

Poetic Terms

As we study poetry this semester, we need to understand some basic poetic terms in order to successfully compare the accomplishments of Whitman and Dickinson to the other poets we have read.

Meter

The first step in analyzing a poem in terms of its structure is to determine its meter. Meter is about the poem's rhythm. Most poetry written before Whitman, and a lot of poetry written following Whitman, has a regular rhythmical pattern or meter. To better explain what meter is, let's look at how the Holman Handbook to Literature defines meter:

"The recurrence in poetry of a rhythmic pattern, or the rhythm established by the regular or almost regular occurrence of similar units of sound pattern...The rhythmic unit within the line is called a *foot*. In English, the standard feet are: iambic [unstressed syllable, stressed syllable], trochaic [stressed, unstressed]...spondaic [stressed, stressed], and pyrrhic [unstressed, unstressed], although others sometimes occur.

The number of feet in a line forms another means of describing the meter. The following are the standard English lines: monometer-one foot; dimeter-two feet; trimeter-three feet; tetrameter-four feet; pentameter-five feet; hexameter-six feet; heptameter-seven feet...

To determine the meter of a line, you begin by counting the syllables. You can then divide that number by 2 to determine the type of line. For example, look at the heroic couplet below which was written by Alexander Pope:

"Art is nature to advantage dressed,
What's oft been said, but ne'er so well expressed."

There are 10 syllables in the first line, which would be five feet, so the first line is pentameter. There are 10 syllables in the second line, five feet, so the second line is also pentameter. Notice that you count the syllables, not the words.

Rhyme scheme

Another aspect of analyzing the structure of a poem is to determine its rhyme scheme. The Holman defines "rhyme" as follows:

"Close similarity or identity of sound between accented syllables occupying corresponding positions in two or more lines of verse. The correspondence of sound is based on the vowels and succeeding consonants of the accented syllables, which must, for a true rhyme, be preceded by different consonants. That is, 'fan' and 'ran' constitute true rhymes because the vowel and succeeding

consonant sounds (an) are the same but the preceding consonant sounds are different."

For our discussion we will only consider the end rhyme, that is the sound that occurs at the end of the lines being considered. To mark the rhyme scheme, a letter is associated with the sound beginning with "a." Then, the next end sound is marked with the next letter, "b," and so on. Let's look at the first stanza of Anne Bradstreet's "The Prologue" and then mark the rhyme scheme.

To sing of wars, of captains, and of kings,
Of cities founded, commonwealths begun,
For my mean pen are too superior things:
Or how they all, or each their dates have run
Let poets and historians set these forth,
My obscure lines shall not so dim their worth.

The first end sound is "kings, so it is marked with an "a." Then, "-gun" would be marked "b." "Things" would be "a" again because it rhymes with "kings," and "run" would be "b" because it rhymes with "-gun." The rhyme scheme for this stanza, then, is a-b-a-b-c-c. If you look at the whole poem you will discover that each stanza repeats this regular rhyme scheme. [Also, the lines are pentameter]

Reading Whitman and Dickinson

You cannot really do this kind of analysis with Whitman. He changed how poetry is written by creating "free verse," which means no regular meter and no regular rhyme scheme. That does not mean that the poetry does not have rhythm or rhyme--Whitman's poetry is very rhythmical and there are many uses of alliteration and assonance within and between the lines. As you read *Song of Myself*, see if you can determine how he creates the rhythm without the use of a regular meter.

Dickinson does often use regular meter and rhyme as she often employs the ballad stanza for her poetry. However, her irregular punctuation, especially the use of the dash in the middle of lines, often in the middle of grammatical phrases, creates a startling and uneven gait to the line. Notice too the irregular capitalization of nouns which creates unusual stress on various concepts. As you read Dickinson's poems, notice how she employs these tactics to create a more innovative and exiting poetry.