

A Guide to the Theory of Poetry

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This tutorial, now converted to bookmarked PDF format, is a modest revision of version 1.7 of 2003. Like the other documents in the PPP project, it offers a toolbox of basic concepts and shows how to put them to work in the analysis of poetry.

Tip: use Shift-Ctrl clicks to open links in a separate browser tab.

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1. Rhythm and meter

1.1. Poetry vs prose. Give us a concise definition of poetry. Can't think of one off the cuff? Well, it is always difficult to define a phenomenon in isolation. Asked in this manner, the question has little direction or purpose. So let me rephrase the question, seemingly making it a more difficult one. Let us try to define poetry in contradistinction to prose. In other words, let us aim at a differential definition whose purpose is to bring out the specificity of poetry and whose validity – success or failure to differentiate as intended – is easily tested.

Obviously, on a printed page a poem looks different from a prose passage (a page from a novel, say). In a poem, the individual lines seem to be relatively independent units (and it is no accident that lines of poetry are identified by a special term: *verse*). Prose, in contrast, is *not* made up of verses. In a prose text, it does not really matter whether the lines are short or long. Apparently, then, what we have isolated is a *sufficient condition* (if this text is written in verse then it must be poetry), possibly even a *necessary condition* (if this is poetry then it must have verses). Finding necessary and sufficient conditions is an excellent first step already. Indeed, some recent approaches use these conditions as their basic assumptions. The following account, in contrast, builds on a more traditional approach which recognizes an essential poetical quality even in the absence of the bare look of written versification. Consider the three short passages quoted below. They may all *look* like prose, yet the truth is that only one of them is prose, while two of them come from poetical texts whose versification has simply been suppressed (credit goes to Raith 1962: 15 for inventing this experiment). Nevertheless, many people will be able to spot the difference and identify which is prose and which is poetry.

- In Xanadu did Kubla Khan a stately pleasure-dome decree; where Alph, the sacred river, ran through caverns measureless to man . . .
- If it assume my noble father's person, I'll speak to it though hell itself should gape and bid me hold my peace.

- And then, thought Clarissa Dalloway, what a morning – fresh as if issued to children on a beach.

Most people are reasonably confident to state, correctly, that the first two items are poetry and that the last item is prose. (The first one is the beginning of Coleridge's poem "Kubla Khan"; the second is a line from Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, a play which is largely written in verse, and the third is the beginning of the novel *Mrs Dalloway* by Virginia Woolf.) Apparently, then, the visual impression that poetry is written in verse, though useful as an initial differentiation, is not enough. Indeed, many theorists assume that the true differentiating criterion is not a visual but an auditory one. But how can that be? Because, reading a text, one pronounces it mentally. Reading the three passages cited above, many people note that the poetical passages have a certain rhythm, and this is what interests us in the following. The prose passage from Woolf's novel, in contrast, has no such rhythm; it is 'rhythmically free'.

1.2. Of course, we cannot just go on introducing new terms – verse, rhythm – that are themselves in need of definition. Let us therefore stipulate the following definition of rhythm:

- **rhythm:** the repetition (iteration) of a group of elements.

This is quite a general definition, as it must be, since rhythm is a very general phenomenon. For instance, the definition covers cases like the sequence of tides (low tide, high tide, low tide, high tide, ...), the seasons of the year (spring, summer, autumn, winter), the rhythm of breathing (breathing in, breathing out, ...); the rhythmic contraction and expansion of one's heart (systole, diastole) etc. In all of these examples, rhythm is characterized by (i) elements, (ii) groups, and (iii) iterations. Low tide is an element, high tide is an element; low tide plus high tide is a group; the iteration of the group creates nature's tidal rhythm. Poetical rhythm can be defined on exactly the same principle. The question is, what are the relevant elements and groups? (If you are interested, we are applying a *Gestalt*-theoretical approach to get a grip on the traditional concepts of **prosody**, the study of verse [see Jackendoff 1983: ch8.1].)

1.3. To begin with, it is no accident that the following lines (and virtually thousands more in the corpus of English poetry) are all identical in one specific feature. Which?

- I find no peace, and all my war is done (Wyatt, 1557)
- One day I wrote her name upon the strand (Spenser, 1594)
- That time of year thou mayst in me behold (Shakespeare, 1609)
- Since there's no help, come let us kiss and part (Drayton, 1619)
- And ten low words oft creep in one dull line (Pope, 1711)

Possibly surprising answer: these lines are all identical in length. Well, not length as measured by number of letters or number of words (as is misleadingly suggested by item five – note that item three has *nine* words, not ten); no, it is the number of syllables – the lines are all exactly ten syllables long. And when one reads these lines (either mentally or out loud) you may notice that they tend to break down into smaller groups of syllables.

Poetical rhythm of this sort is called *meter* (from Greek 'measure'), and a line (or verse) that is rhythmical in this manner is said to be *metrical*.

- **meter:** the syllabic rhythm of poetry. A line of verse consists of a sequence of metrical groups (or metrical units). Metrical groups consist of one stressed syllable and one, two, or three unstressed syllables.

