIT SEAL

WILLIAM WORDSWORTH

A slumber did my spirit seal;
I had no human fears—
She seemed a thing that could not feel
The touch of earthly years.

No motion has she now, no force;
She neither hears nor sees;
Rolled round in earth's diurnal course,
With rocks, and stones, and trees.

In order to create the stark contrast between the active, airy girl of the first stanza with the inert, dead girl of the second, Wordsworth relies partly on the connotative effect of the last line. We know the denotative meaning of "rocks, and stones, and trees," but in this context the emotional or connotative meaning is unpleasant and grating. Rocks and stones are inanimate, cold, cutting, impersonal. And although we usually think of trees as beautiful and majestic, here the association of trees with rocks and stones makes us think of tree roots, of dirt, and thus of the girl's burial. The rocks and stones and trees are not only not human, they confine and smother the girl. Another example of connotation is

the word *diurnal*, which means "daily." But the Latinate *diurnal* has a slightly more formal connotation than the prosaic *daily*. The effect of the word is to make the processes of nature—death, the revolving of Earth, the existence of rocks and stones and trees—seem remote, remorseless, and inevitable.

Be alert for wordplay—double meanings and puns. The speaker in Andrew Marvell's "To His Coy Mistress," for example, tries to persuade a reluctant woman to make love with him. His argument is that time is running out, and unless we take opportunities when they appear, we will lose them. He concludes his speech with a pun:

Thus, though we cannot make our sun
Stand still, yet we will make him run.

That is, we cannot stop time (make the sun stop), but we can bring about new life (a child: "son"), who will "run," and thus defeat decay and death. Some poets, such as e.e. cummings, make imaginative wordplay a dominant trait of their poetry. In "anyone lived in a pretty how town," cummings uses pronouns on two levels of meaning. The words *anyone* and *noone* mean, on the one hand, what we expect them to mean ("anybody" and "nobody"); but on the other hand they refer to two people, male and female, who fall in love, marry, and die.

■ Thinking on Paper about Diction

1. Circle all the words you do not know. Look them up in the dictionary.
2. Underline words that seem especially meaningful or well chosen. For each word, explain denotations and connotations.
3. Underline any wordplay such as double meanings and puns. Explain what the wordplay adds to the sense of the poem.
4. Underline any uses of "unusual" words—slang, profanity, archaisms, foreign language words, made-up words. Explain what qualities and meanings these words add to the poem. Discuss how the poem would be different without them.
5. Identify the level of diction in the poem (formal, informal, colloquial, slangy, dialect). Explain what the poem gains from the use of this level. Explain what it would lose by changing to a different level.
6. Explain how the choice of words contributes to the speaker's tone.

Imagery: Descriptive Language

When applied to poetry, the term *imagery* has two meanings. First, imagery represents the descriptive passages of a poem. Although the word *imagery* calls to mind the visual sense, poetic imagery appeals to all the senses. Sensuous imagery is pleasurable for its own sake, but it also provides concreteness and immediacy. Imagery causes the reader to become personally and experientially involved in the subject matter of the poem. Further, the poet often uses descriptive imagery to underscore other elements in a poem. The selection of detail and the vividness imparted to images help create tone, meaning, and characterization.

An example of descriptive imagery is the first stanza of John Keats's narrative poem "The Eve of St. Agnes":

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 Beadsman'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.

This stanza appeals to the thermal sense (the chill of the evening, the frozen grass), the sense of touch (the beadsman's numb fingers), the visual sense (the beadsman saying his rosary before the picture of the Virgin), the sense of motion (the hare trembling and limping through the grass, the beadsman's frosted breath taking flight toward heaven), and the sense of sound (the silent flock, the sound of the beadsman's monotonous prayer). The dominant sensuous appeal, however, is to the thermal sense. Keats uses every sensuous image in the stanza to make us feel how cold the night is.

Imagery: Figurative Language

Critics today use *imagery* in a second sense. They use it to mean figurative language, especially metaphor. *Figurative language* is the conscious departure from normal or conventional ways of saying things. This could mean merely a rearrangement of the normal word order of a sentence, such as the following: "Sir Gawain the dragon slew" or "With

this ring I thee wed." Such unusual rearrangements are called "rhetorical" figures of speech. But much more common and important to poetry is a second category of figurative language: tropes. *Tropes* (literally, "turns") extend the meaning of words beyond their literal meaning, and the most common form of trope is metaphor. *Metaphor* has both a general and a specific meaning. Generally, it means any analogy. An *analogy* is a similarity between things that are basically different. Specifically, metaphor means a particular kind of analogy and is contrasted with the simile. A *simile* uses *like* or *as* to claim similarities between things that are essentially different; for example, "Her tears were like falling rain." The following stanza from Shakespeare's "Fair Is My Love" contains several similes (indicated by the added italics):

Fair is my love, but not so fair as fickle;
Mild as a dove, but neither true nor trusty;
Brighter than glass, and yet, *as glass is*, brittle;
Softer than wax, and yet, *as iron*, rusty;
A lily pale, with damask dye to grace her;
None fairer, nor none falser to deface her.

