Poetry in Motion

If you saw the film *Dead Poets Society*, you likely remember an early scene when Mr. Keating (Robin Williams), the new charismatic English teacher at an all-male preparatory school, teaches about poetry.[1] The lesson begins ordinarily enough with Mr. Keating asking a student to read from their text the preface entitled "Understanding Poetry." Its author, the fictional Dr. J. Evans Pritchard, offers a ludicrous method of weighing a poem's greatness, whereby poems are graphed by rating a poem's artful presentation on the *x* radius and the importance of the theme on the *y*. The greater the total area, the greater the poem. This reading is followed by Keating's equally ludicrous reaction. He calls the preface "excrement" and demands they tear the preface from their books.

Dead Poets Society may be a good movie, but it demonstrates poor teaching. As Kevin Dettmar points out, while Keating's dynamism and enthusiasm are attractive, especially in comparison to the staid and rote instruction the boys receive in their other classes, he offers his charges no real alternative to Pritchard's approach; he merely excoriates it without providing any methodology or framework in its place.[2] He rightly complains that what Keating "models for his students isn't literary criticism, or analysis, or even study. In fact, it's not even good, careful reading. Rather, it's the literary equivalent of fandom." Keating is the worst type of Romantic: one who is not content with simply placing the primacy of feeling first and is devoid of any intellection. He quotes Whitman out of context and misinterprets Frost. He uses his oratorical gifts to create a cult of personality, not a classroom. Despite his claim that he is teaching the boys to think for themselves, he actually shuts down all independent thought in exclusive favor of his own narrow view.

This is no defense for how the lesson begins. Most of the boys are clearly bored by one student reading aloud and are clearly tuned out and daydreaming. One boy, however, is dutifully and almost eagerly taking notes, copying the graph Keating creates on the chalkboard, which the teacher presently mocks. The boy scribbles out the notes he'd taken. The preface, however, made sense to him and his pre-engineer mind. Keating removes this method as a possible entry for the boy to appreciate poetry and offers him nothing to take its place.

It's easy to understand how some teachers are seduced by Keating's teaching. Who wouldn't want to be beloved and engaging, to have students stand on their desks and address you as "O Captain, my Captain" when you're fired and being escorted out of the building? (Sadly, ultimately none are as engaging as Robin Williams.) I can forgive teachers of other disciplines for this seduction, but English teachers should recognize "there's no there, there" in Keating's lessons. Unfortunately, I've been in secondary English teachers' classrooms with Robert Frost's poem "The Road Not Taken" mistitled as "The Road Less Travelled" on posters. We'll explore this critical difference much later, but someone who has a degree in the subject and is charged with teaching others how to understand poetry should know better.

It's even easier to understand the positive reaction most non-teachers have to Keating. They've likely sat through lessons on poetry bored and confused with no framework for approaching a poem taught to them by teachers who don't even recognize they've got the title of the poem wrong. Compared to that, Keating is dynamic and exciting and seems to be imparting something of value. (Keating does establish some vague relevance when he tells his charges, "We read poetry because we're members of the human race.") Of course, moviegoers' purpose is largely to be entertained not learn poetry lessons, so it makes sense for them to gloss over the fact that they really learn nothing

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[1] Weir, Peter (director) (1989), *Dead Poets Society*.

[2] Dettmar, Kevin (19 Feb 2014), "*Dead Poets Society* Is a Terrible Defense of the Humanities," *The Atlantic*.

of value regarding the subject itself. Even though the recurring poetic motif of *carpe diem* is an important concept, it is taught devoid of true literary context.

Poetry instruction in our public schools is largely based upon the Keating model whereby teachers choose poems with which they feel comfortable and present (as opposed to teach) them along with a single, pat interpretation. Sometimes, specific figures of speech are highlighted and, if the teacher is better than most, students may need to analyze their use, although mostly instruction is limited to mere identification. These poems are frequently limited to the Romantic Period, although occasionally teachers will step gingerly into others. The class then quickly moves on to writing their own poems, as if their production alone teaches them about poetry itself.

I'm convinced that neither the teachers nor the students are comfortable with the ambiguity inherent in much poetry and consequently fear it. Sadly, neither group explores beyond their comfort zone; they generally don't continue to read poetry beyond this classroom experience. The students lack the tools to read a poem for themselves, and given their teacher's pat interpretation, any room for their own divergent reading is quashed. This is accepted because of this fear of ambiguity. The students, mystified by the process of their teacher's analysis (which was likely aided by the teachers' edition of the textbook), are hesitant to voice other possible meanings for fear they will be told they're wrong by the teacher.

All this leads to adults who do not read poetry for pleasure. At best, they feel nostalgia for some of the poems "taught" in school but never move beyond them or develop a deeper understanding of them. Once, I excitedly told an acquaintance I had finished a group of new poems and sent them out to publishers. She replied she didn't like poetry, and when pressed, she elaborated she disliked all forms of poetry, from limericks to lyrics to epics. I was shocked. To me, this was akin to declaring she didn't listen to any form of music. However, I feel I understand her reticence due to the poor introduction to the genre I've described.

My purpose today is to fill in the educational gaps with respect to poetry. I'll do this by first exploring definitions of the genre, followed by looking at a few of the various techniques poets employ in the art and craft. Finally, I'll tackle some of the problems of interpretation intrinsic to poetry.

Poetry: A Definition

The question implied in the heading for this section is deceptively difficult to answer. Any definition must be broad because the category of literary art we call poetry is so big. There are always exceptions, so many definitions of poetry are doomed to fall short by trying to be precise. Oxford Languages tells us poetry is a "literary work in which special intensity is given to the expression of feelings and ideas by the use of distinctive style and rhythm," which seems pretty good for our purposes but it demands all poems have rhythm and, of course, not all do.[3] As we'll see, what most attracts me to this definition is the phrase "special intensity."

Before going further, however, it is illuminating to see how some famous writers have defined poetry. My desire is that you take away a couple of things from these quotations. First, although Oxford Languages' broad definition works well, things become more problematic the more specific you try to get. The second takeaway I hope for you to notice is just how much the times in which authors write influence their thinking. The quotations are pretty dense, as one might expect, but with any luck my explication following each helps you appreciate the main points I'm using them for.

[3] https://languages.oup.com/google-dictionary-en/

In *Rasselas* (1759), Samuel Johnson tells us what the poet should do.

> The business of the poet … is to examine, not the individual, but the species; to remark general properties and large appearances: he does not number the streaks of the tulip, or describe the different shades of verdure in the forest. He is to exhibit in his portraits of nature such prominent and striking features as recall the original to every mind; and must neglect the minuter discriminations, which one may have remarked, and another one neglected, for those characteristics which are alike obvious to vigilance and carelessness.

Johnson wrote during the Neoclassical Period, also known as the Age of Reason. Philosophical thought of the period was dominated by emphasizing qualities *all* people share, as opposed to individual exceptionalism. (Think of the beginning of the Declaration of Independence, perhaps the most well-known example from the period, to see this in action.) Consequently, his views on poetry reflect this mindset. The poet should present the generic, rather than the particular.

It's generally accepted that, at least for writing, William Wordsworth kicks off the next major period in the Preface to *Lyrical Ballads* (1798). Wordsworth tells us,

> I have said that poetry is the spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings; it takes its origin from emotion recollected in tranquility: the emotion is contemplated till, by a species of reaction, the tranquility gradually disappears, and an emotion, kindred to that which was before the subject of contemplation, is gradually produced, and does by itself actually exist in the mind.

Wordsworth is a Romantic, and as such he prizes emotion over thought and the individual over the collective. Consequently, people sometimes take his initial clause out of context; they stop after "spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings" and ignore the role contemplation plays in Wordsworth's definition. The poem is not spontaneous; the feelings are. Quiet work then ensues to transform those feelings into a poem.

Wordsworth's thinking is in many ways diametrically opposed to Johnson's. To the former, the poet is a kind of alchemist who transforms spontaneous individual feelings into art. However, Johnson isn't interested in the individual's feelings; rather, he prefers broad strokes to make the poem more universal. These differences produce different poetry. Toward the start of the Neoclassical Period, Robert Herrick writes,[4]

> Fair Daffodils,
> We weep to see
> You haste away so soon;
> As yet the early-rising sun
> Has not attain'd his noon.

Wordsworth begins "I Wandered Lonely as a Cloud" with these lines:[5]

> 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.

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[4] Herrick, Robert (1665), "To Daffodils."

[5] Wordsworth, William (1807), "I Wandered Lonely as a Cloud," *Poems, in Two Volumes*.

The pronouns are key: Herrick uses the plural "we," Wordsworth the singular "I." Herrick, like Johnson advises, also simply presents daffodils – they could be anywhere – while Wordsworth creates a specific scene with a lake, trees, and a breeze.

Jumping ahead to the early 20th century, T. S. Eliot doesn't wholly agree with either Johnson or Wordsworth. Here he takes on the latter directly:[6]

> The business of the poet is not to find new emotions, but to use the ordinary ones and, working them up into poetry, to express feelings which are not actual emotions at all. And emotions which he has never experienced will serve his turn as well as those familiar to him. Consequently, we must believe that "emotion recollected in tranquility" is an inexact formula. For it is neither emotion, nor recollection, nor, without distortion of meaning, tranquility. It is a concentration, of a very great number of experiences which to the practical and active person would not seem experiences at all. … Poetry is not a turning loose of emotion, but an escape from emotion; it is not the expression of personality, but an escape from personality.

Eliot writes during the Modern Period (around 1900-1930), which is marked by experimentation and attempts to merge form and content. To the Modernist, modern life is often confusing and unexplained with no clear resolutions, and their works reflect their perspective. To concentrate experiences that the practical person would not even recognize as an experience sounds like a recipe for confusion. And yet, if you know Eliot's poetry, you know this is exactly what he frequently does.

These three writers (and I could have added many more) do not agree on the details as to what constitutes poetry. While we may easily recognize works of both Wordsworth and Eliot as poetry, as different as they are, these definition details are important to determine whether less widely accepted writing constitutes poetry. From their statements, it is doubtful that any of the three would identify a lay poet's work consisting solely of lines of simple end rhymes with irregular rhythm (much less meter) as true poetry, but I think it should, just as there is room for folk art and music alongside their more sophisticated brethren. If the efforts of both the Ramones and Beethoven can be called music, so too can both of the efforts of an earnest lay poet to capture their feelings and Eliot's "The Waste Land" (1922) be considered poetry.[7] Both belong on the same continuum representing a movement toward sophistication and artfulness, which is not the same as value. In fact, the former may successfully resonate with more people than the latter, which many may find too obtuse to understand.

As for the second takeaway, we are all products of our times, artists included. Usually, this fact leads artists to adopt the prevailing modes of thought of their period, although sometimes it means the opposite: the artist openly and purposefully rejects those ideas. For example, in a 1725 letter to Alexander Pope (i.e. during the Age of Reason), Jonathan Swift says, "I have Materials toward a Treatise, proving the falsity of that Definition, *Animal rationale* and to show that it should be only *rationis capax*." In other words, Swift declares he is preparing to write a tome showing humans are *not* rational animals; rather, they are merely animals *capable* of reason. He publishes *Gulliver's Travels* the next year, the majority of which is a satire of our supposed rational nature.

In "The Philosophy of Composition" (1850), another Romantic, Edgar Allan Poe, states that "Beauty is the sole legitimate province of the poem." He goes on to connect the beautiful to the

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[6] Eliot, T. S. (1917), *Tradition and the Individual Talent.* It is interesting that both the quotations from Johnson and Eliot begin with "The business of the poet is …"

[7] The reader will recall I disliked the word "rhythm" in the definition we are using.

sublime and clarify that a poem should produce the same emotional response in the reader as a contemplation of the sublime. Not surprisingly, Poe concludes, "Melancholy is thus the most legitimate of the poetical tones." Poe, then, has no room in his definition of poetry for someone like Ogden Nash and his poem "Reflections On Ice Breaking."[8]

> Reflections On Ice Breaking
>
> Candy
> Is dandy
> But liquor
> Is quicker.

I'd argue that Nash has produced a succinct and relatable poem stating some universal truths, which I won't take the time to explicate here. Suffice it to say, the poem's resonance has caused it to reach the status of an aphorism, and it certainly doesn't need to include any contemplation of the sublime and beautiful to reach that status.

Let's return to the Oxford Languages definition of poetry as a "literary work in which special intensity is given to the expression of feelings and ideas by the use of distinctive style and rhythm." As I stated earlier, I'm particularly drawn to the phrase "special intensity." To me, it's the key to the definition. Prose expresses feelings and ideas, and its style may also be distinctive. For example, the style of Ernest Hemingway is so distinctive there was a contest for parodying it. Prose can also have a rhythm, although that quality isn't absolute for either prose or poetry, it is more prone in poetry. Though the language of prose *may* at times carry a special intensity, poetry *always* does. The quality that contributes to this sense of intensity is concision.