1.4. A poem's meter can be brought out by using a technique called **scansion**, a kind of enforced metrical reading. In order to scan a line of poetry, make one radical assumption: assume that a syllable can be either fully stressed or completely unstressed, nothing else. To scan a line means to assign to each of its syllables either zero stress or maximum stress. Suppose, for a moment, that an unstressed syllable sounds like a weak "da" and a stressed one like a strong "DUM". Now take the sequence "da-DUM" and

repeat it a few times (you'll get the hang of it). What you get is clearly rhythmical. Next, take a group of syllables that go like "DUM-da-da", and iterate that. An unmistakable rhythm, a bit like a waltz, but different from the one before. Take one that goes "da-da-DUM". Another kind of rhythm. Take one that goes "da-DUM-da-da". There are many more syllabic patterns – thirty-two exactly – that can be created by combining up to four stressed and unstressed syllables, and an expert prosodist has a separate name for all of them. I am not an expert prosodist, but da-DUM is an *iamb*, DUM-da-da is a *dactyl*, da-da-DUM is an *anapest*, and da-DUM-da-da is a *second paeon*. See Bonheim (1990: ch18) for the full list; in the following paras we will focus on only the four most frequent metrical patterns.

If you are interested in a bit of critical reflection, consider a limit case. Take the single syllable "DUM" and iterate it. Do you get a rhythm? The obvious answer is No. Why? A less obvious but interesting alternative is to say "It depends". Explain, if you can, but perhaps you will have to wait until [1.12](#). Para [1.7](#) and its note on the term *beat* might also be pertinent.

1.5. Rather than continue with "da" and "DUM", which would be a bit silly, we will now introduce a notation which amounts to exactly the same thing but looks more distinguished and more scholarly. Following a suggestion by Bonheim (1990), we will henceforward use a lower-case "o" for an unstressed (zero stressed) syllable, and a "1" for a stressed one. Dedicated prosodists use a variety of special characters for this, but "o"s and "1"s have the advantage of being easily displayed in all kinds of fonts and formats.

1.6. Apart from assigning stress patterns, scansion evidently also involves counting syllables. Counting syllables is an ability that comes intuitively and automatically (possibly an all-too easy way out, I admit, but when in doubt one can always consult a dictionary, right?). Let us just note in passing that the number of syllables in a word is usually equal to the number of vowels (or vowel clusters) in a word. Scanning individual words, we see, for instance, that "compare" has a stress pattern of o1 (da-DUM), "practice" one of 1o (DUM-da), and "feminine" one of 1oo (DUM-da-da). Note, however, that stress patterns may vary both contextually and historically. Hence, sometimes one has the option of either pronouncing a syllable or of swallowing it ("interesting" could be 1oo or 1ooo). Some speakers stress "harassment" on the first syllable, some on the second (ie 1oo or o1o). In ordinary pronunciation, a word like "rattlesnake" has a strong stress on its first syllable, no stress on the second syllable, and a kind of medium stress on the third syllable. In scansion, as was stipulated in [1.4](#), we are forbidden to use medium stresses, so the third syllable of "rattlesnake" must either be upgraded to full stress or downgraded to zero stress. Hence the scansion of "rattlesnake" could be either 1o1 or 1oo (whichever, as we shall see in [1.9](#), is more suitable in a given context). As a general rule, any word in a sentence (including function words like articles and prepositions such as *the*, *in*, *to*, etc) can receive maximum stress (*This is the man* – *This is the man* – *This is the man* – *This is the man*).

1.7. Here is how one determines whether a line is metrical:

- A **metrical line** is a line which, when scanned, has a regular rhythmical pattern. A sequence like o1o1o1 is metrical because it consists of three groups of "o1"s; so is 1oo1oo (two groups of 1oo). In contrast, the sequence o1oo1ooo1o1 is not rhythmical because there are no iterated syllabic groups. Neither is 111111..., for the same reason (this is just an iterated single element, not a group – in modern dance music this is usually called a **beat**; perhaps one should consider this a limit case of rhythm?).
- A **foot** is a minimal syllabic metrical unit (or rhythmical group).

1.8. The four most common feet consist of two or three syllables of which one is stressed.

- **iamb** (o1) An iambic foot is a two-syllable foot that begins with an unstressed syllable, and ends with a stressed one. This is the most common type of foot in English poetry and a useful mnemonic is to associate it with what is probably the best-known line in English literature, "to be or not to be" (Shakespeare).

- **trochee** (1o) A trochaic foot is a two-syllable foot that begins with a stressed syllable followed by an unstressed syllable; an inverted iamb, if you want. Example: "Go and catch a falling star" (Donne).
- **dactyl** (1oo) A dactylic foot is a three-syllable foot that begins with a stressed syllable and ends in two unstressed ones. Example: "Virginal Lilian, rigidly, humbily, dutiful" (Poe 1969 [1846]: 127).
- **anapest** (oo1) An anapestic foot is a three-syllable foot that begins with two unstressed syllables and ends in a stressed syllable; an inverted dactyl, if you want. Example: "It was many and many a year ago" (Poe, "Annabel Lee").