A metaphor also claims similarities between things that are essentially unlike, but it eliminates the comparative words (such as *like*) and thus equates the compared items. For example, "My heart was a tornado of passion" (not "My heart was like a tornado of passion"). The poem "Love Is a Sickness" by Samuel Daniel contains three metaphors—love is a sickness, love is a plant, love is a tempest—indicated here by the italics:

LOVE IS A SICKNESS

SAMUEL DANIEL

Love is a sickness full of woes,
All remedies refusing.
A *plant* that with most cutting grows,
Most barren with best using.
Why so?

More we enjoy it, more it dies,
If not enjoyed it sighing cries,
Hey ho.

Love is a torment of the mind,
A *tempest* everlasting,

And Jove hath made it of a kind
 Not well, nor full, nor fasting.
 Why so?

More we enjoy it, more it dies,
 If not enjoyed it sighing cries,
 Hey ho.

Analogies can be directly stated or implied. The similes and metaphors in the above poems by Shakespeare and Daniel are directly stated analogies; but when Daniel in the last lines of each stanza says that love “sighs,” he implies a kind of analogy called *personification*; he pretends that love has the attributes of a person. When the poet develops just one analogy throughout the whole poem, the analogy is called an *extended metaphor*. Thomas Campion’s “There Is a Garden in Her Face” contains an extended metaphor comparing the features of a woman’s face to the features of a garden:

THERE IS A GARDEN IN HER FACE

THOMAS CAMPION

There is a garden in her face,
 Where roses and white lilies grow,
 A heavenly paradise is that place,
 Wherein all pleasant fruits do flow.
 There cherries grow, which none may buy
 Till “Cherry ripe!” themselves do cry.

Those cherries fairly do enclose
 Of orient pearl a double row;
 Which when her lovely laughter shows,
 They look like rosebuds filled with snow.
 Yet them nor peer nor prince can buy,
 Till “Cherry ripe!” themselves do cry.
 Her eyes like angels watch them still;
 Her brows like bended bows do stand,
 Threatening with piercing frowns to kill
 All that attempt with eye or hand
 Those sacred cherries to come nigh,
 Till “Cherry ripe!” themselves do cry.

*A familiar cry of London street vendors

Questions about imagery Imagery is an important—some would argue the most important—characteristic of poetry. You should try to identify the imagery of a poem. Ask, then, what senses the poet appeals to and what analogies he or she implies or states directly. Ask, *Why* does the poet use these particular images and analogies? In “Dover Beach,” for example, Arnold uses both descriptive and metaphorical imagery meaningfully. He emphasizes two senses: the visual and the aural. He begins with the visual—the moon, the lights of France across the water, the cliffs, the tranquil bay—and throughout the poem he associates hope and beauty with what the speaker sees. But the poet soon introduces the aural sense—the grating roar of the sea—which serves as an antithesis to the visual sense. These two senses create a tension that mirrors the conflict in the speaker’s mind. The first two stanzas show the speaker merely drifting into a perception of this conflict, connecting sight with hope and sound with sadness. By the third stanza, he has become intellectually alert to the full implications of the conflict. He signals this alertness with a carefully worked out analogy, his comparison of the sea with faith. In the fourth stanza, he sums up his despairing conclusion with a stunning and famous simile:

And we are here as on a darkling plain
 Swept with confused alarms of struggle and flight,
 Where ignorant armies clash by night.

This final analogy achieves several purposes. First, it brings the implication of the descriptive imagery to a logical conclusion. No longer can the speaker draw hope from visual beauty; in this image, he cannot see at all—it is night, the plain is dark. He can only hear, but the sound now is more chaotic and directly threatening than the mere ebb and flow of the sea. Second, the analogy provides an abrupt change of setting. Whereas before, the speaker visualized an unpeopled plain, now he imagines human beings as agents of destruction. He implies that a world without faith must seem and be arbitrary and violent. Finally, the analogy allows the speaker to identify his own place in this new world order. Only loyalty is pure and good, so he and his companion must cling to each other and maneuver throughout the world’s battlefields as best they can.

■ Thinking on Paper about Descriptive Language

1. Mark the descriptive images. For each image, name the sense appealed to. Characterize the dominant impression these images make.

2. Explain the relationship of descriptive images to the speaker's state of mind.
3. Describe how the descriptive images create a sense of the time of day and season of the year.
4. Note any progression in the descriptive images; for example, from day to night, hot to cold, soft to loud, color to color, slow to fast.
5. Explain how the descriptive images help create atmosphere and mood. Slow movements, for example, are conducive to melancholy; speed to exuberance and excitement.

