My mistress, when she walks, treads on the ground.
And yet, by heaven, I think my love as rare
As any she belied with false compare.

—WILLIAM SHAKESPEARE (1564–1616)

QUESTIONS
1. The speaker draws a contrast between the qualities often praised in exaggerated love poetry and the reality of his mistress' physical attributes. The series of "false compar[rions]" that this poem implies that other poets have used (eyes as bright as the sun, hair like spun gold, etc.)

2. What is the speaker's tone in lines 1–12? Is there anything about those lines that might find pleasing? (In Shakespeare's time the word "reeks" did not have its modern denotation of "stinks.")

3. The tone clearly shifts with line 13—signaled by the simple phrase "And yet." What is the tone of the last two lines? The last line might be paraphrased "as any woman who has been lied to with false comparisons." How important are truth and lies as subjects in the poem?

Crossing the Bar

Sunset and evening star,
And one clear call for me!
And may there be no moaning of the bar
When I put out to sea,

But such a tide as moving seems asleep,
Too full for sound and foam,
When that which drew from out the boundless deep
Turns again home.

Twilight and evening bell,
And after that the dark!
And may there be no sadness of farewell
When I embark;

For though from out our bourne of Time and Place
The flood may bear me far,
I hope to see my Pilot face to face
When I have crossed the bar.

—ALFRED, LORD TENNYSON (1809–1892)

QUESTIONS
1. Vocabulary: bourne (13).
2. What two sets of figures does Tennyson use for approaching death? What is the precise moment of death in each set?
3. In troubled weather the wind and waves above the sandbar across a harbor’s mouth make a moaning sound. What metaphorical meaning has the "moaning of the bar" (3) here? For what kind of death is the speaker wishing? Why does he want "no sadness of farewell" (11)?
4. What is "that which drew from out the boundless deep" (7)? What is "the boundless deep"? To what is it opposed in the poem? Why is "Pilot" (15) capitalized?

The Oxen

Christmas Eve, and twelve of the clock.
"Now they are all on their knees,"
An elder said as we sat in a flock
By the embers in hearthside ease.

We pictured the meek mild creatures where
They dwelt in their strawy pen,
Nor did it occur to one of us there
To doubt they were kneeling then.

So fair a fancy few would weave
In these years! Yet, I feel,
If someone said on Christmas Eve,
"Come; see the oxen kneel

"In the lonely barton o by yonder coomb,"
Our childhood used to know;"
I should go with him in the gloom,
Hoping it might be so.

—THOMAS HARDY (1840–1928)
3. Both “Crossing the Bar” and “The Oxen” in their last lines use a form of the verb hope. By fully discussing tone, establish the precise meaning of hope in each poem. What degree of expectation does it imply? How should the word be handled in reading Tennyson’s poem aloud?

The Flea

Mark but this flea, and mark in this
How little that which thou deny’sst me is;
It sucked me first, and now sucks thee,
And in this flea our two bloods mingled be;
Thou know’st that this cannot be said
A sin, nor shame, nor loss of maidenhead;
Yet this enjoys before it woo,
And pampered swells with one blood made of two,
And this, alas, is more than we would do.

Oh stay, three lives in one flea spare,
Where we almost, yea more than married are.
This flea is you and I, and this
Our marriage bed and marriage temple is;
Though parents grudge, and you, we are met
And cloistered in these living walls of jet.
Though use make you apt to kill me,
Let not to that, self-murder added be,
And sacrilege, three sins in killing three.

Cruel and sudden, hast thou since
Purpled thy nail in blood of innocence?
Wherein could this flea guilty be,
Except in that drop which it sucked from thee?
Yet thou triumph’st and say’st that thou
Find’st not thyself, nor me, the weaker now.
’Tis true. Then learn how false fears be:
Just so much honor, when thou yield’st to me,
Will waste, as this flea’s death took life from thee.

—JOHN DONNE (1572–1631)

QUESTIONS

1. In many respects this poem is like a miniature play; it has two characters, dramatic conflict, dialogue (though we hear only one speaker), and stage action. The action is indicated by stage directions embodied in the dialogue. What has happened just preceding the first line of the poem? What happens between the first and second stanzas? What happens between the second and third? How does the female character behave and what does she say during the third stanza?

2. What has been the past relationship of the speaker and the woman? What has she denied him (2)? How has she habitually “kill’d” him (16)? Why has she done so? How does it happen that he is still alive? What is his objective in the poem?

3. According to a traditional Renaissance belief, the blood of lovers “mingled” during sexual intercourse. What is the speaker’s argument in stanza 1? Reduce it to paraphrase. How logical is it?

4. What do “parents grudge, and you” in stanza 2? What are the “living walls of jet” (15)? What three things will the woman kill by crushing the flea? What three sins will she commit (18)?

5. Why and how does the woman “triumph” in stanza 3? What is the speaker’s response? How logical is his concluding argument?

Exchanging Hats

Unfunny uncles who insist
in trying on a lady’s hat,
—oh, even if the joke falls flat,
we share your slight transvestite twist
in spite of our embarrassment.

Costume and custom are complex.
The headgear of the other sex inspires us to experiment.

Andrurous aunts who, at the beach
with paper plates upon your laps,
keep putting on the yachtmen’s caps
with exhibitionistic screech,

the visors hugging o’er the ear
so that the golden anchors drag,
— the rides of fashion never lag.
Such caps may not be worn next year.

Or you who don the paper plate
itself, and put some grapes upon it,
or sport the Indian’s feather bonnet,
— perversities may aggravate
the natural madness of the hatter.
And if the opera hats collapse
and crowns grow draughty, then, perhaps,
he thinks what might a miter matter?

Unfunny uncle, you who wore a
hat too big, or one too many,
tell us, can't you, are there any
stars inside your black fedora?

Aunt exemplary and slim,
with averted eyes, we wonder
what slow changes they see under
their vast, shady, turned-down brim.

—Elizabeth Bishop (1911–1979)

QUESTIONS
1. Vocabulary: anadrous (9); miter (24); avemal (30).
2. What point is the poem making about gender roles and expectations?
3. How would you describe the tone of the poem?

History Lesson
I am four in this photograph, standing
on a wide strip of Mississippi beach,
my hands on the flowered hips
of a bright bikini. My toes dig in,
curl around wet sand. The sun cuts
the rippling Gulf in flashes with each
tidal rush. Minnows dart at my feet
blazing like switchblades. I am alone
except for my grandmother, other side
of the camera, telling me how to pose.
It is 1970, two years after they opened
the rest of this beach to us,
forty years since the photograph
where she stood on a narrow plot
of sand marked colored, smiling,

her hands on the flowered hips
of a cotton meal-sack dress.

—Natasha Trethewey (b. 1966)

QUESTIONS
1. Analyze the tone of this poem. Is it nostalgic? Angry? Bitter? Point to specific passages and images that support your argument.
2. Discuss the significance of the following images: "wide strip" (2) and "narrow
plot" (14); "flowered hips / of a bright bikini" (3–4) and "flowered hips / of a
meat-sack dress" (16–17); "glistening like switchblades" (8).
3. In what sense does this photograph represent a "History Lesson" (title)?

