

A.P. ENGLISH LITERATURE & COMPOSITION – MR. ROSE

# Sound and Sense



Archbishop  
**MOELLER**  
English Department

Adapted from *Sound and Sense: An Introduction to Poetry* by Arp & Perrine  
For Use with the Poetry Unit

## Chapter One – What Is Poetry?

Poetry is as universal as language and almost as ancient. The most primitive people have used it and the most civilized have cultivated it. In all ages and in all countries poetry has been written and eagerly read or listened to by all kinds of people. The intelligent and the sensitive individual appreciate it greatly and it has appealed, in its simpler forms, to the uneducated and to children. Why? Firstly because gives pleasure, People have read it, listened to it, or recited it because they liked it, because it gave them enjoyment. But this is not the whole answer. Poetry in all ages has been regarded as important, not simply as a form of amusement. Rather it has been regarded as something central to existence, something having unique value to the fully realized life, something without which we are spiritually impoverished. To understand the reason for this we need to have an understanding of what poetry is – provisional, because people have always been more successful at appreciating poetry than at defining it.

Initially poetry might be defined as a kind of language that **says more** and **says it more intensely** than does ordinary language. In order to understand this fully, we need to understand what is that poetry “says.” For language is employed on different occasions to say quite different kind of things: in other words, language has different uses.

Perhaps the most common use of language is to communicate information. We say that it is nine o’clock, that there is a good movie downtown, That George Washington was the first president of the United States, That the bromine and iodine are the members of halogen group of chemical elements. This we might call the practical use of language; it helps us to understand the ordinary level of business living.

But it is primarily to communicate information that novels and short stories and plays and poems are written. These exist to bring us a sense and a perception of life, to widen and sharpen our contacts with existence. Their concern is with experience. We all have an inner need to live more deeply and fully with greater awareness, To know the experience of others and to know better our own experience. The poet, from his own store of felt, observed, or imagined experiences, selects, combines, and recognizes. He creates significant new experiences for the reader--significant because focused and formed--in which the reader can participate and that he may use to give him a greater awareness and understanding of his world. Literature, in other words, can be used as a gear for stepping up the intensity and increasing the range of our experience and as a glass for clarifying it. This is the literary use of language, for literature is not only an aid to living but a mean to living. (A third use of language is as an instrument of persuasion.)

Suppose, for instance, we are interested in eagles. If we want simply to acquire information about eagles, we may turn to an encyclopedia or a book of natural history. There we find that the family of *Falconidae*, to which eagles belong, and other information about height, weight and etc. But unless we are interested in this information only for practical purposes, we are likely to feel a little disappointed, as we thought we had grasped the feather of the eagle but not its soul. True, we have

learned many facts about the eagle, but we have missed somehow its lonely majesty, its power, and the wild grandeur of its surroundings that would make the eagle something living rather than a mere museum specimen. For the living eagle we must turn to literature

### **The Eagle**

*by Alfred, Lord Tennyson (1809-1892)*

He clasps the crag with crooked hands;  
Close to the sun in lonely lands,  
Ring'd with the azure world, he stands.

The wrinkled sea beneath him crawls;  
He watches from his mountain walls,  
And like a thunderbolt he falls.

#### QUESTIONS

1. What is peculiarly effective about the expressions “crooked hands,” “Close to the sun,” “Ringed with the azure world,” “wrinkled,” “crawls,” and “like a thunderbolt”?
2. Notice the formal pattern of the poem, particularly the contrast of “he stands” in the first stanza and “he falls” in the second. Is there any other contrast between the two stanzas?

When “The Eagle” has been read well, readers will feel that they have enjoyed a significant experience and understand eagles better, though in a different way, than they did from the encyclopedia article alone. While the article **analyzes** our experience of eagles, the poem in some sense **synthesizes** such an experience. Indeed, we may say the two approaches to experience—the scientific and the literary—complement each other. And we may contend that the kind of understanding we get from the second is at least as valuable as the kind we get from the first.

Literature, then, exists to communicate **significant experience**—significant because it is concentrated and organized. Its function is not to tell us about experience but to allow us imaginatively to **participate** in it. It is a means of allowing us, through the imagination, to live more fully, more deeply, more richly, and with greater awareness. It can do this in two ways: by **broadening** our experience—that is, by making us acquainted with a range of experience with which, in the ordinary course of events, we might have no contact— or by **deepening** our experience—that is, by making us feel more poignantly and more understandingly the everyday experiences all of us have. It enlarges our perspectives and breaks down some of the limits we may feel.

We can avoid two limiting approaches to poetry if we keep this conception of literature firmly in mind. The first approach always looks for a lesson or a bit of moral instruction. The second expects to find poetry always beautiful. Let us consider one of the songs from Shakespeare’s *Love’s Labor’s Lost* (5.2).

## Winter

*William Shakespeare (1564—1616)*

When icicles hang by the wall,  
And Dick the shepherd blows his nail,  
And Tom bears logs into the hall,  
And milk comes frozen home in pail,  
When blood is nipped and ways be foul,  
Then nightly sings the staring owl,  
“Tu-whit, tu-who!”

A merry note,  
While greasy Joan doth keel the pot.

When all aloud the wind doth blow,  
And coughing drowns the parson’s saw,  
And birds sit brooding in the snow,  
And Marian’s nose looks red and raw,  
When roasted crabs hiss in the bowl,  
Then nightly sings the staring owl,  
“Tu.whit, tu-who!”

A merry note,  
While greasy Joan doth keel the pot.

### QUESTIONS

1. Vocabulary: saw (11), brooding (12).
2. Is the owl’s cry really a “merry note? How are this adjective and the verb “sings” employed?
3. In what way does the owl’s cry contrast with the other details of the poem?

In this poem Shakespeare communicates the quality of winter life around a sixteenth-century English country house. But he does not do so by telling us flatly that winter in such surroundings is cold and in many respects unpleasant, though with some pleasant features too (the adjectives cold, unpleasant, and pleasant are not even used in the poem). Instead, he provides a series of concrete homely details that suggest these qualities and enable us, imaginatively, to experience this winter life ourselves. The shepherd blows on his fingernails to warm his hands; the milk freezes in the pail between the cowshed and the kitchen; the cook is slovenly and unclean, “greasy” either from spattered cooking fat or from her own sweat as she leans over the hot fire; the roads are muddy; the folk listening to the parson have colds; the birds “sit brooding in the snow”; and the servant girl’s nose is raw from cold. But pleasant things are in prospect. Tom is bringing in logs for the fire, the hot cider or ale is ready for drinking, and the soup or stew will soon be ready. In contrast to all these familiar details of country life is the mournful and eerie note of the owl.

Obviously the poem contains no moral. If we limit ourselves to looking in poetry for some lesson, message, or noble truth about life, we are bound to be disappointed. This limited approach sees poetry as a kind of sugarcoated pill—a wholesome truth or lesson made palatable by being put into pretty words. What this narrow approach really wants is a sermon—not a poem, but something inspirational. Yet “Winter,” which has appealed to readers for more than four centuries, is not inspirational and contains no moral preachment.

Neither is the poem “Winter” beautiful. Though it is appealing in its way and contains elements of beauty, there is little that is really beautiful in red, raw noses, coughing in chapel, nipped blood, foul roads, and greasy cooks. Yet the second limiting approach may lead us to feel that poetry deals exclusively with beauty—with sunsets, flowers, butterflies, love, God—and that the one appropriate response to any poem is, after a moment of awed silence, “Isn’t that beautiful!” But this narrow approach excludes a large proportion of poetry. The function of poetry is sometimes to be ugly rather than beautiful. And poetry may deal with common colds and greasy cooks as legitimately as with sunsets and flowers.

Poetry takes all life as its province. Its primary concern is not with beauty, not with philosophical truth, not with persuasion, but with **experience**. Beauty and philosophical truth are aspects of experience, and the poet is often engaged with them. But poetry as a whole is concerned with all kinds of experience—beautiful or ugly, strange or common, noble or ignoble, actual or imaginary. Paradoxically, an artist can transform even the most unpleasant or painful experiences into works of great beauty and emotional power. Encountered in real life, pain and death are not pleasurable for most people; but we might read and reread poems about these subjects because of their ability to enlighten and move us. A real-life experience that makes us cry is usually an unhappy one; but if we cry while reading a great novel or poem it is because we are deeply moved, our humanity affirmed. Similarly, we do not ordinarily like to be frightened in real life, but we sometimes seek out books or movies that will terrify us. Works of art focus and organize experiences of all kinds, conveying the broad spectrum of human life and evoking a full range of emotional and intellectual responses. Even the most tragic literature, through its artistry of language, can help us to see and feel the significance of life, appealing to our essential humanity in a way that can be intensely pleasurable and affirming.

There is no sharp distinction between poetry and other forms of imaginative literature. Although some beginning readers may believe that poetry can be recognized by the arrangement of its lines on the page or by its use of rhyme and meter, such superficial signs are of little worth. The *Book of Job* in the Bible and Melville’s *Moby Dick* are highly poetical, but the familiar verse that begins “Thirty days hath September, / April, June, and November...” is not. The difference between poetry and other literature is only one of degree. **Poetry is the most condensed and concentrated form of literature.** It is language whose individual lines, either because of their own brilliance or because they focus so powerfully on what has gone before, have a higher voltage than most language. It is language that grows frequently incandescent, giving off both light and heat.

Ultimately, therefore, poetry can be recognized only by the response made to it by a practiced reader, someone who has acquired some sensitivity to poetry. But

there is a catch here. We are not all equally experienced readers. To some readers, poetry may often seem dull and boring, a fancy way of writing something that could be said more simply. So might a color-blind person deny that there is such a thing as color.

The act of communication involved in reading poetry is like the act of communication involved in receiving a message by radio. Two devices are required: a transmitting station and a receiving set. The completeness of the communication depends on both the power and clarity of the transmitter and the sensitivity and tuning of the receiver. When a person reads a poem and no experience is received, either the poem is not a good poem or the reader is not properly tuned. With new poetry, we cannot always be sure which is at fault. With older poetry, if it has acquired critical acceptance—has been enjoyed by generations of good readers—we may assume that the receiving set is at fault. Fortunately, the fault is not irremediable. Though we cannot all become expert readers, we can become good enough to find both pleasure and value in much good poetry, or we can increase the amount of pleasure we already find in poetry and the number of kinds of poetry in which we find it. The purpose of this book is to help you increase your sensitivity and range as a receiving set.

Poetry, finally, is a kind of **multidimensional language**. Ordinary language—the kind that we use to communicate information—is one-dimensional. It is directed at only part of the listener, the understanding. Its one dimension is intellectual. Poetry, which is language used to communicate experience, has at least four dimensions. If it is to communicate experience, it must be directed at the whole person, not just at your understanding. It must involve not only your **intelligence** but also your **senses, emotions, and imagination**. To the intellectual dimension, poetry adds a sensuous dimension, an emotional dimension, and an imaginative dimension.

Poetry achieves its extra dimensions—its greater pressure per word and its greater tension per poem—by drawing more fully and more consistently than does ordinary language on a number of language resources, none of which is peculiar to poetry. These various resources form the subjects of a number of the following chapters. Among them are connotation, imagery, metaphor, symbol, paradox, irony; allusion, sound repetition, rhythm, and pattern. Using these resources and the materials of life, the poet shapes and makes a poem. Successful poetry is never effusive language. If it is to come alive it must be as cunningly put together and as efficiently organized as a tree. It must be an organism whose every part serves a useful purpose and cooperates with every other part to preserve and express the life that is within it.

### **The Two Ravens**

*Anonymous (15<sup>th</sup> century)*

As I was walking all alone,  
I heard two ravens making a moan;  
One said to the other,  
"Where shall we go and dine today?"

"In behind that old turf wall,  
I sense there lies a newly slain knight;  
And nobody knows that he lies there,  
But his hawk, his hound and his lady fair."

"His hound is to the hunting gone,  
His hawk to fetch the wild-fowl home,  
His lady's has taken another mate,  
So we may make our dinner sweet."

"You will sit on his white neck-bone,  
And I'll peck out his pretty blue eyes;  
With one lock of his golden hair  
We'll thatch our nest when it grows bare."

"Many a one for him is moaning,  
But nobody will know where he is gone;  
Over his white bones, when they are bare,  
The wind will blow for evermore."

#### QUESTIONS

1. This is a modernized version of a folk ballad, a narrative poem composed before Gutenberg's invention of moveable type (c. 1436). Such ballads were meant to be recited or sung, and they were composed in simple stanzaic form (usually in abcb quatrains or in rhyming couplets: aa bb cc and so forth) to make them easier to remember. They often concerned events of the day and served therefore as primitive newspapers. They usually contained a good deal of dialogue and frequently had refrains that listeners could sing in unison. This poem tells an implied story of false love, murder, and disloyalty. What purpose does the ballad serve by having the story told from the point of view of the two scavenging birds? How do they emphasize the atmosphere of the poem?
2. The poem presents few details about the knight, his lady, or his followers. Is there enough information for the reader (or listener) to form a plausible theory about what has happened? How does the lady know that the knight lies dead behind the dike? What is implied by the facts that "Many a one for him makes moan" but no one knows what has become of him except his hawk, his hound, and his lady? That he is "new-slain" but his lady has already "taken another mate"? Does the poem lose or gain in effect by not being entirely clear?

## Chapter Two – Reading the Poem

The primary purpose of this unit is to develop your ability to understand and appreciate poetry. Here are some preliminary suggestions:

**1. Read a poem more than once.** A good poem will no more yield its full meaning on a single reading than will a Beethoven symphony on a single hearing. Two readings may be necessary simply to let you get your bearings. And if the poem is a work of art, it will repay repeated and prolonged examination. One does not listen to a good piece of music once and forget it; one does not look at a good painting once and throw it away. A poem is not like a newspaper, to be hastily read and cast into the wastebasket. It is to be hung on the wall of one's mind.

**2. Keep a dictionary by you and use it.** It is futile to try to understand poetry without troubling to learn the meanings of the words of which it is composed. You might as well attempt to play tennis without a ball. One of your primary purposes while in high school and college should be to build a good vocabulary, and the study of poetry gives you an excellent opportunity. A few other reference books also will be invaluable. Particularly desirable are a good book on mythology (like Edith Hamilton's *Mythology*) and a Bible.

**3. Read so as to hear the sounds of the words in your mind.** Poetry is written to be heard: Its meanings are conveyed through sound as well as through print. Every word is therefore important. The best way to read a poem is just the opposite of the best way to read a newspaper. One reads a newspaper as rapidly as possible; one should read a poem as slowly as possible. When you cannot read a poem aloud, lip read it: Form the words with your tongue and mouth even though you do not utter them. With ordinary reading material, lip-reading is a bad habit; with poetry, it is a good habit.

**4. Always pay careful attention to what the poem is saying.** Though you should be conscious of the sounds of the poem, you should never be so exclusively conscious of them that you pay no attention to what the poem means. For some readers, reading a poem is like getting on board a rhythmical roller coaster. The car starts, and off they go, up and down, paying no attention to the landscape flashing past them, arriving at the end of the poem breathless, with no idea of what it has been about. This is the wrong way to read a poem. One should make the utmost effort to follow the thought continuously and to grasp the full implications and suggestions. Because a poem says so much, several readings may be necessary, but on your very first reading you should determine the subjects of the verbs and the antecedents of the pronouns.

**5. Practice reading the poems aloud.** When you find one you especially like, make friends listen to it. Try to read it to them in such a way that they will like it too. (a) Read it affectionately, but not affectedly. The two extremes oral readers often fall into are equally deadly. One is to read as if one were reading a tax report on a railroad timetable, unexpressively, in a monotone. The other is to elocute, with artificial flourishes and vocal histrionics. It is not necessary to put emotion into reading a poem. The emotion is already there. It only wants a fair chance to get out. It will express itself if the poem is read naturally and sensitively. (b) Of the two extremes, reading too fast offers the greater danger than reading too slow. Read slowly enough that each word is clear and distinct and that the meaning has time to sink in. Remember that your friends do not have the advantage, as you do, of having the text before them. Your ordinary rate of reading will probably be too fast. (c) Read the poem so that the rhythmical pattern is felt but not exaggerated. Remember that poetry, with few exceptions, is written in sentences, just as prose



is, and that punctuation is a signal as to how it should be read. Give all grammatical pauses their full due. Do not distort the natural pronunciation of words or normal accentuation of the sentence to fit into what you have decided is its metrical pattern. One of the worst ways to read a poem is to read it ta-dum ta-dum ta-dum with an exaggerated emphasis on every other syllable. On the other hand, it should not be read as if it were prose. An important test of your reading will be how you handle the end of a line that lacks line-ending punctuation. A frequent mistake of the beginning reader is to treat each line as if it were a complete thought, whether grammatically complete or not, and to drop the voice at the end of it. A frequent mistake of the sophisticated reader is to take a running start upon approaching the end of a line and fly over it as if it were not there. The line is a rhythmical unit, and its end should be observed whether there is punctuation or not. If there is no punctuation, you ordinarily should observe the end of the line by the slightest of pauses or by holding on to the last word in the line just a little longer than usual, without dropping your voice. In line 12 of the following poem, you should hold on to the word “although” longer than if it occurred elsewhere in the line. But do not lower your voice on it: it is part of the clause that follows in the next stanza.

### **The Man He Killed**

*By Thomas Hardy (1840-1928)*

Had he and I but met  
    By some old ancient inn,  
We should have sat us down to wet  
    Right many a nipperkin!  
    But ranged as infantry,  
    And staring face to face,  
I shot at him and 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.

One starting point for understanding a poem at the simplest level, and for clearing up misunderstanding, is to paraphrase its content or part of its content. To **paraphrase** a poem means to restate it in different language, so as to make its prose sense as plain as possible. The paraphrase may be longer or shorter than the poem, but it should contain all the ideas in the poem in such a way as to make them

clear to a puzzled reader, and to make the central idea, or **theme**, of the poem more accessible.

#### QUESTIONS

1. In informational prose the repetition of a word like “because” (9-10) would be an error. What purpose does the repetition serve here? Why does the speaker repeat to himself his “clear” reason for killing a man (10-11)? The word “although” (12) gets more emphasis than it ordinarily would because it comes not only at the end of a line but at the end of a stanza. What purpose does this emphasis serve? Can the redundancy of “old ancient” (2) be poetically justified?
2. Someone has defined poetry as “the expression of elevated thought in elevated language.” Comment on the adequacy of this definition in the light of Hardy’s poem.