■ Thinking on Paper about Figurative Language

1. Mark the similes in the poem. Underline or circle the words that signal the comparisons (words such as *like, as, similar to, resembles*). Explain the implications of the analogies (that is, what they contribute to the meaning of the poem).
2. Mark the metaphors in the poem. Explain the implications of the analogies.
3. Mark any personification in the poem. Underline the words and phrases that make the personification clear.
4. Poets often use analogies to help make an abstract quality, such as "love" or "my love's beauty" or "my current predicament" or "the destructive effect of time" or "God's grandeur," concrete and knowable. They do so by comparing the abstract quality to something the reader knows well. Almost always this "something" is a physical object or reality. Name the abstract quality the poet wants to clarify and the object the poet is comparing it to. List the qualities of the object. Explain how the comparison has clarified the abstraction.
5. List the senses appealed to in each analogy. Describe the dominant sensuous impression created by the analogies.

Rhythm

All human speech has rhythm, but poetry often regularizes that rhythm into recognizable patterns. These patterns are called *meters*. Metrical patterns vary depending on the sequence in which one arranges the accented (á) and unaccented (â) syllables of an utterance. The unit that

determines that arrangement is the foot. A *foot* is one unit of rhythm in a verse. Probably the most natural foot in English is the iambic, which has an unaccented syllable followed by an accented syllable (âá). Here are the most common metrical feet:

iamb (iambic) âá	âbóve
trochee (trochaic) áâ	lóvelý
anapest (anapestic) ââá	ôvêrwhélm
dactyl (dactylic) áââ	róyáltý
spondee (spondaic) áá	bréak, bréak

Poets further determine the arrangement of metrical patterns by the number of feet in each line. The following names apply to the lengths of poetic lines:

monometer (one foot)
 dimeter (two feet)
 trimeter (three feet)
 tetrameter (four feet)
 pentameter (five feet)
 hexameter (six feet)
 heptameter (seven feet)
 octameter (eight feet)

A very common line in English poetry is iambic pentameter; it contains five iambic feet. Shakespeare wrote his plays in iambic pentameter, and the sonnet is traditionally composed in iambic pentameter (see pages 107–108 for some examples).

Another feature of line length is that each line may have a fixed number of syllables. When people speak of iambic pentameter, they usually think of a line containing five accented syllables and ten syllables in all. Even if the poet substitutes other feet for iambs, the number of syllables in the line comes out the same—ten for iambic pentameter, eight for iambic tetrameter, six for iambic trimeter, and so forth. When a line of poetry is measured by both accents and syllables, it is called *accentual-syllabic*. Most English poetry is accentual-syllabic, as in these iambic tetrameter lines from "To His Coy Mistress":

Hād wé bŭt wórlđ ěnóugh, ańđ tíme,
Thís cóyneěě, ládŷ, weré nŏ críme.

Each line has four iambic feet—four accented syllables, eight syllables in all. But not all English poetry is accentual-syllabic. Sometimes it is just accentual. Traditional ballads, for example, often count the number of accents per line but not the number of syllables:

"O whére hae ye beén, Lord Rándal, my sŏn?
O whefe hae ye beén, my harĩdsome young mán?"
"I hae beén to the wĩld wŏod; móther, máke my bed soón,
For I'm weáry wi hũńting, and fáin wald lie dŏwn."

The third line of this stanza contains six accented syllables but thirteen (not twelve) syllables. The first two lines contain four accents but ten (not eight) syllables. And the last line contains four accents but twelve (not eight) syllables. The important factor in purely accentual lines is where the accent falls; the poet can freely use the accents to emphasize meaning. One of the accents in line three, for example, falls on *wild*, which expresses the treacherous place from which Lord Randal has returned.

Because individuals hear and speak a language in different ways, *scanning* a poem (using symbols to mark accented and unaccented syllables and thus to identify its metrical pattern) is not an exact science. Some poets establish easily recognizable—often strongly rhythmical—metrical patterns, and scanning their poems is easy. Other poets use more subtle rhythms that make the poetic lines less artificial and more like colloquial language. The best poets often deliberately depart from the metrical pattern they establish at the beginning of the poem. When you scan a poem, therefore, you need not force phrases unnaturally into the established metrical pattern. Always put the accents where you and most speakers would normally say them. The poet probably intends them to go there.

When you scan a poem, be alert for caesuras. A *caesura* is a strong pause somewhere in the line. You mark a caesura with two vertical lines: || Consider the caesuras in this jump-rope rhyme:

Cinderella, dressed in yellow,
Went upstairs || to kiss a fellow.
Made a mistake; || kissed a snake.
How many doctors did it take?
One, two, three, four . . .

A likely place for a caesura is in the middle of the line, and if the meter of the poem is tetrameter, then a caesura in the middle neatly divides the line in half. Such is the case in lines 2 and 3 of this poem. A caesura may also occur near the beginning of a line or near the end. Or there may be no caesuras in a line, as is probably the case in lines 4, 5, and possibly 1 of this poem. Caesuras often emphasize meaning. Caesuras in the middle of lines, for example, can emphasize strong contrasts or close relationships between ideas. In line 3, both the caesura and the rhyme of "mistake" with "snake" link the abstraction (the mistake) with the action (kissing the snake).

