

## Sound

*"For rhyme the rudder is of verses, with which like ships they steer their courses."*

--Samuel Butler

I love mysteries. I think it has to do with the fact that I'm curious. The best way to torture me is to say "I have a secret, but, oops, I can't tell you." Variants on that theme work equally well. However much I love mysteries, the setting of the mystery--the background--makes a difference. I can't read mysteries late at night--especially scary mysteries--when I'm alone, or when the wind blows the tree outside against my house and the tree makes a scratching sound. This happens when I'm just reading a book. When I watch a mystery on television, it's no fun without the sound. Scary music, written in a minor key, always lets me know when something bad is going to happen so I can cover my eyes or turn on all the lights. Happy music played when something bad is happening creates a kind of dissonance--things don't match. That gap can create a tension that may add to the mystery or, if the gap is unintentional, it may create humor that detracts from the mystery. The setting of a mystery is like the sounds in a poem. The sounds in the poem become the background against which the words play. If we have our hearing, everything happens in a background of sound. We hear cars, people's voices, squealing children as they play, the murmurs of sound as people shift positions or whisper during church. But some sounds stand out. They're not like the background sounds. In crime detection, often how something "sounds" can lead to finding out what really happened. Real-life crime detectives care about sound as they identify people with limps, guns with or without silencers, cars that backfire, suspects with accents, and how people sound when they lie. These are sounds that stand out from the background. The setting or background in poetry is the sound. How does a poem sound? What happens when the rhythm or sound of a poem doesn't match the message? What tension does that create? Poets and, by necessity, poetry detectives play with sounds. This lesson focuses on the language used to describe sound and how poets play with sound and language to extend the meanings of their poems.

There is something about sound that human beings respond to. Even babies in the womb hear their mother's voice and heartbeat. After the babies are born, we talk to them and they respond. Have you ever listened to or watched small children discover language? There are several steps to this process. The first step is when they discover they have lips and tongues. The second step is when they begin to babble. (Did you know that even deaf children babble?) Children babble because they like how it feels--and how it sounds. Then the third step is when people respond to the babble--and start rewarding children with attention, with smiles, or with objects. It is then that children learn that babble means something--and the pursuit to get the right sound for what they want is on.

Not only do small children play with individual sounds, but they also play with collections of sounds. When my nephew was just learning to talk well at about age three or four, he told jokes. He would give a series of sounds that rarely made sense, but they sounded like a question. The last word always inflected up--just like a joke. Then he would pause--and we would wait for the punchline. "Train" he would say and then giggle. The punchline was always "train"--and I was

never sure what the joke was. However, if we asked him to repeat the joke--we got the same collection of sounds. If we asked him to tell us another joke, we got different sounds, but the same punchline. The point is that he knew what the sounds meant, and that "repeat" meant to say the same one again, but another joke needed to be a new collection of sounds.

What the story proves is that as soon as we begin to speak, we're caught by the flow of language. We sense emotion from the speed and volume of the language we hear, we sing to ourselves to establish a rhythm, we put sounds together to create meaning. All of these sounds help us know we're human. I have a four-year-old niece who climbed into my lap the other day and said, "Let's play the rhyme game." I had never played that game before, so she had to explain the rules to me. She said a word and then I had to say one that sounded the same. She then said one back to me--and the one who couldn't come up with a word lost. We played several rounds before she got bored, and I was amazed at how many words a four-year-old could come up with. She was playing with language--with sound--just as poets do. Because poets play with language and sound, reading a poem without paying attention to its sounds would be like saying only the words of a song, leaving out the music. Most English poetry plays up sounds with *rhyme*, or repeating sounds--partly for the sheer joy of it, the pleasure in the sound. Rhyme gets even more interesting when it's used to emphasize meaning or change the tension in a poem. How many of us have heard children reciting poems that they made rhyme--and the poem sounded funny? Once we start rhyming, we want things to rhyme--or at least we think we do.

Rhyme usually comes at the end of a line. That is called *end rhyme*. There can also be *internal rhyme*, rhyme within lines. Most rhyme is exact: "How now brown cow." But rhyme can also be deliberately inexact, or *slant*, as in "How rough." One-syllable rhyme--"rough/tough"--is often called masculine (maybe because it's so simplistic). More complex rhyme--"extended/defended"--is referred to as feminine (maybe because women seem so complicated). Check out the rhyme in "When I was One and Twenty." Here Housman uses both masculine and feminine rhyme. How does that affect the music of the poetry?