Poe argues the term "long poem" (as in book-length) is an oxymoron (op cit). (To put this into perspective, Poe's "The Raven" is a little over 100 lines, which Poe does not define as long.) While prose, whether a story or an email, also may be extremely brief, Poe insists the epic poem does not exist as a poem; rather, such works are really a series of short poems strung together. This contention makes perfect sense when you consider that epics originate from an oral tradition whereby the poet recited things like the *Iliad* from memory. They are divided into sections to facilitate the process of memorization and later recitation. I believe Poe is correct, since longer poems, like Eliot's "The Waste Land," tend to be similarly sectioned into parts addressing aspects of their themes separately. As for brief prose, extremely short works of fiction also carry a "special intensity." Here's the famous shortest Hemingway story: "For sale: baby shoes. Never worn."[9]

Consider how I've spent over 1,500 words in prose so far defining poetry. Archibald MacLeisch's poem "Ars Poetica," or the art of poetry, does it in a little over a hundred.[10]

> Ars Poetica
>
> A poem should be palpable and mute
> As a globed fruit,
>
> Dumb
> As old medallions to the thumb,
>
> Silent as the sleeve-worn stone
> Of casement ledges where the moss has grown—

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[8] Nash, Ogden (1931), "Reflections On Ice Breaking," *Hard Lines*.
[9] Wortman, Zack (11 Sept 2016), "Ernest Hemingway's Six-Word Sequels," *The New Yorker*.
[10] MacLeisch, Archibald (Jun 1926), "Ars Poetica," *Poetry: A Magazine of Verse*.

A poem should be wordless
As the flight of birds.

*

A poem should be motionless in time
As the moon climbs,

Leaving, as the moon releases
Twig by twig the night-entangled trees,

Leaving, as the moon behind the winter leaves,
Memory by memory the mind—

A poem should be motionless in time
As the moon climbs.

*

A poem should be equal to:
Not true.

For all the history of grief
An empty doorway and a maple leaf.

For love
The leaning grasses and two lights above the sea—

A poem should not mean
But be.

How MacLeisch defines poetry isn't important here; I merely want to contrast how poetry carries a brevity more difficult for my prose to lift.

MacLeisch's poem is not simply brief; it's concise. The key difference is that "brief" simply means short, whereas "concise" has the additional meaning that something brief presents ideas efficiently.[11] That efficiency of presenting complex ideas briefly leads to a poem's "special intensity," and it is accomplished through a poet's use of the techniques of poetry, the subject of the next section.

Poets generally walk in a connotative world, which leads to the ambiguity of much poetry, the quality I identified early on as causing some people to feel uneasy reading it. Those people prefer the denotative realm, or what they think of as denotative. They prefer the apparent straightforwardness of Frost's "Two roads diverged in a yellow wood" to MacLeisch's "A poem should be palpable and mute / As a globed fruit." They believe they understand the former and are confused by the latter; thus, they fear the range of possibilities for meaning in the latter instead of embracing it. (I say "believe" because many casual readers of Frost often see his famous lyrics as straightforward and somewhat simple, albeit beautifully presented, a reading likely caused by not differentiating between the poet and the speaker.)

Poetry, then, creates its special intensity through the poet's use of connotation over denotation, or what Phillip Wheelwright calls "depth language" over "steno-language."[12] Of course, prose may also create depth and use ambiguity and connotation over denotation, just as some poetry is more

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[11] Hemingway's story is also concise.

[12] Wheelwright, Phillip (1982, 1968), *The Burning Fountain: A Study of the Language of Symbolism* (revised ed.).

denotative than connotative. I'm speaking in generalities and painting with a broad brush because defining something as large and wide-ranging as poetry demands a broad definition.

Techniques of Poetry

Poets have a vast array of techniques at their disposal to meet the needs of their poetry, and although I will discuss quite a few, many more exist. While we'll explore beyond the couple on the surface of which casual readers are aware, like rhyme, you should keep in mind that this list is far from complete. Nor should you consider the examples provided to be exhaustive. They are meant to be salient examples of the technique in discussion and may not be representative of all other instances of the technique.

I won't be discussing diction directly because poets of all skill levels choose from their own working vocabularies to express themselves. Besides, the only way to discuss word choice is to review the possible words the poet did *not* use. Consider the word "yawp" in the following lines from Walt Whitman, "I too am not a bit tamed, I too am untranslatable, / I sound my barbaric yawp over the roofs of the world."[13] Unencumbered by meter, Whitman could have chosen "bellow," "shout," "yell," and myriad other words in the place of yawp; however, "yawp" is so remote from everyday speech that it carries the additional idea of "untranslatable" from the previous line alongside the actual denotative meaning of the word of "a raucous noise."

Before delving into poetic techniques, I need to make sure that we have a shared understanding of a few terms I will be using. The first is "line." A line of poetry is exactly that: the words that appear on a single line no matter their number. It is analogous to a sentence, but it is not the same. A sentence is a group of words with a subject and predicate that express a complete idea and can thus stand alone. A line of poetry may fit that definition, or it may be a fraction of a sentence, or a poet may not be writing in sentences at all. How a poet organizes their lines *is* a technique of poetry, but the term line itself is not.

The second term is "stanza." Like line and sentence, stanza finds its analogous form in prose in the paragraph. A paragraph is a group of sentences with both unity (they are on a single topic) and coherence (they are organized in a logical fashion). Stanzas, however, don't conform to such rigid rules; they are lines the poet chooses to group together for whatever reason, whether that grouping is thematic, a function of the poem's form, or another reason. Stanzas are usually marked by extra space between two lines.

The use of both lines and stanzas will enter our techniques discussion under the heading of juxtaposition, but the terms will arise when discussing unrelated elements, like above when I discussed Whitman's diction.

Lastly, I will use the term "speaker." The speaker is the voice of the poem. In prose the voice is called the narrator. Generally, readers of prose don't confuse the author with the narrator, even a first-person narrator speaking as "I."[14] For example, no one confuses the narrator of *The Great Gatsby* with its author, F. Scott Fitzgerald. In poetry, however, readers confuse the speaker with the poet all the time. This confusion can create problems of interpretation, which is the subject of the final section of this essay.

Form and Structure

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[13] Whitman, Walt (1855), "Song of Myself" *Leaves of Grass*.

[14] An exception to this rule frequently happens with Poe. Readers tend to think of him as an actual maniac, probably due to the salacious biography of him published by Rufus Griswold shortly after Poe's death to help boost sales of his stories for Griswold's profit.

Concision is not the sole difference between MacLeisch's "Ars Poetica" and the excerpts of prose from Johnson, Wordsworth, and Eliot; the form of the writing is different as well. Prose has a dense, packed look as sentences stretching from margin to margin coalesce into paragraphs. Lines of poetry, on the other hand, have more open space for the words to breathe, as if the weightiness of each word needs extra space to hold their connotative power. Poetry simply *looks* different from prose.[15]

Poets can choose to use existing poetic forms, like odes, elegies, narrative poems, sestinas, pantoums, haiku, and many more.[16] Each has its unique set of requirements, usually involving subject matter, line length, meter, rhyme scheme, and/or repetition of words or lines. If we looked at all of these forms, we'd never get to other techniques; therefore, I've chosen to focus mainly on a single form as an exemplar to stand-in for the rest: the sonnet. This way, my sonnet examples can also serve the next sections on meter and rhyme since sonnets have requirements in those areas.

A sonnet is a type of lyric poetry. A lyric is typically a short poem expressing the thoughts of a single speaker and usually on a serious topic.[17] The word "lyric" comes from the Greek "lyre," a stringed musical instrument that accompanied the recitation of these poems in ancient Greece. We still refer to the poetry that accompanies music as lyrics, but the poetic form is larger than songs and contains sonnets, odes, elegies, and other poems that fit the definition. For example, some of Robert Frost's most beloved poems are lyrics.

Sonnets are 14-line poems in iambic pentameter (in English), which will be discussed in the next section, and a specific rhyme scheme, which will be discussed in the section following meter. They date back to 13th century Italy but became popular from the works of Petrarch a hundred years later. Shakespeare's sonnet cycle are the most well-known examples in English. The two poets are the namesakes for two sonnet forms with structural differences, specifically in how the lines are divided.[18] The Petrarchan sonnet, also referred to as Italian, is made up of an octave (a group of eight lines functioning as a unit) and a sestet (six lines). The Shakespearean sonnet, also called English, is made up of three quatrains (four-line units) and a couplet (two lines). There are, of course, many variations, but Italian and English are the two main types. Sometimes these groupings are divided into stanzas, but usually the sonnet's 14 lines are presented as a single unit.

Let's examine three sonnets to get a sense of their range. The first is Shakespeare's "Sonnet 18," perhaps the most famous sonnet in English. Notice, particularly, how the quatrains and couplet function as units.

> Shall I compare thee to a summer's day?
> Thou art more lovely and more temperate:
> Rough winds do shake the darling buds of May,
> And summer's lease hath all too short a date;
> Sometime too hot the eye of heaven shines,
> And often is his gold complexion dimm'd;
> And every fair from fair sometime declines,

[15] There is a poetic form called a prose poem that I won't be discussing as it deviates far from some of the general ideas of this section.
[16] Those interested in exploring the many forms of poetry can find books like Robert Lee Brewer's *The Complete Guide to Poetic Forms* (2020).
[17] Short is not always the case; for example, epics are lyric poems.
[18] They also have different rhyme schemes, which I will highlight later. In addition, I am choosing to talk of the sonnet's *volta*, or shift in thought, indirectly.

By chance or nature's changing course untrimm'd;
But thy eternal summer shall not fade,
Nor lose possession of that fair thou ow'st;
Nor shall death brag thou wander'st in his shade,
When in eternal lines to time thou grow'st:
  So long as men can breathe or eyes can see,
  So long lives this, and this gives life to thee.

The first quatrain poses the question of whether to compare the subject to a summer's day and finds the latter lacking. The second quatrain amplifies this observation by pointing out the vagaries of the season. The third quatrain states the subject's loveliness, unlike summer's, is eternal, while the couplet states the subject's eternal beauty stems from being captured in the art of the poem. Beauty is temporal; beauty depicted in art is eternal.

The structure of "Hap" by Thomas Hardy is a variation of an Italian sonnet.[19] He splits the octave into two quatrain stanzas followed by a sestet stanza.

Hap

If but some vengeful god would call to me
From up the sky, and laugh: "Thou suffering thing,
Know that thy sorrow is my ecstasy,
That thy love's loss is my hate's profiting!"

Then would I bear it, clench myself, and die,
Steeled by the sense of ire unmeritéd;
Half-eased in that a Powerfuller than I
Had willed and meted me the tears I shed.

But not so. How arrives it joy lies slain,
And why unblooms the best hope ever sown?
—Crass Casualty obstructs the sun and rain,
And dicing Time for gladness casts a moan. . . .
These purblind Doomsters had as readily strown
Blisses about my pilgrimage as pain.

Notice that the way Hardy begins his stanzas provides a clear structure. The poem's sections begin "If," "Then," "But not so," establishing a logical argument. The speaker laments that if only a deity would take responsibility for their suffering by declaring its hate for them, then they could endure the suffering that is their lot. (Notice Hardy's use of the marvelous invented word "Powerfuller" to describe this divinity.) Unfortunately, there is no voice from the heavens; there is no explanation for suffering beyond "hap," blind chance, which is made clear in the sestet.

Finally, Percey Bysshe Shelley also gives us an Italian sonnet with "Ozymandias."[20]

Ozymandias

I met a traveller from an antique land,
Who said—"Two vast and trunkless legs of stone
Stand in the desert. . . . Near them, on the sand,

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[19] Hardy, Thomas (1898), "Hap," *Wessex Poems*. It is a variation because of the rhyme scheme.
[20] Shelley, Percy Bysshe (11 Jan 1818), "Ozymandias," *The Examiner*.

Half sunk a shattered visage lies, whose frown,
And wrinkled lip, and sneer of cold command,
Tell that its sculptor well those passions read
Which yet survive, stamped on these lifeless things,
The hand that mocked them, and the heart that fed;
And on the pedestal, these words appear:
My name is Ozymandias, King of Kings;
Look on my Works, ye Mighty, and despair!
Nothing beside remains. Round the decay
Of that colossal Wreck, boundless and bare
The lone and level sands stretch far away."

The octave describes a collapsed colossus with the face of a vain tyrant. The sestet first gives us the pompous boast from Ozymandias that his vast kingdom is surely greater than any other when ironically it is now a kingdom of sand reclaimed by the desert.

If we added to the discussion the requirements of meter and rhyme, the sonnet form might seem quite constricting; however, as these examples demonstrate, it is actually quite versatile for expressing a wide variety of themes. Due to Shakespeare, many people mistakenly consider the sonnet form to be limited to love poems, whereas as we've seen, Shakespeare's true subject matter of "Sonnet 18" is not so much love as it is aesthetics. Physical beauty, and life itself, is transitory, but art transcends time. The poem shares thematic qualities with John Keats's "Ode on a Grecian Urn," which describes two lovers depicted on an ancient urn as locked forever in a moment of perfection and thus revealing that "Beauty is truth; truth beauty."[21]

Hardy writes during the Victorian Period, the era between the English Romantics and Modernism. While this period is marked by great prosperity for England at the expense of other civilizations' exploitation, not all share in this prosperity equally. The rigid class structure of England is challenged by the growing wealth of the middle class and the still wide gulf between the upper class and the poor. Victorian writers frequently address social inequities in their works (think of Charles Dickens), and Hardy's sonnet falls into this thematic category. Wealth, comfort, bliss – these are all just a matter of blind chance not some divine right afforded to a chosen few. The converse is also true: a life of pain, struggle, sadness comes to us "unmerited" through accident and happenstance.