A profound example of the relationship between meaning and caesura—indeed, between meaning and all the qualities of poetic sound—is Shakespeare's Sonnet 129:

SONNET 129

WILLIAM SHAKESPEARE

Th' expense of spirit || in a waste of shame
Is lust in action; || and, till action, lust
Is perjured, murderous, bloody, full of blame,
Savage, extreme, rude, cruel, not to trust;
Enjoyed no sooner || but despisèd straight; 5
Past reason hunted; || and no sooner had,
Past reason hated, || as a swallowed bait,
On purpose laid || to make the taker mad;
Mad in pursuit, || and in possession so;
Had, having, and in quest to have, extreme; 10
A bliss in proof; || and proved, a very woe;
Before, a joy proposed; || behind, a dream.
All this the world well knows; || yet none knows well
To shun the heaven || that leads men to this hell.

Here Shakespeare establishes a pattern of contrasts and similarities, and uses caesura and other sound devices to establish them. One of these devices is the accentual pattern. Like most sonnets, this one has ten syllables per line and is supposed to be iambic pentameter. But for many of these lines, Shakespeare has only four accents per line, not five. This allows him to make some of his comparisons equal in weight. Line 5, for example, has a strong caesura and four accented syllables:

Enjoyed no sooner || but despisèd straight.

The effect is to contrast strongly the two emotional states, pleasure and guilt; and since Shakespeare puts guilt last, he gives it more weight. Lines 11 and 12, however, contain caesuras and five accents each, making the two-part divisions within the lines unequal. Note how this relates to the meaning of the lines:

A bliss in próof; || and próved, a véry wóe;
Befóre, a jóy propósed; || behiñd, a dréam.

The “weaker” sides of the lines contain the pleasure part of the equation and emphasize the brevity and insubstantial quality of pleasure; the “strong” sides emphasize either naïve expectation or guilt.

Questions about rhythm Metrics has many uses in poetry. It provides a method of ordering material. It creates a hypnotic effect that rivets attention on the poem. Like the rhythmic qualities of music, it is enjoyable for itself. Children, for example, take naturally to the strongly rhythmic qualities of nursery rhymes and jump-rope rhymes; jump-rope rhymes, in fact, are that rare form of literature that children teach each other. But probably the greatest importance of metrics is that it establishes a pattern from which the poet can depart. Good poets rarely adhere to the metrical pattern they establish at the beginning of the poem or that is inherent in a fixed form like the sonnet. Sonnet 129, on page 101, is a striking example. Sometimes poets stray from the established pattern to make the language sound more colloquial. Such is partly the case in “Dover Beach” and Browning’s “My Last Duchess,” both of which are spoken by fictional characters. Sometimes poets alter the pattern to emphasize specific aspects of the poem’s content. This is why you should be sensitive to the natural rhythms of the language when you scan a poem. Take, for example, these lines from Sonnet 129: Lust is like

a swallowed bait,	7
On purpose laid to make the taker mad:	8
Mád iñ pŭrsuít, añd iñ pösséssiõn só;	9
Hád, háving, añd iñ quést tõ háve, ěxtréme;	10
A bliss in proof; and proved, a very woe;	11
Before, a joy proposed; behind, a dream.	12

All these lines fit the iambic scheme except lines 9 and 10. Why? A possible reason is that Shakespeare wanted to emphasize certain words in

these two lines, particularly the first words in each. The accents in line 10 are especially emphatic, for the accents emphasize the past (“had”), the present (“having”), the future (“quest” and “have”), and the psychological and moral nature of all three (“extreme”).

Questions to ask about rhythm in poetry, then, are these: Which metrical pattern does the poem use? What is appealing about the pattern? How closely does the poet stick to the established pattern? If closely, why and what effect is the poet striving for? For example, does the poem have a singsong quality? If so, why does the poet do this? Where does the poem vary from the established pattern? Why? How does the poet use pauses, especially caesuras, within each line? Why?

■ Thinking on Paper about Rhythm

1. Count the number of syllables for each line. Write the number at the end of the line.
2. Read the poem aloud, then mark the accented and unaccented syllables of each line.
3. Draw a vertical line between each foot in the line.
4. Identify the metrical pattern (iambic, trochaic, and so forth) and the length of the lines (pentameter, hexameter, and so forth).
5. Use two vertical lines to mark the caesuras in the poem. Explain how the caesuras relate to the sense of each line.
6. Underline the places where the poet departs from the established metrical pattern of the poem. Explain how these departures relate to the sense of each line. Show which words are emphasized by the departures.
7. Explain the appropriateness of the metrical pattern to the poem’s meaning.
8. Describe how easy or difficult it is to read the poem aloud. Does its metrical pattern slow you down? Or does it allow you to read smoothly? Explain how the difficulty or ease of reading the metrical pattern relates to the poem’s meaning and purpose.