#### **A Study of Reading Habits**

*by Philip Larkin (1922-1985)*

When getting my nose in a book  
Cured most things short of school,  
It was worth ruining my eyes  
To know I could still keep cool,  
And deal out the old right hook  
To dirty dogs twice my size.

Later, with inch-thick specs,  
Evil was just my lark:  
Me and my coat and fangs  
Had ripping times in the dark.  
The women I clubbed with sex!  
I broke them up like meringues.

Don't read much now: the dude  
Who lets the girl down before  
The hero arrives, the chap  
Who's yellow and keeps the store  
Seem far too familiar. Get stewed:  
Books are a load of crap.

Larkin’s poem (above) may be paraphrased as follows:

There was a time when reading was one way I could avoid almost all my troubles—except for school. It seemed worth the danger of ruining my eyes to read stories in which I could imagine myself maintaining my poise in the face of threats and having the boxing skills and experience needed to defeat bullies who were twice as big as I.

Later, already having to wear thick glasses because my eyesight had become so poor, I found my delight in stories of sex and evil: imaging myself with Dracula cloak and fangs, I relished vicious nocturnal adventures. I fancied myself a criminal who beat and tortured his vulnerable victims, leaving them broken and destroyed!

I don't read much anymore, because now I can identify myself only with the flawed secondary characters, such as the flashy dresser who wins the heroine's confidence and then betrays her in a moment of crisis before the cowboy hero comes to her rescue, or the cowardly storekeeper who cringes behind the counter at the first sight of danger. Getting drunk is better than reading - books are full of useless lies.

Notice that in the paraphrase, figurative language gives way to literal language; similes replace metaphors and normal word order supplants inverted syntax. But a paraphrase retains the speaker's use of first, second, and third person, and the tense of verbs. Though it is neither necessary nor possible to avoid using some of the words found in the original, a paraphrase should strive for plain, direct diction. And since a paraphrase is prose, it does not maintain the length and position of poetic lines.

A paraphrase is useful only if you understand that it is the barest, most inadequate approximation of what the poem really "says" and is no more equivalent to the poem than a corpse is to a person. After you have paraphrased a poem, you should try to see how far short of the poem it falls, and why.

In what respects does Larkin's poem say more, and say it more memorably, than the paraphrase? Does the phrase "full of useless lies" capture the impact of "a load of crap"? Furthermore, a paraphrase may fall short of revealing the theme of the poem. "A Study of Reading Habits" represents a man summing up his reading experience and evaluating it—but in turn the poem itself evaluates him and his defects. A statement of the theme might be like this:

A person who turns to books as the source of self-gratifying fantasies may, in the course of time, discover that escapist reading no longer protects him from his awareness of his own reality, and he may out of habit have to find other, more potent, and perhaps more self-destructive means of escaping.

### **Who Is the Speaker and What Is the Occasion?**

To aid us in the understanding of a poem, we may ask ourselves a number of questions about it. Two of the most important are *Who is the speaker?* and *What is the occasion?* A cardinal error of some readers is to assume that a speaker who uses the first person pronouns (*I, my, mine, me*) is always the poet. A less risky course would be to assume that the speaker is someone other than the poet. Poems, like short stories, novels, and plays, belong to the world of fiction, an imaginatively conceived world that at its best is "truer" than the factually "real" world that it reflects. When poets put themselves or their thoughts into a poem, they present a version of themselves; that is, they present a person who in many ways is like themselves but who, consciously or unconsciously, is shaped to fit the needs of the

poem. We must be careful, therefore, about identifying anything in a poem with the biography of the poet.

**Terence, this is stupid stuff**

By A.E. Houseman (1859-1936)

"Terence, this is stupid stuff:  
You eat your victuals fast enough;  
There can't be much amiss, 'tis clear,  
To see the rate you drink your beer.  
But oh, good Lord, the verse you make,  
It gives a chap the belly-ache.  
The cow, the old cow, she is dead;  
It sleeps well, the horned head:  
We poor lads, 'tis our turn now  
To hear such tunes as killed the cow.  
Pretty friendship 'tis to rhyme  
Your friends to death before their time  
Moping melancholy mad:  
Come, pipe a tune to dance to, lad."

Why, if 'tis dancing you would be  
There's brisker pipes than poetry.  
Say, for what were hop-yards meant,  
Or why was Burton built on Trent?  
Oh, many a peer of England brews  
Livelier liquor than the Muse,  
And malt does more than Milton can  
To justify God's ways to man.  
Ale, man, ale's the stuff to drink  
For fellows whom it hurts to think:  
Look into the pewter pot  
To see the world as the world's not.  
And faith, 'tis pleasant till 'tis past:  
The mischief is that 'twill not last.  
Oh I have been to Ludlow fair  
And left my necktie god knows where,  
And carried half-way home, or near,  
Pints and quarts of Ludlow beer:  
Then the world seemed none so bad,  
And I myself a sterling lad;  
And down in lovely muck I've lain,  
Happy till I woke again.  
Then I saw the morning sky:  
Heigho, the tale was all a lie;  
The world, it was the old world yet,  
I was I, my things were wet,  
And nothing now remained to do  
But begin the game anew.

Therefore, since the world has still  
Much good, but much less good than ill,

And while the sun and moon endure  
Luck's a chance, but trouble's sure,  
I'd face it as a wise man would,  
And train for ill and not for good.  
'Tis true, the stuff I bring for sale  
Is not so brisk a brew as ale:  
Out of a stem that scored the hand  
I wrung it in a weary land.  
But take it: if the smack is sour,  
The better for the embittered hour;  
It should do good to heart and head  
When your soul is in my soul's stead;  
And I will friend you, if I may,  
In the dark and cloudy day.

There was a king reigned in the East:  
There, when kings will sit to feast,  
They get their fill before they think  
With poisoned meat and poisoned drink.  
He gathered all that springs to birth  
From the many-venomed earth;  
First a little, thence to more,  
He sampled all her killing store;  
And easy, smiling, seasoned sound,  
Sate the king when healths went round.  
They put arsenic in his meat  
And stared aghast to watch him eat;  
They poured strychnine in his cup  
And shook to see him drink it up:  
They shook, they stared as white's their shirt:  
Them it was their poison hurt  
- I tell the tale that I heard told.  
Mithridates, he died old.

However, caution is not prohibition. Sometimes events or ideas in a poem will help us to understand the poet's life. More importantly for us, knowledge of the poet's life may help us understand a poem. There can be little doubt, when all the evidence is in, that "Terence, this is stupid stuff" (above) is Houseman's defense of the kind of poetry he writes, and that the six lines in which Terence sums up his beliefs about the function of poetry are Houseman's own beliefs. On the other hand, it would be folly to suppose that Houseman ever got drunk at Ludlow fair and once lay down in "lovely muck" and slept all night in a roadside ditch.

We may well think of every poem, therefore, as being to some degree *dramatic* – that is, the utterance of a fictional character rather than of the person who wrote the poem. Many poems are expressly dramatic. The fact that Philip Larkin was a poet and novelist, and for many years the chief administrator of a university library, underscores the wide gap between the author and speaker of "A Study of Reading Habits."

In "The Man He Killed" (above) the speaker is a soldier; the occasion is his having been in battle and killed a man – obviously for the first time in his life. We

can tell a good deal about him. He is not a career soldier: he enlisted only because he was out of work. He is a workingman: he speaks a simple and colloquial language. He is a friendly, kindly sort who enjoys a neighborly drink of ale in a bar and will gladly lend a friend a half a crown when he has it. He has known what it is to be poor. In any other circumstance he would have been horrified at taking a human life. It gives him pause even now. He is trying to figure it out. But he is not a deep thinker and thinks he has supplied a reason when he only has supplied a name: "I killed the man...because he was my foe." The critical question of course is why was the man his "foe." Even the speaker is left unsatisfied by his answer though he is not analytical enough to know what is wrong with it. Obviously this poem is expressly dramatic. We need know nothing about Thomas Hardy's life (he was never a soldier and never killed a man) to realize that the poem is dramatic. The internal evidence of the poem tells us so.

### **What Is the Central Purpose of the Poem?**

A third important question that we should ask ourselves upon reading any poem is *What is the central purpose of the poem?* Our only reliable evidence of the poem's purpose is the poem itself. The purpose may be to tell a story, to reveal human character, to impart a vivid impression of a scene, to express a mood or emotion, or to convey vividly some idea or attitude. Whatever the purpose is, we must determine it for ourselves and define it mentally as precisely as possible. Only by relating the various details in the poem to the central purpose or theme can we fully understand their function and meaning. Only then can we begin to assess the value of the poem and determine whether it is a good one or a poor one. In "The Man He Killed" the central purpose is quite clear: It is to make us realize more keenly the irrationality of war. The puzzlement of the speaker may be our puzzlement. But even if we are able to give a more sophisticated answer than his as to why men killed each other we ought still to have a greater awareness, after reading the poem, of the fundamental irrationality in war that makes men kill who have no grudge against one another and who might under different circumstances show each other considerable kindness.

### **By What Means Is That Purpose Achieved?**

Once we have answered the question *What is the central purpose of the poem?* we can consider another question, equally important to full understanding: *By what means is that purpose achieved?* It is important to distinguish means from ends. The question is partially answered by describing the poem's dramatic framework, if it has any. The complete answer requires an accounting of various resources of communication that we will discuss in the rest of this unit.

The most important preliminary advice we can give for reading poetry is to maintain always, while reading it, the utmost mental alertness. The most harmful idea one can get about poetry is that its purpose is to soothe and relax and that the best place to read it is lying in a hammock with a cool drink while low music plays in the background. You *can* read poetry lying in a hammock, but only if you refuse to put your mind in the same attitude as your body. Its purpose is not to soothe and

relax but to arouse and awake, to shock us into life, to make us more alive. Poetry is not a substitute for a sedative.

An analogy can be drawn between reading poetry and playing tennis. Both offer great enjoyment if the game is played hard. Good tennis players must be constantly on the tips of their toes, concentrating on their opponent's every move. They must be ready for a drive to the right or left, a lob overhead, or a drop shot barely over the net. They must be ready for topspin or underspin, a ball that bounces crazily to the left or right. They must jump for the high ones and run for the far ones. And they will enjoy the game almost exactly in proportion to the effort they put into it. The same is true of reading poetry. Great enjoyment is there, but this enjoyment demands a mental effort equivalent to the physical effort one puts into tennis.

The reader of poetry has one advantage over the tennis player: Poets are not trying to win matches. They may expect the reader to stretch for their shots, but they *want* the reader to return them.

### **General Questions That Will Help You Read, Understand, and Appreciate Poetry**

1. Who is the speaker? What kind of person is the speaker?
2. Is there an identifiable audience for the speaker? What can you know about this audience?
3. What is the occasion?
4. What is the setting in time (hour, season, century, etc.)?
5. What is the setting in place (indoors or out, city or country, land or sea, region, country, etc.)?
6. What is the central purpose of the poem?
7. What is the poem about? State the central idea or theme of the poem in a single sentence.
8. What is the tone of the poem? How is it achieved?
9. Outline the poem so as to show its structure and development. What kind of poem is it (ode, sonnet, dramatic monologue, lyric poem, etc.)? Why is this type of poem an appropriate means to communicate the author's theme?
10. Summarize the events of the poem.
11. Paraphrase the poem.
12. Discuss the diction (the word choice) of the poem. Point out words that are particularly well chosen and explain why.
13. Discuss the imagery of the poem. What kinds of imagery are used? Is there any structure to the imagery?
14. Point out and explain any symbols. If the poem is allegorical, explain the allegory.
15. Point out examples of metaphor, simile, conceit, personification, metonymy, or any other literary device and explain their significance and/or appropriateness.
16. Point out and explain any examples of paradox, overstatement, understatement, and/or irony. What is their function? Why are they used?
17. Point out and explain any allusions. What is their function? Why are they used?

18. Point out significant examples of sound repetition and explain their function.
19. How is the poem constructed? What are its units of organization (quatrains, paragraphs, couplets, etc.)? How are these units linked together (continued metaphor, pro and con, linked sound patterns, logical syllogism, train of thought, etc.)?
20. What is the meter of the poem? Copy the poem and mark each syllable as accented (stressed) or unaccented (unstressed), divide the lines into feet (two syllable units). Then, identify the pattern of accented and unaccented syllables and the pattern of the rhymes, and note any significant variations from those patterns.
21. Read the poem out loud. Determine if any sounds in the poem relate to topics discussed within the poem (for example, short, choppy syllables with repeated "ee" sounds could relate to a chirping bird discussed in the poem).
22. State the form or pattern of the poem (line length, stanza length, number of stanzas, etc.)

**I wandered lonely as a cloud**

*William Wordsworth (1770-1850)*

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.

Continuous as the stars that shine  
 And twinkle on the milky way,  
 They stretched in never-ending line  
 Along the margin of a bay:  
 Ten thousand saw I at a glance,  
 Tossing their heads in sprightly dance.

The waves beside them danced; but they  
 Out-did the sparkling waves in glee:  
 A poet could not but be gay,  
 In such a jocund company:  
 I gazed--and gazed--but little thought  
 What wealth the show to me had brought:

For oft, when on my couch I lie  
 In vacant or in pensive mood,  
 They flash upon that inward eye  
 Which is the bliss of solitude;  
 And then my heart with pleasure fills,  
 And dances with the daffodils.

QUESTIONS



1. What different emotional suggestions do the following pairs of words exhibit: lonely (1) and solitude (22), crowd (3) and host (4). We're talking about connotation here.
2. What is the speaker's mood in line 1-2? Where is that mood echoed later in the poem? What was his changed mood when he saw the daffodils? Is this identical to his mood when he later remembers them? Explain.

### **The Solitary Reaper**

*By William Wordsworth (1770-1850)*

BEHOLD her, single in the field,  
Yon solitary Highland Lass!  
Reaping and singing by herself;  
Stop here, or gently pass!  
Alone she cuts and binds the grain,  
And sings a melancholy strain;  
O listen! for the Vale profound  
Is overflowing with the sound.

No Nightingale did ever chaunt  
More welcome notes to weary bands  
Of travellers in some shady haunt,  
Among Arabian sands:  
A voice so thrilling ne'er was heard  
In spring-time from the Cuckoo-bird,  
Breaking the silence of the seas  
Among the farthest Hebrides.

Will no one tell me what she sings?--  
Perhaps the plaintive numbers flow  
For old, unhappy, far-off things,  
And battles long ago:  
Or is it some more humble lay,  
Familiar matter of to-day?  
Some natural sorrow, loss, or pain,  
That has been, and may be again?

Whate'er the theme, the Maiden sang  
As if her song could have no ending;  
I saw her singing at her work,  
And o'er the sickle bending;--  
I listened, motionless and still;  
And, as I mounted up the hill  
The music in my heart I bore,  
Long after it was heard no more.

#### QUESTIONS

1. In how many ways is the girl's song like a birdsong? Name them.
2. Why does the poet place the birds of stanza 2 in Arabia and the Hebrides rather than in Scotland or England?
3. In what way does the suggested range of subject matter for the reaper's song (stanza 3) parallel the geographic references in stanza 2?

## Chapter Three – Denotation and Connotation

A primary distinction between the practical use of language and the literary use is that in literature, especially in poetry, a *fuller* use is made of individual words. To understand this, we need to examine the composition of a word.

The average word has three component parts: sound, denotation, and connotation. It begins as a combination of tones and noises, uttered by the lips, tongue and throat, for which the written word is a notation. But it differs from a musical tone or a noise in that it has meaning attached to it. The basic part of its meaning is its **denotation** or denotations: that is, the dictionary meaning or meanings of the word.

Beyond its denotations, a word also may have **connotations**. The connotations are what it suggests beyond what it expresses: its overtones of meaning. It acquires these connotations from its past history and associations, from the way and the circumstances in which it has been used. The word *home*, for instance, by denotation, means only a place where one lives, but by connotation it suggests security, love, comfort, and family. The words *childlike* and *childish* both mean “characteristic of a child,” but *childlike* suggests meekness, innocence, and wide-eyed wonder, while *childish* suggests pettiness, willfulness, and temper tantrums. It we list the names of different coins—nickel, peso, lira, shilling, sen, doubloon—the word doubloon, to four out of five readers, immediately will suggest pirates, though a dictionary definition includes nothing about pirates. Pirates are part of its connotation.

Connotation is very important in poetry, for it is one of the means by which the poet can concentrate or enrich meaning—say more in fewer words. Consider, for instance, the following short poem:

### **There is no frigate like a book**

*Emily Dickinson* (1830-1886)

There is no frigate like a book  
To take us lands away.  
Nor any coursers like a page  
Of prancing poetry  
This traverse may the poorest take  
Without oppress of toil.  
How frugal is the chariot  
That bears the human soul!

In this poem Emily Dickinson is considering the power of a book or of poetry to carry us away, to take us from our immediate surroundings into a world of the imagination. To do this she has compared literature to various means of transportation: a boat, a team of horses, a wheeled land vehicle.

But she has been careful to choose kinds of transportation and names for them that have romantic connotations. "Frigate" suggests exploration and adventure; "coursers," beauty, spirit, and speed; "chariot," speed and the ability to go through the air as well as on land. (Compare "Swing Low, Sweet Chariot" and the myth of Phaethon, who tried to drive the chariot of Apollo, and the famous painting of Aurora with her horses, once hung in almost every school.) How much of the meaning of the poem comes from this selection of vehicles and words is apparent if we try to substitute *steamship* for "frigate," *horses* for "coursers," and *streetcar* for "chariot."

Just as a word has a variety of connotations, so may it have more than one denotation. If we look up the word *spring* in the dictionary, for instance, we will find that it has between 25 and 30 distinguishable meanings: It may mean (1) a pounce or leap, (2) a season of the year, (3) a natural source of water, (4) a coiled elastic wire, and so forth. This variety of denotation, complicated by additional tones of connotation, makes language confusing and difficult to use. Any person using words must be careful to define precisely by context the meaning that is desired. But the difference between the writer using language to communicate information and the poet is this: the practical writer will always attempt to confine words to one meaning at a time; the poet will often take advantage of the fact that the word has more than one meaning by using it to mean more than one thing at a time. This is called the *double-entendre* (double meaning). Thus when Edith Sitwell in one of her poems writes, "This is the time of the wild spring and the mating of the tigers," she uses the word *spring* to denote both a season of the year and a sudden leap (and she uses *tigers* rather than *lambs* or *birds* because it has a connotation of fierceness and wildness that the other two lack).