Shelley, like Wordsworth, is a Romantic. Another defining quality of that period is the elevation of the natural world over the products of civilization. Their thinking, philosophically, is that if the Garden of Eden represents perfection, the farther we are removed from that state the less "perfect" mankind is. The notion of the "noble savage" stems from this idea. Mankind finds its greatest happiness the closer it is to nature. Ozymandias (the character) has the hubris to believe his creations are eternal when they are a mere temporary blip, and nature will reclaim its dominion over all. Thus, the delicious irony of the word "despair" in the inscription. It is meant to goad a future reader who is presumed to be awed by the spectacle of the king's creation. However, the despair is Ozymandias's, if he only knew his creation's fate, and it becomes ours as well when we realize it encompasses the futility of our endeavors too.

The sonnet, then, is more versatile than its strictures might lead us to believe. The same holds true for poems created using other pre-defined forms as well. In fact, the requirements of a form

[21] Keats, John (1819), "Ode on a Grecian Urn," *Annals of the Fine Arts for 1819*.

can even help poets. Limiting your expression to 14 lines organized either into an octave/sestet or three quatrains/couplet, written entirely in iambic pentameter and following a rhyme scheme forces you to conform your ideas to the structure, impacting everything from diction and syntax to the grouping of ideas. The same holds true for the many other types of poetry with formal demands.

Of course, poets often choose to create their own structure. "Ars Poetica," for example, with its rhyming couplets grouped into stanzas by ellipses is such a poem. A lyric poem expressing the ideas of a single speaker, it otherwise stands as a unique creation.

In addition, there is the poetic form of free verse. Usually credited to Walt Whitman, free verse is defined as poetry without a regular meter or rhyme scheme. (Free verse is sometimes confused with blank verse, which is unrhymed lines of iambic pentameter.) Seeking to create a new and uniquely American poetic voice, Whitman mostly eschews regular meter in favor of other techniques. Consider again the lines from "Song of Myself" quoted earlier: "I too am not a bit tamed, I too am untranslatable, / I sound my barbaric yawp over the roofs of the world." Because it frees the poet to express their ideas any way that suits them, free verse remains a highly popular poetic form today.

As we'll see, those other techniques prominent in free verse can be quite powerful. Here's a famous couplet stanza from T. S. Eliot's "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock"[22]: "In the room the women come and go, / Talking of Michaelangelo." As with much of Eliot, these lines slap the reader with an almost mind-numbing ambiguity. In an essay on Eliot, William H. Pritchard recalls encountering "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock" and Eliot in general for the first time as an undergraduate.[23]

> Sure enough, within a few lines occurs the infamous couplet – "In the room the women come and go,/ Talking of Michaelangelo" – utterly memorable, but what did it mean? That whatever sort of women are in whatever sort of room, coming and going, they are, all of them, talking of Michaelangelo. But what are they saying and what does it have to do with the "sawdust restaurants with oyster shells" just preceding or the patient etherised upon a table with which we began?

Remember: Eliot is a Modernist who is at times deliberately confusing.

Rhythm and Meter

With words, rhythm is created syllabically, specifically by the interplay between stressed and unstressed syllables. (Syllables are centered on vowels, their sonorous hearts.) As the pronunciation guide in a dictionary definition shows, multisyllabic words carry their own patterns of stressed and unstressed syllables. For example, the first syllable of the word *constant* is stressed. When written using stressed and unstressed marks, *constant* looks like "cónstănt."

Meter is the repetition of rhythm creating a pattern. Individual words, therefore, have rhythm but not meter. In poetry, a group of syllables functioning together is called a "foot," and the repetition of feet creates meter. Consequently, to create a meter you must organize words so that their rhythms follow a deliberate pattern.

There are four standard feet in English: the *iamb*, an unstressed syllable followed by a stressed one; the *anapest*, two unstressed syllables followed by a single stressed one; the *trochee*, a stressed syllable followed by an unstressed; and the *dactyl*, a stressed syllable followed by two unstressed. I'll

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[22] Eliot, T. S. (Jun 1915), "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock," *Poetry*.
[23] Pritchard, William H. (1993), "T. S. Eliot," *The Columbia History of American Poetry* (Jay Parini, ed.).

be focusing on iambs and trochees for two reasons. First, they are by far the most common forms. Second, the scansion of poetry (i.e. reading to determine its meter) is far less important to the average reader than feeling it. The former is primarily an intellectual exercise.[24]

Standing alone, the word *constant* is trochaic. Bookended by *the* and *wind*; however, creates the two-foot iambic line: *Thĕ cón/stănt wínd*. Meter is identified by the number of feet within a line of poetry. “The constant wind” is *iambic dimeter*. Thus, *iambic <u>penta</u>meter* is a meter of five iambs (i.e. ten paired syllables) per line.

A lot is made in classrooms of iambic pentameter for a couple of reasons. First, iambs represent the general rhythm of English. Even in prose, English follows a general “băh báh băh báh băh báh” rhythm. Consequently, iambs appear as the predominant feet in much of the poetry read in school. Second, iambic pentameter is the meter used in Shakespeare’s plays, so it is the one meter most likely to be formally taught. (Shakespeare isn’t the only playwright using iambic pentameter, but other prominent writers of the same period, like Christopher Marlowe and Ben Jonson, are not usually covered.)

Shakespeare’s plays contain lines of rhyming iambic pentameter, like “…The play’s the thing / Wherein I’ll catch the conscience of the king” from *Hamlet*. They also contain prose like the Gravedigger’s speech from the same play. Mostly, however, Shakespeare’s plays are made up of unrhymed lines of iambic pentameter or blank verse. (“Blank” because there is no rhyme.) The plays, therefore, are mostly poetry since they conform to this metrical demand. This demand can cause confusion among some modern readers, since in order to meet it, Shakespeare must sometimes alter things like normal syntax. For example, instead of saying “I hit him,” a character might have to say “Him I hit” (i.e. place the direct object before the subject) to maintain the meter. (It’s also why the plays look the way they do on the page with a line sometimes split between different characters to complete the pentameter.) It further explains how, when spoken by actors, the confusion can sometimes evaporate and the lines become understandable, since English is generally iambic.

Let’s look at all this in action. Here’s a famous line of iambic pentameter complete with accent marks from *Romeo and Juliet*: “Bŭt sóft, whăt líght thrŏugh yóndĕr wíndŏw breáks?” Notice it is made up of five iambs, or ten syllables total, since each iamb contains two syllables. Notice too it is perfectly understandable as a sentence, even with the archaic use of the word “soft.” If you review the three sonnets presented earlier, you’ll find each line in all three contains five iambs as well, since one of the demands of the sonnet form is that they are in iambic pentameter.

Of course, iambs don’t only show up in groups of five. Here’s a poem by Robert Frost in iambic tetrameter, or four iambs (i.e. eight syllables) per line:[25]

Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening

Whose woods these are I think I know.
His house is in the village though;
He will not see me stopping here
To watch his woods fill up with snow.

My little horse must think it queer

[24] For the curious, here are some words that are anapests: *cóntrádĭct*, *íntérrŭpt*, *úndérstănd*. These are dactyls: *mŭrmúríng*, *bĭcýclé*, *pŏétrý*.
[25] Frost, Robert (1922), “Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening,” *New Hampshire*.

To stop without a farmhouse near
Between the woods and frozen lake
The darkest evening of the year.

He gives his harness bells a shake
To ask if there is some mistake.
The only other sound's the sweep
Of easy wind and downy flake.

The woods are lovely, dark and deep,
But I have promises to keep,
And miles to go before I sleep,
And miles to go before I sleep.

Like many of Frost's poems, this one is frequently taught in schools, and many people love it, largely because of the bucolic portrait it paints. (We'll see how it's more complex than that in an upcoming section.) They also feel they "understand" it in part because they look at it as a simple scene, but also because the iambs give it a rhythm like regular speech.

Another frequently encountered foot is the trochee, the mirror image of the iamb. Trochaic meter is usually catalectic, which is the technical term for leaving off the final unstressed syllable, as in these lines of trochaic tetrameter from William Blake: "Týgĕr, Týgĕr, búrnĭng bríght, / Ín thĕ fórĕst óf thĕ níght."[26] Though it is tetrameter, there are only seven syllables per line because it is also catalectic.

Ultimately, identifying a specific meter is not as important as feeling the rhythm it produces. Meter is a technique used to produce an effect. Like rhyme, meter can be dropped into a poem's single line or a stanza to produce point of emphasis for the reader. Therefore, for most readers recognizing a specific meter is mere labeling of the parts, but *feeling* the rhythm can aid in interpretation. For example, if a poet interrupts a meter with something else, it draws our attention. Likewise, if they are writing in free verse without regular meter and then insert a line in meter.

An excerpt from a song in Shakespeare's play *Love's Labors Lost* illustrates how a metrical change represents a change in tone and is meant to draw our attention. The song is typically called "The Cuckoo's Song," but it has no actual title.

When daisies pied and violets blue,
    And lady-smocks all silver-white,
And cuckoo-buds of yellow hue
    Do paint the meadow with delight,
The cuckoo then, on every tree,
Mocks married men; for thus sings he,
        "Cuckoo!
Cuckoo, cuckoo!" O word of fear,
Unpleasing to the married ear!

When shepherds pipe on oaten straws,
    And merry larks are plowmen's clocks,
When turtles tread, and rooks, and daws,

[26] Blake, William (1794), "The Tyger," *Songs of Experience*.

And maidens bleach their summer smocks,
The cuckoo then, on every tree,
Mocks married men; for thus sings he,
"Cuckoo!
Cuckoo, cuckoo!" O word of fear,
Unpleasing to the married ear!

The song is in iambic tetrameter and breezes along like the spring day it describes. That takes a turn with the cuckoo's call. The first is extra-metrical; it breaks the tetrameter. All three "cuckoos" in the call are also trochaic and thus stop the iambic flow. This draws our attention to the call and makes it somewhat discordant. We'll discuss why Shakespeare does this later, but for now it's only important to notice how the change in rhythm and meter affects the reader whether or not they can name the iambs and trochees.

Rhyme

Rhyme is the repetition of vowel and consonant sounds at the end of words. When the repeated sounds are exact, it is called true, perfect, or full rhyme. When the sounds are not exact, it is called a near or imperfect rhyme. Imperfect rhyme usually employs either assonance or consonance. Assonance is the repetition of vowel sounds with dissimilar consonant sounds, like "boy" and "toil." The opposite is consonance: the repetition of consonant sounds with dissimilar vowel sounds, as in "rush" and "rash."

A sight or eye rhyme occurs when words look like they should rhyme, but they produce dissimilar sounds. Given that they only differ in their initial letters, "move" and "love" should produce a perfect rhyme, but the rhyme is limited to how they look, not sound.

The most common type of rhyme is end rhyme, where the rhyme occurs at the end of lines. The pattern created by end rhymes is called the rhyme scheme, and it is denoted by designating rhyming lines with the same letter. Thus, a Shakesperean sonnet's rhyme scheme is represented as ABAB, CDCD, EFEF, GG. If you look at "Sonnet 18" above, you'll find it matches the scheme perfectly. Each of the three quatrains and the couplet form separate rhyming groups, as well as expressing different ideas in each group, which we've discussed.

A Petrarchan rhyme scheme should be ABBAABBA for the octave and either CDECDE or CDCDCD for the sestet. The rhyme scheme of Hardy's "Hap" is a combination of the Shakespearean and Petrarchan forms. If you recall, Hardy splits the Petrarchan octave into two quatrains. Those quatrains follow the Shakespearean pattern. He leaves the sestet intact but varies slightly from true Petrarchan form. "Ozymandias" has a rhyme scheme of Shelley's own invention and completely divergent from both forms. The poem's form, however, is Petrarchan, so it is considered that type of sonnet despite not conforming its rhyme scheme.

In general, poets using end rhymes create their own rhyme schemes. "Ars Poetica" is essentially rhyming couplets (until the final stanza) made up of both perfect and imperfect rhymes. "The Cuckoo's Song" follows an ABABCCDD pattern. (The extra metrical "cuckoos" fall out of both meter and rhyme.)

I've ignored a third type of sonnet, the Spenserian, named for English poet Edmund Spenser. It is essentially a Shakespearean sonnet with an altered rhyme scheme. Its pattern is ABAB, BCBC, CDCD, EE. This forms what is known as a "chain rhyme," whereby a rhyme or word to be rhymed is carried over to the next stanza. Rather than presenting another sonnet to see a chain rhyme, review "Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening" above. Its rhyme scheme is AABA, BBCB,

DDED, EEEE. The main rhyme for the second stanza is introduced in the third line of the first stanza and so forth until the final stanza is all one rhyme.