Many prosodists also allow for (at least) two limit-case feet which serve strictly local functions only: the **spondee** (11) and the **pyrrhic** (oo) (see also the discussion of *mixed meter* in [1.13](#), below). It is obvious, however, that neither of these feet allows repetition as a rhythmical group. Moreover, we will soon introduce a distinction between scansion and recitation ([1.14](#)) which removes the need for exceptional feet such as these – usually, they are just ad-hoc fillers touching up local irregularities.

1.9. For a simple exercise (more difficult ones will soon follow), determine, by both oral and written scansion, the type of foot used in Lewis Carroll's "Mad Gardener's Song":

He thought he saw an Elephant,
That practised on a fife;
He looked again, and found it was
A letter from his wife.
"At length I realize," he said,
"The bitterness of Life."

He thought he saw a Rattlesnake
That questioned him in Greek:
He looked again, and found it was
The middle of next week.
"The one thing I regret," he said,
Is that it cannot speak!"

If you do it right everybody will *hear* that Carroll uses an iambic meter throughout. It seems sensible, too, that "Rattlesnake" (cf. discussion in [1.6](#)), in the given context, should be stressed 1o1, not 1oo. Note that, in the approach used here, scansion always attempts to establish a *regular* rhythmical sequence. Theoretically, in line 1, one could easily stress the two occurrences of "he" and leave "thought" unstressed. As a consequence, however, one would then be forced to stress "an", and "Elephant" would come out as o1o – a horrible idea!

1.10. In order to describe a metrical line one indicates (i) type of foot and (ii) number of iterations.

- The **metrical length** of a line equals the number of feet contained in it. On this basis, a verse can be a **monometer** (one foot), a **dimeter** (two feet), a **trimeter** (three feet), a **tetrameter** (four feet), a **pentameter** (five feet), a **hexameter** (six feet) or a **heptameter** (seven feet).

In combination, type of foot plus metrical length yields categories like *trochaic dimeter* (1o 1o), *iambic pentameter* (o1 o1 o1 o1 o1) etc. The iambic pentameter, in particular, stands out as the most popular line in English verse literature, and you do not have to look far in this script to find suitable examples of it (try [1.3](#)). Of course, it is always sensible to query definitions – for instance, you may see the problem that comes with the notion of a *monometer*.

1.11. Poetic license

Sometimes a poet intentionally deviates from ordinary language usage or pronunciation to create or maintain a regular meter. Specifically, poetic license provides two standard tricks for gaining and losing a syllable.

- An **expansion** yields an unstressed syllable, and a **contraction/elision** removes an unstressed syllable.

An example of an expansion:

But came the waves and washèd it away (Spenser)

An example containing two contractions:

And moan th'expense of many vanished sight
Then can I grieve at grievances forgone,
And heavily from woe to woe tell o'er (Shakespeare).

Editors often signal expansions by using a gravis accent mark (`), and elisions by using an apostrophe mark ('). Some expansions (as in *a learned man*, *a crooked leg*) (be careful not to mispronounce these words), and many contractions (like *don't* etc.) are in ordinary use and do not constitute a case of poetic license. There are, however, a number of typically poetic contractions: *o'er* (*over*), *e'er* (*ever*), *e'en* (*even*) – pronounced like *or*, *air*, *Ian*.

- **inversion**: a deviation from ordinary word order for the purpose of maintaining a regular meter. In the examples cited above, "grievances forgone" and "came the waves" are metrically motivated inversions.

1.12. Both a pause and the absence of a pause can be used for metrical purposes.

- A **caesura** is a pause in the body of a line, often marked by punctuation. Occasionally a caesura may substitute for an otherwise missing syllable. Example:

I have a litt-le step-son of on-ly three years old
o 1 o 1 o 1 o 1(!) o 1 o 1 o 1

As Poe (1969 [1846]: 141-2) argues, the caesura after "step-son" takes the place of a missing stressed syllable.¹

- **cadence**: the final rhythm group of a verse (or sentence), usually closing with a pause. Sometimes the final pause is accepted as a substitute for a missing syllable. Example: "Tiger! Tiger! Burning bright" (Blake) [missing syllable at the end substituted by verse-final pause]. Conversely, supernumerary unstressed syllables are freely tolerated in the context of a cadence, yielding a *hypermetrical line*. Example: "A thing of beauty is a joy forever". A **masculine cadence** is one that ends on a stressed syllable; a **feminine cadence** is one that ends on an unstressed syllable.

