**Meter**

When we talk, we naturally stress certain syllables and refrain from stressing others. Poets consider this trait when they write poetry. They carefully choose their words to control the rhythm in which we read their work. Most poems will have a general pattern of rhythm, and we call this pattern its *meter*. No poem will have a perfectly consistent rhythm because poets deliberately choose words that vary the rhythm and thereby direct our attention to important ideas.

Often, the meter of the poem is easy to determine, particularly when it is simple and regular. Sometimes, though, the meter is more complex, and we must read carefully and mark it as we go before it becomes clear. This marking of a metrical scheme is called “scanning” the poem. The conventional way to scan a poem is to place the accent mark (´) above stressed syllables and to place the breve mark (˘) above the unstressed syllables.

Consider this sentence: “I saw a cat run up the maple tree.” When you read this sentence, you naturally stress the words “saw,” “cat,” “up,” and “tree.” You also stress the first syllable in “maple.” It is scanned this way:

\[˘   ´   ˘    ´    ˘     ´    ˘     ´  ˘      ´\]

\[I \text{saw a} \text{cát run up} \text{the} \text{maple tree}.\]

The sentence has a pattern of an unstressed syllable followed by a stressed syllable. This pattern is called *iambic meter*. Our everyday speech, in general, follows this pattern, so many poets, including William Shakespeare, use it in their verse.

The pattern of a stressed syllable followed by an unstressed one is called *trochaic meter*. In English, our sentences usually don’t end with unstressed syllables, so poets sometimes drop the terminal unstressed syllables from their lines. Here is an example of *trochaic meter*:

\[´   ˘       ´      ˘     ´      ˘      ´    ˘        ´\]

\[Failing tests will pull your áverage down.\]
“Fail-,” “tests,” “pull,” “av-,” and “down” are the stressed syllables. Note that it is necessary to read the second two syllables of “average” as though they were one syllable, “v’rage.” You will find that is a common occurrence in poetry, and poets often simply write words with the apostrophe to ensure that we read it that way. Frequent instances of this are the words “over,” written as “o’er,” and “even” written as “e’en.” Watch for these words as you scan older poetry.

Now read the following question and note the stressed syllables:

Why don’t we go to the pool for a swim?

The stresses are on the words “why,” “go,” “pool,” and “swim.” This pattern of a stressed syllable followed by two unstressed syllables is called dactylic meter. Again, as in the trochaic meter, poets frequently drop the unstressed syllables at the end of a line.

The fourth most common meter is anapestic, two unstressed syllables followed by a stressed one. An example of anapestic meter is:

If you eat only candy, your teeth will rot out.

If your mother said this, she would stress “eat,” “can-,” “teeth,” and “out.”

Exercises IX:
In the following questions, read the poems and scan them. Determine their meters by finding the general pattern of stresses.

1. “To My Dear and Loving Husband” (GSP, 6) ____________________

2. “The Tyger” (BLP, 25) ____________________

3. “I Died for Beauty” (GAP, 30) ____________________
4. “Annabel Lee” (BLP, 58) ____________________

5. “The Charge of the Light Brigade” (BLP, 62) ____________________

One set of the metrical pattern, consisting of one stressed syllable and one or more unstressed syllables, is called a poetic foot. A line of poetry contains one or more feet. Here are the names used for the number of feet in a line of poetry:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Number of Feet</th>
<th>Name</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>monometer</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>dimeter</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>trimeter</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>tetrameter</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>pentameter</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>hexameter</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>heptameter</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>octameter</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

After marking the stresses in a line of poetry, find the number of feet by drawing a vertical line after each foot. In this way, you can find the meter of the poem. The following line from John Donne’s “Death Be Not Proud” is a line of *iambic pentameter* (five feet of iambic meter):

\[
\overline{-} \overline{\, \,} | \overline{\, \,} \overline{\,} | \overline{\, \,} \overline{\,} | \overline{\, \,} \overline{\,} | \overline{\, \,} \overline{\,} \\
\text{And death shall be no more: Death thou shalt die}
\]

Many English poems were written in *common meter*, which is a line of *iambic tetrameter* followed by a line of *iambic trimeter*. It is a sing-song meter that causes us to pause at the end of every *trimetric* line. “Amazing Grace” is written in common meter, also known as hymnal measure. Notice how you instinctively pause after the word “me.”
Amazing grace, how sweet the sound
That saved a wretch like me.
I once was lost, but now am found
Was blind but now I see.

Exercise X:
Using your work from the previous exercise, find the number of feet in each line of the poems. Now, identify the metrical scheme for each one.