End rhyme isn't the only type; rhymes can also occur within a line of poetry. This is called internal rhyme. Here is a stanza from Eliot's "The Hollow Men" with an internal rhyme in the first line:

> Sightless, unless
> The eyes reappear
> As the perpetual star
> Multifoliate rose
> Of death's twilight kingdom
> The hope only
> Of empty men.

Eliot's use of rhyme emphasizes the condition of the hollow men's lack of sight. Their "eyes" can reappear if they accept celestial vision. In other words, they can choose *not* to be hollow.

Of course, poets can mix internal rhyme with end rhyme. Samuel Taylor Coleridge uses this effect in "The Rime of the Ancient Mariner."[27]

> In mist or cloud, on mast or shroud,
> It perched for vespers nine;
> Whiles all the night, through fog-smoke white,
> Glimmered the white moon-shine.

You might remember the opening stanza of Poe's "The Raven" with its mélange of internal and end rhymes:[28]

> Once upon a midnight dreary, while I pondered, weak and weary,
> Over many a quaint and curious volume of forgotten lore—
>   While I nodded, nearly napping, suddenly there came a tapping,
> As of some one gently rapping, rapping at my chamber door.
> "'Tis some visitor," I muttered, "tapping at my chamber door—
>   Only this and nothing more."

This opening full of rhyming and repeated words (and sounds) creates an intensity, which sets the scene for the phantasmagorical events to come with the arrival of the bird of the title.

Of course, a mix of internal and end rhyme can appear in free verse as well. Eliot gives us this example from "Prufrock":

> Do I dare
> Disturb the universe?
> In a minute there is time
> For decisions and revisions which a minute will reverse.

"Prufrock" is a dramatic monologue, a poem in which a single speaker is a character expressing their thoughts as if they are speaking. Not only do these lines enhance that effect by mimicking shifts of thought, but like Poe's they include both rhymes and, here, the repeated word "minute." The balance of "minute" appearing near the beginning of the final couplet and again near the end, and

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[27] Coleridge, Samuel Taylor (1798), "The Rime of the Ancient Mariner," *Lyrical Ballads*.
[28] Poe, E. A. (29 Jan 1845), "The Raven," *Evening Mirror*. This is the first publication attaching Poe's name.

additionally appearing near the end rhyming word "reverse" in the latter, gives the reader a real sense of Prufrock's indecision.

Repetition is the next technique we'll explore, so perhaps it's time to get to it.

Repetition

As we've seen, rhyme is a specialized form of repetition. We've already looked at some examples of repeated words used in conjunction with rhymes, but there are more and seemingly endless variations. Earlier in "Prufrock," he tells us,

> Time for you and time for me,
> And time yet for a hundred indecisions
> And for a hundred visions and revisions,
> Before the taking of toast and tea.

In both excerpts, Eliot uses the rhyming words "[in]decisions" and "revisions," as well as throwing in "visions" in the one directly above, and their repetition provides emphasis. Notice, too, that the word "time" is repeated thrice in two lines and appears once in the other excerpt. However, in that first one quoted, a unit of time, "minute," is repeated additionally.

Prufrock desires to approach the women in the room who come and go, but he fears rejection; he fears that their interest is in some "Michaelangelo," not a "J. Alfred Prufrock." Consequently, his fear keeps him frozen in inaction, as it has over and over again. He tells us, "I have measured out my life with coffee spoons," and the action of the poem takes place in a restaurant/tea shop. His fear of rejection stymies him from attempting to break his paralysis, which ironically dooms him to the failure he fears while his life fritters away. ("I grow old … I grow old …")

More repetition can be gleaned from "The Raven" as well. If you recall, in "The Philosophy of Composition" Poe declares, "Melancholy is thus the most legitimate of all the poetical tones." The essay purportedly is about the process Poe followed composing "The Raven," and he goes on to further amplify on the tone statement by pronouncing "…the death, then, of a beautiful woman is, unquestionably, the most poetical topic in the world."

The Romantic Poe wants his poem to produce the effect of causing his readers to *feel* the melancholy, and he decides best way to accomplish this is through a refrain to be repeated at the end of stanzas of the single word "nevermore," as the word, with its combination of a long *o* and *r* sounds, best produces the desired effect of melancholy.

"Nevermore" provides the basis for the primary rhymes in the poem, both end and internal. Those rhymes, however, are far from the only instances of long *o* and *r* sounds; the poem is packed with them. The stanza quoted earlier has few compared with some later stanzas after the introduction of "Lenore" and "nevermore" and their many rhymes, such as door, floor, implore, before, yore, and many more.

Another type of repetition is anaphora, which is the repetition of beginning words or phrases. Anaphora is used rhetorically in prose in "The Declaration of Independence" (the list of King George's grievances), "The Gettysburg Address" ("we can not dedicate – we can not consecrate – we can not hallow"), and King's "I Have a Dream" speech. The last section of Eliot's "The Hollow Men" provides multiple examples:

> *Here we go round the prickly pear*
> *Prickly pear prickly pear*
> *Here we go round the prickly pear*

At five o'clock in the morning

Between the idea
And the reality
Between the motion
And the act
Falls the Shadow

For Thine is the Kingdom

Between the conception
And the creation
Between the emotion
And the response
Falls the Shadow

Life is very long

Between the desire
And the spasm
Between the potency
And the existence

Between the essence
And the descent
Falls the Shadow

For Thine is the Kingdom

For Thine is
Life is
For Thine is the

This is the way the world ends
This is the way the world ends
This is the way the world ends
Not with a bang but a whimper.

"The Hollow Men" is too long and complicated a poem to attempt an exegesis within the confines of this essay. However, we can see the anaphora at work without fully appreciating why it's there.

The first instance comes in the altered version of a children's rhyme, where the mulberry has mutated into a cactus ("prickly pear"). The last is the most famous stanza in Eliot about the way the world will end for the hollow men. In between are several abortive attempts at reciting the Lord's prayer; however, its most powerful use comes in the series of "Between … and … Falls the Shadow" statements. "The Shadow," whatever it might represent, prevents these pairs of original and arresting words conjoined by *ands* from attaining fruition, culminating in the world ending in a whimper.

If my examples of anaphora from Eliot just give us a glimpse of the technique at work, Frost's four stanza "Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening" provides an example more readily explicated. In this poem, the anaphora is a full line in the final stanza.

The woods are lovely, dark and deep,
But I have promises to keep,
And miles to go before I sleep,
And miles to go before I sleep.

That final couplet may resonate with casual readers, but they rarely stop to ponder *why* Frost closes the poem with this repetition; they merely accept it as part of the beautiful bucolic picture Frost paints. Surely, Frost could have composed another line of iambic tetrameter ending in that rhyme, so we must conclude he chose not to. But why?

Rereading the entire poem reveals that the middle two stanzas – i.e. *half* the poem! – are largely about the speaker's horse. Unlike the speaker, the horse *wants* to keep moving, which is what the speaker reveals in the final couplet he *should* be doing. In fact, the anaphora emphasizes he has "miles to go," since all forms of repetition (including rhyme) provide some level of emphasis meant to draw our attention. He is not moving, however; he is "stopping," as the title makes clear.

The action of the poem takes place on the shortest night of the year, the winter solstice, the nadir of the cycle of new life, maturity, decline, and death. A reasonable inference, therefore, is that the dark woods with its sterile snow is symbolic of death, and thus the speaker is symbolically contemplating his own eventual demise. While he is not repulsed by the idea, indeed, he finds it attractive, his time is not nigh. Consequently, he should not be stopping at all; he should be pressing on; he should be living his life rather than contemplating his death. The horse, unencumbered by the type of imagination processed by the speaker, finds stopping, pausing life for any reason, puzzling.

Frost is purported to have taken some delight in casual readers' inability to see through his use of quotidian diction, meter, and rhyme in his most popular lyrics to recognize deeper thematic explorations at play. Here, he is not simply describing the beauty of the woods in a snowstorm, but he's also suggesting focusing on the end of life while you're still in the middle of it is foolish, which the anaphora helps to make clear.

Another form of repetition is alliteration, which is the repetition of consonant sounds at the beginning of nearby words and accented syllables. The alliteration of *w* and *n* in the excerpt from "The Raven" shared above also adds to that sense of intensity formed by the rhymes and repetition of words. Frequently, however, alliteration is largely aesthetic; it provides a tonal quality to a poem, but like all repetition it also draws our attention. For example, Juliet declares that "parting is such sweet sorrow" when she and Romeo must leave each other after professing their love. We must then grapple with the oxymoron "sweet sorrow." The fact that they must part brings her sorrow, but the parting is necessary so that Romeo may arrange for them to be wed, making it sweet.

Another alliteration of *s* sounds, this one from *Macbeth*, serves a much different purpose. In order to maintain his position, Macbeth decides to suborn murderers to kill his friend Banquo. To ensure Banquo's death he must get his friend to ride past the hidden killers at dusk. He expressly invites Banquo to the state dinner that evening to accomplish this. Macbeth says to Banquo, "Tonight we hold a **s**olemn **s**upper, **s**ir, / And I'll reque**s**t your pre**s**en**c**e" (***s*** sounds in **bold**). All those *s* sounds piled up in two quick lines of dialogue (one sentence) give Macbeth's words the sound of a hissing snake, which he is.

Alliteration can also be part of a repetition of words. The witches in *Macbeth* announce the motif of things not being what they seem when they incant "Fair is foul, and foul is fair; / Hover through the fog and filthy air." Later, the first time we hear Macbeth speak, he comments, "So foul and fair a day I have not seen." He and Banquo immediately meet the withes who hail him as "king hereafter," causing Banquo to ask him, "Good sir, why do you start and seem to fear / Things that do sound so fair?" This repetition of words and sounds directly link to Macbeth the idea of evil appearing good, an idea central to the play.

Finally, other types of repeated sounds can function together, and *Macbeth* provides another stellar example. When he learns of Lady Macbeth's death in Act 5, Macbeth delivers a soliloquy on the meaninglessness of life. It begins, "Tomorrow and tomorrow and tomorrow, / Creeps in this petty pace from day to day." Focus on the sounds of those lines. The first repeats the word "tomorrow" three times, illustrating he is describing a never-ending condition. However, it isn't just the word repeated; "tomorrow" is made up of the same *o* in combination with an *r* sound Poe uses to produce melancholy in "The Raven." The next line has alliteration and the repetition of "day," but it similarly repeats other sounds as well. In contrast to the first line, it is a series of single syllable words formed with linguistic stop sounds. Taken together and spoken aloud, especially by an effective actor, the first line with its repeated long *o, r,* and *m* sounds stretches long, conveying a weariness beyond the words themselves, whereas the second line sounds short and clipped, conveying a sense of bitterness about the condition. Shakespeare uses the repetition of these sounds to carry these ideas along with them for us. (This is one reason Shakespeare is Shakespeare.)

Repetition, especially when considered in conjunction with rhyme (the repetition of end of word sounds) is one of the primary tools employed by poets to express their ideas in artful ways.

Punctuation, Enjambment, and Juxtaposition

In formal prose, with its blocks of paragraphs made up of complete sentences, grammar's strict rules for punctuation must be followed. Punctuation doesn't add meaning so much as clarify it. "Let's eat, Grandma" is a suggestion to a family matriarch for the meal to begin; whereas "Let's eat Grandma" suggests that she be the meal itself. Periods, along with question and exclamation marks, end sentences. Colons join closely related independent clauses and introduce lists. Semicolons join independent clauses or are used in longer lists when the items contain commas. Commas themselves have specific uses. They can be loosely summed up as separating two independent clauses joined by a coordinated conjunction, like *and* or *but*, separating items of equal value in a list, and setting off elements that are non-essential to the main clause.

Teaching students to use a comma whenever there is a slight pause is therefore incorrect. When reading aloud, the *effect* of a comma on a reader is to pause slightly, but the *purpose* of the comma conforms to one of the categories I've summarized. When reading "Let's eat, Grandma" aloud, we pause slightly after "eat," which signals "Grandma" is not part of the main clause nor the main course. When reading silently, the comma does its work by physically denoting Grandma is not being eaten.

Punctuation can be used more loosely in poetry because poetry has other tools to convey some of functions of punctuation. In addition, sometimes a poet invites the ambiguity that punctuation in prose helps remove. This results in two distinct types of poems: those that follow the rules of punctuation, and those that don't use punctuation as strictly.

If you review the poems and excerpts above of Shakespeare, Hardy, Shelley, Poe, and Frost, you'll find they all use proper prose punctuation. They do so to ensure their ideas are conveyed to the reader. Imagine if Poe did not punctuate "The Raven" using standard punctuation. Would his ideas be clearer with all the punctuation removed?

> Once upon a midnight dreary while I pondered weak and weary
> Over many a quaint and curious volume of forgotten lore
>   While I nodded nearly napping suddenly there came a tapping
> As of some one gently rapping rapping at my chamber door
> Tis some visitor I muttered tapping at my chamber door

Only this and nothing more

If the stanza weren't so well known, it would be a struggle to comprehend some of the action. Who, for example, is tapping at the chamber door? The visitor or the speaker?