**Sonnet 138: When my love swears that she is made of truth**  
By William Shakespeare (1564-1616)

When my love swears that she is made of truth  
I do believe her, though I know she lies,  
That she might think me some untutored youth,  
Unlearnèd in the world's false subtleties.  
Thus vainly thinking that she thinks me young,  
Although she knows my days are past the best,  
Simply I credit her false-speaking tongue;  
On both sides thus is simple truth suppressed.  
But wherefore says she not she is unjust?  
And wherefore say not I that I am old?  
O, love's best habit is in seeming trust,  
And age in love, loves not to have years told.  
Therefore I lie with her, and she with me,  
And in our faults by lies we flattered be.

## QUESTIONS

1. How old is the speaker in the poem? How old is his beloved? What is the nature of their relationship?
2. How is the contradiction in line 2 to be resolved? How is the one in lines 5-6 to be resolved? Who is lying to whom?
3. How do “simply” (7) and “simple” (8) differ in meaning? The words “vainly” (5), “habit” (11), “told” (12), and “lie” (13) all have double denotative meanings. What are they?

A frequent misconception of the poetic language is that poets seek always the most beautiful or noble-sounding words. What they really seek are the most **meaningful** words, and these vary from one context to another. Language has many levels and varieties, and poets may choose from all of them. Their words may be grandiose or humble, fanciful or matter-of-fact, romantic or realistic, archaic or modern, technical or everyday, monosyllabic or polysyllabic. Usually a poem will be pitched pretty much in one key: the words in Dickinson’s “There is no frigate like a book” and those in Thomas Hardy’s “The Man He Killed” are chosen from quite different areas of language, but both poets have chosen the words most meaningful for their own poetic context. Sometimes a poet may import a word from one level or area of language into a poem composed mostly of words from a different level or area. If this is done clumsily, the result will be incongruous and sloppy; if it is done skillfully, the result will be a shock of surprise and an increment of meaning for the reader. In fact, the many varieties of language open to poets provide their richest resource. Their task is one of constant exploration and discovery. They search always for the secret affinities of words that allow them to be brought together with soft explosions of meaning.

### **The Naked and the Nude**

*by Robert Graves (1895-1985)*

For me, the naked and the nude  
(By lexicographers construed  
As synonyms that should express  
The same deficiency of dress  
Or shelter) stand as wide apart  
As love from lies, or truth from art.

Lovers without reproach will gaze  
On bodies naked and ablaze;  
The Hippocratic eye will see  
In nakedness, anatomy;  
And naked shines the Goddess when  
She mounts her lion among men.

The nude are bold, the nude are sly  
To hold each treasonable eye.  
While draping by a showman's trick  
Their dishabille in rhetoric,  
They grin a mock-religious grin  
Of scorn at those of naked skin.

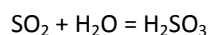
The naked, therefore, who compete  
Against the nude may know defeat;  
Yet when they both together tread  
The briary pastures of the dead,  
By Gorgons with long whips pursued,  
How naked go the sometime nude!

#### QUESTIONS

1. Explain why the poet's words are better than these hypothetical substitutes: *brave* for "bold" (13), *clever* for "sly" (13), *clothing* for "draping" (15), *smile* for "grin" (17).
2. What, for the poet, is the different connotation between "naked" and "nude"? Try to explain reasons for the difference. If your own sense of the two words differs from that of Graves, state the difference and give reasons to support your sense of them.

People using language only to convey information are usually indifferent to the sound of the words and are hampered by their connotations and multiple denotations. They would rather confine each word to a single, exact meaning. They use, one might say, a fraction of the word and throw away the rest. Poets, on the other hand, use as much of the word as possible. They are interested in connotation and use it to enrich and convey meaning. And they may rely on more than one denotation.

The purest form of practical language is scientific language. Scientists need precise language to convey information precisely. The existence of multiple denotations and various overtones of meaning hinders them in accomplishing their purpose. Their ideal language would be a language with a one-to-one correspondence between word and meaning; that is, every word would have one meaning only, and for every meaning there would be only one word. Since ordinary language does not fulfill these conditions, scientists have invented languages that do. A statement in one of these languages may look like this:



In such a statement the symbols are entirely unambiguous; they have been stripped of all connotations and of all denotations but one. The word *sulfurous*, if it occurred in poetry, might have all kinds of connotations: fire,

smoke, brimstone, hell, damnation. But H<sub>2</sub>SO<sub>3</sub> means one thing only; sulfurous acid.

The **ambiguity** and **multiplicity** of meanings possessed by words are an obstacle to the scientist but a resource to the poet. Where the scientist wants singleness of meaning, the poet wants richness of meaning. Where the scientist requires and has invented a strictly one-dimensional language in which every word is confined to one denotation, the poet needs a multi-dimensional language and creates it partly by using a multi-dimensional vocabulary, in which the dimensions of connotation and sound are added to the dimension of denotation.

The poet, we may say, plays a many-stringed instrument and sounds more than one note at a time.

The first task in reading poetry, therefore, as in reading any kind of literature, is to develop a sense of language, a feeling for words. One needs to become acquainted with their shape, their color, and their flavor. There are two ways of doing this: extensive use of the dictionary and, more effectively, extensive reading.

### **The world is too much with us**

*by William Wordsworth (1770-1850)*

The world is too much with us; late and soon,  
Getting and spending, we lay waste our powers;  
Little we see in Nature that is ours;  
We have given our hearts away, a sordid boon!  
This Sea that bares her bosom to the moon,  
The winds that will be howling at all hours,  
And are up-gathered now like sleeping flowers,  
For this, for everything, we are out of tune;  
It moves us not.--Great God! I'd rather be  
A Pagan suckled in a creed outworn;  
So might I, standing on this pleasant lea,  
Have glimpses that would make me less forlorn;  
Have sight of Proteus rising from the sea;  
Or hear old Triton blow his wreathed horn.

#### QUESTIONS

1. Explain why the poet's words are more effective than these possible alternatives: *earth* for "world" (1), *selling and buying* for "getting and spending" (2), *exposes* for "bares" (5), *dozing* for "sleeping" (7), *posies* for "flowers" (7), *nourished* for "suckled" (10), *visions* for "glimpses" (12), *sound* for "blow" (14).
2. Should "Great God!" (9) be considered a term of address or an expletive? Or something of both? Explain.
3. State the theme (central idea) of the poem in a single sentence.

## Chapter Four – Imagery

Experience comes to us largely through the senses. My experience of a spring day, for instance, may consist partly of certain emotions I feel and partly of certain thoughts I think, but most of it will be a cluster of sense impressions. It will consist of **seeing** blue sky and white clouds, budding leaves and daffodils; of **hearing** robins and bluebirds singing in the early morning; of **smelling** damp earth and blossoming hyacinths; and of **feeling** a fresh wind against my cheek. A poet seeking to express the experience of a spring day must therefore provide a selection of sense impressions. So in “**Spring**” (below) Shakespeare gives us “daisies pied” and “lady-smocks all silver-white” and “merry larks” and the song of the cuckoo and maidens bleaching their summer smocks. Had he not done so, he probably would have failed to evoke the emotions that accompanied his sensations. The poet’s language, then, must be more **sensuous** than ordinary language. It must be more full of imagery.

### **Spring**

*By William Shakespeare (1564-1616)*

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

When shepherds pipe on oaten straws,  
And merry larks are ploughmen'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 a married ear.

Imagery may be defined as the representation through language of sense experience. Poetry appeals directly to our senses, of course, through its music and rhythms, which we actually hear when it is read aloud. But indirectly it appeals to our senses through imagery, the representation to



the imagination of sense experience. The word **image** perhaps often suggests a mental picture, something seen in the mind's eye –and **visual** imagery is the kind of imagery that occurs most frequently in poetry. But an image may also represent a sound (**auditory** imagery); a smell (olfactory imagery); a taste (**gustatory** imagery); touch, such as hardness, softness wetness, or heat and cold (**tactile** imagery); an internal sensations, such as hunger, thirst, fatigue, or nausea (**organic** imagery); or movement or tension in the muscles or joints (**kinesthetic** imagery). If we wished to be scientific, we could extend this list further, for psychologists no longer confined themselves to five or even six senses, but for purposes of discussing poetry the preceding classification should ordinarily be sufficient.

### **Meeting at Night**

*By Robert Browning (1812-1889)*

The gray sea and the long black land;  
And the yellow half-moon large and low:  
And the startled little waves that leap  
In fiery ringlets from their sleep,  
As I gain the cove with pushing prow,  
And quench its speed i' the slushy sand.

Then a mile of warm sea-scented beach;  
Three fields to cross till a farm appears;  
A tap at the pane, the quick sharp scratch  
And blue spurt of a lighted match,  
And a voice less loud, through joys and fears,  
Than the two hearts beating each to each!

“**Meeting at Night**” is a poem about love. It makes, one might say, a number of statements about love: being in love is a sweet and exciting experience; when one is in love everything seems beautiful, and the most trivial things become significant when one is in love one's sweetheart seems the most important thing in the world. But the poet actually tells us none of these things directly. He does not even use the word *love* in his poem. His business is to communicate experience, not information. Second, he describes the lover's journey so vividly in terms of sense impressions that the reader virtually sees and hears what the lover saw and heard and seems to share his anticipation and excitement.

Every line in the poem contains some image, some appeal to the senses: the gray sea, the long black land, the yellow half-moon, the startled little waves with fiery ringlets, the blue spurt of the lighted match—all appeal to our sense of sight and convey not only shape but also color and motions. The warm sea-scented beach appeals to the senses of both smell and touch. The pushing prow of the boat on the slushy sand, the tap

at the pane, the quick scratch of the match, the low speed of the lovers, and the sound of their hearts beating—all appeal to the sense of hearing.

The sharpness and vividness of any image will ordinarily depend on how specific it is on the poet's use of effective detail. The word *hummingbird*, for instance, conveys a more definite image than does *bird*, and *ruby-throated humming bird* is sharper and more specific still. However, to represent something vividly a poet need not describe it completely. One or two especially sharp and representative details will often serve, allowing the reader's imagination to fill in the rest. Tennyson in "The Eagle" ( see chapter 1) gives only one detail about the eagle itself—that he clasps the crag with "crooked hands"—but this detail is an effective and memorable one. Robinson in "The Mill" (No. 18) withholds specific information about the life that the miller and his wife had shared, but the fact that she smells "a warm/ And mealy fragrance of the past" when she enters the mill speaks volumes about her sense of loss. Browning, in "Meeting at Night," calls up a whole scene with "A tap at the pane, the quick sharp scratch / And blue spurt of a lighted match."

Since imagery is a peculiarly effective way of evoking vivid experience, and since it may be used to convey emotion and suggest ideas as well as to cause the mental reproduction of sensation, it is an invaluable resource as a poet. In general, the poet will seek concrete or image-bearing words in preference to abstract or non-image-bearing words. We cannot evaluate a poem, however, by the amount or quality of its imagery alone. Sense impression is the only one of the elements of experience. Poetry may attain it by other means, We should never judge any single element of a poem except in reference to the total intentions of that poem.

### **Spring**

*By Gerard Manley Hopkins (1844-1889)*

Nothing is so beautiful as spring –  
When weeds, in wheels, shoot long and lovely and lush;  
Thrush's eggs look little low heavens, and thrush  
Through the echoing timber does so rinse and wring  
The ear, it strikes like lightnings to hear him sing;  
The glassy peartree leaves and blooms, they brush  
The descending blue; that blue is all in a rush  
With richness; the racing lambs too have fair their fling.

What is all this juice and all this joy?  
A strain of the earth's sweet being in the beginning  
In Eden garden. — Have, get, before it cloy,  
Before it cloud, Christ, lord, and sour with sinning,  
Innocent mind and Mayday in girl and boy,  
Most, O maid's child, thy choice and worthy the winning.

## **To Autumn**

*By John Keats (1795-1821)*

SEASON of mists and mellow fruitfulness,  
Close bosom-friend of the maturing sun;  
Conspiring with him how to load and bless  
With fruit the vines that round the thatch-eves run;  
To bend with apples the moss'd cottage-trees,  
And fill all fruit with ripeness to the core;  
To swell the gourd, and plump the hazel shells  
With a sweet kernel; to set budding more,  
And still more, later flowers for the bees,  
Until they think warm days will never cease,  
For Summer has o'er-brimm'd their clammy cells.

Who hath not seen thee oft amid thy store?  
Sometimes whoever seeks abroad may find  
Thee sitting careless on a granary floor,  
Thy hair soft-lifted by the winnowing wind;  
Or on a half-reap'd furrow sound asleep,  
Drows'd with the fume of poppies, while thy hook  
Spare the next swath and all its twined flowers:  
And sometimes like a gleaner thou dost keep  
Steady thy laden head across a brook;  
Or by a cyder-press, with patient look,  
Thou watchest the last oozy hours by hours.

Where are the songs of Spring? Ay, where are they?  
Think not of them, thou hast thy music too,—  
While barred clouds bloom the soft-dying day,  
And touch the stubble plains with rosy hue;  
Then in a wailful choir the small gnats mourn  
Among the river shallows, borne aloft  
Or sinking as the light wind lives or dies;  
And full-grown lambs loud bleat from hilly bourn;  
Hedge-cricket sing; and now with treble soft  
The red-breast whistles from a garden-croft;  
And gathering swallows twitter in the skies.

## Chapter Five – Figurative Language I

### *Simile, Metaphor, Personification, Apostrophe, Metonymy*

*Poetry provides the one permissible way  
of saying one thing and meaning another.*

--ROBERT FROST

Let us assume that your brother has just come out of a rainstorm and you say to him, “Well, you’re a pretty sight! Got slightly wet, didn’t you?” And he replies, “Wet? I’m drowned! It’s raining cats and dogs, and my raincoat’s like a sieve!”

You and your brother probably understand each other well enough; yet if you examine this conversation literally, that is to say unimaginatively, you will find that you have been speaking nonsense. Actually you have been speaking figuratively. You have been saying less than what you mean, or more than what you mean, or the opposite of what you mean, or something other than what you mean. You did not mean that your brother was a pretty sight but that he was a wretched sight. You did not mean that he got slightly wet but that he got very wet. Your brother did not mean that he got drowned but that he got drenched. It was not raining cats and dogs; it was raining water. And your brother’s coat is so unlike a sieve that not even a child would confuse them.

If you are familiar with Moliere’s play *Le Bourgeois Gentilhomme*, you will remember how delighted M. Jourdain was to discover that he had been speaking prose his whole life. Many people might be equally surprised to learn that they have been speaking a kind of subpoetry all their lives. The difference between their figures of speech and the poet’s is that theirs are probably worn and trite, the poet’s fresh and original.

On first examination, it might seem absurd to say one thing and mean another. But we all do it—and with good reason. We do it because we can say what we want to say more vividly and forcefully by figures than we can by saying it directly. And we can say more by figures than we can by saying it directly. And we can say more by figurative statement than we can by literal statement. Figures of speech offer another way of adding extra dimensions to language.

Broadly defined, a **figure of speech** is any way of saying something other than the ordinary way, and some rhetoricians have classified as many as 250 separate figures. For our purposes, however, a figure of speech is more narrowly definable as a way of saying one thing and meaning another, and we need to be concerned with no more than a dozen. **Figurative language**—language using figures of speech—is language that cannot be taken literally (or should not be taken literally only).

**Metaphor** and **simile** are both used as a means of comparing things that are essentially unlike. The only distinction between them is that in simile the comparison is *expressed* by the use of some word or phrase,

such as *like, as, than, similar to, resembles, or seems*; in metaphor the comparison is implied—that is, the figurative term is *substituted for or identified with* the literal term.

### **The Hound**

*By Robert Francis (1901-1987)*

Life the hound  
Equivocal  
Comes at a bound  
Either to rend me  
Or to befriend me.

I cannot tell  
The hound's intent  
Till he has sprung  
At my bare hand  
With teeth or tongue.  
Meanwhile I stand  
And wait the event.

Metaphors may take one of **four forms**, depending on whether the *literal* and *figurative* terms are respectively *named* or *implied*. In the first form of metaphor, as in simile, both the literal and figurative terms are named. In Francis's poem above, for example, the literal term is "life" and the figurative term is "hound." In the second form, the literal term is named and the figurative term is implied.

In the third form of metaphor, the literal term is implied and the figurative term is named. In the fourth form, both the literal and figurative terms are implied. The following poem exemplifies both forms:

### **It sifts from Leaden Sieves**

*By Emily Dickinson (1830-1886)*

It sifts from Leaden Sieves —  
It powders all the Wood.  
It fills with Alabaster Wool  
The Wrinkles of the Road —

It makes an Even Face  
Of Mountain, and of Plain —  
Unbroken Forehead from the East  
Unto the East again —

It reaches to the Fence —  
It wraps it Rail by Rail

Till it is lost in Fleeces —  
It deals Celestial Vail

To Stump, and Stack - and Stem —  
A Summer's empty Room —  
Acres of Joints, where Harvests were,  
Recordless, but for them —

It Ruffles Wrists of Posts  
As Ankles of a Queen —  
Then stills its Artisans — like Ghosts —  
Denying they have been —

**Personification** consists in giving the attributes of a human being to an animal, and object, or a concept. It is really a subtype of metaphor, and implied comparison in which the figurative term of comparison is always a human being. When John Keats describes autumn as a harvester "sitting careless on a granary floor" or "on a half-reaped furrow sound asleep," he is personifying a season. Personifications differ in the degree to which they ask the reader actually to visualize the literal term in human form. In Keats's comparison, we are asked to make a complete identification of autumn with a human being.

### **To Autumn**

*By John Keats (1795-1821)*

SEASON of mists and mellow fruitfulness,  
Close bosom-friend of the maturing sun;  
Conspiring with him how to load and bless  
With fruit the vines that round the thatch-eves run;  
To bend with apples the moss'd cottage-trees,  
And fill all fruit with ripeness to the core;  
To swell the gourd, and plump the hazel shells  
With a sweet kernel; to set budding more,  
And still more, later flowers for the bees,  
Until they think warm days will never cease,  
For Summer has o'er-brimm'd their clammy cells.

