

What is Poetry?

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Upon hearing poems that don't rhyme or follow a metrical pattern, new members of my writers' workshop often ask me what poetry is then, if not meter and rhyme?

And this is a very good and fair question, one that deserves an answer.

What is poetry? Is it lined verse, whether rhyming or not?

What about the prose poem (a poem written in prose with no line breaks), which has existed for centuries at least?

There's a saying that "Poetry is what we talk about when we talk about poetry."

Poetry is the art of naming the un-namable, of describing the indescribable. Yet it is itself almost indescribable.

To be more practical about the matter, poetry is almost impossible to define, but we know it when we hear it.

And why and how do we know it when we hear it? For the same reason we know music when we hear it. For the same reason we know the sun when we see it.

The essential elements of a poem are:

- its music (What Ezra Pound called "melopoeia")
- its imagery ("phanopoeia"),
- and its ability to clarify the inexplicable, to name the un namable with precision of language ("logopoeia")

And as prose writing begins to do these things, whether it is in lines and/or stanzas or sentences or hyperlinks, it becomes poetry.

Of all three elements though, the music is primarily what transforms writing into poetry. Prose can have imagery and precision of naming as well as poetry.

And of course, there is good reason for this musical connection. Ancient lyric poetry was accompanied by the lyre and so on....

So what is the “music” of poetry? Is this just a metaphor?

Well, let’s go back to the original question: What is poetry if not meter and rhyme?

Well, just as there is meter in music, there can be meter in writing, which is called verse, although that is not the only or even the best type of music in poetry.

But let’s begin there: Meter in verse refers to a pattern of stressed and unstressed syllables.

Let’s assume the following: / = a **stressed syllable**.

X = an **unstressed syllable**.

There are 4 types of **metric feet**: iamb / troche / anapest / dactyl

1. The iamb reads as X / duh-DUH: X /
I AM

Penta means 5, so 5 **iamb**s (X / X / X / X / X /) is called **iambic pentameter**.

Spenser’s “One day I wrote her name upon the Strand”:

- X / X / X / X / X /
- One day I wrote her name upon the strand

Shakespeare’s “Sonnet 130”:

- X / X / X / X / X /
- My mistress’ eyes are nothing like the sun.

Whitman’s “Song of Myself” (**alliteration** used to emphasize stressed syllables):

- X / X / X / X /
- I celebrate myself and **sing** myself

In relatively contemporary music: Ella Fitzgerald’s “**Goody Goody**”:

X / X / X / X / X /

1:09: I hope you’re satisfied you rascal you.

The romantic poets considered iambic pentameter the most natural rhythm because it mimics the natural rhythm of the heart. They also considered it more romantic and “feminine” (softer) than trochaic pentameter.

2. Troche: / X (5 of these = **trochaic pentameter**.)

The romantic poets considered trochaic pentameter to be harsher and more “masculine” than iambic pentameter:

/ X / X / X / X / X

Robert Hayden’s “Those Winter Sundays”: Sundays too my father got up early.

The Clash’s “**Clampdown**”: (**Alliteration** used to emphasize stressed syllables.)

/ X / X / X / X / X

In these **days** of evil **presidentes**

Another question I’ve been asked by musicians is: “Why can one line have the same number of syllables as another but still not sound right together, or vice versa?”

Well, because syllables are only part of the equation. Meter is also called **ACCENTUAL SYLLABICS**.

Why did Joe Strummer say “president**ES**” (**Spanish**) instead of **presidents** (**English**)?

The two words have different patterns of stressed and unstressed syllables.

/ x x / x / x

Presidents **Presidentes**

/ x / x

PREsiDENTes fits the line’s use of **TROCHAIC PENTAMETER**.

3 and 4. Anapest: X X / **Dactyl:** / X X

- Not usually used in serious verse.
- More for **songs** and **light verse** such as **limericks**.

- X / X X / X X / X
- There once was a man from Nantucket.

That extra unstressed syllable at the of the line (KET) is called a “feminine ending” – so sexist! Since stressed syllables are/were considered more “masculine”, anapestic and dactylic meters, with twice as many unstressed syllables as stressed syllables, are considered more “feminine”.

3. Anapest: X X /

Leonard Cohen’s “The Sisters of Mercy” (5 anapests = anapestic pentameter):

- X X / X X / X X / X X / X X /
- Oh the sisters of Mercy, they are not departed or gone.

4. Dactyl: / X X

Modest Mouse’s “Dramamine” (3 dactyls = Dactylic TRIMETER. Tri = 3.)

/ X X / X X / X X

Traveling, swallowing Dramamine

/ X X / X X / X X

Feeling spaced, breathing out Listerine

Clearly the same metrical patterns that have been used for centuries are still used in music today. But just as poets have always broken form, so have musicians, and there are many other rhythms than those mentioned here. We must remember that just because we can’t understand or label something, that doesn’t make it any less valid or poignant. Perhaps the best part about poetry is that indefinable, almost magical, quality that lies beyond logic and definitions.