

Meter Handout

In most poems, the lines are written according to patterns of rhythm. Poetic meter is the measure of a line of poetry. It is rhythm that can be measured in poems.

SCANSION

Scansion is the act of looking at a poem and marking the metrical units of which it is composed. It means any attempt, by signs, to indicate the beat of a line of poetry and to mark off the division of feet. Here are the steps to take in scanning a poem,

- (1) Mark the syllables (Read the poem at this and each succeeding step.)
- (2) Mark the feet, using / for stressed syllables and *u* for unstressed syllables
- (3) Expect to encounter variations, or “substitutions” where there is meter, but it is irregular. This keeps poems from sounding sing-songy or juvenile. (Nothing wrong with that, IF it is intended to make meaning or to fit an audience.
- (4) Check your scansion to make sure that it reflects the poem rather than preconceived notions of your own.

The smallest of these metrical units is the 'syllable'. English syllables are two kinds: accented or stressed, and unaccented or unstressed. An "accented syllable" requires more wind and push behind it than an unaccented; it also maybe pitched slightly higher or held for a slightly longer time.

After the syllable, the next largest metrical unit is the 'foot', which is group of two or more syllables. The six common kinds of feet in English metrics have been names derived from Greek:

1. An IAMBIC foot consists of unaccented syllable followed by an accented. (u /) It can be heard in such words as "because, hello, Elaine."
2. A TROCHAIC foot consists of an accented syllable followed by an unaccented. (/ u) These are trochaic words: answer, Tuesday, Albert.
3. A DACTYLIC foot consists of an accented syllable followed by two unaccented syllables (/ u u). You can hear the dactylic beat in these words: beautiful, silently, Saturday.
4. An ANAPESTIC foot consists of two unaccented syllables followed by an accented syllable (u u /). These words are anapestic: cavalier, tambourine, Marianne.

5. A SPONDAIC foot consists of two accented syllables (/ /) Examples include:

go forth, step back, sit down

think of strong commands and you'll get the rhythm/beat

6. A PYRRHIC foot consists of two unaccented syllables (u u).

The next largest metrical unit is the 'line'. A line is the regular succession of feet, which may or may not begin with a capital letter (see enjambment). The number of feet in a line of verse determines the measure or meter. Most poems are not built on a fixed meter, but rather on a combination of meters and variety of them.

A line containing only one foot is called a "monometer;" one with two feet, a "dimeter" line, and so on through "trimeter" (3), "tetrameter" (4), "pentameter" (5), "hexameter" (6), "heptameter" (7), and "octameter" (8).

Granted that much more than meter is needed for a poem, does it follow that a poem must have a meter? A large number of poets, especially in the early years of the twentieth century, answered "no." Their poems, written in rhythmical language but not in traditional meters, are called 'free verse'. so-called *unmetrical poetry* is free because the poet has freed himself from conforming to sets of regular metrical patterns.

Free form poetry must not be confused with 'blank verse', which is the customary label for iambic pentameter without rhyme. Unlike the free forms, blank verse has a regular metrical pattern.

Meter has two functions. First, it makes poem pleasurable because it is intrinsically delightful. In addition to making a poem enjoyable, meter makes it more meaningful. It is a part of the total meaning -- a part that cannot always be described in words, but can always be felt and is always lost when a poem is paraphrased or when it is translated from one language to another.

Iambic pentameter is one of the most common types of meter, or metrical schemes (along with iambic tetrameter which is four beats rather than five).

The word pentameter is used because the line is broken up into five feet. An iamb is a poetic foot consisting of one unstressed beat followed by a stressed one, and is often given the notation "|u /," where u is the unstressed beat and / the stressed one (for example, "to-DAY"). An example of how iambic pentameter is read would be:

| i GO| to WORK | to EARN | a LIV | ing DEAR |

| I am| MAster| I am| LOVer| I RULE is mainly trochaic, with a spondee at the end
foot