Who hath not seen thee oft amid thy store?  
Sometimes whoever seeks abroad may find  
Thee sitting careless on a granary floor,  
Thy hair soft-lifted by the winnowing wind;  
Or on a half-reap'd furrow sound asleep,  
Drows'd with the fume of poppies, while thy hook  
Spares the next swath and all its twined flowers:  
And sometimes like a gleaner thou dost keep

Steady thy laden head across a brook;  
Or by a cyder-press, with patient look,  
Thou watchest the last oozings hours by hours.

Where are the songs of Spring? Ay, where are they?  
Think not of them, thou hast thy music too,—  
While barred clouds bloom the soft-dying day,  
And touch the stubble plains with rosy hue;  
Then in a wailful choir the small gnats mourn  
Among the river shallows, borne aloft  
Or sinking as the light wind lives or dies;  
And full-grown lambs loud bleat from hilly bourn;  
Hedge-cricket sing; and now with treble soft  
The red-breast whistles from a garden-croft;  
And gathering swallows twitter in the skies.

### **Meeting at Night**

*By Robert Browning (1812-1889)*

The gray sea and the long black land;  
And the yellow half-moon large and low:  
And the startled little waves that leap  
In fiery ringlets from their sleep,  
As I gain the cove with pushing prow,  
And quench its speed i' the slushy sand.

Then a mile of warm sea-scented beach;  
Three fields to cross till a farm appears;  
A tap at the pane, the quick sharp scratch  
And blue spurt of a lighted match,  
And a voice less loud, through joys and fears,  
Than the two hearts beating each to each!

In Browning's reference above to "the startled little waves," a personification is barely suggested; we would make a mistake if we tried to visualize the waves in human form or even, really, to think of them as having human emotions.

### **Joy and Temperance**

*Anonymous*

Joy and Temperance and Repose  
Slam the door on the doctor's nose.

Closely related to personification is **apostrophe**, which consists in addressing someone absent or dead or something nonhuman as if that

person or thing were present and alive and could reply to what is being said. The speaker in A. E. Housman's "To an Athlete Dying Young" apostrophizes and personifies autumn. Personification and apostrophe are both ways of giving like and immediacy to one's language, but since neither requires great imaginative power on the part of the poet—apostrophe especially does not—they may degenerate into mere mannerisms and are to be found as often bad and mediocre poetry as in good. We need to distinguish between their effective use and their merely conventional use.

**To an Athlete Dying Young**

*by A. E. Housman (1859-1936)*

The time you won your town the race  
We chaired you through the market-place;  
Man and boy stood cheering by,  
And home we brought you shoulder-high.

To-day, the road all runners come,  
Shoulder-high we bring you home,  
And set you at your threshold down,  
Townsmen of a stiller town.

Smart lad, to slip betimes away  
From fields where glory does not stay  
And early though the laurel grows  
It withers quicker than the rose.

Eyes the shady night has shut  
Cannot see the record cut,  
And silence sounds no worse than cheers  
After earth has stopped the ears:

Now you will not swell the rout  
Of lads that wore their honours out,  
Runners whom renown outran  
And the name died before the man.

So set, before its echoes fade,  
The fleet foot on the sill of shade,  
And hold to the low lintel up  
The still-defended challenge-cup.

And round that early-laurelled head  
Will flock to gaze the strengthless dead,  
And find unwithered on its curls



The garland briefer than a girl's.

**Synecdoche** (the use of the part for the whole) and **metonymy** (the use of something closely related for the thing actually meant) are alike in that both substitute some significant detail or aspect of an experience for the experience itself. Thus Shakespeare uses synecdoche when he says that the cuckoo's song is unpleasing to a "married ear" in "Spring," for he means *a married man*. Robert Graves uses synecdoche in "The Hippocratic eye," and Housman's "Terence, this is stupid stuff" uses synecdoche when he declares that "malt does more than Milton can / To justify God's ways to man," for "malt" means beer or ale, of which malt is an essential ingredient. On the other hand, when Terence advises "fellows whom it hurts to think" to "Look into the pewter pot / To see the world as the world's not," he is using metonymy, for by "pewter pot" he means the ale in the pot, not the pot itself, and by "world" he means human life and the conditions under which it is lived. Shakespeare uses metonymy when he says that the yellow cuckoo-buds "paint the meadows with delight" in "Spring," for he means with bright color that produces delight. Shakespeare, by referring to bright color as "delight," evokes not only the visual effect but the emotional response it arouses. Frost tells us both that the boy's hand is bleeding and that his life is in danger. Many synecdoches and metonymies, of course, like many metaphors, have become so much a part of language that they no longer strike us as figurative; this is the case with:

redhead for a red-haired person  
hands for manual workers  
wheels for automobiles  
highbrow for a sophisticate  
tongues for languages, and a  
boiling kettle for the water in the kettle.

Such figures are often referred to as dead metaphors (where the word metaphor is itself a metonymy for all figurative speech). Synecdoche and metonymy are so much alike that it is hardly worthwhile to distinguish between them, and the latter term is increasingly used for both. In this book metonymy will be used for both figures—that is, for any figure in which a part or something closely related is substituted for the thing literally meant.

We said at the beginning of this chapter that figurative language often provides a more effective means of saying what we mean than does direct statement. What are some of the reasons for that effectiveness?

First, figurative language affords us imaginative pleasure. Imagination might be described in one sense as the faculty or ability of the mind that proceeds by sudden leaps from one point to another, that goes up a stair by leaping in one jump from the bottom to the top rather than by climbing

up one step at a time. The mind take delight in these sudden leaps, in seeing likenesses between unlike thing. We all probably have taken pleasure in staring into a fire and seeing castles and cities and armies in it, or looking into the clouds and shaping them into animals or faces, or in seeing a man in the moon. We name our plants and flowers after fancied resemblances: jack-in-the-pulpit, babies'-breath, Queen Anne's lace. Figures of speech are therefore satisfying in themselves, providing is with a source of pleasure in the exercise of the imagination.

Second, figures of speech are a way of bringing additional imagery into verse, of making the abstract concrete, of making poetry more sensuous. When Tennyson's eagle falls "like a thunderbolt" (Chapter 1), his swooping down for his prey is charged with energy, speed, and power; the simile also recalls that the Greek god Zeus was accompanied by an eagle and armed with lightening. When Emily Dickinson compares poetry to prancing courses ("There is no frigate like a book"), she objectifies imaginative and rhythmical qualities by presenting them in visual terms. When Robert Browning compares the crisping waves to "fiery ringlets," he starts with one image and transforms it into three. Figurative language is a way of multiplying the sense appeal of poetry.

Third, figures of speech are a way of adding emotional intensity to otherwise merely informative statements and of conveying attitudes along with information. If we say, "So-and-so is a rat" or "My feet are killing me," our meaning is as much emotion as informative. When Philip Larkin's pathetic escapist compares books to "a load of crap," the vulgar language not only expresses his distaste for reading, but intensifies the characterization of him as a man whose intellectual growth was stunted. When Wilfred Owen compares a soldier caught in a gas attack to a man drowning under a green sea, he conveys a feeling of despair and suffocation as well as a visual image.

Fourth, figures of speech are an effective means of concentration, a way of saying much in brief compass. Like words, they may be multi-dimensional. Consider, for instance, the merits of comparing life to a candle, as Shakespeare does in a passage from *Macbeth*. Life is like a candle in that it begins and ends in darkness; in that while it burns, it gives off light and energy, is active and colorful; in that it gradually consumes itself, gets shorter and shorter; in that it can be snuffed out at any moment; in that it is brief at best, burning only for a short duration. Possibly your imagination can suggest other similarities. But at any rate, Macbeth's compact, metaphorical description of life as a "brief candle" suggests certain truths about life that would require dozens of words to state literal language. At the same time it makes the abstract concrete, provides imaginative pleasure, and adds a degree of emotional intensity.

**Out, out brief candle** (from *Macbeth*)  
*by William Shakespeare*

Out, out, brief candle!  
Life's but a walking shadow, a poor player  
That struts and frets his hour upon the stage  
And then is heard no more. It is a tale  
Told by an idiot, full of sound and fury,  
Signifying nothing.

Obviously, if we are to read poetry well, we must be able to interpret figurative language. Every use of figurative language involves a risk of misinterpretation, though the risk is well worth taking. For the person who can translate the figure, the dividends are immense. Fortunately all people have imagination to some degree, and imagination can be cultivated. By practice, one's ability to interpret figures of speech can be increased.

### **Metaphors**

*By Sylvia Plath (1932-1963)*

I'm a riddle in nine syllables,  
An elephant, a ponderous house,  
A melon strolling on two tendrils.  
O red fruit, ivory, fine timbers!  
This loaf's big with its yeasty rising.  
Money's new-minted in this fat purse.  
I'm a means, a stage, a cow in calf.  
I've eaten a bag of green apples,  
Boarded the train there's no getting off.

### **To His Coy Mistress**

*By Andrew Marvell (1621-1678)*

Had we but world enough, and time,  
This coyness, lady, were no crime.  
We would sit down and think which way  
To walk, and pass our long love's day;  
Thou by the Indian Ganges' side  
Shouldst rubies find; I by the tide  
Of Humber would complain. I would  
Love you ten years before the Flood;  
And you should, if you please, refuse  
Till the conversion of the Jews.  
My vegetable love should grow  
Vaster than empires, and more slow.  
An hundred years should go to praise  
Thine eyes, and on thy forehead gaze;  
Two hundred to adore each breast,  
But thirty thousand to the rest;

An age at least to every part,  
And the last age should show your heart.  
For, lady, you deserve this state,  
Nor would I love at lower rate.

But at my back I always hear  
Time's winged chariot hurrying near;  
And yonder all before us lie  
Deserts of vast eternity.  
Thy beauty shall no more be found,  
Nor, in thy marble vault, shall sound  
My echoing song; then worms shall try  
That long preserv'd virginity,  
And your quaint honour turn to dust,  
And into ashes all my lust.  
The grave's a fine and private place,  
But none I think do there embrace.

Now therefore, while the youthful hue  
Sits on thy skin like morning dew,  
And while thy willing soul transpires  
At every pore with instant fires,  
Now let us sport us while we may;  
And now, like am'rous birds of prey,  
Rather at once our time devour,  
Than languish in his slow-chapp'd power.  
Let us roll all our strength, and all  
Our sweetness, up into one ball;  
And tear our pleasures with rough strife  
Thorough the iron gates of life.  
Thus, though we cannot make our sun  
Stand still, yet we will make him run.

## Chapter Six – Figurative Language II

### *Symbol, Allegory*

A **symbol** may be roughly defined as something that means more than what it is. “The Road Not Taken,” for instance, concerns a choice made between two roads by a person out walking himself in the woods. He would like to explore both roads. He tells himself that he will explore one and then come back and explore the other, but he knows that he will probably be unable to do so. By the last stanza, however, we realize that the poem is about something more than the choice of paths in a wood, for the choice would be relatively unimportant, while this choice, the speaker believes, is one that will make a great difference in his life and is one that he will remember with a sigh “ages and ages hence.” We must interpret his choice of a road as a symbol for any choice in life between alternatives that appear almost equally attractive but will result through the years in a large difference in the kind of experience one knows.

**Image, metaphor, and symbol** shade into each other and are sometimes difficult to distinguish. In general, however, an image means only what it is; the figurative term in a metaphor means something other than what it is; and a symbol means what it is and something more, too. A symbol, that is, functions literally and figuratively at the same time. If I say that a shaggy brown dog was rubbing its back against a white picket fence, I am talking about nothing but a dog (and a picket fence) and am therefore presenting an image. If I say, “Some dirty dog stole my wallet at the party,” I am not talking about a dog at all and therefore using a metaphor. But if I say, “You can’t teach an old dog new tricks,” I am talking not only about dogs but about living creatures of any species and am therefore speaking symbolically. Images, of course, do not cease to be images when they become incorporated in metaphors or symbols. If we are discussing the sensuous qualities of “The Road Not Taken,” we should refer to the two leaf-strewn roads in the yellow wood as an image; if we are discussing the significance of the poem, we talk about the roads as symbols.

The symbol is the richest and at the same time the most difficult of the poetic figures. Both its richness and its difficulty result from its imprecision. Although the poet may pin down the meaning of a symbol to something fairly definite and precise, more often the symbol is so general in its meaning that it can suggest a great variety of specific meanings. It is like an opal that flashes out different colors when slowly turned in the light. The choice in “The Road Not Taken,” for instance, concerns some choice in life, but what choice? Was it a choice of profession? A choice of residence? A choice of mate? It might be any, all, or none of these. We cannot determine what particular choice the poet had in mind, if any, and it is not important that we do so. It is enough if we see in the poem an expression of regret that the possibilities of life experience are so sharply limited. The speaker in the poem would have liked to explore both roads, but he could

explore only one. The person with a craving for life, whether satisfied or dissatisfied with the choices he has made, will always long for the realms of experience that he had to forego. Because the symbol is a rich one, the poem suggests other meanings too. It affirms a belief in the possibility of choice and says something about the nature of choice — how each choice narrows the range of possible future choices, so that we make our lives as we go, both freely choosing and being determined by past choices. Though not a philosophical poem, it obliquely comments on the issue of free will and determinism and indicates the poet's own position. It can do all these things, concretely and compactly, by its use of an effective symbol.

Symbols vary in the degree of identification and definition given them by their authors. In this poem Frost forces us to interpret the choice of roads symbolically by the degree of importance he gives it in the last stanza. Sometimes poets are much more specific in identifying their symbols. Sometimes they do not identify them at all. Consider, for instance, the next two poems.

### **A Noiseless Patient Spider**

*by Walt Whitman (1819—1892)*

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.

And you, O my soul where you stand,  
Surrounded, detached, in measureless oceans of space,  
Ceaselessly musing, venturing, throwing, seeking the spheres to  
connect them,  
Till the bridge you will need be formed, till the ductile anchor hold,  
Till the gossamer thread you fling catch somewhere, O my soul.

In the first stanza the speaker describes a spider's apparently tireless effort to attach its thread to some substantial support so that it can begin constructing a web. The speaker reveals his attentive interest by the hinted personification of the spider, and his sympathy with it is expressed in the overstatement of size and distance he is trying to perceive the world as a spider sees it from a "promontory" surrounded by vast space. He even attributes a human motive to the spider: exploration, rather than instinctive web-building. Nevertheless, the first stanza is essentially literal — the close observation of an actual spider at its task. In the second stanza the speaker explicitly interprets the symbolic meaning of what he has observed: his soul (personified by apostrophe and by the capabilities assigned to it) is like the spider in its constant striving. But the soul's purpose is to find spiritual or intellectual certainties in the vast universe it

inhabits. The symbolic meaning is richer than a mere comparison; while a spider's actual purpose is limited to its instinctive drives, the human soul strives for much more, in a much more complex "surrounding." And of course, the result of the soul's symbolized striving is much more open-ended than is the attempt of a spider to spin a web, as the paradoxical language ("surrounded, detached," "ductile anchor") implies. Can the human soul connect the celestial spheres?

### **The Sick Rose**

*by William Blake (1757—1827)*

O Rose, thou art sick!  
The invisible worm  
That flies in the night,  
In the howling storm,

Has found out thy bed  
Of crimson joy,  
And his dark secret love  
Does thy life destroy.

In "A Noiseless Patient Spider" the symbolic meaning of the spider is identified and named. By contrast, in "The Sick Rose" no meanings are explicitly indicated for the rose and the worm. Indeed, we are not compelled to assign them specific meanings. The poem is validly read as being about a rose that has been attacked on a stormy night by a cankerworm.

The organization of "The Sick Rose" is so rich, however, and its language so powerful that the rose and the worm refuse to remain merely a flower and an insect. The rose, apostrophized and personified in the first line, has traditionally been a symbol of feminine beauty and of love, as well as of sensual pleasures. "Bed" can refer to a woman's bed as well as to a flower bed. "Crimson joy" suggests the intense pleasure of passionate lovemaking as well as the brilliant beauty of a red flower. The "dark secret love" of the "invisible worm" is more strongly suggestive of a concealed or illicit love affair than of the feeding of a cankerworm on a plant, though it fits that too. For all these reasons the rose almost immediately suggests a woman and the worm her secret lover — and the poem suggests the corruption of innocent but physical love by concealment and deceit. But the possibilities do not stop there. The worm is a common symbol or metonymy for death; and for readers steeped in John Milton (as Blake was) it recalls the "undying worm" of *Paradise Lost*, Milton's metaphor for the snake (or Satan in the form of a snake) that tempted Eve. Meanings multiply also for the reader who is familiar with Blake's other writings. Thus "The Sick Rose" has been variously interpreted as referring to the destruction of joyous physical love by jealousy, deceit, concealment, or the

possessive instinct; of innocence by experience; of humanity by Satan; of imagination and joy by analytic reason; of life by death. We cannot say what specifically the poet had in mind, nor need we do so. A symbol defines an area of meaning, and any interpretation that falls within that area is permissible. In Blake's poem the rose stands for something beautiful, or desirable, or good. The worm stands for some corrupting agent. Within these limits, the meaning is largely "open." And because the meaning is open, the reader is justified in bringing personal experience to its interpretation. Blake's poem, for instance, might remind someone of a gifted friend whose promise has been destroyed by drug addiction.

Between the extremes exemplified by "A Noiseless Patient Spider" and "The Sick Rose" a poem may exercise all degrees of control over the range and meaning of its symbolism. Consider another example:

**You, Andrew Marvell**

*by Archibald MacLeish (1892—1982)*

And here face down beneath the sun  
And here upon earth's noonward height  
To feel the always coming on  
The always rising of the night:

To feel creep up the curving east  
The earthly chill of dusk and slow  
Upon those under lands the vast  
And ever-climbing shadow grow

And strange at Ecbatan the trees  
Take leaf by leaf the evening strange  
The flooding dark about their knees  
The mountains over Persia change

And now at Kermanshah the gate  
Dark empty and the withered grass  
And through the twilight now the late  
Few travelers in the westward pass

And Baghdad darken and the bridge  
Across the silent river gone  
And through Arabia the edge  
Of evening widen and steal on

And deepen on Palmyra's street  
The wheel rut in the ruined stone  
And Lebanon fade out and Crete  
High through the clouds and overblown



And over Sicily the air  
Still flashing with the landward gulls  
And loom and slowly disappear  
The sails above the shadowy hulls

And Spain go under and the shore  
Of Africa the gilded sand  
And evening vanish and no more  
The low pale light across that land

Nor now the long light on the sea:  
And here face downward in the sun  
To feel how swift how secretly  
The shadow of the night comes on...