Dover Beach
The sea is calm tonight,
The tide is full, the moon lies fair
Upon the straits;—on the French coast the light
Gleams and is gone; the cliffs of England stand,
Glimmering and vast, out in the tranquil bay.
Come to the window, sweet is the night-air!
Only, from the long line of spray
Where the sea meets the moon-blanced land,
Listen! you hear the grating roar
Of pebbles which the waves draw back, and fling,
At their return, up the high strand,
Begin, and cease, and then again begin,
With tremulous cadence slow, and bring
The eternal note of sadness in.

Sophocles long ago
Heard it on the Aegean, and it brought
Into his mind the turbid ebb and flow
Of human misery; we
Find also in the sound a thought,
Hearing it by this distant northern sea.

The Sea of Faith
Was once, too, at the full, and round earth's shore
Lay like the folds of a bright girdle furled.
But now I only hear

...
Its melancholy, long, withdrawing roar,  
Retreating, to the breath  
Of the night-wind, down the vast edges dear  
And naked shingles* of the world.

Ah, love, let us be true  
To one another! for the world, which seems  
To lie before us like a land of dreams,  
So various, so beautiful, so new,

Hath really neither joy, nor love, nor light,  
Nor certitude, nor peace, nor help for pain;  
And we are here as on a darkling plain  
Swept with confused alarms of struggle and flight,  
Where ignorant armies clash by night.

—MATTHEW ARNOLD (1822–89)

QUESTIONS
1. Vocabulary: *strand* (11), *girdle* (23), *darkling* (35). Identify the physical locale of the site of Dover and their relation to the French coast; identify Sophocles and the *Age*.
2. As precisely as possible, define the implied scene: What is the speaker’s physical location? Whom is he addressing? What is the time of day and the state of the weather?
3. Discuss the visual and auditory images of the poem and their relation to illusion and reality.
4. The speaker is lamenting the decline of religious faith in his time. Is he himself a believer? Does he see any medicine for the world’s maladies?
5. Discuss in detail the imagery in the last three lines. Are the “armies” figurative or literal? What makes these lines so effective?
6. What term or terms would you choose to describe the overall tone of the poem?

Church Going

Once I am sure there’s nothing going on  
I step inside, letting the door thud shut.  
Another church: matting, seats, and stone;  
And little books, sprawlings of flowers, cut  
For Sunday, brownish now; some brass and stuff  
Up at the holy end; the small near organ;  
And a tense, musty, unignorable silence,  
Brewed God knows how long. Hatless, I take off  
My cycle-clips in awkward reverence,

Move forward, run my hand around the font.  
From where I stand, the roof looks almost new—  
Cleaned, or restored? Someone would know: I don’t.  
Mounting the lectern, I peruse a few  
Hectoring large-scale verses, and pronounce  
“Here endeth” much more loudly than I’d meant.  
The echoes snigger briefly. Back at the door  
I sign the book, donate an Irish sixpence,  
Reflect the place was not worth stopping for.

Yet stop I did: in fact I often do,  
And always end much at a loss like this,  
Wondering what to look for, wondering, too,  
When churches fall completely out of use.

What we shall turn them into, if we shall keep  
A few cathedrals chronically on show,  
Their parchment, plate and pyx in locked cases,  
And let the rest rent-free to rain and sheep.  
Shall we avoid them as unlucky places?

Or, after dark, will dubious women come  
To make their children touch a particular stone;  
Pick simples for a cancer; or on some  
Advised night seek walking a dead one?

Power of some sort or other will go on  
In games, in riddles, seemingly at random;  
But superstition, like belief, must die,  
And what remains when disbelief has gone?

Grass, weedy pavement, brambles, buttress, sky,

A shape less recognizable each week,  
A purpose more obscure. I wonder who  
Will be the last, the very last, to seek  
This place for what it was; one of the crew  
That tap and jot and know what rood-lofts were?  
Some ruin-bibber, randy for antique,

Or Christmas-addict, counting on a whiff  
Of gown-and-bands and organ-pipes and myrrh?  
Or will he be my representative,

Bored, uninformed, knowing the ghostly silt  
Dispersed, yet tending to this cross of ground
CHAPTER ELEVEN

Musical Devices

Poetry obviously makes a greater use of the "music" of language than does language that is not poetry. The poet, unlike the person who uses language to convey only information, chooses words for sound as well as for meaning, and uses the sound as a means of reinforcing meaning. So prominent is this musical quality of poetry that some writers have made it the distinguishing term in their definitions of poetry. Edgar Allan Poe, for instance, describes poetry as "music ... combined with a pleasurable idea." Whether or not it deserves this much importance, verbal music, like connotation, imagery, and figurative language, is one of the important resources that enable the poet to do more than communicate mere information. The poet may indeed sometimes pursue verbal music for its own sake; more often, at least in first-rate poetry, it is an adjunct to the total meaning or communication of the poem.

The poet achieves musical quality in two broad ways: by the choice and arrangement of sounds and by the arrangement of accents. In this chapter we will consider the first of these.

An essential element in all music is repetition. In fact, we might say that all art consists of giving structure to two elements: repetition and variation. All things we enjoy greatly and lastingly have these two elements. We enjoy the sea endlessly because it is always the same yet always different. We enjoy a baseball game because it contains the same complex combination of pattern and variation. Our love of art, then, is rooted in human psychology. We like the familiar, we like variety; but we like them combined. If we get too much sameness, the result is monotony and tedium; if we get too much variety, the result is bewilderment and confusion. The composer of music, therefore, repeats certain musical tones, repeats them in certain combinations, or chords; and repeats them in certain patterns, or melodies. The poet likewise repeats certain sounds in certain combinations and arrangements, and thus adds musical meaning to verse. Consider the following short example.

The Turtle

The turtle lives 'twixt plated decks
Which practically conceal its sex.
I think it clever of the turtle
In such a fix to be so fertile.

—Ogden Nash (1902–1971)

Here is a little joke, a paradox of animal life to which the author has cleverly drawn our attention. An experiment will show us, however, that much of its appeal lies not so much in what it says as in the manner in which it says it. If, for instance, we recast the verse as prose: "The turtle lives in a shell that almost conceals its sex. It is ingenious of the turtle, in such a situation, to be so prolific," the joke falls flat. Some of its appeal must lie in its metrical form. So now we cast it in unrhymed verse:

Because he lives between two decks,
It's hard to tell a turtle's gender.
The turtle is a clever beast
In such a plight to be so fertile.

Here, perhaps, is some improvement over the prose version, but still the piquancy of the original is missing. Much of that appeal must have consisted in the use of rhyme—the repetition of sound in "decks" and "sex," "turtle" and "fertile." So we try once more.

The turtle lives 'twixt plated decks
Which practically conceal its sex.
I think it clever of the turtle
In such a plight to be so fertile.

But for perceptive readers there is still something missing—they may not at first see what—but some little touch that makes the difference between a good piece of verse and a little masterpiece of its kind. And then they see it: "plight" has been substituted for "fix."

But why should "fix" make such a difference? Its meaning is little different from that of "plight"; its only important difference is in sound. But there we are. The final s in "fix" catches up the concluding consonant
I wake to sleep, and take my waking slow.  
I learn by going where I have to go.  