1. “To My Dear and Loving Husband” (GSP, 6) ____________________

2. “The Tyger” (BLP, 25) ____________________

3. “I Died for Beauty” (GAP, 30) ____________________

4. “Annabel Lee” (BLP, 58) ____________________

5. “The Charge of the Light Brigade” (BLP, 62) ____________________

Use the following templates to write your own examples of the meters given. (Write single words or syllables in each blank.)

6. iambic pentameter

   ________ ________ ________ ________ ________ ________ ________ ________ ________
Exercise XI:
Read “The Destruction of Sennacherib,” by Lord Byron (BLP, 34). (Sennacherib is pronounced “suh-NAK-uh-rib.”)

1. Find the meter.

2. Read the Biblical account of Sennacherib in 2 Kings 18 and 19. Before his final battle, what had Sennacherib done?
3. What single verse from 2 Kings 18 and 19 provides the basis for Lord Byron’s poem?

4. If this poem provided your only knowledge of Sennacherib’s downfall, how might you assume that he died? According to 2 Kings 19:37, how does Sennacherib die?

5. When a poet or fiction writer alters certain factual details for effect, he is said to be exercising poetic license. Why do you think Lord Byron used poetic license in this poem?
Imagery

Imagery, in its most literal sense, refers to the collection of images in a poem and may be present in many forms. A poet’s descriptions may rely on sensory imagery, an appeal to our five senses of sight, sound, touch, smell, and taste.

Exercise XII:

1. Read each of the following poems and identify the sense to which each primarily appeals.


   ____________________________

   b. “The Passionate Shepherd to His Love,” by Christopher Marlowe (BLP, 5)

   ____________________________

   c. “To Celia,” by Ben Jonson (BLP, 11) ______________________

   d. “Sympathy,” by Paul Laurence Dunbar (GAP, 42)

   ____________________________

   e. “This is Just to Say,” by William Carlos Williams (GAP, 61)

   ____________________________

2. Read “Upon Julia’s Clothes,” by Robert Herrick (BLP, 13). What does the word “liquefaction” mean? What image of Julia’s clothes is communicated by the use of this word? To which sense (or senses) does this image appeal?
Writing Activity:

3. Think of a subject that you can experience with all five senses: sight, smell, taste, touch, hearing. Write a five-sentence descriptive paragraph appealing to each of the senses.
Analogy

Analogy, another type of imagery, is one way for poets to present their ideas to us in something of a concrete and shorthand way. Instead of describing something for us, they can simply tell us how their idea resembles something else. For example, instead of telling us that he thinks love is fresh and bright and fragrant, pleasing to the eye and also to the ear, Robert Burns, in “A Red, Red Rose,” (BLP, 28) says,

O, my luve is like a red, red rose that’s newly sprung in June.
O, my luve is like a melodie that’s sweetly play’d in tune.

When that poem was written, that comparison was new and fresh and caused people to stop and consider how love is like a flower. Poets always strive for accurate, but novel, comparisons to use.

Similes are comparisons that use the word “like” or “as.” In each of the lines above, Robert Burns uses a simile. (O, my luve is like a red, red rose . . .) Metaphors omit the comparison word and simply say that the two items being compared are the same. An example of a metaphor is “I am a rock, I am an island.” The songwriter/poet here is saying that he is like a rock in that he is emotionally impenetrable and like an island in that he does not need the support of a community.

Poets sometimes attribute human characteristics to animals or inanimate objects. This device is called personification. Consider this portion of a nursery rhyme:

The little dog laughed to see such sport
and the dish ran away with the spoon.

Because dogs don’t laugh and kitchenware doesn’t run off, these items have been personified.
Exercise XIII:

1. Complete these similes with the tired, worn out endings you hear all the time.
   a. As black as __________________
   b. As happy as a __________________
   c. As sweet as __________________
   d. As dark as __________________
   e. As soft as a __________________
   f. As smooth as __________________
   g. As hard as a __________________
   h. As quiet as a __________________
   i. As light as a __________________
   j. As pretty as a __________________

Did you notice how quickly you were able to finish the phrases? These phrases are examples of clichés. The mark of a good poet is the ability to create fresh, interesting images instead of using common, obvious phrases.

