6.13: Sound in Poetry- Rhyme

Rhyme

In addition to line length and rhythm, we also categorize lines by rhyme, especially in formal verse where an extended pattern is maintained. You, of course, have been rhyming from an early age. Children’s books written by writers like Shel Silverstein and Dr. Seuss have delighted both children and adults with their rhyming stories. Rhyme makes language memorable and pleasurable.

In both formal verse and free verse, rhyming is elemental. In formal poetry it occurs more frequently as end rhyme, when two or more words that end lines rhyme. In free verse, the rhyme is more likely to be internal not necessarily occurring at the end of lines.

Let’s take a look at an excerpt from William Wordsworth’s poem “The Daffodils”:

I wandered lonely as a cloud
That floats on high o’er vales and hills,
When all at once I saw a crowd,
A host, of golden daffodils;
Beside the lake, beneath the trees,
Fluttering and dancing in the breeze.

Here we can see the first and third lines rhyme; the second, fourth and sixth; the fifth and sixth. There is definite rhyme scheme. When we refer to the rhymes in this stanza, we diagram the rhymes with matching letters like this: ABABCC.

I wandered lonely as a cloud (A)
That floats on high o’er vales and hills, (B)
When all at once I saw a crowd, (A)
A host, of golden daffodils; (B)
Beside the lake, beneath the trees, (C)
Fluttering and dancing in the breeze. (C)

The letter changes whenever the rhyme changes, and whenever a new rhyme is introduced you add a new letter.

In the poem “They Feed They Lion,” rather than end-rhyme, Philip Levine utilizes internal rhyme. Read the first stanza via this link.

In this example, Levine uses rhymes that are both internal and slant or off rather than exact: sacks, black, shafts; butter, tar. Even the numerous occurrences of “out” paired with “creosote” creates a kind of slant rhyme. Here is another example:

Not my hands but green across you now.
Green tons hold you down, and ten bass curve
teasing your hair. Summer slime
will pile deep on your breast. Four months of ice
will keep you firm.

(Richard Hugo, from “The Lady in Kicking Horse Reservoir”)

In this example, the second line contains a slant internal rhyme: “ten” and “ton,” which also rhyme with “hands” in line one. These sounds are tightly woven and where there isn’t rhyme, per se, there is assonance, similar vowel sounds, or vowel rhyme: green, tease, deep; and slime, pile, ice.

Exercise \[\PageIndex{1}\]

Turn to the entire Levine poem “They Feed They Lion” and perform a close reading with your ears. Note places of assonance and rhyme. How do these patterns affect your reading of the poem? How do these sounds work to create the poem’s tone of voice

If a poem rhymes, 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.

A summary of rhyme terms follows:

**End rhyme**: rhyme occurring on stressed syllables at the ends of verse lines. The most common form of rhyme.

**Couplet**: a pair of end-rhyming verse lines, usually of the same length. E.g.:

Had we but World enough, and Time,

This coyness Lady were no crime.
We would sit down, and think which way
To walk, and pass our long Loves Day.
—Marvell, “To his Coy Mistress”

**Internal rhyme:** rhyme occurring within a single verse line.

**Crossed rhyme:** the rhyming of one word in the middle of a verse line with a word in the middle of the following line.

**Half rhyme:** also known as slant rhyme; an incomplete form of rhyme in which final consonants match but vowel sounds do not. E.g.:

I have heard that hysterical women say
They are sick of the palette and fiddle-bow.
Of poets that are always gay,
For everybody knows or else should know
That if nothing drastic is done
Aeroplane and Zeppelin will come out.
Pitch like King Billy bomb-balls in
Until the town lie beaten flat.
—Yeats, “Lapis Lazuli”

The first quatrain is an example of full end rhyme; the second quatrain an example of half rhyme.

**Para-rhyme:** a form of half rhyme; when all the consonants of the relevant words match, not just the final consonants. E.g.:

It seemed that out of battle I escaped
Down some profound dull tunnel, long since scooped
Through granites which titanic wars had groined.
Yet also there encumbered sleepers groaned,
Too fast in thought or death to be bestirred.
Then, as I probed them, one sprang up, and stared
With piteous recognition in fixed eyes,
Lifting distressful hands, as if to bless.
And by his smile, I knew that sullen hall, –
By his dead smile I knew we stood in Hell.
—Wilfred Owen, “Strange Meeting”

**Eye rhyme:** a visual-only rhyme; i.e. when spellings match but in pronunciation there is no rhyme, e.g. want/pant, five/give.

**Double rhyme:** a rhyme on two syllables, the first stressed, the second unstressed. E.g.

I want a hero: —an uncommon want,

When every year and month sends forth a new one,

Till, after cloying the gazettes with can’t,

The age discovers he is not the true one

—Byron, *Don Juan*, I.i

The second and fourth lines are double rhymes; the first and third lines are examples of half rhyme/eye rhyme.

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**Exercise \(\PageIndex{1}\)**

What is the poem about, and how does the rhyme contribute to the meaning and overall effect?

**Love from the North by Christina Rossetti (1862)**

I had a love in soft south land,
Beloved through April far in May;
He waited on my lightest breath,
And never dared to say me nay.