Sound

Poets delight in the sound of language and consciously present sounds to be enjoyed for themselves. They also use them to emphasize meaning,

action, and emotion, and especially to call the reader's attention to the relationship of certain words. Rhyme, for example, has the effect of linking words together. Among the most common sound devices are the following:

onomatopoeia—The use of words that sound like what they mean (“buzz,” “boom,” “hiss,” “fizz,” “pop,” “glug”).

alliteration—the repetition of consonant sounds at the beginning of words or at the beginning of accented syllables (“the *woeful* woman went *wading Wednesday*”).

assonance—the repetition of vowel sounds followed by different consonant sounds (“*O*, the *groans* that opened to his ears”).

consonance (or *half-rhyme*)—the repetition of final consonant sounds that are preceded by different vowel sounds (“the *beast* climbed *fast* to the *crest*”). Consonance is the opposite of alliteration, which features initial consonant sounds.

rhyme—the repetition of accented vowels and the sounds that follow. There are subcategories of rhyme:

masculine rhyme (the rhymed sounds have only one syllable: “*man-ran*,” “*detect-correct*”).

feminine rhyme (the rhymed sounds have two or more syllables: “*subtle-rebuttal*,” “*deceptively-perceptively*”).

internal rhyme (the rhymed sounds are within the line).

end rhyme (the rhymed sounds appear at the ends of lines).

approximate rhyme (the words are close to rhyming: “*book-buck*,” “*watch-match*,” “*man-in*”).

Edgar Allan Poe’s “To Helen” illustrates many of these sound devices:

TO HELEN

EDGAR ALLAN POE

Helen, thy beauty is to **me**
 Like those Nicean barks of yore,
 That gently, o’er a perfumed **sea**
 The weary, way-worn wanderer bore
 To his own native shore.

alliteration masculine rhyme/
 end rhyme

consonance On desperate **seas** long wont to roam 6
 Thy hyacinth hair, thy classic **face**
 Thy Naiad **airs** have brought me home approximate rhyme 8
 To the glory that was **Greece**
 And the grandeur that was Rome.

assonance Lo! in yon brilliant window-nich 11
 How statue-like I **see (thee)** stand! internal rhyme
 The agate lamp within thy hand,
 Ah! Psyche, from the regions which
 Are Holy Land!

Questions about sound It’s easy to lose yourself in an analysis of the mechanical intricacies of a poem’s sound structure and forget why you are making the analysis in the first place. You start with the question: What sound devices does the poet use? But you move on to ask: Why does the poet use them? How do they help establish the poem’s tone, atmosphere, theme, setting, characterization, and emotional qualities? What meanings do they suggest? In Poe’s “To Helen,” for example, the alliteration in line 4 (“*weary, way-worn wanderer*”) underscores the fatigued state of the wanderer. The consonance of “*seas*” and “*airs*” in lines 6 and 8 emphasizes the contrast between them; one is “desperate” but the other assuages despair. And the assonance in line 11 (“*in yon brilliant window-nich*”), with its emphasis on high, tight, “i” sounds, helps to characterize the luminosity of the place where Helen, statuelike, stands.

Be especially alert to relationships between ideas established by rhyme, most notably by internal rhyme and end rhyme. Rhyme is, of course, a musical device that makes the sound of the poem attractive to the ear, but it can be used meaningfully as well. Turn back to Sonnet 129 and examine the complex sound associations Shakespeare creates there. The words sound rough, almost painful, with their harsh consonants, all of which illustrate the frustrated and frenetic emotional state Shakespeare ascribes to lust. Note the variation on “s” sounds in the first line:

Th’ expense of spirit in a waste of shame

Line 3 begins a list of qualities, and Shakespeare divides and associates them through assonance and alliteration: Lust

Is perjured, murderous, bloody, full of blame.

The words *perjured* and *murderous* are linked by assonance (the “er” sounds) and focus on evil deeds (falsehood, murder), leading to the second half of the line. The words *bloody* and *blame* are linked by alliteration and focus on the results of evil deeds, especially murder: blood and guilt. The linkages signaled by the poem’s end rhyme are also meaningful: shame/blame, lust/not to trust, no sooner had/make the taker mad, extreme/dream, yet none knows well/leads men to this hell.

In the poem you are analyzing, what linkages of meaning are there to *all* the sound qualities of the words—especially to the obvious ones, such as alliteration, internal rhyme, and end rhyme? What light do these linkages throw on the themes of the entire poem?

■ Thinking on Paper about Sound

1. Underline instances of alliteration, assonance, and consonance in the poem. Explain the relationship between these devices and the sense of the lines where they occur.
2. Circle rhymed words. Explain what similarities and contrasts the rhymed words call attention to.
3. Circle words that have meaningful or attractive sound qualities, such as onomatopoeic words. Explain how these words add to the poem’s sense.
4. When the sounds of a poem are harsh and grating, the effect is called *cacophony*. When they are pleasing and harmonious, the effect is called *euphony*. Underline instances of cacophony or euphony. Explain how they relate to the poem’s sense.
5. Describe any sound devices in the poem that catch you by surprise. Explain how and why the poet uses such surprises.