Consequently, when poets use punctuation, they use it consciously and purposefully. When "Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening" was first published, an editor or typesetter purportedly added a comma.[29] "The woods are lovely, dark and deep" was changed to "The woods are lovely, dark, and deep." The former says the woods are lovely *because* they are dark and deep. In the latter, darkness, depth, and loveliness are all qualities of the woods itself rather than its loveliness. Frost was not amused by the error.

As in prose, punctuation in poetry clarifies meaning. The Frost example shows how deviating from the poet's punctuation changes the ideas. In "Ars Poetica," MacLeisch's use of commas *guides* the reader. Here's the first section of the poem again:

A poem should be palpable and mute
As a globed fruit,

Dumb
As old medallions to the thumb,

Silent as the sleeve-worn stone
Of casement ledges where the moss has grown—

A poem should be wordless
As the flight of birds.

Because of the commas, we see MacLeisch is creating a list of equal elements – one of the comma's functions – in the form of couplets, and the em dash indicates that the list is about to be summed up.

MacLeisch employs another technique not available in prose: enjambment. Essentially, enjambment is when a clause in a poem continues over a line break. It occurs when poets do not use end-stopped lines. Without enjambment, the first couplet would be written, "A poem should be palpable and mute as a globed fruit." The unenjambed version uses the same words, but they are not as powerful. This is because when we reach the end of a line of poetry, there is a slight pause before we move to the next line. In the proper version, we pause at the word "mute" ever so slightly giving our brains time to ponder questions of why and how before we complete the unusual and original simile.

If you reexamine the final section of "The Hollow Men" quoted above, you'll see Eliot uses absolutely no punctuation save the final period. If it were written in the same style as Poe, it would be filled with commas, semicolons, and periods. But Eliot has eschewed all punctuation in favor of enjambment. (There is very little punctuation in other sections of the poem as well.) Given punctuation provides clarity, enjambment can create ambiguity, and Eliot is in part seeking to emulate the confusion and uncertainty inherent to modern life in the poem.

Enjambment occurs when rhyme and meter are used; however, the technique is more pronounced in free verse. Rhyme provides a kind of end-stop for the ear, even without any punctuation following it. The third stanza of "Stopping by Woods" has no punctuation until the period at the end, but we still pause.

[29] Rasley, Alicia (19 May 2022), ""The Oxford Comma, Robert Frost, and Comma Suicide," *The Story Journey*.

My little horse must think it queer
To stop without a farmhouse near
Between the woods and frozen lake
The darkest evening of the year.

The enjambment here doesn't create ambiguity as it does in Eliot or in a free verse poem by me titled "On Blindness."[30] Here are a few lines:

and saw chimeras – untied
shoelaces and the pattern of a diamond
back rattlesnake in rocks

The first break occurs after "untied," making it ambiguous as to whether it is the "chimeras" that are untied or something else is. Both are untied, however. The chimeras are unloosed in my speaker's mind, and one of them is untied shoelaces. The second breaks not only the line but the word "diamondback" as well. When read together, the effect of the split alters the original sight from something precious to something dangerous; the effect of being startled by a snake. It also produces the line, "back rattlesnake in rocks," a command when read on its own. The enjambment of the lines, then, reproduces the experience of not seeing clearly, the condition of the speaker.

In another poem of mine, the enjambment is meant to mimic the process of normal cells mutating into cancerous ones.[31] As the poem moves along, the enjambment of words becomes more frequent, again in imitation of cancer.

Mu

My mother speaks of can
cer as if it were
a plant or a plant
ars wart and says
things like it will
get its root down
into you deep as if
it is not mutinous
cells ourselves mu
tated into a doppelganger
of self-destruction in
stead keeping arms
length away by ma
king the other out
of our ordinary selves a fun
damental concept of bi
ology and a perversion
of the random mu
tations necessary for options
from which natural s
election can s
elect to perpetu

[30] Greb, Jeffery (2023), "On Blindness," *Three of a Perfect Pair: Principals and Interest, A Dismal Tide, Words at Play.*
[31] Greb, Jeffery (2021), "Mu," *Mason County Is Poetic.*

ate the species in
to perpetu
ity or at lea
st unt
il can
cer get
s us the fat
e of living
too long o
r not lo
ng eno
ugh.

In the end, the reader is left with the word "ugh," connoting disgust.

Another technique open to poets is juxtaposition. Sometimes words are placed next to each other, like in the first excerpted stanza from "The Hollow Men" with the initial line "Sightless, unless." We looked at the line when we discussed internal rhyme, but the placement of the two words together on a line with no other words produces the same emphasis as the rhyme does, i.e. that the hollow men's lack of vision is conditional. (It also marks one of the few occasions he uses punctuation in the poem.) Eliot doubling up, as it were, doubles the emphasis, which is central to his idea that the hollow men need not be hollow.

Because of enjambment, sometimes juxtaposition occurs between lines. "Ars Poetica" demonstrates this perfectly. MacLeisch splits his similes' two parts, the vehicle and tenor, onto separate lines using enjambment. Placing them on separate lines forces us to consider the components separately. It also means each part is given equal weight, which would not be accomplished as effectively if they were left on the same line, as I alluded to above.

Juxtaposed lines can sometimes be all readers have to work with. The Imagist Ezra Pound's poem "In a Station of the Metro" began life as a thirty-line poem that Pound winnowed down to two lines (three, if you include the title).[32] What is left for the reader are two images juxtaposed with one another.

In a Station of the Metro

The apparition of these faces in the crowd:
Petals on a wet, black bough.

The placement of the two images next to each other is the main tool we have for discovering meaning. We also have the near rhyme of "crowd" and "bough," as well as the colon, which Pound says creates a kind of equation. Juxtaposition, however, is the main technique at play here since the lines alone create a tension for us to resolve. We don't have a verb to help us, just the nouns "apparition" and "petals" with their prepositional phrases, so *placement* becomes vital for us to develop some further understanding.

Stanzas can also be juxtaposed for effect. As I've pointed out, the first section of "Ars Poetica" quoted again above is a series of similes defining what a poem should be. Placing those short stanzas in juxtaposition forces readers to grapple with the questions of *how* and *why* the couplet similes relate to one another. *How* and *why* is a poem both like palpable and mute globed fruit and dumb as old

[32] Pound, Ezra (Apr 1913), "In a Station of the Metro," *Poetry*.

medallions to the touch? The effect is to extend the similes by creating further comparisons through juxtaposition of the stanzas.

Before we look at a poem that encapsulates many of the techniques in this section, I feel I should mention specialized marks and type. As we've seen, MacLeisch uses couplet stanzas purposefully in "Ars Poetica;" however, he wants to group those stanzas into larger structures. To do so, he uses a type of ellipses, in this case an asterisk rather than three dots, after the end punctuation at the close of each group of couplets. Eliot uses Roman numerals in "The Hollow Men" for the same purpose. He also uses italics type in the final section quoted in full above. It's general accepted that the lines in italics, the prickly pear rhyme, the abortive Lord's prayer, and the final "This is the way the world ends" stanza, are meant to be the voice of the hollow men, as opposed to the main speaker of the poem.

Perhaps the poet most well-known for using the techniques of punctuation, enjambment, and juxtaposition is E. E. Cummings, and his poem referred to as "old age sticks" forces readers to grapple with them to find meaning.[33]

old age sticks
up Keep
Off
signs)&

youth yanks them
down(old
age
cries No

Tres)&(pas)
youth laughs
(sing
old age

scolds Forbid
den Stop
Must
n't Don't

&) youth goes
right on
gr
owing old

Cummings is not only a Modernist, but he is influenced by Imagism, Dadism, and Surrealism, so he expects his readers to do most of the intellectual heavy lifting to determine meaning.

The consensus of critical opinion regarding this poem views it as a "dialogue" between old age and youth with the statements of age presented within parentheses. (There is no open parenthesis at the start of the poem, which likely indicates we have walked into the middle of this dialogue; however, other additional interpretations are equally valid.) The parenthetical statements, those of old age, are restricting and controlling, and those of youth are destructive and arrogant. Old age constructs barriers that youth tears down with neither side considering the extremity of their

[33] Cummings, E. E. (1958), "old age sticks," *95 Poems*.

positions. Also, the nature of a dialogue is that the pattern set by the poem is circular and on-going. This is emphasized by the final enjambment, "gr / owing old." Youth will continue to both *grow* old themselves and *owe* the old, which they cannot see in the confines of the poem. Instead we have the growl of "gr" representative of the attitude of youth, while it is actually the business of youth to grow old. Without his use of punctuation, enjambment, and juxtaposition, Cummings might not have a poem at all.

Now that I've given you some idea about how poets employ these tools, it's really up to you to finish the work of the interpreting the poem; it screams for readers to make their own sense of all of its elements, as this mirrors one of the core tenants of Imagism, a school of poetry that demands readers respond to a mere image the poet presents. Good places from which to continue an analysis include exploring why certain words are capitalized, the use of an ampersand, and the other enjambments used by Cummings.

Imagery

With respect to literature, the word imagery has multiple meanings, and all of them apply to poetry. In its most general sense, imagery refers to sensory perceptions, whether visual, auditory, tactile, olfactory (smell), gustatory (taste), or kinesthetic (sense of movement). Given the range of this list, it's easy to see how imagery is central to poetry and fiction as well. The reason for its importance is that sensory perception is how our inner world, the world of the mind, connects with the external physical world. While we "think" in words, we experience and remember through our senses.

In a narrower sense, imagery in poetry is most frequently limited to the visual sense in an attempt to create an arresting picture in the reader's mind, as it does in these lines from Coleridge's "Rime of the Ancient Mariner":

> The rock shone bright, the kirk no less,
> That stands above the rock:
> The moonlight steeped in silentness
> The steady weathercock.

Everything described in the stanza is limited to the visual except the silence of the weathercock bathed in moonlight, although "silentness" here carries the additional connotation of motionless since a moving weathercock presumably makes some sound, which the moonlight has arrested.

Another meaning of imagery is more technical or theoretical. Similes and metaphors have two parts: the tenor and the vehicle. The former is the thing being compared, and the latter is the thing the tenor is compared to. Vehicles are considered a form of imagery. For example, the Robert Burns song "A Red, Red Rose" begins with the famous simile couplet, "O, my luve is like a red, red rose / That's newly sprung in June."[34] The newly sprung red rose is an image and also the vehicle of the simile describing the tenor "luve."

The importance of imagery to poetry is difficult to overstate. Imagery is central to every poem quoted above (although not every excerpted portion) with the exception of Ogden Nash's "Reflections On Ice Breaking." So far, we've seen imagery used by Robert Herrick, William Wordsworth, Archibald MacLeisch, William Shakespeare, Thomas Hardy, Percy Bysshe Shelly, Robert Frost, Edgar Allan Poe, Samuel Taylor Coleridge, Ezra Pound, Robert Burns, and even the often opaque T. S. Eliot. This eclectic group of poets with diverse styles of poetry share this

[34] Burns, Robert (ca 1793-4), "A Red, Red Rose," *The Poems of Robert Burns* (DeLancey Ferguson, ed., 1965).

technique. Although some use it more heavily than others, all employ imagery to some degree. (As alluded to above with respect to Robert Frost, it is often the imagery alone that attracts casual readers to his popular lyrics.)

Imagery is so important it gave birth to Imagism, a subgenre of Modernism. Led by Ezra Pound, the Imagists sought to accurately produce images to evoke emotional responses in their audience. The idea is for the image to "speak" for itself without explanation or interpretation by the poet, which also holds for the tenets of Modernism. The poem by Pound presented in the previous section is an excellent example:

> In a Station of the Metro
>
> The apparition of these faces in the crowd:
> Petals on a wet, black bough.

As pointed out above, the juxtaposition creates context for a comparison, but what we're comparing are two very different images we are forced to reconcile. The first is the appearance of individuals from the masses in a Paris subway station. The second are tree blossom petals on a wet, dark branch.

Even if a reader hasn't noticed it previously, the first image brings home how individual faces are lost in the "face" of a crowd. We don't see persons unless or until we attune to specific faces. When we do, it's like a sudden appearance, a vision, an apparition. Remembering Pound says the lines form a kind of equation with the colon as an equal sign, the second line is meant to mirror the first. The petals of tree blossoms do not stand out unless you attune to an individual blossom.

Perhaps the best way to approach the poem is to consider the colon not a mathematical sign, but the insertion of the words *are like*, creating a simile constructed by the images. Since trees don't bloom in subway stations, the first line is the tenor, the thing being compared, and the second is the vehicle, the idea that carries a new perspective of the tenor. Readers must do the cognitive work of deciding how and why. (By the way, what color are the tree blossoms you see?)

Before leaving Imagism, I thought I'd share one of the most famous poems of the school by William Carlos Williams. It is commonly referred to as "The Red Wheelbarrow," but it actually has no title save for a Roman numeral designation.[35] Not only is it a simple image, it is also quite sparse. The wheelbarrow is red and the chickens are white and it has rained, but otherwise we're given very little information. Meaning derives from our interaction and reaction to the image. The use of the word "depends" is never explained or even hinted at. (Notice, too, the lack of punctuation and capitalization and the enjambment of the word "wheelbarrow" itself.)

