



Meter

The bible of most poets today regarding meter and sound is a book by Paul Fussell called *Poetic Meter and Poetic Form*. Although some of Fussell's ideas are a bit outdated (namely, he doesn't deal with the visual elements of a poem), his approach is complete, concise and useful. Fussell defines meter as "what results when the natural rhythmical movements of colloquial speech are heightened, organized, and regulated so that [repetition] emerges from the relative phonetic haphazard of ordinary utterance." (4-5) To "meter" something, then, is to "measure" it (the word *meter* itself is derived from the Greek for *measure*), and there are four common ways to view meter.

- **Syllabic**: A general counting of syllables per line.
- **Accentual**: A counting of accents only per line. Syllables may vary between accents.
- **Accentual-syllabic**: A counting of syllables and accents. Syllables may not vary between accents.
- **Quantitative**: Measures the duration of words.

Of the ways of looking at meter, the most common in English are those that are accentual. English, being of Germanic origin, is a predominantly *accentual* language. This means that its natural rhythms are not found naturally from syllable to syllable, but rather from one accent to the next. There may be two or three syllables between accents. For this reason most English language poets opt to look at their own meter as **accentual** or **accentual-syllabic**. The former is the more common; adherence to the latter often leads an English language poet toward self-conscious verse, as their predictable rhythms are counter to natural English speech.

To get a bearing on what these rhythms look and sound like, let's start with a method for writing out the rhythms of a poem. This technique is called **scansion**, and is important because it puts visual markers onto an otherwise entirely *heard* phenomenon.

Scansion

There are three kinds of scansion: the graphic, the musical and the acoustic. Since the most commonly and most easily used is graphic, we will use it in our discussion. For a discussion of the others, I refer you to Fussell, page 18. To begin to look at graphic scansion, we first must look at a couple of symbols that are used to scan a poem.

- ~ = an unaccented syllable
- ` = an accented syllable
- / = a break between poetic feet
- _ = a caesura, or metrical pause

Syllables can either be **accented**, meaning they are naturally given more emphasis when spoken, or **unaccented**, meaning they receive less emphasis when spoken. A **poetic foot** is a unit of accented and unaccented syllables that is repeated or used in sequence with others to form the meter. A **caesura** is a long pause in the middle of a line of poetry.

To show an example of these symbols, let's look at a poem written with the less common, the **accentual-syllabic** meter, in mind. Here are three scanned lines from Dante Gabriel Rossetti's "Autumn Idleness":

This sun/light shames /Novem/ ber where/ he grieves
In dead red leaves, || and will/ not let /him shun
The day, || though bough/ with bough/ be ov/er-run.

"The nature of music is that you must hear all the digressions."
From "The Blue Swan" by Diane Wakowski

You can then see, when comparing the reading of the poem to the scansion marks, how they compare. The accented syllables are marked by ' and the non-accented with ˘. The symbol / shows the break between the feet of the poem, and _ shows a caesura in the line.

These lines are taken from a sonnet and thus somewhat predictably written in **iambic pentameter**. They thus have five accents per line and their syllable counts are 10/10/10. The term **iambic pentameter** often comes up in discussions of Shakespeare or any sonneteer, but the meaning of the term is often mistaken or simply overlooked. Defining **iambic pentameter** helps us break down two important parts of meter: **poetic feet** and **line length**.

Poetic Feet

There are two parts to the term **iambic pentameter**. The first part refers to the type of **poetic foot** being used predominantly in the line. A poetic foot is a basic repeated sequence of meter comprised of two or more accented or unaccented syllables. In the case of an **iambic foot**, the sequence is ˘ ' , or "unaccented, accented". There are other types of poetic feet commonly found in English language poetry.

The primary feet are referred to using these terms (an example word from Fussell's examples is given next to them):

- **Iambic**: destroy
- **Anapestic**: intervene
- **Trochaic**: topsy
- **Dactylic**: merrily

The substitutive feet (feet not used as primary, instead used to supplement and vary a primary foot) are referred to using these terms:

- **Spondaic**: hum drum
- **Pyrrhic**: the sea/ son of/ mists

The second part of defining **iambic pentameter** has to do with line length.

Line Length

The **poetic foot** then shows the placement of accented and unaccented syllables. But the second part of the term, **pentameter**, shows the number of feet per line. In the case of **pentameter**, there are basically five feet per line.

The types of line lengths are as follows:

- One foot: **Monometer**
- Two feet: **Dimeter**
- Three feet: **Trimeter**
- Four feet: **Tetrameter**
- Five feet: **Pentameter**
- Six feet: **Hexameter**
- Seven feet: **Heptameter**
- Eight feet: **Octameter**

Rarely is a line of a poem longer than eight feet seen in English language poetry.

Line length and poetic feet are most easily seen in more formal verse. The example above from D.G. Rossetti is pretty obviously iambic pentameter. And Rossetti uses an **accentual-syllabic** meter to flesh out his poem with quite a bit of success. What most free verse poets find more useful than this strict form is accentual meter, where the accents only are counted in the line (although when scanned, the syllables are still marked off...it is just that their number is not of as much import.)

Take this free-verse example from James Merrill:

A Downward Look

Seen from above, the sky
Is deep. Clouds float down there,

Foam on a long, luxurious bath.
Their shadows over limbs submerged in "air,"

Over protuberances, faults,
A delta thicket, glide. On high, the love

That drew the bath and scattered it with salts

Still radiates new projects old as day,
And hardly registers the tug

When, far beneath, a wrinkled, baby hand
Happens upon the plug.

(Merrill 3)

Things to note about this poem:

There is no any "set" meter in this poem, but the meter clearly plays a key role in its effectiveness. In particular it is worth noting the line that stands alone (line 7). Notice that Merrill moves toward iambic pentameter in line 6 and then sustains it through line 7. Here there is an inversion from the typical set-meter/variation sequence that is found in a lot of more formal poetry. Here the variation comes in the move into set meter, rather than varying *from* a set meter.

Just like establishing a visual pattern in a poem, establishing a meter creates expectations in your reader. Consequently, as with pattern, to vary that meter is to create emphasis. Some will say that your ear should be the first judge on these matters rather than your eye (looking at the scanned poem). There is probably some truth to this. Many poets will tell you that you should always read a poem out loud several times every time you get a draft done. If it doesn't sound good every time, there might be something that isn't working. This is where scanning the poem might come in handy; dissecting the lines and sculpting them until they sound better.

Handout written by Sean Conrey
HTML markup by Erin Karper

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