¹ Poe actually uses a system of long and short syllables in place of our present system of stressed and unstressed syllables. In this particular case he gives the caesura a weight of two short syllables, which would be equivalent to one long syllable, or a stressed one in our system. He actually misquotes from Amelia Welby's "The Little Step-Son", whose first line reads "I have a little step-son, the loveliest thing alive", another one reads "My sturdy little step-son, that's only five years old". Offhand, I would opt for a moderate mixed-meter solution (cf 1.13), say o1 o1 o1 **oo1** o1 o1. This scansion wholly ignores the caesura, and the lines come out as hexameters. I note, however, that most other lines in Welby's poem are heptameters, usually including a caesura in medial position, with or without substituting for any missing syllables. Poe's solution does create a heptameter, so he may be right after all. (Prosodists like arguing.)

For reasons only known to prosodists, a hypermetrical line does not count as an irregular line.

- **run-on line/enjambement:** a line whose flow of speech continues, without a pause, into the next. Occasionally, the meter wraps to the next line, too. Examples:

I met a traveller from an antique land
Who said: Two vast and trunkless legs of stone
Stand in the desert . . . (Shelley, "Ozymandias")

Know ye the land where the cypress and myrtle
Are emblems of deeds that are done in their clime –
Where the rage of the vulture, the love of the turtle
Now melt into softness, now madden to crime? (Byron, "The Bride of Abydos")

Again it was Poe who pointed out that the lines of the Byron poem have a wraparound meter (Poe did not, of course, use the term 'wraparound'). At any rate, they are not as irregular as they may seem at first glance (Poe 1969 [1846]: 144-47).

1.13. Using the metrical potentialities of elision, expansion, caesura, cadence, hypermetrical lines, and enjambement, many seeming irregularities can simply be explained away. There comes a point, however, when a line cannot be regarded as truly regular any longer. Hence a certain amount of rhythmic variation has to be tolerated even within the framework of scansion.

- **mixed meter:** a meter whose basic type of foot is occasionally substituted by a different type of foot.

Mixed meter is governed by what R. Wells has termed the 'principle of maximization' (qtd Ludwig 1990: 55).

- **principle of maximization:** make a line maximally regular by establishing a *predominant meter* and keeping the number of irregular feet to a minimum.

Useful but nonstandard terms would be *endogenic* feet vs *exogenic* feet (insider/outsider feet). Hence, the principle of maximization could be rephrased as *When scanning a line use as many endogenic and as few exogenic feet as possible*. Examples:

- There lived a wife at Usher's well
And a wealthie wife was she (cp 2.7 for fuller quote)
- When that I was, and a tiny little boy (Shakespeare, *Twelfth Night* V.1.375)

Hint: The problem areas are "And a wealthie" in item 1 (why not simply scan this line as a trochaic tetrameter?), and "and a tiny" in item 2. In both cases the "and" seems superfluous, so why did the poets use it at all?

1.14. Scansion vs recitation

Scanning is not the same as reciting. Scansion attempts to establish the metrical basis (or *metrical grid*, Ludwig 1990: 47) of a poetical line. Reciting a poem aims at reading it for sense and effect; scansion is an enforced metrical reading which sounds intentionally monotonous and boring. Although "sense overrides meter" (Smith 1961: 24), a reciter must have a conception of the metrical grid on which a poem has been fashioned; and, sense permitting, s/he will take good care to let this rhythm be perceived.

1.15. As an example, consider the following lines from a poem by Wordsworth (3.8 for full poem):

My heart leaps up when I behold
A rainbow in the sky

Smith argues that the first line should be stressed 01110101, claiming that "The three stressed syllables, *heart leaps up*, are like three strong bounds, and we feel the delight of the poet" (1961: 23). Well, if he says so. But are we talking of scanning or of reciting? Scansion of the two lines, as you can easily verify, is unproblematically and regularly iambic. How a *reciter* actually reads those lines out loud is a different matter altogether. Indeed, the very first thing a reciter will avoid is restricting him- or herself to using zero and full stresses only. When scanning you do not recite, and when reciting you do not scan: it is as simple as that. Failure to recognize this rather basic distinction has resulted in a host of pointless controversies in the history of prosody.

In this context, consider the following point raised by M.H. Abrams, the general editor of the reputable *Norton Anthology*. Abrams quotes the initial quatrain of Shakespeare's sonnet 116:

Let me not to the marriage of true minds
Admit impediments. Love is not love
Which alters when it alteration finds,
Or bends with the remover to remove.

Abrams then comments as follows:

It is perfectly possible, if one crushes all one's sensitivities, to read the first line of this poem as a mechanical iambic pentameter [...]. But of course, nobody ever reads it that way, except to make a point; read with normal English accent and some sense of what it is saying, the line should probably form a pattern something like this [...] [indicating a stress pattern of 1000010011, MJ], which is neither pentameter nor in any way iambic. The second line is a little more iambic, but, read for expression, falls just as far short of pentameter. Only in the third and the fourth lines do we get verses which read as well as scan like five iambic feet. (1986: 2550-51)