> so much depends
> upon
>
> a red wheel
> barrow
>
> glazed with rain
> water
>
> beside the white
> chickens

[35] Williams, William Carlos (1924) "XXII," *Spring and All.*

Readers have to decide how and why "so much depends / upon" the three equal components of the image; Williams simply states it as fact. Trying to decipher Williams's thinking is pointless and futile; the poem's purpose is our reaction to it. It is the embodiment of MacLeisch's declaration ending "Ars Poetica": "A poem should not mean / But be." The image itself, however, is clear. We "see" all three components clearly. The sparse nature of the description leads us to fill in other details the poem leaves out and doing so means everyone's "picture" is slightly different and personal and therefore so too is each interpretation.

The critic I. A. Richards developed the idea of similes and metaphors being comprised of vehicles and tenors, or *V-T* relationships, as he called them.[36] One of the key aspects of the theory is that the effect of placing two different things together changes our notions of both by creating a new third thing: a symbolic meaning. The symbolic meaning is different for each reader, as the reader must do the work of reconciling *how* and *why*, as I've previously stated.

Because it's such a salient example, let's return to the first stanza of "Ars Poetica" once more.

> A poem should be palpable and mute
> As a globed fruit,
>
> Dumb
> As old medallions to the thumb,
>
> Silent as the sleeve-worn stone
> Of casement ledges where the moss has grown—
>
> A poem should be wordless
> As the flight of birds.

Each part of each *V-T* relationship is changed by the relationship. Furthermore, the four similes taken together require us to grapple with how and why a poem is like all of these things combined, creating a larger context within which we develop a complete symbolic understanding.

A simile is a comparison using *like* or *as*. A metaphor speaks of the *V-T* as equal by using *is* or another form of *to be*. For an implied metaphor, the tenor is removed, and you are left with only the vehicle. For example, there was a security officer (let's call him Officer X) in the 1990s who was muscular and had a gold front tooth. People started saying, "Office X is like Mike Tyson." Eventually, that came to be replaced with, "Officer X, you know, Mike Tyson." As the comparison become even more well-known, Officer X was simply called Mike Tyson, as in "Mike Tyson was working yesterday." Each type of comparison is successively stronger.

Given the strength of a metaphor over a simile, why would MacLeisch choose to say, "A poem should be wordless / As the flight of birds" rather than "A poem should be the wordless flight of birds"? The simile makes it possible to have a tenor stating that a poem should be wordless, an oxymoron. Since a poem is made up of words, how can it be wordless? We must conclude that a poem is something beyond the words that comprise it. The metaphor version, in this case, is weaker than the simile.

On the other hand, Emily Dickinson's "'Hope' is the thing with feathers" is built around the metaphor in the title.[37]

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[36] Richards, I. A. (1936), *The Philosophy of Rhetoric*. Richards also identifies a third component, the *ground*, but I'm choosing to ignore it for this discussion.
[37] Dickinson, Emily (1861-62), "'Hope' is the thing with feathers," *Fascicle 13*.

“Hope” is the thing with feathers -
That perches in the soul -
And sings the tune without the words -
And never stops - at all –

And sweetest - in the Gale - is heard -
And sore must be the storm -
That could abash the little Bird
That kept so many warm –

I’ve heard it in the chillest land -
And on the strangest Sea -
Yet - never - in Extremity,
It asked a crumb - of me.

In Dickinson’s alternating lines of iambic tetrameter and iambic trimeter (called “hymnal meter”), hope is a bird unflappable in the face of the fiercest storm at sea. Perching it in the soul helps equate the bird with salvation, as does the idea of flight itself since it calls to mind the angelic.

The metaphor of a gale has a specific meaning in Walt Whitman’s “O Captain! My Captain!”[38] In fact, Whitman’s poem contains three extended implied metaphors interwoven in its three stanzas. The dead captain who successfully guided the ship through the storm is Abraham Lincoln. The ship represents the United States, and the storm is the Civil War. Addressing the assassinated Lincoln is also an apostrophe, a figure of speech in which an absent figure is directly addressed.

O Captain! My Captain!

O Captain! my Captain! our fearful trip is done,
The ship has weather’d every rack, the prize we sought is won,
The port is near, the bells I hear, the people all exulting,
While follow eyes the steady keel, the vessel grim and daring;
But O heart! heart! heart!
O the bleeding drops of red,
Where on the deck my Captain lies,
Fallen cold and dead.

O Captain! my Captain! rise up and hear the bells;
Rise up—for you the flag is flung—for you the bugle trills,
For you bouquets and ribbon’d wreaths—for you the shores a-crowding,
For you they call, the swaying mass, their eager faces turning;
Here Captain! dear father!
This arm beneath your head!
It is some dream that on the deck,
You’ve fallen cold and dead.

My Captain does not answer, his lips are pale and still,
My father does not feel my arm, he has no pulse nor will,
The ship is anchor’d safe and sound, its voyage closed and done,
From fearful trip the victor ship comes in with object won;
Exult O shores, and ring O bells!

[38] Whitman, Walt (4 Nov 1865), “O Captain! My Captain!” *The Saturday Post.*

But I with mournful tread,
  Walk the deck my Captain lies,
    Fallen cold and dead.

Though heart-felt, this poem is considered a minor work of Whitman's, and it certainly is not as great as his much longer elegy to Lincoln, "When Lilacs Last in the Dooryard Bloom'd," in which Lincoln is represented by the implied metaphor of "O powerful western fallen star!" in section two. (Illinois was considered part of the West at the time of the poem.)

A type of auditory imagery is onomatopoeia, whereby words or phrases are meant to create sounds which imitate the sounds they describe. Most people learn of onomatopoeia through very dramatic examples, like *bang*, *pow*, and *zoom*. Their application in poetry is often far more subtle, although we've already seen the clear and obvious example of the cuckoo's call in Shakespeare's "The Cuckoo's Song."

If you recall, we first looked at the song in connection to its meter and how Shakespeare draws attention to the call by stopping the iambic flow of the poem with the insertion of the trochaic call. Here's the second verse again:

When shepherds pipe on oaten straws,
  And merry larks are plowmen's clocks,
When turtles tread, and rooks, and daws,
  And maidens bleach their summer smocks,
The cuckoo then, on every tree,
Mocks married men; for thus sings he,
    "Cuckoo!
Cuckoo, cuckoo!" O word of fear,
Unpleasing to the married ear!

The attention of the shepherds and plowmen at work in the spring fields is drawn toward the mating activity of the birds all around them. ("Tread" is a term for animal mating, and "turtles" are turtledoves.) Shakespeare then adds the image of the maidens cleaning their summer garments. As Tennyson says in "Locksley Hall," "In the spring a young man's fancy lightly turns to thoughts of love."[39] Into their sexual reverie intrudes the call of the cuckoo, disrupting their thoughts with the distress of fears of cuckoldry, since "cuckoo" is a near rhyme with "cuckold." Just as they fantasize about sex, the call of the cuckoo reminds them their wives may not only have similar thoughts but may be acting upon them while they're away in the fields.

Most poetic onomatopoeia is subtler than this example from Shakespeare, and frequently it is aided by other techniques like alliteration. In "The Raven," the line "And the silken sad uncertain rustling of each purple curtain," the alliteration of ***s*** sounds helps the word "rustling" imitate the sound of the curtain in the wind. Similarly, the lines "The only other sound's the sweep / Of easy wind and downy flake" use alliteration to produce the onomatopoeia of the sound of the wind in Frost's "Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening."

* * * *

We've covered quite a few techniques of poetry, and although there are always more, our discussion has hopefully provided some understanding of these major ones. A few other ones of note include personification, synecdoche, and metonymy. Personification is the giving of human

[39]Tennyson, Lord Alfred (1842), "Locksley Hall," *Poems*.

characteristics to non-human forms and objects. For example, as inanimate objects Poe's curtains quoted above are neither "sad" nor "uncertain." Similarly, Wordsworth's cloud and daffodils are described in human terms in the stanza from "I Wandered Lonely as a Cloud" quoted early on:

> 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.

Synecdoche and metonymy are closely related. For the former, a part of something is used to stand for the whole; for the latter, something related is used to stand for something else. For example, in "Prufrock" Eliot uses synecdoche in the lines "I should have been a pair of ragged claws / Scuttling across the floors of silent seas." Part of a crab, its "ragged claws," stands for the whole. However, when Mark Antony calls on the Romans to "lend me your ears" in Shakespeare's *Julius Caesar*, he is using metonymy because he is using "ears" to ask for their attention.

We're ready now to shift our focus from techniques of poetry to the final major section exploring problems of interpretation.

Problems of Interpretation

As I stated near the beginning of this essay, I'm convinced that the unease many readers have with poetry has its roots in the genre's frequent use of ambiguity. This unease in turn has its origins in encountering poems in school where teachers shut down the possibility of multiple meanings for a poem in favor of their own, or, more likely, the interpretation given in a textbook, and creating a "right or wrong" dichotomy. Despite many dictionary definitions of ambiguity citing poetry as a literary form that deliberately employs it, educators are more comfortable with the regurgitation of "right" answers than allowing for students to reach and defend their own understandings. (This preference probably stems from the teachers' own discomfort with ambiguity.)

However, as I've stressed throughout the section above, personal responses/interpretations are often the whole point of a poem. Some interpretations are certainly better than others, but that judgment is based upon pointing out the techniques a poet has used to defend those interpretations, as well as being cognizant of the three ideas explored in this section: maintaining a separation between the poet and the speaker, elevating the concept of reader response over authorial intent, and accounting for all the elements in the poem.

Poet vs. Speaker

At the start of the techniques section, I defined some terms I'd be using throughout. One of these terms was "speaker." The speaker of the poem is the voice of the poem, and confusing the speaker with the poet is the first problem of interpretation we'll cover.

Casual readers confuse the speaker with the poet for a couple of reasons. The most obvious is when referring to what a poem says we use the poet's name. For example, we might say, "In 'The Road Not Taken,' Frost says things that are often missed by some readers." The confusion regarding the voice of the poem results because Frost *is* saying things, but he is doing so *through* a speaker. Frost uses a speaker to deliver his ideas, which are not the same ideas as the speaker's, as we'll see below.

In most of his beloved lyrics, Frost is speaking through a persona or character, rather than directly to the reader. This leads us to the second reason for confusion. Casual readers who have dabbled in poetry and even many experienced lay poets do not create a persona through which they speak. They *are* speaking directly to readers and often in personal and heartfelt ways. However, as we'll see, literary poets frequently use a persona through which to filter their ideas. Of course, sometimes literary poets speak in their own voice, which means it can be difficult to discern when they aren't. It's best, then, to adopt the practice of not assuming a poet is speaking directly, since if we know about a poet's life, our interpretation can be colored by reading from the perspective that the poet is speaking directly when they may not be.

For example, if you know about Poe's lurid and tragic life and know he is composing "The Raven" while his wife Virginia is dying in the next room, you might be tempted to think he is describing a personal occurrence, perhaps experienced during an alcohol induce delirium. Poe may have been *inspired* to write the poem anticipating the death of Virginia, but it is a character speaking to us, not Poe. His essay "The Philosophy of Composition" makes clear the poem does not describe his personal situation; rather, it is a narrative of his invention.

While lay poets may not think in terms of creating a character or persona to speak their poems, literary poets often do, so we must be on guard so as not to conflate the two. Much earlier we looked a sonnet by Thomas Hardy titled "Hap." Here it is again so that we may use the voice for comparison.

Hap

If but some vengeful god would call to me
From up the sky, and laugh: "Thou suffering thing,
Know that thy sorrow is my ecstasy,
That thy love's loss is my hate's profiting!"

Then would I bear it, clench myself, and die,
Steeled by the sense of ire unmeritéd;
Half-eased in that a Powerfuller than I
Had willed and meted me the tears I shed.

But not so. How arrives it joy lies slain,
And why unblooms the best hope ever sown?
—Crass Casualty obstructs the sun and rain,
And dicing Time for gladness casts a moan. . . .
These purblind Doomsters had as readily strown
Blisses about my pilgrimage as pain.

If you know about Hardy, you know the speaker is close to his personal views; however, the speaker of "The Man He Killed" is clearly a character, and the voice is clearly different.[40]

The Man He Killed

"Had he and I but met
    By some old ancient inn,
We should have sat us down to wet
        Right many a nipperkin!

[40] Hardy, Thomas (8 Nov 1902), "The Man He Killed," *Harper's Weekly*.

"But ranged as infantry,
And staring face to face,
I shot at him as he at me,
And killed him in his place.

"I shot him dead because —
Because he was my foe,
Just so: my foe of course he was;
That's clear enough; although

"He thought he'd 'list, perhaps,
Off-hand like — just as I —
Was out of work — had sold his traps —
No other reason why.

"Yes; quaint and curious war is!
You shoot a fellow down
You'd treat if met where any bar is,
Or help to half-a-crown."

The first and most obvious indication Hardy is not speaking is that the entire poem is in quotation marks. The poet is ostensibly listening to another person speak the poem, likely in a bar or pub. Of course, this too is an illusion. Uneducated enlisted men don't generally speak in rhyme. Why "uneducated"? Words like "nipperkin" and "traps" are working class colloquialisms.