—THEODORE ROETHKE (1908–1963)

QUESTIONS
1. The refrains in lines 1 and 3 occur at patterned intervals in this example of the 
   form called “villanelle” (see page 922 for a definition of the form). Even without the 
definition you can work out the repetitive pattern—but the key question is, what 
do these two lines mean, as statements both within the first stanza and in each 
subsequent repetition? Starting with line 1, for what is “sleep” a common metaphor? 
What would be the meaning if the first phrase were “I was born to die”? 
2. Paraphrase the third line, in light of the idea that the first line presents an attitude 
toward the fact that all living things must die. Where does the speaker “have to 
go” ultimately? What is the process of his present “going”? 
3. Explain the clear-cut attitude toward emotive experience versus intellectual 
knowledge expressed in line 4. How is that attitude a basis for the ideas in the 
refrain lines? How does it support line 10? 
4. What is it that “Great Nature has ... to do” (13) to people? How should they 
live their lives, according to the speaker? 
5. Explain the paradox that “shaking keeps [the speaker] steady” (16). Consider the 
possibility that the speaker is personifying “the Tree” (10) as himself—what then 
is “fall[ing] away,” and how near is it (17)? 

We have not nearly exhausted the possibilities of sound repetition by 
giving names to a few of the more prominent kinds. The complete study of 
possible kinds of sound repetition in poetry would be so complex, however, 
that it would exceed the scope of this introductory text. 
Some of the subtlest and loveliest effects escape our net of names. In 
as short a phrase as this from the prose of John Ruskin—“ivy as light and 
lovely as the vine”—we notice alliteration in light and lovely; assonance in 
ivy, light, and vine; and consonance in icy and lovely. But we have no name 
to connect the v in vine with the s in icy and lovely, or the second l in lovely 
with the first l, or the final syllables of icy and lovely with each other; yet 
these are all an effective part of the music of the line. Also contributing to 
the music of poetry is the linking of related rather than identical sounds, 
such as m and n, or p and b, or the vowel sounds in boat, boot, and book. 

These various musical repetitions, for trained readers, will ordinarily 
make an almost subconscious contribution to their reading of the poem: 
readers will feel their effect without necessarily being aware of what has 
cause it. There is value, however, in occasionally analyzing a poem for 
these devices in order to increase awareness of them. A few words of caution 
are necessary. First, the repetitions are entirely a matter of sound; spelling
Blow, blow, thou winter wind

Blow, blow, thou winter wind.
Thou art not so unkind
As man’s ingratitude.
Thy tooth is not so keen,
Because thou art not seen.
Although thy breath be rude.
Heigh-ho, sing heigh-ho, unto the green holly.
Most friendship is feigning, most loathing mere folly.
Then heigh-ho, the holly!
This life is most jolly.
Freeze, freeze, thou bitter sky,
That dost not bite so nigh
As benefits forgot.
Though thou the waters warp,
Thy sting is not so sharp
As friend remembered not.
Heigh-ho, sing heigh-ho, unto the green holly.
Most friendship is feigning, most loathing mere folly.
Then heigh-ho, the holly!
This life is most jolly.

—WILLIAM SHAKESPEARE (1564-1616)

QUESTIONS
1. Vocabulary: Heigh-ho (7) is an expression of melancholy or disappointment; holly (7) is an emblem of cheerfulness (as at Christmas); warp (14) implies freezing into rages.
2. This song from As You Like It (Act 2, scene 7), contrasts the social and natural worlds and is sung to celebrate living freely in the forest. What essential qualities does it ascribe to the two environments displayed in the behavior of people and the actions of nature? What paradox does the poem create by presenting the expression “heigh-ho” linked with “the holly”? Are we to take “heigh-ho” at its literal meaning?
3. What musical devices help to create the songlike quality of this poem?

We Real Cool

The Pool Players.
Sweat At The Golden Shovel.

We real cool. We
Left school. We

Lurk late. We
Strike straight. We

Sing sin. We
Thin gin. We

Jazz June. We
Die soon.

—GWENDOLYN BROOKS (1917-2000)

QUESTIONS
1. In addition to end rhyme, what other musical devices does this poem employ?
2. Try reading this poem with the pronouns at the beginning of the lines instead of at the end. What is lost?
3. English teachers in a certain urban school were once criticized for having their students read this poem; it was said to be immoral. What essential poetic device did the critics misunderstand?

Woman Work

I've got the children to tend
The clothes to mend
The floor to mop
The food to shop
Then the chicken to fry
The baby to dry
I got company to feed
The garden to weed
I've got the shirts to press
The toots to dress
The cane to be cut
I gotta clean up this hut
Then see about the sick
And the cotton to pick.

Shine on me, sunshine
Rain on me, rain
Fall softly, dewdrops
And cool my brow again.
Storn, blow me from here
With your fiercest wind
Let me float across the sky
"Til I can rest again.

Fall gently, snowflakes
Cover me with white
Cold icy kisses and
Let me rest tonight.

Sun, rain, curving sky
Mountain, oceans, leaf and stone
Star shine, moon glow
You're all that I can call my own.

—MAYA ANGELOU (B. 1928)

QUESTIONS
1. What is the pattern of rhymes in lines 1–14? What does it shift to in lines 15–30? Whom is the speaker addressing in the first 14 lines? What figurative address characterizes the rest of the poem?
2. The phrases "I've got ... gotta" (1–12) produce a type of refrain called anaphora, the repetition of an opening word or phrase in a series of lines. What feeling is expressed by this repetition here? How do the varying forms of the phrase characterize the speaker?
3. Most of the stanzas in the first 14 lines are associated popularly with "woman[s] work," but two are not. What do these exceptions reveal about the situation of the speaker?
4. What kinds of release from "work" are presented in lines 15–30? Metaphorically, what does the speaker desire in lines 19–26?
5. Explain the statement in the last four lines.

The Bells

I
Hear the sleighs with the bells—
Silver bells!
What a world of merriment their melody foretells!
How they tinkle, tinkle, tinkle,
In the icy air of night!
While the stars that oversprinkle
All the heaves, seem to twinkle
With a crystalline delight;

Keeping time, time, time,
In a sort of Runic rhyme,
To the tintinnabulation that so musically wells
From the bells, bells, bells, bells,
Bells, bells, bells—
From the jingling and the tinkling of the bells.

II
Hear the mellow wedding bells—
Golden bells!
What a world of happiness their harmony foretells!
Through the balmv air of night
How they ring out their delight!—
From the molten-golden notes,
And all in tune,
What a liquid diry floats
To the turtle-dove that listens, while she gloats
On the moon!
Oh, from out the sounding cells,
What a gush of euphony voluminously wells!
How it swells!
How it swells
On the Future!—how it tells
Of the rapture that impels
To the swinging and the ringing
Of the bells, bells, bells—
Of the bells, bells, bells, bells,
Bells, bells, bells—
To the rhyming and the chiming of the bells!