He saddened if my cheer was sad,
But gay he grew if I was gay;
We never differed on a hair,
My yes his yes, my nay his nay.

The wedding hour was come, the aisles
Were flushed with sun and flowers that day;
I pacing balanced in my thoughts,—
"It’s quite too late to think of nay."—

My bridegroom answered in his turn,
Myself had almost answered "yea":
When through the flashing nave I heard.
A struggle and resounding "nay."

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Bridemaids and bridegroom shrank in fear,
But I stood high who stood at bay:
"And if I answer yea, fair Sir,
What man art thou to bar with nay?"

He was a strong man from the north,
Light-locked, with eyes of dangerous gray:
"Put yea by for another time
In which I will not say thee nay.

He took me in his strong white arms,
He bore me on his horse away
O’er crag, morass, and hair-breadth pass,
But never asked me yea or nay.

He made me fast with book and bell,
With links of love he makes me stay;
Till now I’ve neither heart nor power
Nor will nor wish to say him nay.

Answer

‘Love From the North’ tells a simple story. A woman about to marry one man is whisked away by another, just as she is about to exchange vows. The form of the poem is very simple: the second and fourth lines of each of the eight 4-line stanzas rhyme. More significantly, because the last word of each stanza is ‘nay’, there is only one rhyme sound throughout. There are more internal rhymes relying on the same repeated sound, however, aren’t there? Look at the last lines of stanzas 1, 2, 6, 7 and 8 where ‘say’ ‘nay’; ‘nay’ ‘nay’; ‘say’ ‘nay’; ‘yea’ ‘nay’; and ‘say’ ‘nay’ appear. In the second stanza, ‘gay’ occurs twice in line 2; stanza five and six both have ‘yea’ in line 3. What is the effect of this?

Do you think the effect might be to help over-simplify the story? Clearly the woman has doubts about the man from the south’s devotion: he ‘never dared’ to say no to her. He seems to have no will of his own: he ‘saddens’ when she does, is ‘gay’ when she is, wants only what she does. On her wedding day she thinks: ‘It’s quite too late to think of nay’. But is she any happier with the strong man from the north? Who is he? Has he carried her off against her will? And what exactly do you make of the last stanza? Do the ‘links of love’ imply a chain? This strong-minded woman who imposed her will on the man from the south has ‘neither heart nor power/Nor will nor wish’ to say no to the man from the north. Is that good, or bad? And what do you make of the ‘book and bell’ with which she’s made to stay? Certainly they imply something different from the conventional Christian marriage she was about to embark on in the middle of the poem – witchcraft, perhaps, or magic? And are the words ‘Till now’ particularly significant at the beginning of line 3 in the last stanza? Might they suggest a new resolve to break free?

How important is it to resolve such questions? It is very useful to ask them, but not at all easy to find answers. In fact, that is one of the reasons I like the poem so much. The language is very simple and so is the form – eight quatrains (or four-line stanzas) – and yet the more I think about the poem, the more interesting and ambiguous it seems. In my opinion, that is its strength. After all, do we always know exactly what we want or how we feel about relationships?
Even if we do, is it always possible to put such feelings into words? Aren’t feelings often ambivalent rather than straightforward?

It is also worth bearing in mind the fact that the poem is written in ballad form. A ballad tells a story, but it does only recount events – part of the convention is that ballads don’t go into psychological complexities. It is likely that Rossetti chose this ancient oral verse form because she was interested in raising ambiguities. But perhaps the point of the word ‘nay’ chiming throughout ‘Love From the North’ is to indicate the female speaker saying no to both men – the compliant lover and his opposite, the demon lover, alike? After all, ‘nay’ is the sound which gives the poem striking unity and coherence.

Exercise \(\PageIndex{1}\))

Keats’s ‘Eve of St Agnes’ (1820) also tells a tale of lovers, but it isn’t a ballad, even though the rhyme scheme of the first four lines is the same as Rossetti’s quatrains. The stanzas are longer, and the form more complex and sophisticated. The rhyme pattern is the same throughout all 42 stanzas, the first two of which are reproduced for the following activity: Read the first two stanzas of Keats’s poem above. How would you describe the rhyme scheme, and does it seem appropriate for the subject matter?

**Eve of St. Agnes by Keats**

St. Agnes’ Eve – Ah bitter chill it was!

The owl, for all his feathers, was a-cold;

The hare limp’d 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,

Seem’d taking flight for heaven, without a death,

Past the sweet Virgin’s picture, while his prayer he saith.

His prayer he saith, this patient, holy man;

Then takes his lamp, and riseth from his knees,

And back returneth, meagre, barefoot, wan,

Along the chapel aisle by slow degrees:
The sculptur’d dead, on each side, seem to freeze,
Emprison’d in black purgatorial rails:
Knights, ladies, praying in dumb orat’ries,
He passeth by; and his weak spirit fails
To think how they may ache in icy hoods and mails.