The speaker is clearly troubled by his experience killing a man. It may be the only time he has taken a life or at least done so in such close proximity. (He is not a career soldier: "He thought he'd 'list, perhaps, / Off-hand like — just as I — / Was out of work — had sold his traps — / No other reason why.") He identifies with the dead man and sees how he could have died instead.

Hardy's focus in the poem is the inhumanity, horror, and trauma of war. Readers must infer these things, however, since the speaker lacks the ability to fully articulate these ideas. When contemplating why he took the man's life, he struggles. He repeats the word "because" and comes to the inadequate conclusion that it was because he was the enemy without exploring the implications of his own words. He says nothing about ideology or duty; it came down to shooting his doppelganger before being shot instead. He only recognizes they might have been friends under different circumstances.

"The Man He Killed" is a dramatic monologue, where the speaker is a character. These poems are the easiest to differentiate between poet and speaker; therefore, I've chosen to focus upon them. We'll examine a more subtle use of a speaker in the final section of this essay.

We looked previously at excerpts from a dramatic monologue with Eliot's "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock." Rather than look at that poem in its entirety, I've chosen a dramatic monologue from Robert Browning, "My Last Duchess."[41] It is the delicious portrait of a vile, narcissistic sociopath. ("Ferrara" is purportedly the duke upon whom the portrait is based.)

Although Browning uses rhyming couplets in iambic pentameter, the enjambment gives the poem a conversational feel. The speaker is leading a representative of a Count, who comes with an offer of marriage to the Count's daughter, on a tour of his artworks. They pause before a portrait of the late Duchess, a portrait obscured by curtains none but the Duke is allowed to open.

[41] Browning, Robert (1842), "My Last Duchess," *Dramatic Lyrics*.

The Duke's vanity is on full display as he name drops the portrait's artist, as well as that of a sculptor later. He tells us the artist perfectly captured the Duchess's pleasant gaze and goes into great detail how she offered that look to everyone she saw rather than saving it for him exclusively. With his "commands" to her, all smiles stopped entirely.

My Last Duchess

FERRARA

That's my last Duchess painted on the wall,
Looking as if she were alive. I call
That piece a wonder, now; Fra Pandolf's hands
Worked busily a day, and there she stands.
Will't please you sit and look at her? I said
"Fra Pandolf" by design, for never read
Strangers like you that pictured countenance,
The depth and passion of its earnest glance,
But to myself they turned (since none puts by
The curtain I have drawn for you, but I)
And seemed as they would ask me, if they durst,
How such a glance came there; so, not the first
Are you to turn and ask thus. Sir, 'twas not
Her husband's presence only, called that spot
Of joy into the Duchess' cheek; perhaps
Fra Pandolf chanced to say, "Her mantle laps
Over my lady's wrist too much," or "Paint
Must never hope to reproduce the faint
Half-flush that dies along her throat." Such stuff
Was courtesy, she thought, and cause enough
For calling up that spot of joy. She had
A heart—how shall I say?— too soon made glad,
Too easily impressed; she liked whate'er
She looked on, and her looks went everywhere.
Sir, 'twas all one! My favour at her breast,
The dropping of the daylight in the West,
The bough of cherries some officious fool
Broke in the orchard for her, the white mule
She rode with round the terrace—all and each
Would draw from her alike the approving speech,
Or blush, at least. She thanked men—good! but thanked
Somehow—I know not how—as if she ranked
My gift of a nine-hundred-years-old name
With anybody's gift. Who'd stoop to blame
This sort of trifling? Even had you skill
In speech—which I have not—to make your will
Quite clear to such an one, and say, "Just this
Or that in you disgusts me; here you miss,
Or there exceed the mark"—and if she let
Herself be lessoned so, nor plainly set

Her wits to yours, forsooth, and made excuse—
E'en then would be some stooping; and I choose
Never to stoop. Oh, sir, she smiled, no doubt,
Whene'er I passed her; but who passed without
Much the same smile? This grew; I gave commands;
Then all smiles stopped together. There she stands
As if alive. Will't please you rise? We'll meet
The company below, then. I repeat,
The Count your master's known munificence
Is ample warrant that no just pretense
Of mine for dowry will be disallowed;
Though his fair daughter's self, as I avowed
At starting, is my object. Nay, we'll go
Together down, sir. Notice Neptune, though,
Taming a sea-horse, thought a rarity,
Which Claus of Innsbruck cast in bronze for me!

The Duke's description of his earlier marriage carries with it the veiled implication that he may have killed her due to his displeasure with her disposition. It serves as a warning to the emissary that the future Duchess must submit to his control, just as he now has total control in death over his last Duchess by placing her portrait behind a curtain only to be revealed when he chooses it to be.

Recognizing poets are employing a speaker, then, is easier when encountering a narrative, like "The Raven," or the two dramatic monologues we've just explored in this section. Readers always should assume, however, that a speaker has been adopted because its use is often subtle.

As I stated repeatedly when presenting poems by Robert Frost, his most famous lyrics are enjoyed by casual readers because those readers believe they understand them due to those poems' approachability. This assumption is a trap for interpretation, however, because Frost is not speaking with his own voice. As Elaine Barry puts it,[42]

> Almost all of his poems are experiments in "tone of voice," ways of "saying a thing," and even the most seemingly direct of them should be approached through the persona of the implied speaker – whether it is the simple wayfarer of "Stopping by Woods," barely verbalizing his temptation, or the more rational and practical tongue-in-cheek farmer of "Mending Wall," who sees the absurdity of what he is doing but does it anyway, or the subtly intellectual speaker of "For Once, Then, Something." The characterization of a speaking voice was Frost's buffer between himself and a subject that might otherwise become sentimental, trite, or melodramatic.

As I've suggested, most casual readers are sucked in by the sentimental portraits Frost paints without any recognition the speaking voice is not Frost's but a character's, often one at whom he is subtly poking fun.

Confusing the poet and the speaker, therefore, leads to problems interpreting a poem. It is akin to failing to recognize you are dealing with an unreliable narrator in prose fiction. We can easily discern a mad narrator in a Poe story is not to be trusted and judge his version of events accordingly. When faced with a likeable and straightforward narrator like Huckleberry Finn, however, we can forget we are listening to a young adolescent raised in a racist society and fail to filter his story

[42] Barry, Elaine (1973), *Robert Frost.*

through a clearer lens to understand Mark Twain's point. The poetry of Robert Frost, and many other poets, is a little like the latter, which can lead to us misunderstanding the larger ideas the poet may be attempting to convey.

Reader Response vs. Authorial Intent

As I've postulated, I believe those readers who dread poetry do so out of fear, a fear with its roots in their schooling. For them, poetry was taught as a kind of secret code with only one correct answer to the question of meaning. Interpreting a poem, however, falls along a continuum of responses with some better than others. At the low end is the response of "Well, that's what it means to me" without taking into account the poetic elements the poet has given readers. Better interpretations use those elements to support an interpretation.

The fear-based desire to have the "correct" answer as to the meaning of a poem drives some readers to look to the poet's life for clues as to why they wrote the poem or other biographical details alone to support an interpretation. This problem is complicated by the fact that sometimes such information can be very useful.

For example, knowing of Whitman's near worship of Lincoln helps us to interpret the extended implied metaphors in "O Captain! My Captain!", as does the date of the poem's publication. Without this knowledge, we might be tempted to read the poem as a narrative about the return of the body of an actual sea captain tragically dead after guiding his ship through a storm. Again, this interpretation is also valid, but in the context of this poem, it falls on the lower end of the interpretation continuum.

Similarly, readers of "The Hollow Men" might be tempted to see the poem as merely a nihilistic statement lamenting the loss of values following the spread of the ideas of proto existentialists like Nietzsche, who proclaimed "God is dead,"[43] coupled with the horrors of World War I, which in turn caused the rejection of the values that led to that cataclysm. Indeed, these things are two of the drivers of Modernism and Ezra Pound's credo that artists should "make it new."[44]

Although Eliot is a Modernist and embraces some of the tenets of the movement, such as experimenting with form as well as omitting exposition and explanation, he is also a devout Anglican. Knowing his deep religious convictions helps the reader recognize he is saying this loss of values need not be. The hollow men need not be hollow, which I emphasized in my explication. The biographical fact of Eliot's beliefs helps lead to a better interpretation of the poem. It isn't entirely necessary, however, since the poem itself, with lines I've discussed like "Sightless, unless," leads readers to the same conclusion when these elements are taken into account.

Awareness of larger philosophical and artistic movements under which a poet falls *can* be a useful tool to aid interpretation. These place a poem within a context that can help guide our thinking. As long as we are cognizant that a poet may reject those ideas and be presenting an alternative view, knowledge of major periods of thought often provides a framework and starting place from which to begin.

Too heavy a focus on biography, however, can prove superfluous and weaken our understanding. As an example, consider Shakespeare's *Macbeth*. Shakespeare writes the play to please his new patron King James I, who takes the crown of England following the death of Elizabeth I. Before becoming the English king, James was James VI of Scotland, so a play involving a Scottish

[43] Nietzsche, Frederich (1882), *The Gay Science*.
[44] Pound, Ezra (1934), *Make It New*.

king would interest him. James also survived an assassination attempt, the Gunpowder Plot of 1605; hence, the murder of a Scottish king was topical. Finally, James had a keen interest in the occult, and prophesizing witches are central to the play.

To focus on these facts when interpreting the play, however, is a mistake. While they provide Shakespeare's impetus for writing on the subject and including some details, the play itself is not "about" James. It is about a good and loyal thane who succumbs to his most base desires on the way to becoming a usurper and ruthless tyrant, a dangerous thing to imply about the new King James. Shakespeare even places the assassination of Duncan offstage to de-emphasize its importance. That killing also takes place in Act II, outside the pivotal position for dramatic structure in a five-act play. Instead, the murder of Macbeth's friend Banquo takes place both in Act III and onstage by hired killers, showing how morally bankrupt the once brave Macbeth has fallen. (At least he murders Duncan himself, a twisted act of courage.)

Even when a poet includes clear historical information, it may not aid our interpretation. The Duke of Ferrara, Alfonso II d'Este, is Browning's subject in "My Last Duchess." The Duchess of the title is his first wife, Lucrezia di Cosimo de' Medici, whose family was just beginning to flex its wealth and power and considered *nouveau riche* at the time. While she died under mysterious circumstances and some suspect poisoning, her likely cause of death was tuberculosis.

Because he writes the poem over 250 years following the Duke's death, Browning probably included the "Ferrara" reference for readers to look up the poisoning speculation to add to the portrait of the Duke's malevolence. To focus on the historical Duke, however, weakens the universality of the poem, making his portrait that of an individual rather than a type. Vile, narcissistic sociopaths are still with us today, as they were in the 1800s; they weren't merely a phenomenon of the 1500s.

Creating a sense of universality is important in poetry and is chiefly achieved by readers being allowed to bring their own personal responses to a work. Shelley wrote "Ozymandias" after the British Museum acquired a bust and torso fragment of Ramses II. (Ozymandias was one of the pharaoh's names in Greek.) A great deal of critical energy has also been spent trying to identify which contemporary monarch, whether King George or another, Shelley may have been skewering with his unflattering portrait in the sonnet. Here it is again:

Ozymandias

I met a traveller from an antique land,
Who said—"Two vast and trunkless legs of stone
Stand in the desert. . . . Near them, on the sand,
Half sunk a shattered visage lies, whose frown,
And wrinkled lip, and sneer of cold command,
Tell that its sculptor well those passions read
Which yet survive, stamped on these lifeless things,
The hand that mocked them, and the heart that fed;
And on the pedestal, these words appear:
My name is Ozymandias, King of Kings;
Look on my Works, ye Mighty, and despair!
Nothing beside remains. Round the decay
Of that colossal Wreck, boundless and bare
The lone and level sands stretch far away."

Does knowing these historical facts help in our appreciation of the poem? If it is merely "about" Ramses or George, it can't be about us too, as we are not the mighty and powerful. We are, however, subject to the same hubris and vanity as Ozymandias, and to not see ourselves in his empty boasts weakens our appreciation of the poem.

The temptation to search for a poet's intent to guide interpretation is perhaps greatest when readers are confronted with a work of Imagism, since an Imagist simply presents an image for us to react to without any other information. Here's one we looked at earlier.

> so much depends
> upon
>
> a red wheel
> barrow
>
> glazed with rain
> water
>
> beside the white
> chickens

The poem's actual title is "XXII," and referring to the poem by the erroneous title "The Red Wheelbarrow" does it a disservice since in the poem itself the indefinite article "a," not the definite article "the," is used. Therefore, the specific wheelbarrow described in the poem isn't important, *any* wheelbarrow will suffice, which changes the process of interpretation. "A" can include our wheelbarrows, while "the" excludes them.

Critics have searched for Williams's inspiration and come up with two distinctly different sources. One is an old fisherman named Marshall, who Williams befriended, and the other is one of his patients, a little girl, deathly ill, who had a toy wheelbarrow. (Williams was a pediatrician.) Where Williams got the image is really immaterial, however. He only gives us the wheelbarrow, the rainwater, and the chickens with the judgment that "so much depends / upon" them. The interpretive question the poem poses for readers is how "so much depends / upon" these things *for us*, the readers, not some personage outside the work.