On the literal level, “You, Andrew Marvell” is about the coming on of night. The speaker, lying at noon full length in the sun somewhere in the United States, pictures in his mind the earth’s shadow, halfway around the world, moving silently westward over Persia, Syria, Crete, Sicily, Spain, Africa, and finally the Atlantic —approaching swiftly, in fact, the place where he himself lies. But the title of the poem tells us that, though particularly concerned with the passage of a day, it is more generally concerned with the swift passage of time; for the title is an allusion to a famous poem on this subject by Andrew Marvell (“**To His Coy Mistress**”) and especially to two lines of that poem:

But at my back I always hear  
Time’s wingèd chariot hurrying near.

Once we are aware of this larger concern of the poem, two symbolic levels of interpretation open to us. Marvell’s poem is primarily concerned with the swift passing of man’s life; and the word night, we know from our experience with other literature, is a natural and traditional metaphor or symbol for death. Thus, the speaker in “You, Andrew Marvell” is thinking not only about the passing of a day but also about the passing of his life. He is at present “upon earth’s noonward height” — in the full flush of manhood — but he is acutely conscious of the declining years ahead and of “how swift how secretly” his death comes on.

If we are to account fully for all the data of the poem, however, a third level of interpretation is necessary. What has dictated the poet’s choice of geographical references? The places named, of course, progress from east to west; but they have a further linking characteristic. Ecbatan, Kermanshah, Baghdad, and Palmyra are all ancient or ruined cities, the relics of past empires and crumbled civilizations. Lebanon, Crete, Sicily, Spain, and North Africa are places where civilization once flourished more

vigorously than it does at present. On a third level, then, the poet is concerned, not with the passage of a day nor with the passage of a lifetime, but with the passage of historical epochs. The poet's own country — the United States — now shines "upon earth's noonward height" as a favored nation in the sun of history, but its civilization, too, will pass.

Meanings ray out from a symbol, like the corona around the sun or like connotations around a richly suggestive word. But the very fact that a symbol may be so rich in meanings requires that we use the greatest tact in its interpretation. Although Blake's "The Sick Rose" might, because of personal association, remind us of a friend destroyed by drug addiction, it would be unwise to say that Blake uses the rose to symbolize a gifted person succumbing to drug addiction, for this interpretation is private, idiosyncratic, and narrow. The poem allows it, but does not itself suggest it.

Moreover, we should never assume that because the meaning of a symbol is more or less open, we may make it mean anything we choose. We would be wrong, for instance, in interpreting the choice in "The Road Not Taken" as some choice between good and evil, for the poem tells us that the two roads are much alike and that both lie "in leaves no step had trodden black." Whatever the choice is, it is a choice between two goods. Whatever our interpretation of a symbolic poem, it must be tied firmly to the facts of the poem. We must not let loose of the string and let our imaginations go ballooning up among the clouds. Because the symbol is capable of adding so many dimensions to a poem, it is a peculiarly effective resource for the poet, but it is also peculiarly susceptible to misinterpretation by the incautious reader.

Accurate interpretation of the symbol requires delicacy, tact, and good sense. The reader must maintain balance while walking a tightrope between too little and too much — between underinterpretation and overinterpretation. If the reader falls off, however, it is much more desirable to fall off on the side of too little. Someone who reads "The Road Not Taken" as being only about a choice between two roads in a wood has at least understood part of the experience that the poem communicates, but the reader who reads into it anything imaginable might as well discard the poem and simply daydream.

Above all, we should avoid the disease of seeing symbols everywhere, like a person with hallucinations, whether there are symbols there or not. It is better to miss a symbol now and then than to walk constantly among shadows and mirages.

### **To the Virgins, to Make Much of Time**

*by Robert Herrick (1591-1633)*

Gather ye rosebuds while ye may,  
Old Time is still a-flying;  
And this same flower that smiles today

Tomorrow will be dying.

The glorious lamp of heaven, the Sun,  
The higher he's a-getting,  
The sooner will his race be run,  
And nearer he's to setting.

That age is best which is the first,  
When youth and blood are warmer;  
But being spent, the worse, and worst  
Times still succeed (he former.  
Then be not coy, but use your time;  
And while ye may, go marry;  
For having lost but once your prime,  
You may forever tarry.

**Allegory** is a narrative or description that has a second meaning beneath the surface. Although the surface story or description may have its own interest, the author's major interest is in the ulterior meaning. When Pharaoh in the Bible, for instance, has a dream in which seven fat kine (i.e., cows) are devoured by seven lean kine, the story does not really become significant until Joseph interprets its allegorical meaning: that Egypt is to enjoy seven years of fruitfulness and prosperity followed by seven years of famine. Allegory has been defined sometimes as an **extended metaphor** and sometimes as a series of related symbols. But it is usually distinguishable from both of these. It is unlike extended metaphor in that it involves **a system of related comparisons** rather than one comparison drawn out. It differs from symbolism in that it puts less emphasis on the images for their own sake and more on their ulterior meanings. Also, these meanings are more fixed. In allegory there is usually a one-to-one correspondence between the details and a single set of ulterior meanings. In complex allegories the details may have more than one meaning, but these meanings tend to be definite. Meanings do not ray out from allegory as they do from a symbol.

Allegory is less popular in modern literature than it was in medieval and Renaissance writing, and it is much less often found in short poems than in long narrative works such as *The Faerie Queene*, *Everyman*, and *Pilgrim's Progress*. It has sometimes, especially with political allegory, been used to disguise meaning rather than reveal it (or, rather, to disguise it from some people while revealing it to others). Though less rich than the symbol, allegory is an effective way of making the abstract concrete and has occasionally been used effectively even in fairly short poems.

## **Peace**

*by George Herbert (1593—1633)*

Sweet Peace, where dost thou dwell? I humbly crave,  
Let me once know.  
I sought thee in a secret cave,  
And asked if Peace were there.  
A hollow wind did seem to answer, "No,  
Go seek elsewhere."

I did, and going did a rainbow note.  
"Surely," thought I,  
"This is the lace of Peace's coat;  
I will search out the matter:"  
But while I looked, the clouds immediately  
Did break and scatter.

Then went I to a garden, and did spy  
A gallant flower,  
The Crown Imperial. "Sure," said I,  
"Peace at the root must dwell."  
But when I digged, I saw a worm devour  
What showed so well.

At length I met a reverend good old man,  
Whom when for Peace  
I did demand, he thus began:  
"There was a prince of old  
At Salem dwelt, who lived with good increase  
Of flock and fold.

"He sweetly lived; yet sweetness did not save  
His life from foes.  
But after death out of his grave  
There sprang twelve stalks of wheat;  
Which many wondering at, got some of those  
To plant and set.

"It prospered strangely, and did soon disperse  
Through all the earth,  
For they that taste it do rehearse  
That virtue lies therein,  
A secret virtue, bringing peace and mirth  
By flight of sin.

“Take of this grain, which in my garden grows,  
And grows for you;  
Make bread of it; and that repose  
And peace, which everywhere  
With so much earnestness you do pursue,  
Is only there.”

## Chapter Seven – Figurative Language III

### *Paradox, Overstatement, Understatement, Irony*

Aesop tells the tale of a traveler who sought refuge with a Satyr on a bitter winter night. On entering the Satyr's lodging, he blew on his fingers, and was asked by the Satyr why he did it. "To warm them up" he explained. Later, on being served a piping hot bowl of porridge, he blew also on it, and again was asked why he did it. "To cool it off," he explained. The Satyr thereupon thrust him out of doors, for he would have nothing to do with a man who could blow hot and cold with the same breath.

A **paradox** is an apparent contradiction that is nevertheless somehow true. It may be either a situation or a statement. Aesop's tale of the traveler illustrates a paradoxical situation. As a figure of speech, paradox is a statement. When Alexander Pope wrote that a literary critic of his time would "damn with faint praise," he was using a verbal paradox, for how can a man damn by praising?

When we understand all the conditions and circumstances involved in a paradox, we find that what at first seemed impossible is actually entirely plausible and not strange at all. The paradox of the cold hands and hot porridge is not strange to anyone who knows that a stream of air directed upon an object of different temperature will tend to bring that object closer to its own temperature. And Pope's paradox is not strange when we realize that damn is being used figuratively, and that Pope means only that a too reserved praise may damage an author with the public almost as much as adverse criticism. In a paradoxical statement the contradiction usually stems from one of the words being used figuratively or in more than one sense.

The value of paradox is its **shock value**. Its seeming impossibility startles the reader into attention and, by the fact of its **apparent absurdity**, underscores the truth of what is being said.

#### **Much madness is divinest sense**

by Emily Dickinson

Much madness is divinest sense  
To a discerning eye,  
Much sense, the starkest madness.  
'Tis the majority  
In this, as all, prevail:  
Assent, and you are sane;  
Demur, you're straightway dangerous  
And handled with a chain.

Overstatement, understatement, and verbal irony form a continuous series, for they consist, respectively, of saying more, saying less, and saying the opposite of what one really means.

**Overstatement**, or **hyperbole**, is simply exaggeration, but exaggeration in the service of truth. It is not the same as a fish story. If you say, “I’m starved!” or “You could have knocked me over with a feather!” or “I’ll die if I don’t pass this course!” you do not expect to be taken literally; you are merely adding emphasis to what you really mean. (And if you say, “There were literally millions of people at the beach!” you are merely piling one overstatement on top of another, for you really mean, “There were figuratively millions of people at the beach,” or, literally, “The beach was very crowded.”) Like all figures of speech, overstatement may be used with a variety of effects. It may be humorous or grave, fanciful or restrained, convincing or unconvincing. When Tennyson says of his eagle that it is “Close to the sun in lonely lands;” he says what appears to be literally true, though we know from our study of astronomy that it is not. When Wordsworth reports of his golden daffodils in “I wandered lonely as a cloud” that they “stretched in never-ending line” along the margin of a bay, he too reports faithfully a visual appearance. When Frost says, at the conclusion of “The Road Not Taken,”

I shall be telling this with a sigh  
Somewhere ages and ages hence,

we are scarcely aware of the overstatement, so quietly is the assertion made. Unskillfully used, however, overstatement may seem strained and ridiculous, leading us to react as Gertrude does to the player-queen’s speeches in *Hamlet*: “The lady doth protest too much.”

It is paradoxical that one can emphasize a truth either by overstating it or by understating it. **Understatement**, or saying less than one means, may exist in what one says and in how one says it. If, for instance, upon sitting down to a loaded dinner plate, you say, “This looks like a nice snack;” you are actually stating less than the truth; but if you say, with Artemus Ward, that a man who holds his hand for half an hour in a lighted fire will experience “a sensation of excessive and disagreeable warmth” you are stating what is literally true but with a good deal less than the situation warrants.

### **The Sun Rising**

by John Donne (1572—1631)

Busy old fool, unruly sun,  
Why dost thou thus  
Through windows and through curtains call on us?  
Must to thy motions lovers’ seasons run?  
Saucy pedantic wretch, go chide

Late school boys and sour 'prentices,  
Go tell court-huntsman that the king will ride,  
Call country ants to harvest offices;  
Love, all alike, no season knows, nor clime,  
Nor hours. days, months, which are the rags of time.

Thy beams so reverend and strong  
Why shouldst thou think?  
I could eclipse and cloud them with a wink,  
But that I would not lose her sight so long;  
If her eyes have not blinded thine.  
Look, and tomorrow late tell me  
Whether both th' Indias of spice and mine  
Be where thou left'st them, or lie here with me.  
Ask for those kings whom thou saw'st yesterday,  
And thou shalt hear, "All here in one bed lay."

She's all states, and all princes I;  
Nothing else is.  
Princes do but play us; compared to this,  
All honor's mimic, all wealth alchemy.  
Thou, sun, art half as happy as we,  
In that the world's contracted thus;  
Thine age asks ease, and since thy duties he  
To warm the world, that's done in warming us.  
Shine here to us, and thou art everywhere;  
This bed thy center is, these walls thy sphere.

Like paradox, irony has meanings that extend beyond its use merely as a figure of speech. **Verbal irony**, saying the opposite of what one means, is often confused with sarcasm and with satire, and for that reason it may be well to look at the meanings of all three terms. Sarcasm and satire both imply ridicule, one on the colloquial level, the other on the literary level. **Sarcasm** is simply bitter or cutting speech, intended to wound the feelings (it comes from a Greek word meaning *to tear flesh*). **Satire** is a more formal term, usually applied to written literature rather than to speech and ordinarily implying a higher motive: it is ridicule (either bitter or gentle) of human folly or vice, with the purpose of bringing about reform or at least of keeping other people from falling into similar folly or vice. Irony, on the other hand, is a literary device or figure that may be used in the service of sarcasm or ridicule or may not. It is popularly confused with sarcasm and satire because it is so often used as their tool; but irony may be used without either sarcastic or satirical intent, and sarcasm and satire may exist (though they do not usually) without irony. If, for instance, one of the members of your class raises his hand on the discussion of this point and says, "I don't understand," and your instructor replies, with a tone of



heavy disgust in his voice, “Well, I wouldn’t expect you to,” he is being sarcastic but not ironic; he means exactly what he says. But if, after you have done particularly well on an examination, your instructor brings your test papers into the classroom saying, “Here’s some bad news for you: you all got A’s and B’s!” he is being ironic but not sarcastic. Sarcasm, we may say, is cruel, as a bully is cruel: it intends to give hurt. Satire is both cruel and kind, as a surgeon is cruel and kind: it gives hurt in the interest of the patient or of society. Irony is neither cruel nor kind: it is simply a device, like a surgeon’s scalpel, for performing any operation more skillfully.

Though verbal irony always implies the opposite of what is said, it has many gradations, and only in its simplest forms does it mean only the opposite of what is said. In more complex forms it means both what is said and the opposite of what is said, at once, though in different ways and with different degrees of emphasis. When Terence’s critic, in “Terence, this is stupid stuff” says, “Pretty friendship ‘tis to rhyme / Your friends to death before their time” (11–12), we may substitute the literal sorry for the ironic “pretty” with little or no loss of meaning. When Terence speaks in reply, however, of the pleasure of drunkenness — “And down in lovely muck I’ve lain, / Happy till I woke again” (35–36) — we cannot substitute *loathsome* for “lovely” without considerable loss of meaning, for, while muck is actually extremely unpleasant to lie in, it may seem lovely to an intoxicated person. Thus two meanings — one the opposite of the other — operate at once.

Like all figures of speech, verbal irony runs the danger of being misunderstood. With irony the risks are perhaps greater than with other figures, for if metaphor is misunderstood, the result may be simply bewilderment; but if irony is misunderstood, the reader goes away with exactly the opposite idea from what the user meant to convey. The results of misunderstanding if, for instance, you ironically called someone a villain, might be calamitous. For this reason the user of irony must be very skillful in its use, conveying by an altered tone, or by a wink of the eye or pen, that irony is intended; and the reader of literature must be always alert to recognize the subtle signs of irony.

No matter how broad or obvious the irony, a number of people in any large audience always will misunderstand. The humorist Artemus Ward used to protect himself against these people by writing at the bottom of his newspaper column, “This is writ ironical.” But irony is most delightful and most effective when it is subtlest. It sets up a special understanding between writer and reader that may add either grace or force. If irony is too obvious, it sometimes seems merely crude. But if effectively used, it, like all figurative language, is capable of adding extra dimensions to meaning.

### **The Adversary**

By Phyllis McGinley (1905—1978)

A mother's hardest to forgive.  
Life is the fruit she longs to hand you,  
Ripe on a plate. And while you live,  
Relentlessly she understands you.

The term *dramatic irony*, which stems from Greek tragedy, often connotes something more specific and a little different from the way the term is being used in this chapter. It describes a speech or an action in a story that has much greater significance to the audience or reader than to the character who speaks or performs it, because the audience possesses knowledge that the character does not have, as in the case of Christopher John Francis Boone in *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-time*.

The term irony always implies some sort of **discrepancy** or **incongruity**. In verbal irony the discrepancy is between what is said and what is meant. In other forms the discrepancy may be between appearance and reality or between expectation and fulfillment. These other forms of irony are, on the whole, more important resources for the poet than is verbal irony. Two types are especially important.

In **dramatic irony**\* the discrepancy is not between what the speaker says and what the speaker means but between what the speaker says and what the poem means. The speaker's words may be perfectly straightforward, but the author, by putting these words in a particular speaker's mouth, may be indicating to the reader ideas or attitudes quite opposed to those the speaker is voicing. This form of irony is more complex than verbal irony and demands a more complex response from the reader. It may be used not only to convey attitudes but also to illuminate character, for the author who uses it is indirectly commenting not only upon the value of the ideas uttered but also upon the nature of the person who utters them. Such comment may be harsh, gently mocking, or sympathetic.

### **The Chimney Sweeper**

By William Blake (1757-1827)

When my mother died I was very young,  
And my father sold me while yet my tongue  
Could scarcely cry " 'weep! 'weep! 'weep! 'weep! "  
So your chimneys I sweep and in soot I sleep.

There's little Tom Dacre, who cried when his head  
That curled like a lamb's back, was shaved: so I said,  
"Hush, Tom! never mind it, for when your head's bare  
You know that the soot cannot spoil your white hair."

And so he was quiet, and that very night,  
As Tom was a-sleeping he had such a sight!  
That thousands of sweepers, Dick, Joe, Ned and Jack,  
Were all of them locked up in coffins of black.

And by came an Angel who had a bright key,  
And he opened the coffins and set them all free;  
Then down a green plain, leaping, laughing, they run,  
And wash in a river and shine in the Sun.

Then naked and white, all their bags left behind,  
They rise upon clouds and sport in the wind.  
And the Angel told Tom, if he'd be a good boy,  
He'd have God for his father and never want joy.

And so Tom awoke; and we rose in the dark,  
And got with our bags and our brushes to work.  
Though the morning was cold, Tom was happy and warm;  
So if all do their duty, they need not fear harm.