Structure

Poets give structure to their poems in two overlapping ways: by organizing ideas according to a logical plan and by creating a pattern of sounds. Arnold arranges “Dover Beach” in both ways, as do most poets. He divides the poem into four units, each of which has a pattern of end rhyme, and he arranges the whole poem rhetorically—that is, by ideas. Each unit elaborates a single point, and each point follows logically from the preceding one.

Perhaps the most common sound device by which poets create structure is end rhyme, and any pattern of end rhyme is called a *rhyme scheme*. Rhyme scheme helps to establish another structural device, the *stanza*, which is physically separated from other stanzas (by a space inserted between each stanza) and usually represents one idea.

The stanzas in a poem typically resemble one another structurally. They have the same number of lines, length of lines, metrical patterns, and rhyme schemes. Poets can, of course, create any rhyme scheme or stanza form they choose, but they often work instead within the confines of already established poetic structures. These are called *fixed forms*. Stanzas that conform to no traditional limits, such as those in “Dover Beach,” are called *nonce forms*. The most famous fixed form in English is the *sonnet*. Like other fixed forms, the sonnet provides ready-made structural divisions by which a poet can organize ideas. But it also challenges poets to mold unwieldy material into an unyielding structure. The result is a tension between material and form that is pleasing to both poet and reader.

All sonnets consist of fourteen lines of iambic pentameter. The two best known kinds of sonnets are named for their most famous practitioners. A *Shakespearean sonnet* rhymes abab/cdcd/efef/gg and has a structural division of three quatrains (each containing four lines) and a couplet. A *Petrarchan sonnet* rhymes abbaabba in the octave (the first eight lines) and cdecde in the sestet (the last six lines). Poets often vary the pattern of end rhyme in these kinds of sonnets; this is especially true of the sestet in the Petrarchan sonnet. Note, for example, the sonnet below by Wordsworth. Each kind of sonnet has a *turn*, a point in the poem at which the poet shifts from one meaning or mood to another. The turn in the Shakespearean sonnet occurs between lines 12 and 13 (just before the couplet). The turn in the Petrarchan sonnet occurs between the octave and the sestet. In both forms, the part of the poem before the turn delineates a problem or tension; the part after the turn offers some resolution to or comment on the problem, and it releases the tension.

SONNET 116

WILLIAM SHAKESPEARE

three
quatrains

Let me not to the marriage of true minds
Admit impediments. Love is not love
Which alters when it alteration finds,
Or bends with the remover to remove:

a
b
a
b 4

three quatrains (cont'd)	Oh, no! it is an ever-fixèd mark,	c	
	That looks on tempests and is never shaken;	d	
	It is the star to every wandering bark,	c	
	Whose worth's unknown, although his height be taken,	d	8
	Love's not Time's fool, though rosey lips and cheeks	e	
	Within his bending sickle's compass come;	f	
turn → couplet	Love alters not with his brief hours and weeks,	e	
	But bears it out even to the edge of doom.	f	12
	If this be error and upon me proved,	g	
	I never writ, nor no man ever loved.	g	14

Shakespeare molds the ideas and images of this poem to fit its form perfectly. He states the theme—that love remains constant no matter what—in the first quatrain. In the second, he says that cataclysmic events cannot destroy love. In the third, he says that time cannot destroy love. Finally, in the couplet, he affirms the truth of his theme.

THE WORLD IS TOO MUCH WITH US

WILLIAM WORDSWORTH

octave	The world is too much with us; late and soon,	a	
	Getting and spending, we lay waste our powers;	b	
	Little we see in nature that is ours;	b	
	We have given our hearts away, a sordid boon!	a	4
	This Sea that bares her bosom to the moon,	a	
turn →	The winds that will be howling at all hours,	b	
	And are up-gathered now like sleeping flowers,	b	
	For this, for everything, we are out of tune;	a	8
sestet	It moves us not.—Great God! I'd rather be	c	
	A Pagan suckled in a creed outworn;	d	
	So might I, standing on this pleasant lea,	c	
	Have glimpses that would make me less forlorn;	d	
	Have sight of Proteus rising from the sea;	c	
	Or hear old Triton blow his wreathèd horn.	d	14

Wordsworth uses the structure of the Petrarchan sonnet to shape his ideas. In the octave he states his general theme: that materialistic values and activities dull our sensitivity to nature. But he divides the octave into

two quatrains. In the first he states his theme; in the second he exemplifies it. He then uses the sestet to suggest an alternate attitude, one that might produce a greater appreciation of nature's mystery and majesty.