### **When I was One-and Twenty**

When I was one-and-twenty  
I heard a wise man say,  
'Give crowns and pounds and guineas  
But not your heart away;  
Give pearls away and rubies  
But keep your fancy free.'  
But I was one-and-twenty,  
No use to talk to me.

When I was one-and-twenty  
I heard him say again,  
'The heart out of the bosom  
Was never given in vain;  
'Tis paid with sighs a plenty

And sold for endless rue.'  
And I am two-and-twenty,  
And oh, 'tis true, 'tis true.

--A.E. Housman

Other sound patterns enrich poetry. *Alliteration* repeats consonant sounds, usually at the beginning of words: "Peter Piper picked a peck of pickled peppers"--it's a kind of inverted rhyme, rhyme backwards. Most tongue twisters use some kind of alliteration. We use alliteration to create catchy names for products or to draw attention to language--candy cane, "when a boy and barefoot." The cousin to alliteration is *assonance*, which repeats vowel sounds--"blue moon" or "happy camper" or "cool dude." Poets play with alliteration and assonance to catch their readers and hearers. It makes us pay attention both ways--when we expect to hear a repeated sound and don't or when the pattern continues in complex ways. Go back to Houseman's poem and look at the use of alliteration and assonance. My personal favorite of the sound devices, because I like to say it and spell it (and it has also appeared on Jeopardy! as an answer and Who Wants to Be a Millionaire can't be far behind), is *onomatopoeia*, one of the loveliest words in the language. Onomatopoeia describes a sound that imitates what it's talking about, like "crash" or "buzz" or "pop." I like to consider the word "whisper" as an onomatopoeia word. Have you ever tried to yell the word "whisper"? It sounds really bizarre if you do manage to shout it, but notice that however loud you start out, the word gets softer by the time you finish the word.

To make sure you've got the ideas of alliteration, assonance, and onomatopoeia, you may want to find several illustrations in the poems for today or the poems we've read previously.

Here are two translations of the same passage from the Italian poet Petrarch, written by the two men who imported the sonnet to England:

Love that liveth and reigneth in my  
thought,  
That built his seat within my captive  
breast,  
Clad in the arms wherein with me he  
fought,  
Oft in my face he doth his banner  
rest.

--Henry Howard, Earl of Surrey

The long love that in my thought doth  
harbor,  
And in mine heart doth keep his  
residence,  
Into my face presseth with bold pretense  
And therein campeth, spreading his  
banner.

--Sir Thomas Wyatt

Which do you think is the better poem, Surrey's or Wyatt's? Does the sound of the poem make a difference? Do assonance and alliteration affect your choice? Does rhyme have anything to do with your preference? What about the smoothness of the poem? Try two more poems. You might

want to read these out loud. I didn't catch some of the differences the first time when I read them silently.

### Upon a Child That Died

Here she lies, a pretty bud,  
Lately made of flesh and blood.  
Who as soon fell fast asleep  
As her little eyes did peep.  
Give her strewings, and not stir  
The earth that lightly covers her.

- Robert Herrick

### Poem

The only response to a child's grave is  
to lie down before it and play dead

- Bill Knott

After reading the poems aloud, what differences do you find between the effect of the first elegy and the impact of the second? Which reaction to the death of a child hits you the hardest? What do the sounds of the poem have to do with that impact? How does the rhyming of the first poem create a tension between the meaning and the sound? Is that tension deliberate or a mistake? Is that tension a good thing? What about the rhyme between "bud" and "blood"?

Poets play with more than the sound of poetry; they also play with the speed and rhythm of words and lines. Just as dancers dance to a beat, poets often write to a beat. That beat is called *meter*, which we will explore next.

We do everything to a beat. Think about the rhythm of our heartbeats. It's always there. We dance to a beat, we "march to a different drummer." Beneath everything in our lives, there is a rhythm. Poets tap into those rhythms that make up our lives. Those beats are called *meter*, which is the other major dimension of sounds in poetry--the recurrence of a rhythmic pattern. It's like the beat of a song, the part you tap your toe to or nod your head with.

The beat for poems in English meter depends on the stresses or emphasis on the syllables of words. The specific type of meter is determined by the repeated pattern of stresses in syllables, like 3/4 time in music. *Free verse*, which there's more and more of in modern poetry, has rhythm, too, but it's less regular and less likely to follow a rigid pattern, just like the lines. However, *metrical verse* isn't so regular it gets boring. In fact most poets set up a regular metrical verse as a kind of background they make rhythmic changes against--and the changes are usually the most interesting part.