Abrams is quite right initially: it would never do to *recite* Shakespeare's lines as "mechanical iambic pentameters" (because sense overrides meter); it is true, too, that if one did read them as iambic pentameters one would probably do it "to make a point" – namely to establish the poem's meter. Unfortunately, Abrams goes on to roundly invalidate his point by using the zero/full stress convention of scansion for illustrating "reading for expression", ie reciting. Surely, pronouncing line 1 as "LET me not to the MARRIage of TRUE MINDS", as Abrams suggests, would strike a live audience as fairly absurd. Worse, line 3 allegedly "read[s] as well as scan[s] like five iambic feet", hence has a stress pattern of "Which ALters WHEN it ALterAtion FINDS", followed by "Or BENDS with THE reMOVer TO reMOVE". Well, if that rendering doesn't "crush all one's sensitivities" then I don't know what does. Consider also line 5 of the same poem:

O no, it is an ever fixed mark

Should the word "fixed" be rendered as one or two syllables? Virtually every reciter and scholar, including Abrams (I think), would expand it to two syllables, and rightly so, because the underlying iambic meter, as established by scansion, demands it. Which goes to show that, in recital, sense does not always or totally override all aspects of meter and that scansion remains useful for fulfilling its restricted purpose.

1.16. Hopefully, bearing in mind the foregoing squabble, you will be in a position to explain and resolve the well-known metrical problems of the following lines, also from a sonnet by Shakespeare (Chatman 1970: 328). Tip: juxtapose scansion and likely recital of the lines.

Shall I compare thee to a summer's day?
Thou art more lovely and more temperate

1.17. Here are some more scansion exercises, but be warned, they are not quite as easy as the examples cited earlier.

Swift of foot was Hiawatha;
 He could shoot an arrow from him,
 And run forward with such fleetness,
 That the arrow fell behind him.
 (Longfellow, "The Song of Hiawatha")

Cannon to right of them,
 Cannon to left of them,
 Cannon in front of them
 Volleyed and thundered;
 Stormed at with shot and shell,
 Boldly they rode and well,
 Into the jaws of Death,
 Into the mouth of Hell
 Rode the six hundred.
 (Tennyson, "The Charge of the Light Brigade")

If thou be'st borne to strange sights,
 Things invisible to see,
 Ride ten thousand days and nights,
 Till age snow white hairs on thee.
 Thou, when thou return'st, wilt tell me
 All strange wonders that befell thee,
 And swear
 Nowhere
 Lives a woman true, and fair.
 (Donne, "Go and catch a falling star")

There was a young lady of Niger
 Who smiled as she rode on a tiger;
 They returned from the ride
 With the lady inside,
 And the smile on the face of the tiger!

Hints: if the Donne poem poses a problem consider that one line of it was used for illustrating one of the most common feet ([1.8](#)). If you find that the "young lady of Niger" limerick seems to be slightly irregular, which it is, try to establish its predominant meter on the basis of the concluding three lines.

1.18. Poets often enjoy playing with exotic metrical effects. Given the concepts and strategies introduced here, comment on the following games and experiments.

HEAR the sledges with the bells –
 Silver bells!
 What a world of merriment their melody foretells!
 How they tinkle, tinkle, tinkle,
 In the icy air of night!
 While the stars, that oversprinkle
 All the heavens, seem to twinkle
 With a crystalline delight;
 Keeping time, time, time,
 In a sort of Runic rhyme,
 To the tintinabulation that so musically wells
 From the bells, bells, bells, bells,
 Bells, bells, bells –
 From the jingling and the tinkling of the bells. (Poe, "The Bells")

There was a merry passenger,
 a messenger, a mariner;
 he built a gilded gondola
 to wander in, and had in her
 a load of yellow oranges
 and porridge for his provender;
 he perfumed her with marjoram
 and cardamom and lavender.
 (J.R.R. Tolkien, "Errantry")

1.19. Historical shift of emphasis. Historically, early poetical texts tend to conform strictly to metrical rules, while more modern texts (roughly, from the middle of the 19C onwards) allow increasing degrees of variation and irregularity. The development towards increasing freedom is typified in the 19C concept of *sprung rhythm* and the 20C concept of *free verse*.

- **sprung rhythm:** "G.M. Hopkins' term for a mixed meter in which the foot consists of a stressed syllable which may stand alone, or may be combined with from one to three more unstressed syllables" (Abrams 1964: 52).

I caught this morning morning's minion, kingdom of daylight's
 dauphin, dapple-dawn-drawn Falcon, in his riding
 Of the rolling level underneath him steady air
 (Hopkins, "The Windhover")

- **free verse:** "verse which, although more rhythmic than ordinary prose, is written without a regular metric pattern" (Abrams 1964: 39).

Let us go then, you and I,
 When the evening is spread out against the sky
 Like a patient etherized upon a table
 (T.S. Eliot, "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock")

Can you give me a precise description?
 Said the policeman. Her lips, I told him,
 Were soft. Could you give me, he said, pencil
 Raised, a metaphor? Soft as an open mouth,
 I said.
 (Barry Cole, "Reported Missing")

These lines exhibit a gradual loss of metrical rhythm, and begin to sound more and more like ordinary prose. Nevertheless, they still use elements like visual versification, cadences, and regular pauses that might be constitutive of a different kind of poetical rhythm. To my knowledge, little has been done in this area of prosody.