III
Hear the loud alarum bells—
Drazen bells!
What a tale of terror, now, their turbulency tells!
In the startled ear of night
How they scream out their affright!
Too much horrified to speak,
They can only shriek, shriek,
Out of tune,
In a clamorous appealing to the mercy of the fire,
In a mad expostulation with the deaf and frantic fire,
Leaping higher, higher, higher,
With a desperate desire,
And a resolute endeavor
Now—now to sit, or never,
By the side of the pale-faced moon,
Oh, the bells, bells, bells!
What a tale their terror tells
Of Despair!
How they clang, and clash, and roar!
What a horror they outpour
On the bosom of the palpitating air!
Yet the ear, it fully knows,
By the twanging
And the clanging,
How the danger ebbs and flows;
Yet the ear distinctly tells,
In the jangling
And the wrangling,
How the danger sinks and swells,
By the sinking or the swelling in the anger of the bells—
Of the bells,—
Of the bells, bells, bells, bells,
Bells, bells, bells—
In the clamor and the clangor of the bells!

IV
Hear the tolling of the bells—
Iron bells!
What a world of solemn thought their monody compels!
In the silence of the night,
How we shiver with affright
At the melancholy menace of their tone!
For every sound that floats
From the rust within their throats
Is a groan.
And the people—a, the people—
They that dwell up in the steeple,
All alone,
And who tolling, tolling, tolling,
In that muffled monotone,
Feel a glory in so rolling
On the human heart a stone—
They are neither man nor woman—
They are neither brute nor human—
They are Ghouls:
And their king it is who tolls:
And he rolls, rolls, rolls,
Rolls
A paean from the bells!
And his merry bosom swells
With the paean of the bells!
And he dances, and he yells;
Keeping time, time, time,
In a sort of Runic rhyme,
To the paean of the bells—
Of the bells:
Keeping time, time, time,
In a sort of Runic rhyme,
To the throbbing of the bells—
Of the bells, bells, bells—
To the sobbing of the bells;
Keeping time, time, time,
As he knells, knells, knells,
In a happy Runic rhyme,
To the rolling of the bells—
Of the bells, bells, bells—
To the rolling of the bells—
Of the bells, bells, bells, bells,
Bells, bells, bells—
To the moaning and the groaning of the bells.

—Edgar Allan Poe (1809–1849)

QUESTIONS
1. Vocabulary: sledge (1); tintinnabulation (11); euphony (26); expostulation (45); poen (92); Runic (101).
2. What different kinds of bells are described in the poem? How does the sound of the various stanzas comport with the type of bells being described?
3. How would you describe the tone of the poem? Besides his attitude toward the bells, what can we infer about the speaker?
4. What effects do the rhyme scheme and the punctuation have on the way you experience the poem?
Music Lessons

Sometimes, in the middle of the lesson,
we exchanged places. She would gaze at her hands
spread over the keys; then the small house with its knickknacks,
its shut windows,
its photographs of her sons and the serious husband,
vanished as new shapes formed. Sound
became music, and music a white
scarp for the listener to climb
alone. I leaped rock over rock to the top
and found myself waiting, transformed,
and still she played, her eyes luminous and willful,
her pinned hair falling down—
forgetting me, the house, the neat green yard,
she fled in that lick of flame all tedious bonds:
supper, the duties of flesh and home,
the knife at the throat, the death in the metronome.

—MARY OLIVER (b. 1935)

QUESTIONS

1. Vocabulary: scarp (8), metronome (16).
2. What musical qualities do you see in the poem? How are they appropriate?
3. Discuss the characterization of the piano teacher. What kind of woman is she? What does the speaker, now a mature adult, see in her that she didn’t see when she actually knew the teacher?
4. Why does the speaker use imagery of violence and death in the final line? What poetic effect does this imagery have on the reader?

Traveling through the dark

Traveling through the dark I found a deer
dead on the edge of the Wilson River road.
It is usually best to roll them into the canyon:
that road is narrow; to swerve might make more dead.

By glow of the tail-light I stumbled back of the car
and stood by the heap, a doe, a recent killing;
she had stiffened already, almost cold.
I dragged her off; she was large in the belly.
Rite of Passage

As the guests arrive at my son's party
they gather in the living room—
short men, men in first grade
with smooth jaws and chins.
Hands in pockets, they stand around
jostling, jockeying for place, small fights
breaking out and calming. One says to another
How old are you? Six. I'm seven. So?
They eye each other, seeing themselves
tiny in the other's pupils. They clear their
throats a lot, a room of small bankers,
they fold their arms and frown. I could beat you
up, a seven says to a six,
the dark cake, round and heavy as a
turret, behind them on the table. My son,
freckles like specks of nutmeg on his cheeks,
chest narrow as the balsa keel of a
model boat, long hands
cool and thin as the day they guided him
out of me, speaks up as a host
for the sake of the group.
We could easily kill a two-year-old,
his says in his clear voice. The other
men agree, they clear their throats
like Generals, they relax and get down to
playing war, celebrating my son's life.

—Sharon Olds (b. 1942)

QUESTIONS

1. Vocabulary: Rite of Passage (title).
2. What is the implication of the metaphor comparing the boys to "bankers" (11) clearing
their throats? of that comparing them to "Generals" (25) doing the same thing?
Is there a "rite of passage" implied in the shift from one comparison to the other?
3. What tones of voice would be appropriate for the phrase "I'm seven" and the
reply "So?" (8)? Explain the image in the next sentence.
4. How are the similes in lines 14–15 and 16–17 linked? How do they function in
the progress from bankers to Generals?
5. What is the speaker's tone as she describes the children's violent impulses?
6. The poem displays a considerable amount of musicality—alternation, assonance
and consonance—through line 21. Identify these devices, and discuss the implica-
tion of their absence in the remainder of the poem.

Music Lessons

Sometimes, in the middle of the lesson,
we exchanged places. She would gaze a moment at her hands
spread over the keys; then the small house with its knickknacks,
it's shut windows,
its photographs of her sons and the serious husband,
vanished as new shapes formed. Sound
became music, and music a white
scarp for the listener to climb
alone. I leaped rock over rock to the top
and found myself waiting, transformed,
and still she played, her eyes luminous and willful,
her pinned hair falling down—
forgetting me, the house, the neat green yard,
she fled in that lick of flame all tedious bonds:
supper, the duties of flesh and home,
the knife at the throat, the death in the metronome.

—Mary Oliver (B. 1935)

QUESTIONS

1. Vocabulary: scarp (8), metronome (16).
2. What musical qualities do you see in the poem? How are they appropriate?
3. Discuss the characterization of the piano teacher. What kind of woman is she?
What does the speaker, now a mature adult, see in her that she didn't see when she
actually knew the teacher?
4. Why does the speaker use imagery of violence and death in the final line? What
poetic effect does this imagery have on the reader?

Traveling through the dark

Traveling through the dark I found a deer
dead on the edge of the Wilson Road.
It is usually best to roll them into the canyon:
that road is narrow; to swerve might make more dead.

By glow of the tail-light I stumbled back of the car
and stood by the heap, a doe, a recent killing;
she had stiffened already, almost cold.
I dragged her off; she was large in the belly.
My fingers touching her side brought me the reason—
her side was warm; her fawn lay there waiting,
avive, still, never to be born.
Beside that mountain road I hesitated.
The car aimed ahead its lowered parking lights;
under the hood purred the steady engine.
I stood in the glare of the warm exhaust turning red;
around our group I could hear the wilderness listen.

I thought hard for us all — my only swerving —,
then pushed her over the edge into the river.

