

## 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 that 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, and 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 like "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 participates. 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 like these: Who is speaking? (Remember that the speaker is often not the poet.) 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? Try to answer these questions for each section of the poem. A good exercise is to summarize the meaning of each part of the poem in your own words.

Matthew Arnold's "Dover Beach" provides an example of how you could use most of these questions to get at the central meaning 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<sup>o</sup> of the world.

<sup>o</sup>beaches covered with pebbles

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.

Since 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 he sees the high white cliffs of Dover "glimmering" in the moonlight. He invites his companion to share the glorious view. But 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 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.

## 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 saw in chapter 3, *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. You should be alert to such choices.

**Questions about diction** You should examine the words in a poem for all their possible shades and levels of meaning. Then you should ask how these meanings combine to create an overall effect. Note 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



nonhuman; 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 the 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 female to have sex 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”), which is one way of defeating decay and death. Some poets, like E. E. Cummings, make imaginative wordplay a dominant trait of their poetry. In Cummings’s “anyone lived in a pretty how town,” he uses pronouns on two levels of meaning. The words *anyone* and *noone* mean, on the one hand, what they usually mean (“anybody” and “nobody”); but on the other hand they refer to two people, male and female, who fall in love, get married, and die.

### 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, experientially involved in the subject matter of the poem. Furthermore, 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). But the dominant sensuous appeal 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 “This do in remembrance of me.” 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 partial similarity between two things upon which a comparison may be based). Specifically, metaphor means a particular kind of analogy and is contrasted with the simile. A *simile* is a comparison of two things that are essentially different, and it is signaled by the use of *like* or *as*; 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 fairer to deface her.

A metaphor also compares things that are essentially unlike, but it eliminates the comparative words and thus equates the compared items. For example, "My heart was a tornado of passion." The poem "Love Is a Sickness" by Samuel Daniel contains several metaphors (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*; that is, 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 always identify the imagery of a poem.~~ Ask, then, what senses the poet appeals to and what analogies he or she implies or states directly. But you should also ask, *Why* does the poet use these particular images and analogies? In "Dover Beach," for example, Arnold meaningfully uses both descriptive and metaphorical imagery. 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. But 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. By 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 unavoidably 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 through the world's minefields as best they can.

## Rhythm

All human speech has rhythm, but poetry 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 (ā) 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 (āá). Here are the most common metrical feet:

iamb (iambic) āá	ābóve
trochee (trochaic) áā	lóvelý
anapest (anapestic) āāā	ōvērwhélm
dactyl (dactylic) áāā	róyāltý
spondee (spondaic) áá	drúmbéat

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 106–07 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, like these iambic tetrameter lines from “To His Coy Mistress”:

Hād wé bŭt wórd ěnóúgh, añd tírġe,  
Thġs cōyneŝŝ, lādý, wéfe nŏ crġme.

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 whérġ hae ye beén, Lord Raíndal, my sŏn?  
O whérġ hae ye beén, my hándsŏme yŏung mán?”  
“I hae beén to the wíld wŏod; móther, máke my bed sŏŏn,  
For I’m weáry wġ hŭntġng, and fáin wald lie dŏwn.”



The third line of this stanza (from the ballad "Lord Randal") contains five accented syllables but twelve (not five) 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 of the above stanza, 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 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. When you scan a poem, therefore, do 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 for 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 the 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 serve to 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 despised 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 he 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 despised straight.

The effect is to strongly contrast 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 proof; || and proved, a véry woe;  
Before, a jóy propósed; || behínd, 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 in itself. Children, for example, take to the strongly rhythmic qualities of nursery rhymes and jump-rope rhymes naturally; jump-rope rhymes, in fact, is 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 stick 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, above, is a striking example. Sometimes they depart 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 narrators. Sometimes poets depart from the pattern to emphasize specific parts 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 pŭrsŭit, ańd iñ pösséssiŭn só;	9
Hád, hávingġ, ańd iñ quést tŭ háve, eġtréme;	10
A bliss in proof; and proved, a very woe;	11
Before, a joy proposed; behind, a dream.	12

All of these lines fit the iambic scheme except lines 9 and 10. Why? Because Shakespeare wants 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: What 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?