### A Narrow Fellow in the Grass

A narrow Fellow in the Grass  
Occasionally rides--  
You may have met Him--did you not

His notice sudden is--  
 The Grass divides as with a Comb--  
 A spotted shaft is seen--  
 And then it closes at your feet  
 And opens further on--  
 He likes a Boggy Acre  
 A floor too cool for Corn--  
 Yet when a Boy, and Barefoot--  
 I more than once at Noon  
 Have passed, I thought, a Whip lash  
 Unbraiding in the Sun  
 When stooping to secure it  
 It wrinkled, and was gone--  
 Several of Nature's people  
 I know, and they know me--  
 I feel for them a transport  
 Of cordiality--  
 But never met this Fellow  
 Attended, or alone  
 Without a tighter breathing  
 And Zero at the Bone—  
 --Emily Dickinson

For instance, "A Narrow Fellow" seems to have a fairly regular rhythm. Very little feels out of place, and most of the poem flows smoothly. Read the poem aloud in an exaggerated sing-song voice using a ta-da, ta-da rhythm. Four lines seem to stand out--in order to keep the sing-song rhythm we have to mispronounce or alter the words slightly. Notice these four lines: "Occasionally rides--" "Have passed, I thought, a Whip lash [here notice specifically whip lash]" "It wrinkled, and was gone--" and "And Zero at the Bone." If we read the poem in a sing-song voice, those words either don't quite fit, or we alter the pronunciation in order to make them fit. Those are the words that stand out--that somehow make us reevaluate the poem and our responses to it. That's what meter can do. There are four recognizable patterns of emphasis: iamb, trochee, anapest, and dactyl. As we talk about patterns of emphasis, the stressed or emphasized syllable will be in bold print.

The most common pattern in English verse is an iamb, also called *iambic* or common meter. It's the one we tend to walk in, talk in. It's an unstressed syllable followed by a stressed syllable, just as in its name "**iamb**." It also occurs in "Salt **Lake**" or "St. **George**" or "**L.A.**" or "Whose **woods** these **are I think I know**."

Trochee, also known as *trochaic*, is marching meter, landing heavily with the first foot--left/right, left/right. It is also traditionally used for spells. The emphasized syllable here also reinforces its name--**trochee**. It's iambic turned around, as in "**Provo**" or "**Boston**" or the witches'

spell in Shakespeare's *Macbeth*: "**Double, double, toil and trouble/Fire burn and cauldron bubble.**"

The anapest's emphasis also helps us to remember its pattern. Also called *anapestic*, it is the galloping rhythm: "And their **anapests carry a narrative load/** (The **hoofbeats of horses of course on the road.**)" It's a three-syllable meter, with the stress at the end, anapest, as in "Pleasant **Grove**" or "New **Rochelle.**" Just think of the "William Tell Overture": [Is there any way to hear part of that here?] or Edgar Allan Poe's "For the **moon never beams without bringing me dreams . . .**" Notice that these rhythms tend to become fast, and to take off with the meaning of the poem--whether they're supposed to or not.

The name of the last of the four major beat patterns doesn't match its beat pattern. You have to remember the dactyl by remembering it's the opposite of the anapest. By far the least common of the big four English meters, the *dactylic* pattern is the stumbling rhythm--like that drum sound on David Letterman after he makes a joke. It's three syllables again, this time with the stress at the first, as in "**Santaquin,**" or "**Mapleton,**" or "**Baltimore:**" "**Half** a league, **half** a league/**Half** a league **onward./ All** in the **valley of death/ Rode** the six **hundred.**" The musical equivalent of dactylic meter is waltz rhythm, or three-four time.

Also-ran feet include the spondee or *spondaic*, which is a double stress foot, as in "**Hong Kong**" or "**Alpine.**" This meter is more common in other languages which emphasize syllables more equally; in English, you can't get a whole poem in it because it's too hard to keep up--it's too stressful to hear somebody who's always emphasizing everything. It makes it hard to pick out the important details. *Pyrrhic*, no stresses, is equally hard to maintain at length because you tend to go to sleep. Nothing is important.