—WILLIAM STAFFORD (1914–1993)

QUESTIONS
1. State precisely the speaker’s dilemma. What kind of person is he? Does he make
the right decision? Why does he call his hesitation “my only swerving” (17), and
how does this connect with the word “swerve” in line 4?
2. What different kinds of imagery and of image contrasts give life to the poem?
Do any of the images have symbolic overtones?
3. At first glance this poem may appear to be without end rhyme. Looking closer,
do you find any correspondences between lines 2 and 4 in each four-line stanza?
line 3 of stanzas 2 and 3? between the final words of the concluding couplet? What one line end in the poem has no connection in sound to
another line end in its stanza?

SUGGESTIONS FOR WRITING
1. Write an essay analyzing the use and effectiveness of alliteration and/or
assonance in one of the following:
a. Shakespeare, “Shall I compare thee to a summer’s day?” (page 689).
b. Dickinson, “There’s a certain Slant of light” (page 951).
e. Robinson, “Richard Cory” (page 1034).
2. Discuss the rhymes in one of the following. Does the poem employ exact rhymes
or approximate rhymes? How do the kind and pattern of rhyme contribute to the
poem’s effect?
a. MacLeish, “Ars Poetica” (page 1023).
b. Browning, “My Last Duchess” (page 806).
e. Heaney, “Follower” (page 1004).
Rhythm and Meter

Our love of rhythm is rooted even more deeply in us than our love of musical repetition. It is related to the beat of our hearts, the pulse of our blood, the intake and outflow of air from our lungs. Everything that we do naturally and gracefully we do rhythmically. There is rhythm in the way we walk, the way we swim, the way we ride a horse, the way we swing a golf club or a baseball bat. So native is rhythm to us that we read it, when we can, into the mechanical world around us. Our clocks go tick-tick-tick, but we hear tick-tock, tick-tock. The click of railroad wheels beneath us patterns itself into a tune in our heads. There is a strong appeal for us in language that is rhythmic.

The term rhythm refers to any wavelike recurrence of motion or sound. In speech it is the natural rise and fall of language. All language is to some degree rhythmic, for all language involves alternations between accented and unaccented syllables. Language varies considerably, however, in the degree to which it exhibits rhythm. Sometimes in speech the rhythm is so unobtrusive or so unpatterned that we are scarcely aware of it. Sometimes, as in rap or in oratory, the rhythm is so pronounced that we may be tempted to tap our feet to it.

In every word of more than one syllable, one or more syllables are accented or stressed; that is, given more prominence in pronunciation than the rest.* We say toDAY, toMORrow, YESterday, interVENe. These accents within individual words are indicated by stress marks in

*Though the words accent and stress generally are used interchangeably, as here, a distinction is sometimes made between them in technical discussions. Accent, the relative prominence given a syllable in relation to its neighbors, is then said to result from one or more of four causes: one, or force of utterance, producing loudness; duration; pitch; and juncture, the manner of transition between successive sounds. Of these, stress, in verse written in English, is the most important.
The poetic line is the basic rhythmic unit in free verse, the predominating type of poetry now being written. Except for its line arrangement, there are no necessary differences between the rhythms of free verse and the rhythms of prose, so our awareness of the line as a rhythmic unit is essential. Consider the rhythmic contrast between end-stopped lines and run-on lines in these two excerpts from poems presented earlier, and notice how the caesuras (marked ||) help to vary the rhythms:

A noiseless patient spider,
I marked where on a little promontory it stood isolated,
Marked how to explore the vacant vast surrounding,
It launched forth filament, || filament, || filament, || out of itself,
Ever unreeling them, || ever tirelessly speeding them.

Sorrow is my own yard
where the new grass
flames || as it has flamed
often before || but not
with the cold fire
that closes round me this year.

There is another sort of poetry that depends entirely on ordinary prose rhythms—the prose poem, exemplified by Carolyn Forché’s “The Colonel” (page 997) and Rita Dove’s “Kentucky, 1833” (page 834). Having dispensed even with the line as a unit of rhythm, the prose poem lays its claim to being poetry by its attention to many of the poetic elements presented earlier in this book: connotation, imagery, figurative language, and the concentration of meaning in evocative language.

But most often, when people think of poetry they think of the two broad branches, free verse and metrical verse, which are distinguished mainly by the absence or presence of meter. Meter is the identifying characteristic of rhythmic language that we can tap our feet to. When verse is metrical, the accents of language are so arranged as to occur at apparently equal intervals of time, and it is this interval we mark off with the tap of a foot.

The study of meter is fascinating but highly complex. It is by no means an absolute prerequisite to an enjoyment, even a rich enjoyment, of poetry, any more than is the ability to identify by name the multiplicity of figures of speech. But a knowledge of the fundamentals of meter does have value. It can make the beginning reader more aware of the rhythmic effects of poetry and of how poetry should be read. It can enable the more advanced reader to analyze how certain effects are achieved, to see how rhythm interacts with meaning, and to explain what makes one poem (in this respect) better than another. The beginning student ought to have at least an elementary knowledge of the subject. And it is not so difficult as its traditional terminology might suggest.

Even for the beginner, one essential distinction must be understood: although the terms rhythm and meter are sometimes used interchangeably, they mean different things. Rhythm designates the flow of actual, pronounced sound (or sound heard in the mind’s ear), whereas meter refers to the patterns that sounds follow when a poet has arranged them into metrical verse. This may be illustrated by an analogy of a well-designed building and the architect’s blueprint for its construction. The building, like rhythmic sound, is actual and real; the blueprint for it is an abstract, idealized pattern, like metrical form. When we look at a building, we see the actuality, but we also recognize that it is based on a pattern. The actuality of the building goes beyond the idealized blueprint in a number of ways—it presents us with texture, with color, with varying effects depending on light and shade, with contrasts of building materials. In poetry, the actuality is language arranged in sentences, with a progression through time, with varying emotions, dramatic contrasts of meaning and tone, the revelation of the speaker’s situation, and so forth. All these are expressed through the sounds of language, which are constantly shifting to create meanings and implications.

The word meter comes from a word meaning “measure” (the word rhythm from a word meaning “flow,” as in waves). To measure something we must have a unit of measurement. For measuring length we use the inch, foot, yard; for measuring time we use the second, minute, hour. For measuring verse we use the foot, the line, and (sometimes) the stanza.

One basic unit of meter, the foot, consists normally of one accented syllable plus one or two unaccented syllables, though occasionally there may be no unaccented syllables. To determine which syllable in a foot is accented, we compare its sound with that of the other syllables within its foot, not with the sounds of syllables in other feet within a line. In fact, because of the varying stresses on syllables in a spoken sentence, it is very unusual for all of the stressed syllables in a line to be equally stressed.

For diagramming the metrical form of verse, various systems of visual symbols have been devised. In this book we shall use a breve (·) to indicate an unstressed syllable, an ictus (') to indicate a stressed syllable, and
Thy root is ever in its grave,
And thou must die.

Sweet spring, full of sweet days and roses,
A box where sweets compacted lie;
My music shows ye have your closes,
And all must die.

Only a sweet and virtuous soul,
Like seasoned timber, never gives;
But though the whole world turn to coal,
Then chiefly lives.

—George Herbert (1593–1632)

QUESTIONS
1. Vocabulary: bridal (2), brave (5), chosen (11), coal (15).
2. How are the four stanzas interconnected? How do they build to a climax? How does the fourth contrast with the first three?