Questions about structure You can find definitions of many fixed forms—ballad, ode, heroic couplet, Alexandrine stanza, rhyme royal stanza, Spenserian stanza, and so forth—by looking them up in handbooks of literature (such as those by Abrams and Harmon and Holman). However, since poets do not always use fixed forms, and since there are many ways to give poetry structure, try to answer this question: What devices does the poet use to give the poem structure? Does the poet use rhyme scheme, stanzas, double spaces, indentations, repetition of words and images, line lengths, rhetorical organization? As with rhythm and sound, a follow-up question is of equal consequence: How does the poem's structure emphasize or relate to its meaning? An example of such a relationship is the final stanza of "Dover Beach," in which Arnold uses end rhyme to emphasize opposing worldviews:

Ah, love, let us be true	a
To one another! for the world, which seems	b
To lie before us like a land of dreams,	b
So various, so beautiful, so new,	a
Hath really neither joy, nor love, nor light,	c
Nor certitude, nor peace, nor help for pain;	d
And we are here as on a darkling plain	d
Swept with confused alarms of struggle and flight,	c
Where ignorant armies clash by night.	c

The rhyme scheme of the first four lines is almost the same as the next five lines; the only difference is the addition of the fifth line. This similarity divides the stanza in half, and the difference in rhymes corresponds to the difference of the ideas in the two halves (the new, beautiful world versus the war-torn, chaotic, threatening world).

Thinking on Paper about Structure

1. Mark the rhyme scheme of the poem or stanza. (Use the three examples on pages 107, 108, and above as models for doing this.)
2. Draw horizontal lines between each division or unit of the poem. In a sonnet, for example, mark divisions between quatrains, couplets,

octaves, and sestets. (Use the same poems mentioned in the above assignments.)

3. Summarize the meaning of each division of the poem. In a Shakespearean sonnet, for example, summarize the meaning of each quatrain and the couplet. In a Petrarchan sonnet, summarize the meaning of the octave (and the quatrains within the octave) and the sestet. For both kinds of sonnet, indicate how the meaning changes after the turn.
4. Within the poem or stanza, summarize the relationships between ideas suggested by the end rhyme. A couplet, for example, wherever it may appear in the poem or stanza, almost always states one idea or indicates a close connection between the sense of the two lines.
5. If one or more lines are shorter or longer than most of the others, describe the effect of that differing length on the sense and impact of the poem or stanza.
6. Account for variations from the established rhyme scheme. Explain how the variations relate to the sense of the poem or stanza.
7. Describe and explain the significance of subtle differences between sections or stanzas in a poem. Ballads, for example, often rely on *incremental repetition*—the repeating of phrases and lines from stanza to stanza but with slight changes. The changes enhance suspense by altering the meaning of each stanza.
8. Outline the units of meaning in the poem. That is, indicate where the poet moves from one idea to another. Show how the units of meaning relate to visual structural divisions (such as stanzas), if they do.
9. Describe the imagery of each unit. Show what images dominate each unit. Show differences in imagery from unit to unit. Explain how the images help create the sense of the unit.
10. Some poems, for instance ballads, the songs in Shakespeare's plays, and popular songs, were meant to be sung. For one of these poems, explain the effect of this intention on the poem (choice of words, metrical pattern, rhyme, other sound devices, stanzaic form). If you can, listen to a recording of the song.
11. Some poems, such as George Herbert's "Easter Wings" and many of the poems by e. e. cummings, create an effect by the way they look on the page. Choose one such poem and explain the relation-

ship between how it looks and other elements of the poem, including rhyme scheme, metrical pattern, line length, word choice, and meaning.

Free Verse

One sometimes puzzling form of poetry is *free verse*. It is puzzling because it seems to lack obvious structural elements. The first practitioner of free verse in modern times was Walt Whitman (beginning with the 1855 edition of *Leaves of Grass*). Many people, when they saw Whitman's poetry for the first time, wondered if it was really poetry. They asked why any "prose" writings could not be arranged into lines of varying lengths and be called poetry. Since Whitman's time, many poets have written in free verse, and there is one very well-known antecedent to Whitman's free verse: the Bible. Hebrew poetry has its own complicated system of rhythms and sound associations, but when it is translated into English it comes out as free verse. Here is a well-known example (from the 1611 King James translation):

The Lord is my shepherd; I shall not want.
 He maketh me to lie down in green pastures; he leadeth me beside the still waters.
 He restoreth my soul; he leadeth me in the paths of righteousness for his name's sake.
 Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil, for thou art with me; thy rod and thy staff they comfort me.
 Thou preparest a table before me in the presence of mine enemies; thou anointest my head with oil; my cup runneth over.
 Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life, and I will dwell in the house of the Lord forever.

Free verse is "free" in certain ways. It avoids strict adherence to metrical patterns and to fixed line lengths. But it is not entirely "free," because it creates rhythm and sound patterns in other ways. First, it often relies on the sound qualities of words to establish associations within words—assonance, alliteration, internal rhyme, and so forth. Second, it creates rhythm by repeating phrases that have the same

syntactical structure. See the Twenty-third Psalm, for example: "He maketh me," "he leadeth me," "he restoreth my soul," "he leadeth me." A more blatant example appears in the "out of" phrases in the first section of Whitman's "Out of the Cradle Endlessly Rocking":

Out of the cradle endlessly rocking,
Out of the mockingbird's throat, the musical shuttle,
Out of the Ninth-month midnight . . .