Now, if you want to impress your friends or ace a poetry question on Jeopardy! or Millionaire with your arcane knowledge of meter, the rest is easy. Just count the repetitions of a metric pattern (the "feet") in a line--most poems have three (trimeter) or four (tetrameter) or, most often, five (pentameter). "What we have here," you may then proclaim, "is iambic pentameter, the most common meter in English." Most of Shakespeare's plays--and all of his sonnets--are written in iambic pentameter. Just for fun, see if you can mark the pattern of "A Narrow Fellow." Hint: The sing-song pattern should help you find it.

Another thing to do for fun is to read the following poem, which serves as a mnemonic device. See if his lines match the pattern he's naming. It might be fun to memorize it for future reference.

Trochee trips from long to short, From long to long in solemn sort. Slow Spondee stalks, strong foot!, yea ill-able Ever to keep up with Dactyl's trisyllable. Iambics march from short to long, With a leap and a bound the swift Anapests throng."

-- Samuel Taylor Coleridge

Now that we've talked about rhythm and beat patterns, let's see how those work in a poem to help create meaning or to lend a feeling to the poem. Let's start with passages first.

In two of the following passages, rhythm works against meaning and tone and consequently against the poem's effectiveness. See if you can pick out the passages in which the rhythm is inappropriate.

Break, break, break,  
On thy cold gray stones, O Sea!  
---Alfred Lord Tennyson

Then my heart it grew ashen and sober  
As the leaves that were crisped and sere--  
As the leaves that were withering and sere,  
And I cried: "It was surely October  
On this very night of last year  
That I journeyed--I journeyed down here--  
On this night of all nights of the year,  
Ah, what demon has tempted me here?"  
---Edgar Allen Poe

James James  
Morrison Morrison  
Weatherby George Dupree  
Took great Care of his mother,  
Though he was only three.  
James James  
Said to his Mother  
"Mother," he said, said he;  
"You must never go down to the end of the town,  
if you don't go down with me."  
---A. A. Milne

Weep eyes, break heart!  
My love and I must part.  
---Thomas Middleton

May a lip is gaping for drink,  
And madly calling for rain  
And some hot brains are beginning to think  
Of a messmate's opened vein.  
---Eliza Cook

How did you do? Are there keys in the relationship between form and content? How well does the manner embody the matter? Can you see why Tennyson and Middleton's poems are admired for their heavy stresses? Did you notice Milne's poem skips along, childlike in rhythm? What's the problem with the stanzas from Poe and Cook?

We take sound so much for granted. We know if we read a poem aloud we will hear the words, but in addition to hearing the words, we're also hearing beat and rhythm and pauses and stresses. However, we don't necessarily label those things as things we've heard. It's almost unconscious. In many ways those unconscious things add to the poem's meaning. Read the following poem by Emily Dickinson out loud. Her pauses--places where she wants you to breathe--are indicated by the double hyphen (--). Make sure you pause there, wherever they appear. Notice how the rhyme and beat of the poem also add to the meaning of this poem.

### **I Taste a Liquor Never Brewed**

I taste a liquor never brewed--  
From Tankards scooped in Pearl--  
Not all the Vats upon the Rhine  
Yield such an Alcohol!

Inebriate of Air--am I--  
And Debauchee of Dew--  
Reeling--thro endless summer days--  
From inns of Molten Blue--

When "Landlords" turn the drunken Bee  
Out of the Foxglove's door--  
When Butterflies--renounce their "drams"--  
I shall but drink the more!

Till Seraphs swing their snowy Hats--  
And Saints--to windows run--  
To see the little Tippler  
Leaning against the--Sun--

--Emily Dickinson

First of all, remember the pattern of reading poetry that we talked about so long ago in Lesson 3 Poetry: An Overview. Read the poem several times out loud. Look for interesting words or places that "catch" you. Do you know what's happening here? What is the condition of the speaker? What words do you see that indicate or highlight or confirm or contribute to that condition? How does the rhythm and meter of the poem contribute to that condition? Now--here's the tough question: what is the speaker drunk on? Look at the first two lines--it's not alcohol because this liquor is "never brewed," and "Not all the Vats upon the Rhine/Yield such an Alcohol!" Okay, if it isn't alcohol, what is it? Look at the next several stanzas to see if you can decide.



Would this poem have the same effect if the rhyme and meter were regular? What does the irregularity of both the rhythm and meter do to help us understand the poem? Another poem in which rhythm and meter can make a difference is "We Real Cool" by Gwendolyn Brooks.

### **We Real Cool**

We real cool. We  
Left school. We

Lurk late. We  
Strike straight. We

Sing sin. We  
Thin gin. We

Jazz June. We  
Die soon.