2. Rhyme, verse sequence, stanza

2.1. Rhyme

Like rhythm, rhyme is a sound-oriented poetical feature.

- Two words **rhyme** if they are identical or similar from the last stressed vowel onwards. A rhyme is a **pure rhyme** or a **perfect rhyme** when the rhyming bits are identical in sound (*ran/man, bright/night, many/any, subdue/renew, glorious/victorious*); whereas a **half rhyme/slant rhyme** is one in which the rhyming parts are only similar in sound (often it is exactly the vowels that differ: *load/lid, stone/frown, over/recover*).

There are two main exceptions:

- An **eye rhyme** links two words that look as if they ought to rhyme perfectly but in reality do not, e.g., *daughter* and *laughter*. Usually, an eye rhyme is only a half rhyme. Note, however, that what may appear as an eye rhyme may once have been a pure rhyme (as *prove/love* was in Shakespeare); and in the special case of the word *wind* there was once a poetic license ([1.11](#)) that permitted it to rhyme perfectly with words like *find* etc. (Cases like these have to be checked in a good etymological dictionary such as the *Oxford English Dictionary*.)
- A **rich rhyme** links two words that sound wholly alike (homophones): *reed/read*, *rite/right*.

2.2. Further common distinctions concern the position of rhymes and the number of syllables involved.

- An **end rhyme** is one in which the rhyming words occur at the end of two lines (this is, of course, the standard case).
- An **internal rhyme** is one in which one of the rhyming words occurs in the middle and the other at the end of a line ("Once upon a midnight dreary, while I pondered, weak and weary" – Poe).
- A **masculine rhyme** is one that ends in a single stressed syllable (*ran/man*).
- A **feminine rhyme** is one that ends in one or more unstressed syllables (*Niger/tiger*).

2.3. Verse sequence

Rhymes have a variety of functions: they emphasize the end of a line; they help memorize verses; and they link and bind verse sequences. For an analysis of complex rhyming patterns, ordinary lower-case letters (with the exception of 'x') are used to represent rhyming lines, and the letter 'x' represents a non-rhyming line. The two most common and basic rhyming patterns are alternate rhymes and embracing rhymes:

- An **alternate rhyme** is a verse sequence that rhymes abab (or similarly, such as xaxa);
- an **embracing rhyme** is a verse sequence that rhymes abba (or similarly, such as axxa).

A rhyming pattern such as xaxaxa (clearly a variant of an alternate rhyme) consists of a verse sequence of six lines of which the second, fourth and sixth rhyme (Carroll's "Mad Gardener's Song", partially quoted in [1.9](#), provides an example). Occasionally, one adds an indication of the lines' metrical length so that the fully specified general formula for the stanzas of the "Mad Gardener's Song" becomes x4a3x4a3x4a3.

2.4. The following standard verse-sequence patterns have acquired proper terms:

- A **couplet** is a verse sequence consisting of exactly two rhyming lines (aa).
- The **short couplet** or **octosyllabic couplet** is a verse sequence consisting of the pattern a4a4:
I am his Highness' Dog at Kew;
Pray tell me, Sir, whose Dog are you? (Pope)
- The **heroic couplet** uses the pattern a5a5:
An hour of quiet shortly shall we see;
Till then, in patience our proceeding be. (*Hamlet* V.1.291)
- A **tercet** is a verse sequence using either the rhyme pattern axa or aaa (the latter is also called a **triplet**).
- A **quatrain** is a verse sequence consisting of four lines, usually of the rhyming pattern xaxa, abba or abab.

Longer verse sequences (whose possible rhyming patterns are too varied to be listed here) include **quintets**, **sestets**, **septets**, **octets**, and **nonets**.

2.5. As was pointed out above ([1.13](#)), the most popular type of verse sequence in English as well as European dramatic literature is the blank verse.

- **blank verse** A sequence of unrhymed iambic pentameters. Blank verse is 'blank' because it has neither rhymes nor a rhyming pattern. For an example, we can fall back on a couple of lines that we used to establish the rhythmical character of poetry:

If it assume my noble father's person,
I'll speak to it, though hell itself should gape
And bid me hold my peace. [...] (*Hamlet* I.2.265)

2.6. Stanza

- A **stanza** is sequence of lines that is visually marked off as a separate unit. A stanza consists of one or more verse sequences. A poem consists of one or more stanzas.

2.7. Some types of poems such as ballads, limericks and sonnets can be defined on the basis of their formal features.

- A **ballad stanza** is a four-line stanza conforming to the pattern x4a3x4a3. Example:

There lived a wife at Usher's Well
And a wealthie wife was she;
She had three stout and stalwart sons,
And she sent them o'er the sea.

- **limerick** (define it yourself – [1.17](#) cites a typical example)²
- **sonnet** A poem consisting of exactly fourteen lines (usually, iambic pentameters). The **Italian sonnet** subdivides into two quatrains (or one octet) and two tercets (or one sestet), usually following the pattern abba abba cde cde. The **English sonnet** (as used, among others, by Shakespeare) subdivides into three quatrains and one couplet (usually abab cdcd efef gg). Many sonnets move towards a **volta**, a sudden turn in thought – "from question to answer, from problem to solution" (Holman 1977), often occurring either at the end of the octet or the end of the third quatrain.