#### QUESTIONS

1. In the 18<sup>th</sup> century small boys, sometimes no more than four or five years old, were employed to climb up narrow chimney flues and clean them, collecting soot in bags. Such boys, sometimes sold to the master sweepers by their parents, were miserably treated by their masters and often suffered disease and physical deformity. Characterize the boy who speaks in this poem. How do his and the poet's attitudes toward his lot in life differ? How, especially, are the meanings of the poet and the speaker different in lines 3, 7-8, and 24?
2. The dream in lines 11-20, besides being a happy dream, can be interpreted allegorically. Point out possible significances of the sweepers' being "locked up in coffins of black" (12) and the Angel's releasing them with a bright key to play upon the green plains.

A third type of irony, situational irony, occurs when a discrepancy exists between the actual circumstances and those that would seem appropriate or between what one anticipates and what actually comes to pass. If a man and his second wife, on the first night of their honeymoon, are accidentally seated at the theater next to the man's first wife, we should call the situation ironic. When in O Henry's famous short story "The Gift of the Magi" a poor young husband pawns his most prized possession, a gold watch, in order to buy his wife a set of combs for her hair for Christmas, and his wife sells her most prized possession, her long brown hair, in order to buy a fob chain for his gold watch, we call the situation ironic. When King Midas is granted his fondest wish, that anything he touch turn to gold, and then finds that he cannot eat because the even his food turns to gold, we call the situation ironic. In each case the circumstances are not what would seem appropriate or what we would expect.

Dramatic irony and situational irony are powerful devices for poetry, for, like symbol, they enable a poem to suggest meanings without stating them – to communicate a great deal more than is said. One effective use of situational irony is in "Ozymandias," which follows. Because irony and

paradox demand an exercise of critical intelligence, they are particularly valuable as safeguards against sentimentality.

### **Ozymandias**

By Percy Bysshe Shelley (1792-1822)

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.

#### QUESTIONS

1. Ozymandias was an ancient Egyptian tyrant. This poem was first published in 1817. Of what is Ozymandias a symbol? What contemporary reference might the poem have had in Shelley's time?
2. What is the theme of the poem and how is it "stated" using situational irony?

### **Batter my heart, three-personed God**

*by John Donne (1572-1631)*

Batter my heart, three-personed God, for you  
As yet but knock, breathe, shine, and seek to mend;  
That I may rise, and stand, o'erthrow me, and bend  
Your force to break, blow, burn, and make me new.  
I, like an usurped town, to another due,  
Labour to admit you, but Oh, to no end.  
Reason, your viceroy in me, me should defend,  
But is captived, and proves weak or untrue.  
Yet dearly I love you, and would be loved fain,  
But am betrothed unto your enemy:  
Divorce me, untie or break that knot again,  
Take me to you, imprison me, for I,  
Except you enthrall me, never shall be free,  
Nor ever chaste, except you ravish me.

## Chapter Eight – Allusion

The famous English diplomat and letter writer Lord Chesterfield once was invited to a great dinner given by the Spanish ambassador. At the conclusion of the meal the host rose and proposed a toast to his master, the king of Spain, whom he compared to the sun. The French ambassador followed with a health to the king of France, whom he likened to the moon. It was then Lord Chesterfield's turn. "Your excellencies have taken from me," he said, "all the greatest luminaries of heaven, and the stars are too small for me to make a comparison of my royal master; I therefore beg leave to give your excellencies--Joshua!"

For a reader familiar with the Bible— that is, for one who recognizes the biblical allusion — Lord Chesterfield's story will come as a stunning revelation of his wit. For an **allusion** — a reference to something in history or previous literature—is, like a richly connotative word or a symbol, a means of suggesting far more than it says. The one word "Joshua," in the context of Chesterfield's toast, calls up in the reader's mind the whole biblical story of how the Israelite captain stopped the sun and the moon in order that the Israelites might finish a battle and conquer their enemies before nightfall. The force of the toast lies in its extreme economy; it says **so much in so little**, and it exercises the mind of the reader to make the connection for himself.

The effect of Chesterfield's allusion is chiefly humorous or witty, but allusions also may have a powerful emotional effect. The essayist William Hazlitt writes of addressing a fashionable audience about the lexicographer Samuel Johnson. Speaking of Johnson's great heart and of his charity to the unfortunate, Hazlitt recounted how, finding a drunken prostitute lying in Fleet Street late at night, Johnson carried her on his broad back to the address she managed to give him. The audience, unable to face the picture of the famous dictionary-maker doing such a thing, broke out in titters and expostulations, whereupon Hazlitt simply said: "I remind you, ladies and gentlemen of the parable of the Good Samaritan." The audience was promptly silenced.

**Allusions** are a means of reinforcing the emotion or the ideas of one's own work with the emotion or ideas of another work or occasion. Because they may compact so much meaning in so small a space, they are extremely useful to the poet.

### **"Out, Out—"**

*by Robert Frost (1874—1963)*

The buzz-saw snarled and rattled in the yard  
And made dust and dropped stove-length sticks of wood,  
Sweet-scented stuff when the breeze drew across it.  
And from there those that lifted eyes could count

Five mountain ranges one behind the other  
 Under the sunset far into Vermont.  
 And the saw snarled and rattled, snarled and rattled,  
 As it ran light, or had to bear a load.  
 And nothing happened: day was all but done.  
 Call it a day, I wish they might have said  
 To please the boy by giving him the half hour  
 That a boy counts so much when saved from work.  
 His sister stood beside them in her apron  
 To tell them "Supper." At the word, the saw,  
 As if to prove saws knew what supper meant,  
 Leaped out at the boy's hand, or seemed to leap—  
 He must have given the hand. However it was,  
 Neither refused the meeting. But the hand!  
 The boy's first outcry was a rueful laugh,  
 As he swung toward them holding up the hand  
 Half in appeal, but half as if to keep  
 The life from spilling. Then the boy saw all—  
 Since he was old enough to know, big boy  
 Doing a man's work, though a child at heart—  
 He saw all spoiled. "Don't let him cut my hand off—  
 The doctor, when he comes, Don't let him, sister!"  
 So. But the hand was gone already.  
 The doctor put him in the dark of ether.  
 He lay and puffed his lips out with his breath.  
 And then — the watcher at his pulse took fright.  
 No one believed. They listened at his heart,  
 Little — less nothing! — and that ended it.  
 No more to build on there. And they, since they  
 Were not the one dead. turned to their affairs.

Allusions vary widely in the burden put on them by the poet to convey meaning. Lord Chesterfield risked his whole meaning on his hearers' recognizing his allusion. Robert Frost in "Out, Out —" makes his meaning entirely clear even for the reader who does not recognize the allusion contained in the poem's title. His theme is the uncertainty and unpredictability of life, which may be ended accidentally at any moment, and the tragic waste of human potentiality that takes place when such premature deaths occur. A boy who is already "doing a man's work" and gives every promise of having a useful life ahead of him is suddenly wiped out. There seems no rational explanation for either the accident or the death. The only comment to be made is, "No more to build on there."

Frost's title, however, is an allusion to one of the most famous passages in all English literature, and it offers a good illustration of how a poet may use allusion not only to reinforce emotion but also to help define his theme. The passage is that in *Macbeth* in which Macbeth has just been

informed of his wife's death. A good many readers will recall the key phrase, "Out, out, brief candle!" with its underscoring of the tragic brevity and uncertainty of life. For some readers, however, the allusion will summon to mind the whole passage in Act 5, scene 5, in which this phrase occurs. Macbeth's words are:

She should have died hereafter;  
There would have been a time for such a word.  
To-morrow, and to-morrow, and to-morrow  
Creeps in this petty pace from day to day  
To the last syllable of recorded time;  
And all our yesterdays have lighted fools  
The way to dusty death. Out, out, brief candle!  
Life's but a walking shadow, a poor player,  
That struts and frets his hour upon the stage  
And then is heard no more. It is a tale  
Told by an idiot, full of sound and fury,  
Signifying nothing.

Macbeth's first words underscore the theme of premature death. The boy also "should have died hereafter." The rest of the passage, with its marvelous evocation of the vanity and meaninglessness of life, expresses neither Shakespeare's philosophy nor, ultimately, Frost's, but it is Macbeth's philosophy at the time of his bereavement, and it is likely to express the feelings of us all when such tragic accidents occur— Life does indeed seem cruel and meaningless, a tale told by an idiot, signifying nothing, when human life and potentiality are thus without explanation so suddenly ended.

#### QUESTION

Examine Macbeth's speech for examples of personification, apostrophe, and metonymy. How many metaphors for an individual human life does it present?

Allusions also vary widely in the number of readers to whom they will be familiar. Poets, in using an allusion, as in using a figure of speech, are always in danger of being misunderstood. What appeals powerfully to one reader may lose another reader altogether. But poets must assume a certain fund of common experience in readers. They could not even write about the ocean unless they could assume that readers have seen the ocean or pictures of it. In the same way poets assume a certain common fund of literary experience, most frequently of classical mythology, Shakespeare, or the Bible — particularly the King James Version. Poets are often justified in expecting a rather wide range of literary experience in readers, for the people who read poetry for pleasure are generally intelligent and well-read. But, obviously, beginning readers will not have

this range, just as they will not know the meanings of as many words as will more mature readers. Students should therefore be prepared to look up certain allusions, just as they should be eager to look up in their dictionaries the meanings of unfamiliar words. They will find that every increase in knowledge broadens their base for understanding both literature and life.

### **On His Blindness**

*by John Milton (1608-1674)*

When I consider how my light is spent  
Ere half my days in this dark world and wide,  
And that one talent which is death to hide  
Lodg'd with me useless, though my soul more bent  
To serve therewith my Maker, and present  
My true account, lest he returning chide,  
"Doth God exact day-labour, light denied?"  
I fondly ask. But Patience, to prevent  
That murmur, soon replies: "God doth not need  
Either man's work or his own gifts: who best  
Bear his mild yoke, they serve him best. His state  
Is kingly; thousands at his bidding speed  
And post o'er land and ocean without rest:  
They also serve who only stand and wait."

#### QUESTIONS

1. What two meanings has "talent"? What is the speaker's "one talent"?
2. The poem is unified and expanded in its dimensions by a biblical allusion that Milton's original readers would have recognized immediately. What is it? If you do not know, look up Matthew 25:14-30. In what ways is the situation in the poem similar to that of the parable? In what ways is it different?

### **Hero and Leander**

*by John Donne (1572-1631)*

BOTH robb'd of air, we both lie in one ground ;  
Both whom one fire had burnt, one water drown'd

#### QUESTIONS

1. Look up Hero and Leander (if necessary), explain each of the four parts into which this epigram is divided by its punctuation. Which parts are literal? Which are metaphorical?
2. The subject of the poem is taken from Greek legend; its structure is based Greek science. Explain.



**In the Garden**

*Anonymous*

In the garden there strayed  
A beautiful maid  
As fair as the flowers of the morn;  
The first hour of her life  
She was made a man's wife,  
And was buried before she was born.

QUESTION

Resolve the paradox by identifying the allusion.

## Chapter Nine – Meaning and Idea

### Little Jack Horner

*Anonymous*

Little Jack Homer  
Sat in a corner  
Eating a Christmas pie.  
He stuck in his thumb  
And pulled out a plum  
And said, “What a good boy am I!”

The meaning of a poem is the experience it expresses — nothing less. But readers who, baffled by a particular poem, ask perplexedly, “What does it mean?” are usually after something more specific than this. They want something they can grasp entirely with their minds. We may therefore find it useful to distinguish the **total meaning of a poem** — the experience it communicates (and which can be communicated in no other way) — from its **prose meaning** — the ingredient that can be separated out in the form of a prose paraphrase (see Chapter 2). If we make this distinction, however, we must be careful not to confuse the two kinds of meaning. The prose meaning is no more the poem than a plum is a pie or than a prune is a plum.

The prose meaning will not necessarily or perhaps even usually be an idea. It may be a story, a description, a statement of emotion, a presentation of human character, or some combination of these. Tennyson’s “The Eagle” (from Chapter 1) is primarily descriptive; “Western Wind” is an expression of emotion; “My Last Duchess” is an account of human character. None of these poems is directly concerned with ideas. Message hunters will be baffled and disappointed by poetry of this kind, for they will not find what they are looking for, and they may attempt to read some idea into the poem that is really not there. Yet ideas are also part of human experience, and therefore many poems are concerned, at least partially, with presenting ideas. But with these poems message-hunting is an even more dangerous activity, for the message hunters are likely to think that the whole object of reading a poem is to find the message — that the idea is really the only important thing in it. Like Little Jack Horner, they will reach in and pluck out an idea and say, “What a good boy am I!” as if the pie existed for the plum.

The idea in a poem is only part of the total experience that it communicates. The value and worth of the poem are determined by the value of the total experience, not by the truth or the nobility of the idea itself. This is not to say that the truth of the idea is unimportant, or that its validity should not be examined and appraised. But a good idea alone will not make a good poem, nor need an idea with which the reader does not

agree ruin one. Good readers of poetry are receptive to all kinds of experience. They are able to make that “willing suspension of disbelief” that Coleridge characterized as constituting poetic faith. When one attends a performance of *Hamlet*, one is willing to forget for the time being that such a person as Hamlet never existed and that the events on the stage are fictions. Likewise, poetry readers should be willing to entertain imaginatively, for the time being, ideas they objectively regard as untrue. It is one way of understanding these ideas better and of enlarging the reader’s own experience. The person who believes in God should be able to enjoy a good poem expressing atheistic ideas, just as the atheist should be able to appreciate a good poem in praise of God. The optimist should be able to find pleasure in pessimistic poetry, and the pessimist in optimistic poetry. The teetotaler should be able to enjoy *The Rubaiyat of Omar Khayydrn*, and the winebibber a good poem in praise of austerity.

The primary value of a poem depends not so much on the truth of the idea presented as on the power with which it is communicated and on being made a convincing part of a meaningful total experience. We may feel that the idea has been truly and deeply felt by the poet, and that the poet is doing something more than merely moralizing. The plum may be made part of a pie. If the plum is properly combined with other ingredients and if the pie is well baked, it should be enjoyable even for persons who do not care for the type of plums from which it is made. Consider, for instance, the following two poems.

### **Barter**

*by Sara Teasdale (1884-1933)*

Life has loveliness to sell,  
All beautiful and splendid things,  
Blue waves whitened on a cliff,  
Soaring fire that sways and sings,  
And children's faces looking up,  
Holding wonder like a cup.

Life has loveliness to sell,  
Music like the curve of gold,  
Scent of pine trees in the rain,  
Eyes that love you, arms that hold,  
And for your spirit's still delight,  
Holy thoughts that star the night.

Spend all you have for loveliness,  
Buy it and never count the cost;  
For one white singing hour of peace  
Count many a year of strife well lost,  
And for a breath of ecstasy

Give all you have been, or could be.

**Stopping by woods on a Snowy Evening**

*by Robert Frost (1874 —1963 )*

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  
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.

**QUESTIONS**

1. How do these two poems differ in idea?
2. What contrasts are suggested between the speaker in the second poem and (a) his horse and (b) the owner of the woods?

Both of these poems present ideas, the first more or less explicitly, the second symbolically. Perhaps the best way to get at the idea of the second poem is to ask two questions. First, why does the speaker stop? Second, why does he go on? He stops, we answer, to watch the woods fill up with snow — to observe a scene of natural beauty. He goes on, we answer, because he has “promises to keep” — that is, he has obligations to fulfill. He is momentarily torn between his love of beauty and these other various and complex claims that life has upon him. The small conflict in the poem is symbolic of a larger conflict in life. One part of the sensitive thinking person would like to give up his life to the enjoyment of beauty and art. But another part is aware of larger duties and responsibilities owed, at least in part, to other human beings. The speaker in the poem would like to satisfy both impulses. But when the two conflict, he seems to suggest, the “promises” must take precedence.

The first poem also presents a philosophy but an opposing one. For this poet, beauty is of such supreme value that any conflicting demand

should be sacrificed to it: "Spend all you have for loveliness, / Buy it and never count the cost . . . And for a breath of ecstasy / Give all you have been, or could be." Thoughtful readers will have to choose between these two philosophies — to commit themselves to one or the other — but this commitment should not destroy for them their enjoyment of either poem. If it does, they are reading for plums and not for pies.

Nothing we have said so far in this chapter should be construed as meaning that the truth or falsity of the idea in a poem is a matter of no importance. Other things being equal, good readers naturally will, and properly should, value more highly the poem whose idea they feel to be more mature and nearer to the heart of human experience. Some ideas, moreover, may seem so vicious or so foolish or so beyond the pale of normal human decency as to discredit by themselves the poems in which they are found. A rotten plum may spoil a pie. But good readers strive for intellectual flexibility and tolerance, and are able to entertain sympathetically ideas other than their own. They often will like a poem whose idea they disagree with better than one with an idea they accept. And above all, they will not confuse the prose meaning of any poem with its total meaning. They will not mistake plums for pies.

## Chapter Ten – Tone

**Tone**, in literature, may be defined as the writer’s or speaker’s attitude toward his subject, his audience, or himself. It is the emotional coloring, or the **emotional meaning**, of the work and is an extremely important part of the full meaning. In spoken language it is indicated by the inflections of the speaker’s voice. If, for instance, a friend tells you, “I’m going to get married today,” the facts of the statement are entirely clear. But the emotional meaning of the statement may vary widely according to the tone of voice with which it is uttered. The tone may be excited (“I’m going to get married today!”); it may be incredulous (“I can’t believe it! I’m going to get married today”); it may be despairing (“Horrors! I’m going to get married today”); it may be resigned (“Might as well face it. I’m going to get married today”). Obviously, a correct interpretation of the tone will be an important part of understanding the full meaning. It may even have rather important consequences. If someone calls you a fool, your interpretation of the tone may determine whether you roll up your sleeves for a fight or walk off with your arm around his shoulder. If a woman says “No” to a proposal of marriage, the man’s interpretation of her tone may determine whether he asks her again and wins her or starts going with someone else.