The first step in scanning a poem is to read it normally, according to its prose meaning, listening to where the accents fall naturally, and perhaps bearing time with the hand. If we have any doubt about how a line should be marked, we should skip it temporarily and go on to lines where we feel greater confidence; that is, to those lines that seem most regular, with accents that fall unmistakably at regular intervals for we are seeking the poem's pattern, which will be revealed by what is regular in it. In "Virtue" lines 3, 10, and 14 clearly fall into this category, as do the short lines 4, 8, and 12. Lines 3, 10, and 14 may be marked as follows:

The dew shall weep thy fall to night.

A box where sweets compacted lie.

Like seasoned timber, never gives.

Lines 4, 8, and 12 are so nearly identical that we may use line 4 to represent all three.

For thou must die.

Surveying what we have done so far, we may with some confidence say that the prevailing metrical foot of the poem is iambic; and we may reasonably hypothesize that the second and third lines of each stanza are tetrameter (four-foot) lines and the fourth line dimeter. What about the first lines? Line 1 contains eight syllables, and since the poem is iambic, we may mark them into four feet. The last six syllables clearly constitute three iambic feet (as a general rule, the last few feet in a line tend to reflect the prevailing meter of a poem).

Sweet day, so cool, so calm, so bright.

This too, then, is a tetrameter line, and the only question is whether to mark the first foot as another iamb or as a spondee—that is, whether it conforms to the norm established by the iambic meter, or is a substituted foot. The adjective "Sweet" is certainly more important in the line than the repeated adverb "so," and ought to receive more stress than the adverbs on the principle of rhetorical stress, by which the plain prose sense governs the pronunciation. But we must remember that in marking metrical stresses, we are only comparing the syllables within a foot, so the comparison with the repeated "so" is irrelevant. The real question is whether "Sweet" receives as much emphasis as "day."

As another general rule (but by no means an absolute one), a noun usually receives more stress than an adjective that modifies it, a verb more than its adverbs, and an adjective more than an adverb that modifies it—except when the modifying word points to an unusual or unexpected condition. If the phrase were "far day" or "red day," we would probably feel that those adjectives were odd enough to warrant stressing them. "Sweet day" does not strike us as particularly unusual, so the noun ought to receive stress. Further, as we notice that each of the first three stanzas begins with "Sweet" modifying different nouns, we recognize that the statement of the poem is drawing attention to the similarities (and differences) of three things that can be called sweet—"day," "rose," and "spring." By its repetition before those three nouns, the word sweet may come to seem formulaic, and the nouns the object of attention. On the other hand, the repetition of "Sweet" may seem emphatic, and lead us to give approximately equal stress to both the noun and its adjective. As our purpose is to detect the pattern of sounds in the poem, the most likely result of this study will be to mark it iambic. However, judging it to be spondaic would not be incorrect, for ultimately we are reporting what we hear, and there is room for subjective differences.

The first feet of lines 5 and 9 raise the same problem as line 1 and should be marked in the same way. Choices of a similar sort occur in other
lines (13 and 16). Many readers will quite legitimately perceive line 16 as parallel to lines 4, 8, and 12. Others, however, may argue that the word “Then”—emphasizing what happens to the virtuous soul when everything else has perished—has an importance that should be reflected in both the reading and the scansion, and will therefore mark the first foot of this line as a spondee:

Then chiefly lives.

These readers also will hear the third foot in line 15 as a spondee:

But though the world turn to coal.

Lines 2 and 7 introduce a different problem. Most readers, if they encountered these lines in a paragraph of prose, would read them thus:

The bridal of the earth and sky
Thy root is ever in its grave.

But this reading leaves us with an anomalous situation. First, we have only three stresses where our pattern calls for four. Second, we have three unaccented syllables occurring together, which is almost never found in verse of duple meter. From this situation we may learn an important principle. Though normal reading of the sentences in a poem establishes its metrical pattern, the metrical pattern so established in turn influences the reading. An interactive process is at work. In this poem the pressure of the pattern will cause most practiced readers to stress the second of the three unaccented syllables in both lines slightly more than those on either side of it. In scansion, comparing the syllables within the individual foot, we acknowledge that slight increase of stress by marking those syllables as stressed (remember, the marking of the accent does not indicate a degree of stress in comparison with other accents in the line). We mark them thus:

The bridal of the earth and sky
Thy root is ever in its grave.

Line 5 presents a situation about which there can be no dispute. The word “angry,” though it occurs in a position where we would expect an iamb,

by virtue of its normal pronunciation must be accented on the first syllable, and thus must be marked a trochee:

Sweet rose, whose hue, an-gry and brave.

There is little question also that the following line begins with a trochee, but the second foot (“rash gaz-er”) must be examined, for we may wonder whether the adjective rash presents an unexpected modification for the noun gazier. Since the possibilities seem about equal, we prefer to let the pattern again take precedence, although a spondee would be acceptable:

Bids the rash gaz-er wipe his eye.

Similarly, the word “Only,” beginning line 13, must be accented on the first syllable, thus introducing a trochaic substitution in the first foot of the line. Line 13 also presents another problem. A modern reader perceives the word “virtuous” as a three-syllable word, but the poet writing in the seventeenth century, when metrical requirements were stricter than they are today, would probably have meant the word to be pronounced as two syllables: vir-tuous. Following the tastes of this century, we mark it as three syllables, so introducing an anapest instead of the expected iamb in the last foot:

On-ly a sweet and vir-tu-ous soul.

In doing this, however, we are consciously modernizing—altering the probable practice of the poet for the sake of a contemporary audience.

One problem of scansion remains: in the third stanza, lines 9 and 11 differ from the other lines of the poem in two respects—(a) they contain an uneven number of syllables (nine rather than the expected eight); (b) they end on unaccented syllables:

Sweet spring, full of sweet days and roses,
My musi-c shows ye have your clos-es.

Such leftover unaccented syllables at line ends are examples of extrametrical syllables and are not counted in identifying and naming the
meter. These lines are both tetrameter, and if we tap our feet when reading them, we shall tap four times. Metrical verse will often have one and sometimes two leftover unaccented syllables. In iambic and anapestic verse they will come at the end of the lines; in trochaic and dactylic, at the beginning. They never occur in the middle of a line.

Our metrical analysis of "Virtue" is completed. Though (mainly for ease of discussion) we have skipped about, we have indicated a scansion for all its lines. "Virtue" is written in iambic meter (meaning that most of its feet are iambics), and is composed of four-line stanzas, the first three lines tetrameter, the final line dimeter. We are now ready to make a few generalizations about scansion.

1. Most readers will not ordinarily stop to scan a poem they are reading, and they certainly will not read a poem aloud with the exaggerated emphasis on accented syllables that we sometimes give them in order to make the metrical pattern more apparent. However, occasional scansion of a poem has value, as will be indicated in the next chapter, which discusses the relation of sound and meter to sense. Just one example here. The structure of meaning of "Virtue" is unmistakable; three parallel stanzas concerning things that die are followed by a contrasting fourth stanza concerning the one thing that does not die. The first three stanzas all begin with the word "Sweet" preceding a noun, and the first metrical foot in these stanzas is either an iamb or a spondee. The contrasting fourth stanza, however, begins with a trochee, thus departing both from the previous pattern and from the basic meter of the poem. This departure is significant, for the word only is the hinge upon which the structure of the poem turns, and the metrical reversal gives it emphasis. Thus meter serves meaning.