2.8. The haiku

Meter and rhyme are culturally determined patterns. For a type of poem that is based on a different set of formal features consider the haiku:

- **haiku** A three-line poem of Japanese origin, often consisting of exactly 17 syllables arranged in a 5-7-5 sequence. By preference, a haiku treats a natural event (often a trivial or quotidian one related to one of the seasons of the year). It is usually offered and received in (or used to reinforce) a spirit of tranquillity, harmony, meditation, and contemplation. (All this is typical, apparently, of Zen Buddhism, the Japanese tea ceremony, etc.)

Here is a haiku by Moritake, a 16C poet, translated by Babette Deutsch:

The falling flower
I saw drift back to the branch
Was a butterfly.

² Assuming the "Lady of Niger" to be a prototypical case, a limerick is a five-line poem consisting of mainly anapestic feet and a verse/metrical length pattern of a3a3b2b2a3. I am sure there are many variants, however, and the semantic patterns are also of interest.

As Deutsch comments, "the poem refers to the Buddhist proverb that the fallen flower never returns to the branch; the broken mirror never again reflects" (qtd Gwynn/Condee/Lewis 1965: 143).

Mastery of Japanese haiku poetry is usually credited to the 17C poet Matsuo Basho. Here is one of his haikus (qtd *Encyclopaedia Britannica* under. *Basho*):

On a withered branch
A crow has alighted:
Nightfall in autumn.

Perhaps Basho's most famous haiku is the one cited in the opening scene of Edward Bond's *Narrow Road to the Deep North* (a play on the life of Basho):

Silent old pool
Frog jumps
Kdang!

A more popular version of this poem, and a good candidate for the shortest poem ever, is generally quoted as "Pond/Frog/Plop". In the early 20C, the imagists, a group of English and American poets, made occasional use of the form. Best known is the following haiku by Ezra Pound:

In a Station of the Metro
The apparition of these faces in the crowd;
Petals on a wet, black bough.

2.9. Strange as it may seem, the haiku has recently been revived in the form of internet haikus, also known as error-message haikus, thematizing a malfunctioning computer component or program:

Yesterday it worked
Today it is not working
Windows is like that

Out of memory.
We wish to hold the whole sky,
But we never will.

First snow, then silence.
This thousand dollar screen dies
so beautifully.

The Tao that is seen
Is not the true Tao, until
You bring fresh toner.

A file that big?
It might be very useful.
But now it is gone.

How would one analyze the effectiveness of these poems? A difficult exercise, I think; perhaps concepts such as *parody*, system intertextuality [(Broich/Pfister 1985: chIII] and/or epiphany [[N3.3.10](#)] might prove helpful.

3. Semantic analysis of poetry

3.1. Types of poems

British and American Classical Poems is a carefully annotated and lovingly illustrated anthology of poetry in which the poems are arranged not, as is usual, by author or historical sequence but by text types. Among their sixteen types, editors Herrig, Meller, and Sühnel include "Ballads", "Narrative Poems", "Dramatic Monologues", "Short Lyrics and Songs", "Pastorals", "Sonnets", "Elegies", "Odes", "Reflective Verse and Verse Essays", "Epigrams", and "Nursery Rhymes". Some of these types of poems are defined by formal criteria (sonnet – a 14-line poem), some by pragmatic criteria (Nursery Rhymes – poems for children), and some by semantic criteria (Pastoral – a poem set in idyllic rural surroundings [often identified as "Arcadia"] and revolving around the life of shepherds and shepherdesses).

3.2. Regarding the type of discourse presented by a poem, the most useful distinction is that between lyrical poems and narrative poems (see the genre taxonomy on PPP's [project page](#)).

- A **lyrical poem** is a subjective and reflective type of discourse in which a speaker presents or describes an emotion, or discusses a philosophical problem (example: Wordsworth, "My heart leaps up"). The sentences of a lyrical poem are typically framed in the present tense. Common subtypes of lyrical poems are odes, elegies and verse essays. See [5](#) for an interpretation of a lyrical poem.
- A **narrative poem**, in contrast, "is one that tells a story" (Preminger 1975). The speaker of a narrative poem is a narrator who tells a story that either happened to her/himself or to other characters (see the distinction between first- and third-person narrators in the narratology section, [N1.10](#)). The sentences of a narrative poem are typically framed in the past tense ("There lived a wife at Usher's Well"). The most common types of narrative poems are ballads, nursery rhymes and verse epics.

Note that this is not intended to be a watertight division; indeed, many poems have both lyrical and narrative features, or lyrical and narrative passages. Still, it is usually possible to determine a dominant orientation, especially in the sense that a narrative passage can work in the service of a lyrical poem, or else a lyrical passage in the service of a narrative poem (cp Chatman's notion that text types "can operate at each other's service", 1990: 8). For an excellent collection of narratological interpretations of 16C to 20C English poetry see Hühn/Kiefer (2005).