In poetry tone is likewise important. We have not really understood a poem unless we have accurately sensed whether the attitude it manifests is playful or solemn, mocking or reverent, calm or excited. But the correct determination of tone in literature is a much more delicate matter than it is with spoken language, for we do not have the speaker’s voice to guide us. We must learn to recognize tone by other means. Almost all the elements of poetry help to indicate its tone: connotation, imagery, and metaphor; irony and understatement; rhythm, sentence construction, and formal pattern. There is therefore no simple formula for recognizing tone. It is an end product of all elements in a poem. The best we can do is to illustrate.

### **Stopping By Woods on a Snowy Evening**

*By Robert Frost*

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  
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.

Robert Frost's "**Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening**" seems a simple poem, but it has always afforded trouble to beginning readers. A very good student, asked to interpret it, once wrote this: "The poem means that we are forever passing up pleasures to go onward to what we wrongly consider our obligations. We would like to watch the snow fall on the peaceful countryside, but we always have to rush home to supper and other engagements. Frost feels that the average person considers life too short to stop and take time to appreciate true pleasures?" This student did a good job in recognizing the central conflict of the poem but went astray in recognizing its tone. Let's examine why.

In the first place, the fact that the speaker in the poem does stop to watch the snow fall in the woods immediately establishes him as a human being with more sensitivity and feeling for beauty than most. He is not one of the people of Wordsworth's sonnet who, "getting and spending," have laid waste their powers and lost the capacity to be stirred by nature. Frost's speaker is contrasted with his horse, who, as a creature of habit and an animal without esthetic perception, cannot understand the speaker's reason for stopping. There is also a suggestion of contrast with the "owner" of the woods, who, if he saw the speaker stopping, might be as puzzled as the horse. (Who most truly "profits" from the woods—its absentee owner or the person who can enjoy its beauty?) The speaker goes on because he has "promises to keep?" But the word "promises" though it may here have a wry ironic undertone of regret, has a favorable connotation: people almost universally agree that promises ought to be kept. If the poet had used a different term, say, "things to do," or "business to attend to," or "financial affairs to take care of," or "money to make," the connotations would have been quite different. As it is, the tone of the poet tells us that the poet is sympathetic to the speaker; Frost is endorsing rather than censuring the speaker's action. Perhaps we may go even further. In the concluding two lines, because of their climactic position, because they are repeated, and because "sleep" in poetry is often used figuratively to refer to death, there is a suggestion of symbolic interpretation: "and many years to live before I die?" If we accept this interpretation, it poses a parallel between giving oneself time to contemplation of the woods and dying. The poet's total implication would

seem to be that beauty is a distinctively human value that deserves its place in a full life but that to devote one's life to its pursuit, at the expense of other obligations and duties, is tantamount to one's death as a responsible being. The poet therefore accepts the choice the speaker makes, though not without a touch of regret.

Differences in tone, and their importance, can perhaps be studied best in poems with similar content. Consider, for instance, the following pair.

**For a Lamb**

*by Richard Eberhart (b. 1904)*

I saw on the slant hill a putrid lamb,  
Propped with daisies. The sleep looked deep.  
The face nudged in the green pillow  
But the guts were out for crows to eat.

Where's the lamb? whose tender plaint  
Said all for the mute breezes-  
Say he's in the wind somewhere,  
Say, there's a lamb in the daisies.

QUESTIONS

1. What connotative force do these words possess: putrid, guts, mute, lamb, daisies, pillow, tender?
2. Give two relevant denotations of "a lamb in the daisies."

**Apparently with no surprise**

*By Emily Dickinson (1830—1886)*

Apparently with no surprise  
To any happy flower,  
The frost beheads it at its play  
In accidental power.

The blond assassin passes on,  
The sun proceeds unmoved  
To measure off another day  
For an approving God.

QUESTIONS

1. What is the blond assassin?
2. What ironies are involved with this poem?

Both of these poems are concerned with natural process; both contrast as their basic organizing principle—a contrast between life and death, innocence and destruction, joy and tragedy. But in tone the two



poems are sharply different. The first is realistic and resigned; its tone is wistful but not pessimistic. The second, though superficially fanciful, is basically grim, almost savage; its tone is horrified. Let's examine the difference.

The title, "For a Lamb" invites associations of innocent, frolicsome youthfulness, with the additional force of traditional Christian usage. These expectations are shockingly halted by the word "putrid." Though the speaker tries to overcome the shock with the more comforting personification implied in "face" and "pillow," the truth is undeniable: the putrefying animal is food for scavengers. The second stanza comes to grips with this truth, and also with the speaker's desire that the lamb might still represent innocence and purity in nature. It mingles fact and desire by hoping that what the lamb represented is still "somewhere" in the wind, that the lamb is both lying in the daisy field and will, in nature's processes, be transformed into the daisies. The reader shares the speaker's sad acceptance of reality.

The second poem makes the same contrast between joyful innocence ("happy flower . . . at its play") and fearful destruction ("beheads it"). The chief difference would seem to be that the cause of destruction - "the blond assassin" - is specifically identified, while the lamb seems to have died in its sleep, pillowed as it is in grass and surrounded by flowers. But the metaphorical sleep is no less a death than that delivered by an assassin - lambs do die, and frost actually does destroy flowers. In the second poem, what makes the horror of the killing worse is that nothing else in nature is disturbed by it or seems even to notice it. The sun "proceeds unmoved / To measure off another day?" Nothing in nature stops or pauses. The flower itself is not surprised, And even God - the God who we have all been told is benevolent and concerned over the least sparrows fall - seems to approve of what has happened, for He shows no displeasure, and He supposedly created the frost as well as the flower. Further irony lies in the fact that the "assassin" (the word's connotations are of terror and violence) is not dark but "blond," or white (the connotations here are of innocence and beauty). The destructive agent, in other words, is among the most exquisite creations of God's handiwork. The poet, then, is shocked at what has happened, and is even more shocked that nothing else in nature is shocked. What has happened seems inconsistent with a rule of benevolence in the universe. In her ironic reference to an "approving God"; therefore, the poet is raising a dreadful question: Are the forces that created and govern the universe actually benevolent? And if we think that the poet is unduly disturbed over the death of a flower, we may consider that what is true for the flower is true throughout nature. Death - even early or accidental death, in terrible juxtaposition with beauty - is its constant condition; the fate that befalls the flower befalls us all. In Dickinson's poem, that is the end of the process. In Eberhart's, the potentially terrible irony is directed into a bittersweet acceptance of both death and beauty as natural.

These two poems, then, though superficially similar, are basically as different as night and day. And the difference is primarily one of tone.

Accurately determining tone, whether it be the tone of a rejected marriage proposal or of an insulting remark, is extremely important, both when reading poetry and in real life. For the experienced reader it will be instinctive and automatic. For the beginning reader it will require study. But beyond the general suggestions for reading that we already have made, there are no specific instructions we can give. Recognition of tone requires an increasing familiarity with the meanings and connotations of words, alertness to the presence of irony and of other figures, and, above all, careful reading. Poetry cannot be read as one would skim a newspaper or a mystery novel looking merely for facts.

### **The Coming of Wisdom with Time**

*by William Butler Yeats (1865-1939)*

Though leaves are many, the root is one;  
Through all the lying days of my youth  
I swayed my leaves and flowers in the sun;  
Now I may wither into the truth.

#### QUESTION

Is the poet exulting over a gain or lamenting a loss?

### **The Oxen**

*by Thomas Hardy (1840-1928)*

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

## QUESTIONS

1. Is the simple superstition referred to in this poem opposed to, or identified with, religious faith? With what implications for the meaning of the poem?
2. What are “these years” (10) and how do they contrast with the years of the poet’s boyhood? What event in intellectual history between 1840 and 1915 (the date Hardy wrote the poem) was most responsible for the change?

### **The Apparition**

By John Donne (1572-1631)

WHEN by thy scorn, O murd'ress, I am dead,  
And that thou thinkst thee free  
From all solicitation from me,  
Then shall my ghost come to thy bed,  
And thee, feign'd vestal, in worse arms shall see :  
Then thy sick taper will begin to wink,  
And he, whose thou art then, being tired before,  
Will, if thou stir, or pinch to wake him, think  
Thou call'st for more,  
And, in false sleep, will from thee shrink :  
And then, poor aspen wretch, neglected thou  
Bathed in a cold quicksilver sweat wilt lie,  
A verier ghost than I.  
What I will say, I will not tell thee now,  
Lest that preserve thee ; and since my love is spent,  
I'd rather thou shouldst painfully repent,  
Than by my threatenings rest still innocent.

## QUESTIONS

1. What has been the past relationship between the speaker and the woman addressed? How does a “solicitation” differ from a proposal? Why does he call her a murderess? What threat does he make against her?
2. Why (according to the speaker) will the woman really be trying to wake up her bedmate? Why, when she fails, will she be “verier” ghost than the speaker?
3. What will the ghost say to her that he will not now reveal lest his telling it “preserve” her? Can we know? Does he know? Why does he make this undefined threat?
4. For what does the speaker say he wants the woman to “painfully repent”? Of what crime or sin would she remain “innocent” if he revealed now what his ghost would say? What is the speaker’s real objective

## **Dover Beach**

*by Matthew Arnold (1822-1888)*

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

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

The Sea of Faith  
Was once, too, at the full, and round earth's shore  
Lay like the folds of a bright girdle furled.  
But now I only hear  
Its melancholy, long, withdrawing roar,  
Retreating, to the breath  
Of the night-wind, down the vast edges drear  
And naked shingles\* of the world.                   \*pebbled beaches

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.

QUESTIONS

1. Identify the physical location of the cliffs of Dover and their relation to the French coast; identify the Aegean and Sophocles.
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?

**Note:**

If you are looking for Chapters 11-12, you need to download the updated version of this file. This is the "old file."

## 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 most 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 complex combination of pattern and variation. Our love of art, then, is rooted in human psychology. We like 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**

*by Ogden Nash (1902—1971)*

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**.

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: “Turtle lives

in a shell which 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 **rime**—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 x in “fix” catches up the concluding consonant sound in “sex;” and its initial f is repeated in the initial consonant sound of “fertile.” Not only do these sound recurrences provide a subtle gratification to the ear, but, they also give the verse structure; they emphasize and draw together the key words of the piece: “sex,” “fix,” and “fertile.”

Poets may repeat any unit of sound from the smallest to the largest. They may repeat individual vowel and consonant sounds, whole syllables, words, phrases, lines, or groups of lines. In each instance, in a good poem, the repetition will serve several purposes: it will please the ear, it will emphasize the words in which the repetition occurs, and it will give structure to the poem. The popularity and initial impressiveness of such repetitions are evidenced by their becoming in many instances embedded in the language as clichés like “wild and woolly;” “first and foremost,” “footloose and fancy-free,” “penny-wise, pound-foolish,” “dead as a doornail,” “might and main,” “sink or swim,” “do or die,” “pell-mell,” “helter-skelter,” “harum-scarum,” “hocus-pocus.” Some of these kinds of repetition have names, as we will see.

A **syllable** consists of a vowel sound that may be preceded or followed by consonant sounds. Any of these sounds may be repeated. The repetition of initial consonant sounds, as in “tried and true,” “safe and

sound," "fish or fowl," "rime or reason," is **alliteration**. The repetition of vowel sounds, as in "mad as a hatter," "time out of mind," "free and easy," "slapdash," is **assonance**. The repetition of final consonant sounds, as in "first and last," "odds and ends," "short and sweet," "a stroke of luck," or Shakespeare's "struts and frets" is **consonance**.

Repetitions may be used alone or in combination. **Alliteration** and **assonance** are combined in such phrases as "time and tide," "thick and thin," "kith and kin," "alas and alack," "fit as a fiddle," and Edgar Allan Poe's famous line, "The viol, the violet, and the vine." **Alliteration and consonance** are combined in such phrases as "crisscross," "last but not least," "lone and lorn," "good as gold," Housman's "Malt does more than Milton can," and Kay's "meanings lost in manners." The combination of assonance and consonance is rime.

**Rime** (rhyme) is the repetition of the accented vowel sound and all succeeding sounds. It is called masculine when the rime sounds involve only one syllable, as in decks and sex or support and retort. It is **feminine** when rime sounds involve two or more syllables, as in *turtle* and *fertile* or *spitefully* and *delightfully*. It is referred to as **internal rime** when one or more riming words are within the line and as **end rime** when the riming words are at the ends of lines. **End rime** is probably the most frequently used and most consciously sought sound repetition in English poetry. Because it comes at the end of the line, it receives emphasis as a musical effect and perhaps contributes more than any other musical resource except rhythm and meter to give poetry its musical effect as well as its structure.

There exists, however, a large body of poetry that does not employ rime and for which rime would not be appropriate. Also, there has always been a tendency, especially noticeable in modern poetry, to substitute **slant rimes** for perfect rimes at the ends of lines. Slant rimes (also called *approximate rimes*) include words with any kind of sound similarity, from close to fairly remote. Under slant rhyme we include alliteration, assonance, and consonance or their combinations when used at the end of the line; **half-rime** (feminine rimes in which only half of the word rimes — the accented half, as in *lightly* and *frightful*, or the unaccented half, as in *yellow* and *willow*); and other similarities too elusive to name.

### **That night when joy began**

*by W. H. Auden (1907—1973)*

That night when joy began  
Our narrowest veins to flush,  
We waited for the flash  
Of morning's levelled gun.

But morning let us pass,  
And day by day relief



Outgrows his nervous laugh,  
Grown credulous of peace,

As mile by mile is seen  
No trespasser's reproach,  
And love's best glasses reach  
No fields but are his own.

#### QUESTIONS

1. What has been the past experience with love of the two people in the poem? What is their present experience? What precisely is the tone of the poem?
2. What basic metaphor underlies the poem? Work it out stanza by stanza. What is the "flash of morning's leveled gun"? Does line 10 mean that no trespasser reproaches the lovers or that no one reproaches the lovers for being trespassers? Does "glasses" (11) refer to spectacles, tumblers, mirrors, or binoculars?
3. Point out three personifications.
4. The rime pattern in the poem is intricate and exact. Work it out, considering alliteration, assonance, and consonance.

In addition to the repetition of individual sounds and syllables, poet may repeat whole words, phrases, lines, or groups of lines. When such repetition is done according to some fixed pattern, it is called a **refrain**. The refrain is especially common in songlike poetry. Shakespeare's "Winter" and "Spring" furnish examples of refrains.

We have not nearly exhausted the possibilities of sound repetition 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 break down under its own machinery. 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 ivy and lovely, but we have no name to connect the v in vine with the v's in ivy and lovely, or the second l in lovely with the first l, or the final syllables of ivy 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 caused 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 is irrelevant. *Bear* and *pair* are rimes, but *through* and *rough* are

not. *Cell* and *sin*, *folly* and *philosophy* alliterate, but *sin* and *sugar*, *gun* and *gem* do not. Second, alliteration, assonance, consonance, and **masculine rime** are matters that ordinarily involve only stressed or accented syllables; for only such syllables ordinarily make enough impression on the ear to be significant in the sound pattern of the poem. For instance, we should hardly consider *which* and *its* in the second line of “The Turtle” an example of assonance, for neither word is stressed enough in the reading to make it significant as a sound. Third, the words involved in these repetitions must be close enough together that the ear retains the sound, consciously or subconsciously, from its first occurrence to its second. This distance varies according to circumstances, but for alliteration, assonance, and consonance the words ordinarily have to be in the same line or adjacent lines. End rime bridges a longer gap.

### **God’s Grandeur**

*by Gerard Manley Hopkins (1844 – 1889)*

The world is charged with the grandeur of God.  
It will flame out, like shining from shook foil;  
It gathers to a greatness, like the ooze of oil  
Crushed. Why do men then now not reck his rod?  
Generations have trod, have trod, have trod;  
And all is seared with trade; bleared, smeared with toil;  
And wears man’s smudge and shares man’s smell: the soil  
Is bare now, nor can foot feel, being shod.

And for all this, nature is never spent;  
There lives the dearest freshness deep down things;  
And though the last lights off the black West went  
Oh, morning, at the brown brink eastward, springs—  
Because the Holy Ghost over the bent  
World broods with warm breast and with ah! bright wings.

#### QUESTIONS

1. What is the theme of this sonnet?
2. The image in lines 3-4 possibly refers to olive oil being collected in great vats from crushed olives, but the image is much disputed. Explain the simile in line 2 and the symbols in lines 7-8 and 11-12.

We should not leave the impression that the use of these musical devices is necessarily or always valuable. Like the other resources of poetry, they can be judged only in the light of the poem’s total intention. Many of the greatest works of English poetry—for instance, *Hamlet* and *King Lear* and *Paradise Lost*—do not employ end rime. Both alliteration and rime, especially feminine rime, become humorous or silly if used excessively or unskillfully. If the intention is humorous, the result is

delightful; if not, fatal. Shakespeare, who knew how to use all these devices to the utmost advantage, parodied their unskillful use in lines like “The preyful princess pierced and pricked a pretty pleasing pricket” in *Love’s Labor’s Lost* and “Whereat with blade, with bloody, blameful blade, He bravely broached his boiling bloody breast” in *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*. Swinburne parodied his own highly alliterative style in “Nephelidia” with lines like “Life is the lust of a lamp for the light that is dark till the dawn of the day when we die.” Used skillfully and judiciously, however, musical devices provide a palpable and delicate pleasure to the ear and, even more important, add dimension to meaning.

### **We Real Cool**

By Gwendolyn Brooks (b. 1917)

*The Pool Players.*  
*Seven 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.

### QUESTIONS

1. In addition to end rhyme, what other musical devices does this poem employ?
2. Try reading this poem with the we’s 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. Was the criticism justified? Why or why not?

### **Counting-Out Rhyme**

By Edna St. Vincent Millay

Silver bark of beech, and sawlow  
Bark of yellow birch and yellow  
Twig of willow.

Stripe of green in moosewood maple,

Colour seen in leaf of apple,  
Bark of popple.

Wood of popple pale as moonbeam,  
Wood of oak for yoke and barn-beam,  
Wood of hornbeam.

Silver bark of beech, and hollow  
Stem of elder, tall and yellow  
Twig of willow.

#### QUESTIONS

1. List all instances of alliteration, assonance, consonance, half-rime, internal rime, and word repetition.
2. How serious is the purpose of this poem?
3. What is a “counting-out rhyme”? What is being counted here?

## Chapter Twelve – Rhythm and Meter

Our love of rhythm and meter is rooted even deeper 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-tick, but we hear them go tick-tock, tick tock in an endless trochaic. The click of die railway wheels beneath us patterns itself into a tune in our heads. Unquestionably, language that is rhythmical holds a strong appeal for us.