2. Scansion only begins to reveal the rhythmic quality of a poem. It simply involves classifying all syllables as either accented or unaccented and ignores the sometimes considerable differences between degrees of accent. Whether we call a syllable accented or unaccented depends only on its degree of accent relative to the other syllable(s) in its foot. In lines 2 and 7 of "Virtue," the accents on "of" and "in" are obviously much lighter than on the other accented syllables in the line. Further, unaccented syllables also vary in weight. In line 5 "whose" is clearly heavier than "-gry" or "and," and is arguably even heavier than the accented "of" and "in" of lines 2 and 7. It is not unusual, either, to find the unaccented syllable of a foot receiving more stress than the accented syllable immediately preceding it in another foot, as in this line by Gerard Manley Hopkins (page 862):

It will flame out like shin-ing from shook foil

The last four syllables of the line, two perfectly regular iambs, are actually spoken as a sequence of four increasingly stressed accents. A similar sequence of increasing accents occurs in lines 4, 8, and 12 of "Virtue."

Since the necessity expressed in the word "must" makes it more heavily stressed than the pronoun "thou." The point is that metrical scansion is incapable of describing subtle rhythmic effects in poetry. It is nevertheless a useful and serviceable tool, for by showing us the metrical pattern, it draws attention to the way in which the actuality of sound follows the pattern even while departing from it; that is, recognizing the meter, we can more clearly hear rhythms. The idea of regularity helps us to be aware of the actuality of sounds.

3. Notice that the divisions between feet have no meaning except to help us identify the meter. They do not correspond to the speech rhythms in the line. In the third foot of line 14 of "Virtue," a syntactical pause occurs within the foot; and, indeed, feet divisions often fall in the middle of a word. It is sometimes a mistake of beginners to expect the word and the foot to be identical units. We mark the feet divisions only to reveal regularity or pattern, not to indicate rhythm. But in "Virtue," if we examine all of the two-syllable words, we find that all eleven of them as isolated words removed from their lines would be called trochaic. Yet only two of them—"angry" (5) and "only" (13)—actually occur as trochaic feet. All the rest are divided in the middle between two iambic feet. This calls for two observations: (a) the rhythm of the poem, the beard sound, often runs counter to the meter—iambic feet have what is called a "rising" pattern, yet these words individually and as they are spoken have a "falling" rhythm; and (b) the trochaic henge word "only" thus has rhythmic echoes throughout the poem, those preceding it yielding a kind of predictive power, and those following it reinforcing the fact that the sense of the poem turns at that word. This rhythmic effect is especially pronounced in the simile of line 14:

Like sea-soned tim-ber, nev-er gives

Echoing the key word "only," this line contains three disyllabic words, each of them having a falling rhythm running counter to the iambic meter.

4. Finally—and this is the most important generalization of all—perfect regularity of meter is no criterion of merit. Inexperienced readers
sometimes get the notion that it is. If the meter is regular and the rhythm
mirrors that regularity in sound, they may feel that the poet has
handled the meter successfully and deserves all credit for it. Actually there is
nothing easier for any moderately talented versifier than to make language
go ta-DUM ta-DUM ta-DUM. But there are two reasons why this is
not generally desirable. The first is that, as we have said, all art consists
essentially of repetition and variation. If a rhythm alternates too regularly
between light and heavy beats, the result is to banish variation; the rhythm
mechanically follows the meter and becomes monotonous. But used occa-
sionally or emphatically, a monotonous rhythm can be very effective, as in
the triumphant last line of Tennyson’s “Ulysses” (page 787):

        To strive, to seek, to find, and not to yield.

The second reason is that once a basic meter has been established, devia-
tions from it become highly significant and are a means by which the poet
can reinforce meaning. If a meter is too regular and the rhythm shows little
deviation from it, the probability is that the poet, instead of adapting rhythm
to meaning, has simply forced the meaning into a metrical straitjacket.

Actually what gives the skillful use of meter its greatest effective-
ness is to be found in the distinction between meter and rhythm. Once
we have determined the basic meter of a poem, say iambic tetrameter,
we have an expectation that the rhythm will coincide with it—that the
pattern will be identical to the actual sound. Thus, a silent drumbeat is
set up in our minds, and this drumbeat constitutes an expected rhythm.
But the actual rhythm of the words—the heard rhythm—will some-
times confirm this expected rhythm and sometimes not. Thus, the two-
meter and rhythm—are counterpointed, and the appeal of the verse is
magnified, just as when two melodies are counterpointed in music, or
when we see two swallows flying together and around each other, follow-
ing the same general course but with individual variations and so making
a more eye-catching pattern than one swallow flying alone. If the heard
rhythm conforms too closely to the expected rhythm (meter), the poem
becomes dull and uninteresting rhythmically. If it departs too far from
the meter, there ceases to be an expected rhythm and the result is likely
to be a muddle.

There are several ways by which variation can be introduced into
a poem’s rhythm. The most obvious way, as we have said, is by the
substitution of other kinds of feet for the basic foot. Such metrical vari-
ation will always be reflected as a rhythmic variation. In our scansion of line 13
of “Virtue,” for instance, we found a trochee and an anapest substituted for
the expected iambs in the first and last feet. A less obvious but equally
important means of variation is through varying degrees of accent arising
from the prose meaning of phrases—from the rhetorical stressing.
Though we began our scansion of “Virtue” by marking lines 3, 10, and
14 as perfectly regular metrically, there is actually a considerable rhyth-
ic difference among them. Line 3 is quite regular because the rhythmic
phrasing corresponds to the metrical pattern, and the line can be read:
ta DUM ta DUM ta DUM ta DUM (The DEW shall WEEP thy FALL
to NIGHT). Line 10 is less regular, for the three-syllable word “com-
pact” cuts across the division between two feet. This should be read: ta
DUM ta DUM ta DUM (a BOX where SWEETS comPACTed
LIE). Line 14 is the least regular of these three because here there is no
correspondence between rhythmic phrasing and metrical division. This
should be read: ta DUM ta DUM ta DUM (Like SEAsoned
TIMber, NEVER GIVES). Finally, variation can be introduced by grammatical
and rhetorical pauses, whether or not signaled by punctuation
(punctuated pauses are usually of longer duration than those occasioned
only by syntax and rhetoric, and pauses for periods are longer than those
for commas). The comma in line 14, by introducing a grammatical
pause (in the middle of a foot), provides an additional variation from
its perfect regularity. Probably the most violently irregular line in the
poem is line 5,