Third, free verse can establish rhythms within lines by means of phrases of about equal length. Finally, free verse can vary lines meaningfully. Whitman, for example, will sometimes have a series of long lines and then one very short line that comments perty on the preceding lines or resolves a tension within them.

Questions about free verse Questions about free-verse poetry should be similar to questions about any poetry. What structural devices—divisions within the poem, line length, repeated syntactical units—does the poet use, and how do they complement the poet's meaning? What patterns of imagery—descriptive and figurative—does the poet use? What sound devices does the poet weave into the poem? Why does the poet choose the words he or she does? Who is the speaker, and to what situation is the speaker responding?

■ Thinking on Paper about Free Verse

1. Read the poem aloud. Note the phrases that create the rhythm of the poem.
2. Underline repeated phrases in the poem, as with the "out of the cradle" phrase in Whitman's poem.
3. Mark with double vertical lines the caesuras in each line of the poem.
4. Mark the accents in each line of the poem.
5. Explain why the lines end where they do.
6. Note any variation between short phrases and long phrases. Explain how these variations relate to the sense of the poem.
7. Explain the relationship between the rhythms of the poem and its meaning and purpose.

8. Mark and account for all of the sound qualities of the poem: alliteration, assonance, cacophony, euphony, internal rhyme, and so forth.

Symbolism

Symbolism appeals to poets because symbols are highly suggestive yet succinct. As we say in Chapter 4, a symbol is an object—usually a physical object—that represents an abstract idea or ideas. The most powerful symbols are those that do not exactly specify the ideas they represent. An example of a symbol in poetry occurs in the Twenty-third Psalm, quoted on page 111. The poem begins with a metaphor: God is like a shepherd and I (the speaker) am like one of his sheep; just as a shepherd takes care of his sheep, so will God take care of me. But the poem shifts from metaphor to symbol with phrases such as "green pastures," "still waters," and particularly "the valley of the shadow of death." The meanings of "green pastures" (nourishment, security, ease) and "still waters" (peace, sustenance, calm) are fairly easy to ascertain. But the meaning of "the valley of the shadow of death" is more difficult. It does not seem to mean just death, but a life experience—perhaps psychological or spiritual—that is somehow related to death (the "shadow" of death) that we must journey through (through the "valley"). Perhaps the indefiniteness of this phrase, combined with its ominous overtones, explains the grip it has had on people's imaginations.

Another example of a symbol in poetry is William Blake's "The Sick Rose" (1794):

THE SICK ROSE

WILLIAM BLAKE

O Rose, thou art sick.
The invisible worm
That flies in the night
In the howling storm

Has found out thy bed
Of crimson joy,
And his dark secret love
Does thy life destroy.

This poem might be understandable as a literal treatment of horticulture: a real rose beset by an insect that preys on roses. But Blake probably means for us to see the rose, the worm, and the action of the worm as symbolic. For one thing, the poem occurs in Blake's collection of poems *Songs of Experience*, suggesting that it represents the ominous aspects of life, particularly human life. For another, much of the poem makes little sense unless it can be taken symbolically: the "howling storm," the bed of "crimson joy," the worm's "dark secret love," for example. What, then, do these things represent? One interpretive approach would be to consider word meanings that Blake, who read widely in symbolic Christian literature, may have had in mind. The archaic meaning of "worm" is dragon, which in Christian romance represented evil and harks back to the devil's appearance to Eve as a snake. Also in Christian romance, the rose represented female beauty and purity and sometimes represented the Virgin Mary. Blake seems, then, to be symbolizing the destruction of purity by evil. The poem probably also has sexual implications, since, for example, the worm (a phallic image) comes at "night" to the rose's "bed." In general, the poem may represent the destruction of all earthly health, innocence, and beauty by mysterious forces. The point is that although we get the drift of Blake's meaning, we do not know precisely what the symbolic equivalents are. Yet the symbols are presented so sensuously and the action so dramatically that the poem grips us with a mesmerizing power.

When you read poetry, be alert for symbols, but persuade yourself—and your reader—that the objects you claim to be symbols were intended as such by the author. Remember that not *every* object in a poem is a symbol. What, then, are the symbols in the poem you are reading? Why do you think they are symbols? What do they mean? In answer to this last question, offer reasonable and carefully thought out explanations for your interpretations. Stay close to what the author seems to have intended the symbols to represent.

■ Thinking on Paper about Symbolism

1. Circle the symbols in the poem.
2. List the possible meanings of each symbol. Explain what evidence suggests these meanings.
3. Explain what each symbol contributes to the overall meaning of the poem.

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