In comparison to the Rossetti poem the rhyme sounds form complex patterns, don’t they? While ‘was’/’grass’ in the first stanza and ‘man’/’wan’ in the second do not quite produce a full rhyme (depending on your accent), the first and third lines do rhyme in subsequent stanzas. Using a letter of the alphabet to describe each new rhyme sound, we could describe the pattern like this: a b a b c b c c (imagine sustaining that intricate patterning for 42 stanzas). This kind of formula is useful up to a point for showing how often the same sounds recur, and it does show how complicated the interweaving of echoing sounds is. But it says nothing about how the sounds relate to what is being said – and, as I have been arguing all along, it is the relationship between meaning and word choice that is of particular interest. To give a full answer to my own question, I’d really need to consider the function of rhyme throughout the poem. It would not be necessary to describe what happens in each stanza, but picking out particular pertinent examples would help me argue a case. With only the first two stanzas to work with, I could say that, if nothing else, the intricate rhyme pattern seems appropriate not only for the detailed descriptions but also for the medieval, slightly gothic setting of the chapel where the holy man prays.

Exercise

Read the extract from the poem below. Again, this comes from a longer poem, so it would be useful to look it up and read the rest if you have the opportunity.

Consider the following questions:

1. Describe the rhyme in the stanza from Tennyson’s ‘Mariana’.
2. What is the first stanza about?

Mariana by Alfred Lord Tennyson (1830)

With blackest moss the flower-plots
Were thickly crusted, one and all:
The rusted nails fell from the knots
That held the pear to the gable-wall.
The broken sheds looked sad and strange:
Unlifted was the clinking latch;
Weeded and worn the ancient thatch
Upon the lonely moated grange.
She only said, 'My life is dreary,
He cometh not,' she said;
She said, 'I am aweary, aweary,
I would that I were dead!' (Trilling and Bloom, 1973, p.396)

Answer

1) As with the Keats poem, the rhyme scheme here is quite complicated. Using the same diagrammatic formula of a letter for each new rhyme sound, we could describe this as 'a b a b c d d c e f e f. You might notice too that indentations at the beginning of each line emphasise lines that rhyme with each other: usually the indentations are alternate, except for lines 6 and 7, which form a couplet in the middle of the stanza. It is worth telling you too that each of the stanzas ends with a variation of the line ‘I would that I were dead’ (this is known as a refrain) so – as in Christina Rossetti’s ‘Love From the North’ – a dominant sound or series of sounds throughout helps to control the mood of the poem.

2) We may not know who Mariana is, or why she is in the lonely, crumbling grange, but she is obviously waiting for a man who is slow in arriving. The ‘dreary’/’aweary’ and ‘dead’/’said’ rhymes, which, if you read the rest of the poem, you will see are repeated in each stanza, convey her dejection and express the boredom of endless waiting. As with the stanzas from Keats’s ‘Eve of St Agnes’, there is plenty of carefully observed detail – black moss on the flower-plots, rusty nails, a clinking latch on a gate or door – all of which description contributes to the desolation of the scene and Mariana’s mood. Were the moated grange a lively, sociable household, the poem would be very different. Either Mariana would be cheerful, or her suicidal misery would be in sharp contrast to her surroundings. It is always worth considering what settings contribute to the overall mood of a poem.

Free Verse

Free verse refers to poetry that does not follow standard or regularized meter (the organization of stressed and unstressed syllables) or rhyme scheme. As opposed to more traditional poetry, which tends to use recurring line lengths, metrical patterns, and rhyme to unify individual lines of verse and tie them to other lines within the same poem, free verse can, at times, seem to be random, having no pattern or organization at all. Yet in the hands of many poets, free verse enables a different kind of organization, as they balance free verse’s openness, its ability to provide elements of the poem with a different amount of emphasis, with the use of repeated imagery or syntactic patterns (parallel organization of grammatical elements) to maintain coherence and create a sense of connection among lines.

Free verse does, at times, draw on metrical patterns and occasional rhyme to tie lines together. What distinguishes free verse from other traditional forms of verse is that it only uses these elements occasionally—for a few lines here and
there in a longer poem—and does not use them to structure the poem as a whole. A poem in free verse, then, does not lack structure—or, in many cases, some instances of metrical organization or rhyme—it simply does not maintain or use a regular pattern of meter or rhyme to structure the poem as a whole. Instead, free verse relies more on thematic, syntactic, or semantic repetition and development to create coherence.

Walt Whitman’s *Leaves of Grass* is often credited as introducing free verse into English-language poetry. While not quite true (other experiments and uses preceded his), Whitman’s poetry helped to establish free verse’s potential for exploring a broad range of topics and its ability to embrace an extensive number of ways of organizing verse lines. Later-nineteenth century poets, such as Matthew Arnold in England, further explored the use of free verse, but it was the French symbolists (Jules Laforgue, Gustave Kahn, and Arthur Rimbaud) who practiced what they called vers libre most fully during this period. In the twentieth century, free verse came to dominate much poetic production in English, beginning with the modernists (such as T. S. Eliot, Ezra Pound, and William Carlos Williams) who saw the open form as allowing for the more nimble representation of a modern fragmented and accelerated world.

For more examples, please see the [The Poetry Foundation](https://www.poetryfoundation.org).

**Contributors:**

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