        Sweet rose, whose hue, an-gry and brave,

for here the unusual trochaic substitution in the second from last foot
of an iambic line (a rare occurrence) is set off and emphasized by the
grammatical pause; and also, as we have noted, the unaccented “whose”
is considerably heavier than the other unaccented syllables in the line.
This trochee “angry” is the first unquestionable metrical substitution
in the poem. It occurs in a line which, because it opens a stanza, is sub-
consciously compared to the first line of the first stanza—an example of
regularity with its grammatical pauses separating all four of its feet. Once
we have noticed that the first line of the second stanza contains a metric
variation, our attention is called to the fact that after the first, each
stanza opens with a line containing a trochee—and that these trochees are
moved forward one foot in each of the successive stanzas, from the third
position in stanza two, to the second in four, and finally to the first in the
concluding stanza. This pattern itself tends to add even more emphasis to
the climactic change signaled by the final trochee, “only.” Again, meter and
rhythm serve meaning.
The effects of rhythm and meter are several. Like the musical repetitions of sound, the musical repetitions of accent can be pleasing for their own sake. In addition, rhythm works as an emotional stimulus and heightens our awareness of what is going on in a poem. Finally, a poet can adapt the sound of the verse to its content and thus make meter a powerful reinforcement of meaning. We should avoid, however, the notion that there is any mystical correspondence between certain meters or rhythms and certain emotions. There are no "happy" meters and no "melancholy" meters. The "falling" rhythm of line 14 of "Virtue," counterpointed against its "rising" meter, does not indicate a depression of mood or feeling—the line has quite the opposite emotional tone. Poets' choice of meter is probably less important than how they handle it after they have chosen it. In most great poetry, meter and rhythm work intimately with the other elements of the poem to produce the total effect.

And because of the importance of free verse today, we must not forget that poetry need not be metrical at all. Like alliteration and rhyme, like metaphor and irony, like even imagery, meter is simply one resource poets may or may not use. Their job is to employ their resources to the best advantage for the object they have in mind—the kind of experience they wish to express. And on no other basis should they be judged.

EXERCISES

1. A term that every student of poetry should know (and should be careful not to confuse with free verse) is blank verse. Blank verse has a very specific meter: it is iambic pentameter, unrhymed. It has a special name because it is the principal English meter; that is, the meter that has been used for a large proportion of the greatest English poetry, including the plays of Shakespeare and the epics of Milton. Iambic pentameter in English seems especially suitable for the serious treatment of serious themes. The natural movement of the English language tends to be iambic. Lines shorter than pentameter tend to be songlike, or at least less suited to sustained treatment of serious material. Lines longer than pentameter tend to break up into shorter units, the hexameter line being read as two three-foot units. Rhyme, while highly appropriate to many short poems, often proves a handicap for a long and lofty work. (The word blank indicates that the end of the line is bare of rhyme.)

   Of the following poems, four are in blank verse, two are in other meters, and four are in free verse. Determine in which category each belongs.
   a. Frost, "Birches" (page 998).
   b. Donne, "Break of Day" (page 708).
   c. Stafford, "Traveling through the dark" (page 871).
   d. Plath, "Mirror" (page 715).
   e. Tennyson, "Ulysses" (page 787).
   f. Arnold, "Dover Beach" (page 851).
   g. Auden, "The Unknown Citizen" (page 803).
   h. Yeats, "The Second Coming" (page 1050).
   i. Frost, "Out, Out—" (page 811).
   j. Atwood, "Siren Song" (page 818).

2. Examine Browning, "My Last Duchess" (page 806) and Pope, "Sound and Sense" (page 902). Both are in the same meter; iambic pentameter rhymed in couplets, but their general rhythmic effect is markedly different. What accounts for the difference? How does the contrast support our statement that the way poets handle meter is more important than their choice of a meter?

3. Examine Williams, "The Widow's Lament in Springtime" (page 736) and Williams, "The Dance" (page 915). Which is the most forcibly run-on in the majority of its lines? Describe the differences in effect.

REVIEWING CHAPTER TWELVE

1. Review the terms printed in boldface, and as you read on in this chapter take note of the examples that you find; identify the poems as free verse or metrical, and write out scansion of the metrical verse.

2. Using examples from the poems that follow in this chapter, draw clear distinctions between rhythm and meter; and using appropriate adjectives, describe the rhythmic effects (jolly, somber, playful, etc.).

3. When possible, explain how the rhythms of a poem reinforce emotional or intellectual meanings.

"Introduction" to Songs of Innocence

Piping down the valleys wild,
Piping songs of pleasant glee,
On a cloud I saw a child,  
And he laughing said to me:

"Pipe a song about a Lamb."
So I piped with merry cheer.
"Pipe, pipe that song again."
So I piped; he wept to hear.

"Drop thy pipe, thy happy pipe;  
Sing thy songs of happy cheer."

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So I sung the same again
While he wept with joy to hear.

"Piper, sit thee down and write
In a book that all may read."
So he vanished from my sight,
And I plucked a hollow reed,

And I made a rural pen,
And I stained the water clear,
And I wrote my happy songs
Every child may joy to hear.

—William Blake (1757–1827)

Questions
1. Poets have traditionally been thought of as inspired by one of the Muses (Greek female divinities whose duties were to nurture the arts). Blake's Songs of Innocence, a book of poems about childhood and the state of innocence, includes "The Chimney Sweeper" (page 798) and "The Lamb" (page 835). In this introductory poem to the book, what function is performed by the child upon a cloud?

2. What is symbolized by "a Lamb" (5)?

3. What three stages of poetic composition are suggested in stanzas 1–2, 3, and 4–5 respectively?

4. What features of the poems in his book does Blake hint at in this "Introduction"? Name at least four.

5. Mark the stressed and unstressed syllables in lines 1–2 and 9–10. Do they establish the basic meter of the poem? If so, is that meter iambic or trochaic? Or could it be either? Some metrists have discarded the distinction between iambic and trochaic, and between anapestic and dactylic, as being artificial. The important distinction they feel is between duple and triple meters. Does the poem support their claim?

Had I the Choice

Had I the choice to tally greatest bards,
To limn their portraits, stately, beautiful, and emulate at will,
Homer with all his wars and warriors—Hector, Achilles, Ajax,
Or Shakespeare's woe-entangled Hamlet, Lear, Othello—Tennyson's fair ladies,
Meter or wit the best, or choice conceit to wield in perfect rhyme,
Delight of singers;
These, these, O sea, all these I'd gladly barter,

Would you the undulation of one wave, its trick to me transfer,
Or breathe one breath of yours upon my verse,
And leave its odor there.

—Walt Whitman (1819–1892)

Questions
1. Vocabulary: tally (1), iamb (2), conceit (5).
2. What poetic qualities does the speaker propose to barter in exchange for what?
3. What qualities do the sea and its waves symbolize?
4. Is this free verse, or metrical verse in duple meter? In what way might this be taken as an imitation of the rhythms of the sea?

Stanzas

When a man hath no freedom to fight for at home,
Let him combat for that of his neighbors;
Let him think of the glories of Greece and of Rome,
And get knocked on his head for his labors.

To do good to mankind is the chivalrous plan,
And is always as nobly required:
Then battle for freedom wherever you can,
And, if not shot or hanged, you'll get knighted.

—George Gordon, Lord Byron (1788–1824)

Questions
1. Vocabulary: chivalrous (5), required (6).
2. Scan the poem. How would you describe its rhythmic effects? How do these effects relate to the poem's tone and general meaning?
3. This poem makes use of feminine rhyme. Does this particular kind of rhyme affect the way you read and understand the poem?
4. How is irony effectively used in this poem, particularly in the final line?

Insomnia

The moon in the bureau mirror
Looks out a million miles
(and perhaps with pride, at herself,
but she never, never smiles)
Far and away beyond sleep, or
Perhaps she's a daytime sleeper.