

Components of Poetry Analysis

by Chloe Stricklin



WHAT'S COVERED

In this lesson, you will explore several major components of poems that can be subject to analysis. Specifically, this lesson will focus on:

1. Rhythm
2. Rhyme
3. Voice

1. Rhythm

All speech has **rhythm** because we naturally stress some words or syllables more than others. In poetry, rhythm is extremely important: patterns are deliberately created and repeated for varying effects.

The rhythmical pattern of a poem is called its meter, and we can analyze, or "scan" lines of poetry to identify stressed and unstressed syllables. In marking the text to show this, the mark '/' is used to indicate a stressed syllable, and 'x' is used to indicate an unstressed syllable.

Each complete unit of stressed and unstressed syllables is called a "foot," which usually has one stressed and one or two unstressed syllables. The most common foot in English is known as the iamb, which is an unstressed syllable followed by a stressed one (x /).

While you will not be scanning poetry in this course, rhythm is still important to pay attention to, even in an informal capacity.



TERM TO KNOW

Rhythm

The pattern of beats or stresses in a line creating a sense of movement.

2. Rhyme

If a poem uses **rhyme**, then considering how the rhyme works is always important. **Rhyme schemes** can be simple or highly intricate and complex; it will always be worth considering why a particular rhyme pattern was chosen and trying to assess its effects.

Are poems that don't rhyme prose? Not necessarily.

➦ **EXAMPLE** Virginia Woolf (1882–1941), a novelist rather than a poet, and T. S. Eliot (1888–1965), known particularly for his poetry, both wrote descriptive pieces best described as "prose poems." These look like short prose passages since there is no attention to line lengths or layout on the page.

When you study Shakespeare, you will come across blank verse. "Blank" here means "not rhyming," but the term "blank verse" is used specifically to describe verse in un-rhyming iambic pentameters.

IN CONTEXT

Although iambic pentameters resemble our normal speech patterns, in ordinary life we speak in prose. You'll notice if you look through Shakespeare's plays that blank verse is reserved for kings, nobles, heroes, and heroines. They may also speak in prose, as lesser characters do, but commoners don't ever have speeches in blank verse. Shakespeare – and other playwrights like him – used the form to indicate status. It is important to recognize this convention, which would have been understood by his contemporaries— writers, readers, and audiences alike.

So choosing to write a poem in blank verse is an important decision, as it will elevate the subject.

➦ **EXAMPLE** One such example is John Milton's epic *Paradise Lost* (1667), a long poem in twelve parts describing creation, Adam and Eve's temptation, and their disobedience and expulsion from Paradise. It sets out to justify the ways of God to man, so blank verse is entirely appropriate. This great epic was in William Wordsworth's mind when he chose the same form for his autobiographical poem, "The Prelude."



TERMS TO KNOW

Rhyme

The echo of a similar sound, usually at the end of a line of poetry.

Rhyme Scheme

The pattern of rhymes established in a poem.

3. Voice

Is the speaker in a poem one and the same as the writer? Stop and consider this for a few moments. Can you think of any poems you have read where a writer has created a character, or persona, whose voice you hear when you read?

IN CONTEXT

Wordsworth's "The Prelude" was written as an autobiographical poem, but there are many instances where it is obvious that poet and persona are different. Charlotte Mew's poem "The Farmer's Bride" (1916) begins like this:

Three summers since I chose a maid,
Too young maybe – but more's to do

At harvest-time than bide and woo.
When us was wed she turned afraid
Of love and me and all things human;

(Warner, 1981, p. 1–2)

Mew invents a male character here, and clearly separates herself as a writer from the voice in her poem.



TRY IT

Some of the most well-known created characters – or personae – in poetry are in Robert Browning’s dramatic monologues. Consider the opening lines from three Robert Browning poems. Who do you think is speaking?

From “Soliloquy of the Spanish Cloister” (1842)

Gr-rr — there go, my heart’s abhorrence!
Water your damned flower-pots, do!
If hate killed men, Brother Lawrence,
God’s blood, would not mine kill you!

(Trilling and Bloom, 1973, p. 500)

From “My Last Duchess” (1842)

That’s my last Duchess painted on the wall,
Looking as if she were alive...

(Trilling and Bloom, 1973, p. 502)

From “Porphyria’s Lover” (1842)

The sun set early in to-night,
The sullen wind was soon awake,
It tore the elm-tops down for spite,
And did its worst to vex the lake:
I listed with heart fit to break.

(Jack and Fowler, 1988, p. 250)



SUMMARY

In this lesson, you learned about some of the main components of poems that you can analyze,

including **rhythm**, **rhyme**, and **voice**. While you looked at these components separately here, be aware that they will be interdependent and the end product effective or not because of the way such elements work together.

Best of luck in your learning!

Source: This material has been adapted from Lumen Learning's "Approaching Poetry" tutorial.



TERMS TO KNOW

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The echo of a similar sound, usually at the end of a line of poetry.

Rhyme Scheme

The pattern of rhymes established in a poem.

Rhythm

The pattern of beats or stresses in a line creating a sense of movement.