Given the inherent ambiguity to poetry, it's understandable that some readers feel more comfortable with it stripped away in favor of clarity and that they'd look to the poet's life for clues as to their intentions. As we've seen, however, those intentions usually don't provide clarity as much as lead us down paths that tend to limit the interpretive options available to readers, which in turn tend to thwart a poet's overarching intentions of having readers make meaning for themselves.

Therefore, the best strategy for readers to employ is to relax and allow the poem's meaning to speak to them. Looking for a "right" interpretation is a fool's errand since interacting with a poem is a personal experience. Better interpretations exist on the continuum of interpretation; however, the intent of the poet is seldom the root of them. It is best to try to follow the precept of the final section below, rather than search for some Rosetta Stone based upon the poet's specific purpose or inspiration.

Accounting for All Elements

If we return to the start of this essay and review our working definition of a poem, we see a poem is a "literary work in which special intensity is given to the expression of feelings and ideas by the use of distinctive style and rhythm." I further suggested the key words in the definition are "special intensity" and that the intensity derives, at least in part, from concision. Poets prune away at

their work until they are left with a condensation of language, like a fine reduced sauce. Because of their sparsity, the words of a poem attain that special intensity. Consequently, everything a poet puts on the page carries a portion of that "special intensity." Ignoring or simply not recognizing elements often dooms us to less satisfying interpretations of the poem.

We've already explored numerous instances of this at work. For example, in "Stopping by Woods" Frost's focus upon the horse for half the poem coupled with his use of anaphora in the final couplet steer the reader to a different interpretation than a reader who fails to account for these elements. Given those elements, the reader should question the wisdom of "stopping" at all, which leads to quite a different interpretation than simply focusing on the beauty of the scene he describes. That fuller interpretation doesn't invalidate the beauty of the imagery, but it does add a significant layer of meaning over it.

Perhaps the most overlooked words in a poem are its title. A title's effect on interpretation can be subtle but still important. I went through an interpretation of "Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening" whereby the poem is a meditation on death by the speaker, but Frost thematically is urging the reader to live life rather than focus upon its temporal nature. That tension is reflected within the title. The first word "stopping" introduces this tension between pausing and moving forward. Also, "by" (as opposed to a different preposition such as "in") places the speaker outside the woods, emblematic of death, which he'll enter some other time.

The title's effect is also subtle for "My Last Duchess." The first-person singular possessive pronoun "my" is our introduction to the character of the Duke, who viewed his wife as a possession under his control, rather than a person.

Of course, a title may be an integral element for interpretation. Pound's "In a Station of the Metro" is a two-line poem juxtaposing two images, each on its own line. The title provides a context, a frame, for those images. Consequently, we recognize "The apparition of these faces in the crowd:" describes a packed subway platform, which is compared to "Petals on a wet, black bough." We've also seen how the mistitle of "The Red Wheelbarrow" can subtly affect our reading of the poem.

A mnemonic that provides a framework for how to approach a poem to try to account for all its constituent parts is TPS-FASTT (pronounced "types fast" when spoken as an acronym).[45] "T" is for title, which should be noted as you begin to read. "P" stands for paraphrase. After reading the poem, put the literal action into different words. Speaker is the first "S" of the mnemonic. Who is the speaker and what is their relationship and attitude toward the subject?

"F" is for figurative language and encompasses everything we've discussed in the major section above looking at techniques of poetry. After exploring these devices, it's time to consider "A," the attitude or attitudes of the speaker and the poem itself. (The attitude should not be expressed in a single word, but rather as a statement.) This leads to the second "S" for shifts. What indicates changes in thinking? These could be diction, words like *but*, *however*, and *although*, etc. Shifts can be indicated by punctuation and by stanza breaks. (Look above at the poem "Hap" to see these shifts at work.) They can also be indicated by changes in sound, like the shift in "The Cuckoo's Song" when Shakespeare changes the meter from iambic to trochaic. Finally, irony may be used to indicate a shift, like in "Ozymandias."

[45] Other similar mnemonics exist, e.g. TP-CAST.

"T" takes us back to the title to reexamine it under the light of what we've found. Does the title express something we weren't aware of when we first read it? Only now are we ready to ascribe meaning to the poem with "T" for theme. When speaking about literature, theme is what the work says about the human experience or human nature. Like attitude, it is a fully developed statement, not a single word.

Here's the mnemonic as a whole:

- T – title
- P – paraphrase
- S – speaker
- F – figurative language
- A – attitude
- S – shifts
- T – title
- T – theme

Let's walk through its use with a final well-known poem by Robert Frost, "The Road Not Taken."[46]

The Road Not Taken

Two roads diverged in a yellow wood,
And sorry I could not travel both
And be one traveler, long I stood
And looked down one as far as I could
To where it bent in the undergrowth;

Then took the other, as just as fair,
And having perhaps the better claim,
Because it was grassy and wanted wear;
Though as for that the passing there
Had worn them really about the same,

And both that morning equally lay
In leaves no step had trodden black.
Oh, I kept the first for another day!
Yet knowing how way leads on to way,
I doubted if I should ever come back.

I shall be telling this with a sigh
Somewhere ages and ages hence:
Two roads diverged in a wood, and I—
I took the one less traveled by,
And that has made all the difference.

Applying TPS-FASTT to the poem, the quality of the title that stands out is the negative in the statement. Rather than the road taken, the title emphasizes the other road.

[46] Frost, Robert (Aug 1915), "The Road Not Taken," *Atlantic Monthly*; (1916), *Mountain Interval.*

To paraphrase the poem, the first stanza sets the narrative stage. The speaker recalls a time in the woods when they came upon a fork of two roads. They looked down one to where it became obscured by undergrowth. In the second stanza, they consider the second road, which they conclude is better despite being worn about the same as the first. They continue this thought into the third stanza and admit again both roads were about the same before lamenting never coming back to travel the first road. The final stanza summarizes the speaker's thoughts by stating they will continue to tell this story for a long time and that their decision to take the less travelled road has impacted their life.

The speaker is a somewhat wistful person preoccupied with a past decision they recognize they cannot really change. They also lack a certain self-awareness of the contrary nature of their words. For example, they declare they still keep the first as a possibility for another day, even though they recognize the chance of going back is unlikely, if not impossible.

Frost uses four five-line stanzas primarily in iambic tetrameter with the rhyme scheme ABAAB. By breaking up the meter with an occasional anapest and separating the rhymes, he gives the poem a conversational feel. We feel like we're being spoken to rather than encountering a poem, which enhances this effect and somewhat disarms the reader.

Besides meter and rhyme, the main figurative language Frost uses is imagery. We *see* the woods; we *see* the bent grasses obscuring the roads farther up the trail, etc. He accomplishes this using very few words, as he frequently does, like in "Stopping by Woods." In the first line, the woods are described as "yellow," which sets the time of year of the action as fall. Setting the action in autumn could have been communicated in many ways, but Frost chose to use the word "yellow," which carries different connotations than, say, "golden," which could have been used and would have maintained the meter. The time of year and word "yellow" influence the attitude, as we'll see shortly.

The other color Frost gives us is "black" near the start of the third stanza, where the speaker admits both roads had "leaves no step had trodden black." "Black" clearly carries negative connotations that may lead some readers to misread Frost's intent, again, as we'll see.

Lastly, the idea of a road can symbolize the journey of one's life.

The attitude of the speaker is nostalgic or even elegiac. The use of "yellow" combined with the tone of wistfulness places the action in the distant past, like a weathered photograph. The autumnal references also symbolically place the speaker as nearing the end of his personal journey on his road through life. The effect of these elements creates mild feelings of regret for the reader.

The main shift in the poem occurs with the word "sigh" to end the first line of the final stanza. (Making it a rhyming word further emphasizes it.) Of course, a wistful sigh fits the character of the speaker, but the speaker didn't choose the word, Frost did. The word itself is ambivalent. People sigh for many reasons beyond wistfulness. In fact, sighs are generally negative, as any thesaurus can tell you. So while the speaker may be wistful, "sigh" signals to the reader that there are problems with the speaker's assessment. The character of the speaker will be essential to our final understanding of the poem.

Returning to the title at this point, we now see the speaker gives almost the same energy to the road not taken as to the road they chose. We can also see they admit multiple times little differentiated one road from the other when they made their choice, undercutting the notion that making "all the difference" is positive.

We're now ready to take all these observances and apply them to theme. Barry sees the character of the speaker as integral to the theme.

> How many of us, for example, first read "The Road Not Taken" as a serious, if wistful, comment on the irrevocable decisions that govern our lives? Frost himself was fond of teasing his readers on their gullibility here ("I bet not one reader in ten knows what 'The Road Not Taken' is about"). He once declared that the most perceptive question anyone ever raised with regard to the poem is "Why the sigh?" . . . The "sigh," of course, helps to characterize the "I," and provides the first hint that the poem is a gentle parody of the kind of person whose life in the present is distorted by the nostalgic regrets for the possibilities of the past, who is less concerned for the road taken than the "road not taken." . . . Once we have the initial clue, all other parts of the characterization seem obvious: the negative emphasis in the title, the nostalgic, autumnal mood, the hesitancy of the decision ("Though as for that, the passing there had worn them really about the same"), the inability to turn his back completely on any possibility ("Oh, I kept the first for another day!"), the romantic pose of finality in the last line ("And that has made all the difference"). Our awareness of the characterization of the speaker has altered the meaning of the poem.

Barry calls the poem a parody of a type of person knowing full well (as did Frost) the pervasiveness and attractiveness of the type.

Many people continue to read the poem as a paean to following one's own path as a defining quality for a well-lived life. They support this misreading by pointing out the choice "has made all the difference;" however, "difference," like "sigh," is ambivalent. Not all roads deviating from the commonly traveled lead to good destinations, nor are all typical paths to be avoided. Frost tickles this reading by his speaker's declaration that both roads lay covered "In leaves no step had trodden black," implying that if they showed the mark of previous travelers, they'd be less valuable. What they miss is that the speaker is not talking about the road they chose; rather, neither road is well-traveled, or symbolically all roads in life are unique and individual.

David Orr considers the poem's immense popularity and misreading to be quintessentially American.[47] "This is the most remarkable thing about 'The Road Not Taken'—not its immense popularity (which is remarkable enough), but the fact that it is popular for what seem to be the wrong reasons." The misreading of the poem is strengthened by that uniquely American quality of self-reliance, which makes us predisposed to view choosing a less traveled path more desirable, "but the literal meaning of the poem's own lines seems completely at odds with this interpretation," as we've seen. Consequently, the poem is regularly mistitled as "The Road Less Traveled," which one must think Frost would view humorously.

Hopefully, this critique has demonstrated how TPS-FASTT is a useful framework to approach a poem. It is not perfect, and some poems resist exegesis using this method; however, as a tool it emphasizes paying attention to all the elements of a poem. Failing to do so can lead to misinterpretation, as with the widespread misreading of "The Road Not Taken."

Conclusion

We've spent a good deal of time in the above pages talking about poetry. We started by looking for a definition, for which we chose "a literary work in which special intensity is given to the expression of feelings and ideas by the use of distinctive style and rhythm." While some poems may not express feelings, and others may not use a distinctive rhythm, all poems convey a "special intensity" emphasized by their relative brevity and concision.

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[47] Orr, David (2015), *The Road Not Taken: Finding America in the Poem Everyone Loves and Almost Everyone Gets Wrong.*

We walked through numerous techniques of poetry, looking at their definitions followed by a myriad of examples from well-known (and some lesser-known) poems. This section covered a lot of ground in a short period of time and probably proved very dense at times for the average reader. Fortunately, there is no test for you at the end of this essay, so readers are free to return to that section with its many subsections whenever they choose to better understand a specific aspect of a poem they are reading to further their enjoyment.

This last section looked at common errors or stumbling blocks readers encounter when reading poetry and how to work through them. In particular, the mnemonic TPS-FASTT provides a framework for approaching most poems. Even when not applied rigorously, such a tool serves as a reminder that reading poetry is a process that differs greatly from reading other sorts of texts. *Some* prose may be poetic, but all poetry is.

I took fingers to keyboard with the hope that an essay of this type might promote more reading of poetry by dispelling some of its difficulty and mystery. I tried to alleviate the first by repeatedly encouraging readers to stop thinking in terms of "right and wrong" answers when it comes to understanding a poem. Approach poetry from where you are, and your depth of understanding will grow as you read more poetry. You will move toward more sophisticated interpretations and understandings if you stay open and mindful.

As for the second, I tried to pull the curtain aside that cloaks the rarified world of the poet through illuminating the various tools in the poet's toolbox and how they may be used. In practical terms, much of the information was overkill. For example, it's more important to recognize a change in rhythm occurred and ask why the poet may have chosen to do this than to recognize rhythm shifted from iambs to anapests.

With any luck, I've been successful in my goal to close some of the educational gaps you may have had with regard to poetry. While it's important to recognize poetry is something of a moving target and thus difficult to hit, such difficulty does not diminish the worthiness of attempting to do so. Besides, if there are no wrong answers, what have you got to be afraid of?