“To His Coy Mistress” is a poem that adheres with little variation to its iambic tetrameter pattern. How is Marvell’s choice to do this fitting for his dramatic situation (man addressing woman) and his subject? What variations from the established pattern does the poet make? Why? What words and ideas do these variations emphasize? Does the poet establish a pattern of emphasis? How does the poet use pauses within each line? What are the strong pauses (caesuras) and the weaker pauses? When the poet uses pauses to break a line into smaller units, what relationships do the units have? Are there cause-and-effect relationships or comparison-and-contrast relationships between them?

## 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”).

**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”).

**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”).



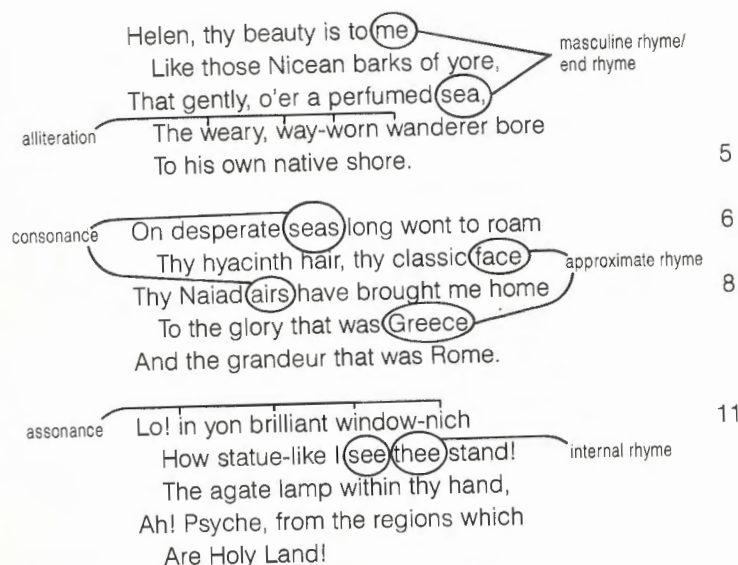
*internal rhyme* (the rhymed sounds are within the line).

*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



**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 want to ask, What sound devices does the poet use? But you also should ask, Why does the poet use them? How do they help establish the poem's tone, atmosphere, theme, setting, characterization, and emotional qualities? In Poe's "To Helen," for example, the alliteration in the fourth line ("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 luminousness of the place where Helen, statuelike, stands.

Be especially alert to the relationships between ideas established both by rhyme, and most notably by internal rhyme and end rhyme. Rhyme, of course, is 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 and almost painful, with their harsh consonants, all of which illustrate the frustrated, 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 they focus on evil deeds (falsehood, murder), which leads to the second half of the line. The words *bloody* and *blame* are linked by alliteration, and they 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 reading, what linkages of meaning are there to *all* the sound qualities of the words—especially to the obvious ones like alliteration, internal rhyme, and end rhyme? What light do these linkages throw on the themes of the entire poem?

### 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 extra spaces and usually represents one idea. Poets, of course, can 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, like 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 both to poet and reader.

All sonnets have fourteen lines of iambic pentameter. There are two kinds of sonnets, both named for their most famous practitioners. A *Shakespearean sonnet* rhymes abab/cdcd/efef/gg and has a structural division of three quatrains (that is, 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, and this is especially true of the sestet in the Petrarchan sonnet. Note, for example, the sonnet by Wordsworth below. 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 (that is, 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

Let me not to the marriage of true minds	a	
Admit impediments. Love is not love	b	
Which alters when it alteration finds,	a	
Or bends with the remover to remove:	b	4

three quatrains	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
turn → couplet	Love's not Time's fool, though rosey lips and cheeks	e	
	Within his bending sickle's compass come;	f	
	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
turn →	This Sea that bares her bosom to the moon,	a	
	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 by looking them up in handbooks of literature (see the bibliography at the end of this chapter)—the ballad, the ode, the heroic couplet, the Alexandrine stanza, the rhyme royal stanza, the Spenserian stanza, and so forth. But since poets do not always use fixed forms, and since there are many ways to give poetry structure, you should 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? But 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  
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.

a  
b  
b  
a  
c  
d  
d  
c  
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.