2. Try to think of fresh, new ways to make the following comparisons.
   a. Festooned like ______________________ (Simile)
   b. As unruly as _________________________ (Simile)
   c. The prairie grass was ____________________ (Metaphor)
   d. Snails were _____________________ (Personification)
   e. A homeless man was ____________________ (Metaphor)
   f. Photocopies shot from the machine like _________________ (Simile)
   g. Homework piled up like _______________________ (Simile)

Writing innovative and fresh comparisons takes much effort. How much longer did you struggle with this answer than the one before it?
Exercise XIV:
Read “The Builders,” by Henry Wadsworth Longfellow (GAP, 6), “Because I Could Not Stop for Death,” by Emily Dickinson (GAP, 29), and “Dream Deferred,” by Langston Hughes (GAP, 75).

1. In these three poems, determine which device is primarily used in each: simile, metaphor, or personification. Write your answer in the blank.
   a. “The Builders” __________________  
   b. “Because I Could Not Stop for Death” __________________ 
   c. “Dream Deferred” __________________  

2. Restate the questions posed in “Dream Deferred” as sentences:
   a. A dream deferred may dry up like a ____________________.
   b. A dream deferred may fester like a ____________________.
   c. A dream deferred may stink like ____________________.
   d. A dream deferred may crust and sugar over like a ____________________.

3. What does the phrase “dream deferred” mean?

4. Each question in the poem makes a comparison. How does the comparison in the final question of the poem differ from the other comparisons?
5. Why do you think that Hughes changed form in the last question?

6. What subject is being addressed in both “Dream Deferred” and “Sympathy,” by Paul Laurence Dunbar (GAP, 42)?

7. What does the subject of Dickinson’s poem mean when she says she “could not stop for Death”?

8. In the third stanza, what does the subject of the poem see on her carriage ride? What do each of these three images symbolize? To determine the meaning of the images, think of what you associate with these images.

9. What is “the house” Dickinson refers to in the fourth stanza? What form of comparison is she using?

10. How is death personified?
11. What two things is the poet comparing in “The Builders?”

12. For how long does the comparison continue in the poem?

13. How does the theme of “The Builders” compare or contrast to the message of 1 Corinthians 12?

14. How does the theme of “The Builders” (GAP, 6) compare or contrast to Whitman’s “I Hear America Singing” (GAP, 22)? Use examples from the text to support your response.
**Tone**

_Tone_ is the feeling the reader gets when he reads a poem. When you read a poem, attempt to articulate precisely how the poem made you feel. You may have a feeling of sadness, but you should be able to delve a little deeper and question why you are feeling sad. Did the poem evoke feelings of wistfulness or regret? If you find that you are having trouble identifying a specific tone, try using a thesaurus to find a more precise word. Where “sadness” may be adequate, a word such as “bereaved,” “bitter,” “dejected,” “grief-stricken,” “melancholy,” or “pessimistic” may be a more accurate evaluation of the feeling associated with a poem.

Now that we have studied all the elements of poetry, we are equipped to attempt to identify the tone of a poem. Everything in the poem contributes to its tone; therefore, consider the poet’s words and diction, imagery, subject matter, and other devices you have studied.

**Exercise XV:**


1. What is the tone of each poem?
   a. “Holy Sonnet XIV” ____________________________
   b. “When I Was One-and-Twenty” _________________
   c. “I’m Nobody! Who Are You?” __________________
   d. “We Wear the Mask” __________________________

2. “Holy Sonnet XIV” is full of apparent paradoxical, or contradictory, ideas. List some of these. What is the poet pleading for?
3. In the first line, Donne addresses the “three-person’d God.” In the second and fourth lines, he uses a trio of verbs: “knock, breathe, shine,” and “break, blow, burn.” To which person of the trinity (Father, Son, Holy Spirit) might the following verbs correspond? Explain your responses.

a. Knock/break ____________________

b. Breathe/blow ____________________

c. Shine/burn ____________________

4. Summarize the advice of the wise man in “When I Was One-and-Twent.”

5. What lesson has the poet learned by the end of the poem?

6. Read Proverbs 7. How does this advice compare or contrast to the advice of the wise man in “When I Was One-and-Twent”?

7. What is the rhyme scheme of “We Wear the Mask?” What is the “mask” in Dunbar’s poem?
8. What might Dickinson be criticizing in her poem?

9. Why do you think the subject of Dickinson’s poem is glad to be a “nobody”? (Note: during her life, Emily Dickinson was extremely reclusive.) What might be attractive about being a “nobody”? Why might it be attractive to be reclusive?

10. Read Matthew 6:1–18. Who or what does Jesus criticize in this passage?

11. Read Galatians 1:10. What sorts of things might Dickinson’s “admiring bog” want to see in our lives? (In other words, what kinds of things does the world seem to value?) What kinds of conflicts might we experience if we tried to please both God and other people?