--Gwendolyn Brooks

Try reading this poem in a couple of different rhythms. Think of the opening scene of *West Side Story* where the Sharks and the Jets are snapping their fingers in a regular rhythm. Try doing that while you're reading the poem. Does the finger snapping and regular rhythm contribute to your understanding of the poem? Of the characters in the poem?

Now trying reading the poem a little differently. An alternate title for "We Real Cool" is "The Pool Players. Seven at the Golden Shovel." Don't snap your fingers, and hesitate slightly after each line ending. Does that change how you view the "Seven at the Golden Shovel"? Are they the tough guys of the first reading, or do they become unsure teenagers trying to reinforce their lagging self-images as they try to convince themselves they are tough guys? How does hesitating or not hesitating make a difference?

### **Pied Beauty**

Glory be to God for dappled things--  
For skies of couple-colour as a brindled cow;  
For rose-moles all in stipple upon trout that swim;  
Fresh-firecoal chestnut-falls; finches' wings;  
Landscape plotted and pieced--fold, fallow, and plough;  
And all trades, their gear and tackle and trim.

All things counter, original, spare, strange;  
Whatever is fickle, freckled (who knows how?)  
With swift, slow; sweet, sour; adazzle, dim;  
He fathers-forth whose beauty is past change:  
Praise Him.

"Pied Beauty" is also an interesting case of sound matching meaning. Gerard Manley Hopkins didn't use typical meters, but invented his own called "sprung rhythm." Don't worry, you don't have to know it, but notice in "Pied Beauty" how the emphasis seems to happen in odd, irregular places. During the last term I taught this class, I challenged my students to read this poem next time they gave a talk about appreciating nature. Why would I do a thing like that? What does the speaker give thanks for? (Hint: Think zebras, giraffes, appaloosa horses, leopards.) What does it mean to give thanks for "dappled things"? What dappled things does he mention? Work through the poem. Look up some of the words, and see if the uneven rhythm doesn't help convince you of the worth of the poem.

### **Resume**

Razors pain you;  
Rivers are damp;  
Acids stain you;  
And drugs cause cramp;  
Guns aren't lawful;  
Nooses give;  
Gas smells awful;

You might as well live

--Dorothy Parker

In the three specific poems we've discussed so far, the rhythm and meter have added to the meaning of the poem by confirming feelings or reinforcing the words in the poem. What happens, however, when the rhythm and beat create a tension in the poem? "Resume" by Dorothy Parker is a poem where tension creates interest. A resume could also be considered a list. What is this poem a list of? Look carefully at the last line for a clue. But what about the rhythm--does the relentless rhythm and rhyme create some real questions about the tone and purpose of the poem? This tension creates one kind of idea, and an interesting poem, but now let's move to a more disputed poem.

Read "My Papa's Waltz" by Theodore Roethke. Remember to read the poem several times out loud and to follow the poetry reading pattern.

### **My Papa's Waltz**

The whiskey on your breath  
Could make a small boy dizzy;  
But I hung on like death:  
Such waltzing was not easy.

We romped until the pans  
Slid from the kitchen shelf;  
My mother's countenance  
Could not unfrown itself.

The hand that held my wrist  
Was battered on one knuckle;  
At every step you missed  
My right ear scraped a buckle.

You beat time on my head  
With a palm caked hard by dirt,  
Then waltzed me off to bed  
Still clinging to your shirt.

--Theodore Roethke

One of the reasons this poem is in this section is because this poem came up three times in discussions with different friends when I was having hysterics about writing this section. All four of us have different ideas about this poem. Here's the question that started all three discussions: Do you think this a sad poem or a happy poem? Of course, other questions can be asked that lead off from the first question. Is this child abuse or a happy childhood memory? Or maybe a neutral memory? What evidences from word choice do you see that support your stand? How does the rhythm affect your stand? Make you more or less sure about what you believe? How old is the speaker? Are there different levels of tone? Notice the tension--whichever stand you take. Roethke is a poet of control--everything has a purpose here. You have a poem in which the words and the situation may or may not be happy, but you have a happy rhythm. How does that contradict or confirm the poem's meaning? Is the tension deliberate? Does the tension itself reveal an answer? If a simple question about a poem can start great discussions among English teachers, what can it do for you? That's the discussion question for this lesson: Is "My Papa's Waltz" a sad poem or a happy poem? Why?

Now that we've talked about specific poems, see if you can apply the sounds of poetry to less formal poetry and have some fun.