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 rhythmical, for all language involves some kind of alternation between accented and unaccented syllables. Language varies considerably, however, in the degree to which it exhibits rhythm. In some forms of speech the rhythm is so unobtrusive or so unpatterned that we are scarcely, if at all, aware of it. In other forms of speech the rhythm is so pronounced that we may be tempted to tap our foot to it.

**Meter** is the kind of rhythm we can tap our foot to. In metrical language the accents are arranged to occur at apparently equal intervals of time, and it is this interval we mark off with the tap of our foot. Metrical language is called **verse**. Nonmetrical language is **prose**. Not all poetry is metrical, nor is all metrical language poetry. *Verse* and *poetry* are not synonymous terms, nor is a *versifier* necessarily a *poet*.

The study of meter is a fascinating but highly complex subject. It is by no means an absolute prerequisite to an enjoyment, even a rich enjoyment, of poetry. But a knowledge of its fundamentals does have certain values. It can make the beginning reader more aware of the rhythmical 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 is adapted to thought, 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. It is not so difficult as its terminology might suggest.

In every word of more than one syllable, one syllable is accented or stressed, that is, given more prominence in pronunciation than the rest. We say inter, enter, intervene, enterprise, interpret. These accents are indicated in the dictionary, and only rarely are words in good poems accented differently: only cannot be pronounced only. If words of even tone syllable are arranged into a sentence, we give certain words or syllables more prominence than the rest. We say: "He went to the store" or "Ann is driving her car." There is nothing mysterious about this; it is the normal process of language. The only difference between prose and verse

is that in prose these accents occur more or less haphazardly; in verse the poet has arranged them to occur at regular intervals.

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

The basic metrical unit, the **foot**, consists normally of one accented syllable plus one or two unaccented syllables, though occasionally there may be no unaccented syllables, and very rarely there may be three. For diagramming verse, various systems of visual symbols have been invented. In this book we shall use a short curved line to indicate an unaccented syllable and a short horizontal line to indicate an accented syllable. We generally do not attempt through longer or shorter horizontal lines to distinguish between heavier or lighter accents. A vertical bar will indicate the division between feet. The basic kinds of feet are shown in the first table below.

Examples	Name of foot	Name of meters
$\overset{\curvearrowright}{\text{in}}-\overset{\curvearrowright}{\text{ter}}$ $\overset{\curvearrowright}{\text{the}} \overset{\curvearrowright}{\text{sun}}$	Iamb	Iambic
$\overset{\curvearrowright}{\text{en}}-\overset{\curvearrowright}{\text{ter}}$ $\overset{\curvearrowright}{\text{went}} \overset{\curvearrowright}{\text{to}}$	Trochee	Trochaic
$\overset{\curvearrowright}{\text{in}}-\overset{\curvearrowright}{\text{ter}}-\overset{\curvearrowright}{\text{vene}}$ $\overset{\curvearrowright}{\text{in}} \overset{\curvearrowright}{\text{a}} \overset{\curvearrowright}{\text{hut}}$	Anapest	Anapestic
$\overset{\curvearrowright}{\text{en}}-\overset{\curvearrowright}{\text{ter}}-\overset{\curvearrowright}{\text{prise}}$ $\overset{\curvearrowright}{\text{col}}-\overset{\curvearrowright}{\text{or}} \overset{\curvearrowright}{\text{of}}$	Dactyl	Dactylic
$\overset{\curvearrowright}{\text{True}}-\overset{\curvearrowright}{\text{blue}}$	Spondee	Spondaic
$\overset{\curvearrowright}{\text{truth}}$	Monosyllabic foot	

The secondary unit of measurement, the **line**, is measured by naming the number of feet in it. The following names are used:

Monometer	one foot	Pentameter	five feet
Dimeter	two feet	Hexameter	six feet
Trimeter	three feet	Heptameter	seven feet
Tetrameter	four feet	Octameter	eight feet

The third unit, the **stanza**, consists of a group of lines whose metrical pattern is repeated throughout the poem. Since not all verse is written in stanzas, we shall save our discussion of this unit till a later chapter.

The process of measuring verse is referred to as **scansion**. To scan any specimen of verse, we do three things: (1) we identify the prevailing foot, (2) we name the number of feet in a line—if this length follows any regular pattern, and (3) we describe the stanza pattern — if there is one. We may try out our skill on the following poem.

## Virtue

By George Herbert (1593-1633)

Sweet day, so cool, so calm, so bright,  
The bridal of the earth and sky;  
The dew shall weep thy fall to night,  
For thou must die.

Sweet rose, whose hue, angry and brave,  
Bids the rash gazer wipe his eye;  
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.

The first step in scanning a poem is to read it normally according to its prose meaning, listening to where the accents fall, and perhaps beating 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 which seem most regular, with accents that fall unmistakably at regular intervals. In “Virtue” lines 3, 10, and 14 clearly fall into this category, as do also 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	3
∨   —       ∨   —       ∨   —       ∨   —	
A box where sweets   com- pact- ed lie;	10
∨   —       ∨   —       ∨   —       ∨   —	
Like sea-soned tim-ber, nev-er gives	14

Lines 4, 8, and 12 are so nearly identical that we may let line 4 represent all three:

∨   —       ∨   —	
For thou   must die.	4

Surveying what we have done so far, we may with some confidence say that the prevailing metrical foot of the poem is iambic; we also reasonably may hypothesize that the second and third lines of each stanza are tetrameter (four-foot) lines and that the fourth line is diameter. What

about the first line? Line 1 contains eight syllables, and the last six are clearly iambic:

Sweet day, |  $\overset{\vee}$ so  $\text{—}$  cool, |  $\overset{\vee}$ so  $\text{—}$  calm, |  $\overset{\vee}$ so  $\text{—}$  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. Many metrists, emphasizing the priority of pattern, would mark it as an iamb. Clearly, however, the word “Sweet” is more important and receives more emphasis in a sensitive reading than the three “so’s” in the line. Other metrists, therefore, would give it equal emphasis with “day” and mark the first foot as a spondee. Neither marking can be called incorrect. It is a matter of the reader’s personal judgment or of his metrical philosophy. Following my own preference, I mark it as a spondee, and mark the first foot in lines 5 and 9 correspondingly. Similar choices occur at several points in the poem (lines 11, 15, 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 they will therefore mark the first foot of this line as a spondee:

$\text{—}$   $\text{—}$  |  $\overset{\vee}$ ly  $\text{—}$   
Then chief- ly lives.

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

$\overset{\vee}$   $\text{—}$  |  $\overset{\vee}$   $\text{—}$  |  $\text{—}$   $\text{—}$  |  $\overset{\vee}$   $\text{—}$   
But though the whole world turn to coal.

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

$\overset{\vee}$   $\text{—}$   $\overset{\vee}$   $\overset{\vee}$   $\text{—}$   $\overset{\vee}$   $\text{—}$   
The bri- dal of the earth and sky;  
 $\overset{\vee}$   $\text{—}$   $\overset{\vee}$   $\overset{\vee}$   $\text{—}$   
Thy root is ev- er in its grave.

But this reading leaves us with an anomalous situation. First, we have only three accents where our hypothetical pattern calls for four. Second, we have three unaccented syllables occurring together, a situation almost never encountered in verse of duple meter. From this situation we 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. A circular process is at work. In this poem the pressure of the pattern will cause most sensitive readers to stress the second of the three unaccented syllables slightly more than those on either side of it. In scansion we recognize this slight increase of stress by



promoting the syllable to the status of an accented syllable. Thus we mark lines 2 and 7 respectively thus:

$\checkmark$  — |  $\checkmark$  — |  $\checkmark$  — |  $\checkmark$  — |  
 The bri- dal of the earth and sky;  
 $\checkmark$  — |  $\checkmark$  — |  $\checkmark$  — |  $\checkmark$  — |  
 Thy root is ev- er 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, must be accented on the first syllable, and thus must be marked as a trochee:

— — |  $\checkmark$  — | —  $\checkmark$  — |  $\checkmark$  — |  
 Sweet rose, whose hue, an- gry and brave.

There is little question also that the following line begins with a trochee in the first foot, followed by a spondee:

—  $\checkmark$  | — — |  $\checkmark$  — |  $\checkmark$  — |  
 Bids the rash gaz- er wipe his eye.

Similarly, the word “Only,” beginning line 13, is accented on the first syllable, thus introducing a trochaic substitution in the first foot of that 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 (*ver-tyus*). Following the tastes of my century, I mark it as three, thus introducing an anapest instead of the expected iamb in the last foot:

—  $\checkmark$  |  $\checkmark$  — |  $\checkmark$  — |  $\checkmark$   $\checkmark$  — |  
 On- ly a sweet and vir- tu- ous soul.

In doing this, however, I am consciously “modernizing” — altering the intention of the poet for the sake of a contemporary audience.

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

— — | —  $\checkmark$  | — — |  $\checkmark$  — |  
 Sweet spring, full of sweet days and ros- es,  
 $\checkmark$  — |  $\checkmark$  — |  $\checkmark$  — |  $\checkmark$  — |  
 My mu- sic shows ye have your clos- es

Such left-over unaccented syllables are not counted in identifying and naming the meter. These lines are both tetrameter, and if we tap our foot while reading them, we shall tap it four times. Metrical verse will often have one and sometimes two left-over unaccented syllables. In iambic and anapestic verse they will come at the end of lines; in trochaic and dactylic verse they will come at the beginning.

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

**1. Good readers ordinarily will not stop to scan a poem they are reading,** and they certainly will not read a poem with the exaggerated emphasis on accented syllables that we sometimes give them in order to make the scansion more apparent. However, occasional scansion of a poem has value, as will become more apparent in the next chapter, which discusses the relation of sound and meter to sense. We shall give just one example here. The structure of meaning in “Virtue” is unmistakable. It consists of three parallel stanzas concerning things that die, 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—whether we consider it iamb or spondee—is the same. The contrasting fourth stanza, however, begins with a trochee, thus departing from both 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 is at best a gross way of describing the rhythmical quality of a poem.** It depends on classifying all syllables into either accented or unaccented categories and on ignoring the sometimes considerable difference between degrees of accent. Whether we call a syllable accented or unaccented depends, moreover, on its degree of accent relative to the syllables on either side of it. 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. Unaccented syllables also vary in weight. In line 5 “whose” is clearly heavier than “-gry” and “and,” and is arguably heavier even than the accented “of” and “in” of lines 2 and 7. The most ardent champion of spondees, moreover, would concede that the accentual weight is not really equivalent in “Sweet rose”: the noun shoulders more of the burden. Scansion is thus incapable of dealing with the subtlest rhythmical effects in poetry. It is nevertheless a useful and serviceable tool. Any measurement device more refined or sensitive would be too complicated to be widely serviceable.

**3. Scansion is not an altogether exact science.** Within certain limits we may say that a certain scansion is right or wrong, but beyond these limits qualified readers might legitimately disagree. Line 11 of “Virtue” provides the best example. Many metrists— those wanting scansion to reflect as closely as possible the underlying pattern — would mark it as perfectly regular: a succession of four iambs. Others — those wishing the scansion to reveal more nearly the nuances of a sensitive reading — would find that

three sensitive readers might read this line in three different ways. One might stress “ye”; a second, “your”; and a third, both.

4. Finally—and this is the most important generalization of all perfect regularity of meter is no criterion of merit. Beginning students sometimes get the notion that it is. If the meter is smooth and perfectly regular, they feel that the poet has handled the meter successfully and deserves all credit for it. Actually, a moderately talented versifier can easily make language go ta-dam ta-dam ta-dam. 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 meter alternates too regularly between light and heavy beats, the result is to banish variation; the meter becomes mechanical and, for any sensitive reader, monotonous. The second is that, once a basic meter has been established, any deviations from it become highly significant and provide a means by which the poet can use meter to reinforce meaning. If a meter is too perfectly regular, the probability is that the poet, instead of adapting rhythm to meaning, has simply forced the meaning into a metric straitjacket.

Actually, what gives the skillful use of meter its greatest effectiveness is that it consists, not of one rhythm, but of two. One of these is the expected rhythm. The other is the heard rhythm. Once we have determined the basic meter of a poem, say, iambic tetrameter, we expect that this rhythm will continue. Thus a silent drumbeat is set up in our minds, and this drumbeat constitutes the expected rhythm. But the actual rhythm of the words — the heard rhythm — will sometimes confirm this expected rhythm and sometimes not. Thus the two rhythms are counterpointed, and the appeal of the verse is magnified, just as when two melodies are counterpointed in music, or as when two swallows, flying together and following the same general course but with individual variations, make a much more eye-catching pattern than one swallow flying alone. If the heard rhythm conforms too closely to the expected rhythm, the meter becomes dull and uninteresting. If it departs too far from the expected rhythm, there ceases to be an expected rhythm. If the irregularity is too great, meter disappears and the result is prose rhythm or free verse (see page 186).

There are several ways in which the poet can introduce variation into the meter. The most obvious way is by the substitution of other kinds of feet for regular feet. In our scansion of line 9 of “Virtue,” for instance, we found a spondee, a trochee, and another spondee substituted for the expected iambs in the first three feet (plus an unexpected unaccented syllable left over at the end of the line). A less obvious but equally important means of variation is through simple phrasing and variation of degrees of accent. Though we began our scansion of “Virtue” by marking lines 3, 10, and 14 as perfectly regular, there is actually a considerable difference among them. Line 3 is quite regular, for the phrasing corresponds with the metrical pattern, and the line can be read ta-dum ta-dum

ta-dum ta-dum. Line 10 is less regular, for the three-syllable word “compacted” cuts across the division between two feet. We should read it ta-dum ta-dum ta-dump-ty dum. Line 14 is the least regular of the three, for it shows no correspondence between phrasing and metrical division. We should read this line ta-dump-ty dump-ty, dump-ty dum. Finally, variation can be introduced by grammatical and rhetorical pauses. The comma in line 14, by introducing a grammatical pause, provides an additional variation from its perfect regularity. Probably the most violently irregular line in the poem is line 5,

Sweet rose, whose hue, angry and brave,

for here the spondaic substitution in the first foot, and the unusual trochaic substitution in the middle of a line in the third foot, are set off and emphasized by grammatical pauses, and also (as we have noted) the unaccented “whose” is considerably heavier than the other two unaccented syllables in the line. Significantly, the violent irregularity of this line (only slightly diminished in the next) corresponds with, and reinforces, the most violent image in the poem. Again, meter serves meaning.

The uses 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 serves, when used well, to heighten our attention to and awareness of what is going on in a poem. Finally, by choice of meter, and by skillful use of variation within the metrical framework, the poet can adapt the sound of verse to its content and thus make meter a powerful reinforcement of meaning. Nevertheless, we should avoid the notion that there is any mystical correspondence between certain meters and certain emotions. There are no “happy” meters and no “melancholy” ones. The choice of meter is probably less important for poets than how they handle it after they have chosen it. However, some meters are swifter than others, some slower; some are more lilting than others, some more dignified. Poets can choose meters that are appropriate or inappropriate to the content of the poem, and by their handling of them can increase or decrease the appropriateness. A swift, lilting meter used for a serious and grave subject will probably keep the reader from feeling any really deep emotion, while a more dignified meter will intensify the emotion. In all great poetry, meter works intimately with the other elements of the poem to produce the appropriate total effect.

We must not forget, of course, that poetry need not be metrical at all. Like alliteration and rime, like metaphor and irony, like even imagery, meter is simply one resource poets may use. Their job is to employ 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 can we judge them.

## SUPPLEMENTAL NOTE

Of the four standard meters, iambic is by far the most common. Perhaps eighty percent of metered poetry in English is iambic. Anapestic meter (examples: “The Chimney Sweeper,” and “In the Garden;”) is next most common. Trochaic meter (example: “Counting-Out Rhyme,”) is relatively infrequent. Dactylic meter is so rare as to be almost a museum specimen (“Bedtime Story,” in stanzas of three tetrameter lines followed by a dimeter line, is the sole example in this book).

Because of the predominance of iambic and anapestic meters in English verse, and because most anapestic poems have a high percentage of iambic substitutions, Robert Frost has written that in our language there are virtually but two meters: “Strict iambic and loose iambic.” This is, of course, an overstatement; but, like many overstatements, it contains a good deal of truth. “Strict iambic” is strictly duple meter: it admits no trisyllabic substitutions. Trochees, spondees, and occasionally, monosyllabic feet may be substituted for the expected iambs, but not anapests or dactyls. The presence of a triple foot has such a conspicuous effect in speeding up or loosening up a line that the introduction of a few of them quite alters the nature of the meter. Herbert’s “Virtue” is written “strict iambic” (most of its feet are iambic; and, with the dubious exception of “virtuous,” it contains no trisyllabic feet). “In the Garden” and “The Chimney Sweeper” (after its difficult first stanza) are anapestic (most of their feet are anapests). But e. e. cummings’s “if everthing happens that can’t be done,” though by actual count it has more iambic feet than anapestic, sounds more like “The Chimney Sweeper” than it does like “Virtue.” It would be impossible to define what percentage of anapestic feet a poem must have before it ceases seeming iambic and begins seeming anapestic, but it would be considerably less than fifty percent and might be more like twenty-five percent. At any rate, a large number of poems fall into an area between “strict iambic” and “prevailingly anapestic,” and they might be fittingly described as iambic-anapestic (what Frost called “loose iambic”).

Finally, the importance of the final paragraph preceding this note must be underscored: poetry need not be metrical at all. Following the prodigious example of Walt Whitman in the nineteenth century, more and more twentieth-century poets have turned to the writing of free verse. Free verse, by our definition, is not verse at all; that is, it is not metrical. It may be rimed or unrimed but is more often the latter. The only difference between free verse and rhythmical prose is that free verse introduces one additional rhythmical unit, the line. The arrangement into lines divides the material into rhythmical units, or cadences. Beyond its line arrangement there are no necessary differences between it and rhythmical prose. Probably more than fifty percent of published contemporary poetry is written in **free verse**.

To add one further variation, a number of contemporary poets have begun writing “prose poems,” or poems in prose (example: Carolyn Forché’s “The Colonel,” No. 226). It is too early to determine whether this is a passing fashion or will be a lasting development.