### Free Verse

One sometimes puzzling form of poetry is *free verse*. It is puzzling because sometimes it is hard to see structural elements in it. The first practitioner of free verse in modern times was Walt Whitman (in the

1855 edition of *Leaves of Grass*). Many people, when they saw Whitman's poetry for the first time, wondered if this 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 for ever.

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," for it uses other ways of creating rhythm and sound patterns. First, it often uses the sound qualities of words to create 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 is 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 mocking-bird's throat, the musical shuttle,  
Out of the Ninth-month midnight . . .

Third, free verse can create rhythms within lines by creating phrases of about equal length. And 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, then, 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?

## SYMBOLISM

Poets frequently use symbolism because, among other reasons, symbols are highly suggestive yet can be established in just a few words. As we said 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, shown previously. 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 like “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) and that we must journey through it (through the “valley”). Perhaps the indefiniteness of this phrase, combined with its ominous overtones, explains the grip it has had on people's imaginations for generations.

Another example of 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 can possibly be read as a literal treatment of a real rose beset by some real insect that preys on roses. But Blake probably means for the rose, the worm, and the action of the worm to be taken symbolically. 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 it represented the Virgin Mary. Blake seems, then, to be symbolizing the destruction of purity by evil. The poem also probably 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 convince yourself and certainly 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 for the symbols to mean.

### FOR FURTHER STUDY

- Boulton, Marjorie. *The Anatomy of Poetry*. London: Routledge, 1953.  
 Fussell, Paul, Jr. *Poetic Meter and Poetic Form*. New York: Random, 1967.  
 Holman, C. Hugh. *A Handbook to Literature*. 4th ed. Indianapolis: Odyssey, 1980.  
 MacLeish, Archibald. *Poetry and Experience*. Boston: Houghton, 1961.  
 Reeves, James. *Understanding Poetry*. New York: Barnes, 1965.

Marjorie Boulton's *The Anatomy of Poetry* and James Reeves's *Understanding Poetry* offer thorough explanations of the elements of poetry. Both attempt the difficult task of defining what poetry is. Paul Fussell, Jr., provides a lucid explanation of metrical patterns and poetic structures and how one uses them to analyze poetry. His book concludes with an inviting bibliography. Archibald MacLeish is a fine American poet who, in *Poetry and Experience*, offers his own view of poetry. Hugh Holman's *Handbook to Literature* is an encyclopedia of literary terms.

## How to Generate Topics by Using Specialized Approaches

**I**N CHAPTERS 4, 5, AND 6 we described an approach to analyzing literature that utilizes only the facts provided in the works themselves. Other approaches, however, often require specialized knowledge, knowledge of disciplines other than literature. Although some of these approaches are so specialized that only graduate students or full-time scholars would use them, many are accessible to any serious student and are good sources of essay topics. This chapter describes five of them.

### HISTORICAL CRITICISM

*Historical criticism* is a method of studying literature by period and movement. This approach recognizes that literary phenomena—methods of composition, subject matter, and philosophical outlook—characterize various historical periods. Thus, the use of blank verse in plays characterizes the Shakespearean era; the use of heroic couplets the Neoclassical era. An emphasis on free will characterizes the Romantic movement; a philosophy of determinism the Realistic and Naturalistic movements. A focus on hedonistic self-indulgence distinguishes the 1920s; a focus on social conflict the 1930s. The historical approach also assumes that literary periods and movements are dynamic. As one period reaches exhaustion, another period begins.