3.3. Author and speaker

Regarding the person or subject who utters the poetical text, modern theoretical and analytical discourse is very circumspect in its use of the terms *author* and *speaker*. Like all texts, poems have a communicational structure involving senders and addressees (compare [D2.1](#) and [N2.3.1](#) on the definition of these terms in drama theory and narratology, respectively).

- **speaker**: the text-internal agency (usually a first person) who acts as the subject, originator and 'voice' of the poetical text (or part of the poetical text, since a poem may have several speakers). The term *speaker* is useful for two reasons: (i) it emphasizes the auditory characteristics (meter, rhyme) of most poetical texts, and (ii) it avoids automatic equation with the text's external author (see below). Once the speaker of a poem identifies him- or herself in the first person, one can use a nominalized **I** as a form of reference ("the I of this poem reflects on... "). If the poem happens to be a lyrical poem ([3.2](#)), then the term **lyrical I** is appropriate. If the text is a narrative poem ([3.2](#)) then narratological terms such as **narrator**, **narrating I** etc are appropriate. Finally, if one has reasons to believe that a poem's speaker is *not* the author then the speaker is often called a **persona** (typically, the speakers of dramatic monologues are personae – example: the Duke of Ferrara in Browning's "My Last Duchess").

The speaker's communicational partner is, logically enough, a **hearer** or more generally an **addressee**. The addressee may be present, named, and overt; often, however, s/he is absent, nameless,

indeterminate, or imaginary (cf. the rhetorical figure of apostrophe 4.5). In an act of self-communication, the speaker's addressee is, of course, the speaker him- or herself.

- The **author**, in contrast to the speaker, is the real-life poet him- or herself, the creator (writer) of the poetical text: people like Auden, Dickinson, Shakespeare, Wordsworth, and so on. Since it is always possible that the author may use the voice of a persona (see above), or use several speakers, many scholars today do not automatically identify a poem's speaker with its author.

Even though speakers and authors are here treated as distinct textual roles, they may, of course, share certain characteristics; indeed, biographical and other text-external evidence may add considerable substance and meaning to a poem. In this case it is clearly legitimate to use the terms speaker and author side by side.

Finally, **we**, ie the real **readers**, are the author's and the poetical text's external addressees.

3.4. Whatever you may think of political correctness in general, interpretive discourse must decide on which pronoun to use in order to refer to a text's speaker. Since a generic 'he' is clearly out of the question, most scholars today follow what has become known as 'Lanser's rule' (1981: 166; the original reference is to narrators in narrative texts):

- **Lanser's rule:** in the absence of any text-internal clue as to the speaker's sex, use the pronoun appropriate to the author's sex. For instance, a speaker of indeterminate sex in a poem by Emily Dickinson would be referred to as "she", while a similar speaker in a poem by William Carlos Williams would be referred to as "he".

3.5. The basic assumption guiding all analyses of meaning is that texts are coherent. A random collection of words such as "The king of and is" does not constitute a (meaningful) text, and neither does a random collection of sentences that may be meaningful in isolation. In fact, let us assume that coherence is the feature that separates texts from 'non-texts':

- A **non-text** (Werlich 1976: 23) consists of a basically random accumulation of words or sentences.
It was a dark and stormy night. Suddenly a shot rang out. The maid screamed. Suddenly a pirate ship appeared on the horizon. While millions of people were starving, the king lived in luxury. Meanwhile, on a small farm in Kansas, a boy was growing up. (Charles Schulz, *You're Out of Sight*, *Charlie Brown*)
- A coherent **text**, in contrast, is based on a network of meaningfully related expressions:
And wow he died as wow he lived,
going whop to the office and blooie home to sleep and biff got married and bam had children and oof got fired,
zowie did he live and zowie did he die (Francis Fearing, "Dirge")

Words and sentences must cohere if we want to speak meaningfully: describe something, tell a story, argue a point, or convey a message.

3.6. Isotopies

Most approaches toward an analysis of thematic coherence use the concept of *isotopies* proposed by the French structuralist A.J. Greimas.

- An **isotopy** is a sequence of expressions joined by a common semantic denominator. An isotopy identifies one of the text's **themes**. On the most basic level, names, descriptive phrases, and pronouns are isotopically related ("Kate was a young woman who ..."). More generally, synonyms and co-referential expressions ("Pluto", "my dog") and members of a set ("cats", "dogs") are isotopically related, and so are contrasts ("black", "white") and opposites ("hot", "cold"). Often, one has to move up or down on the **abstraction ladder** of the language (that is, generalize or exemplify) to find the relevant semantic commonality (cp examples given here, and exercises below; note also that generalization and exemplification are now often referred to as 'chunking up' and 'chunking down', respectively). Ultimately, the theory of isotopies claims that in a coherent

text *all* expressions are isotopically linked, leaving no isolated islands of expressions. See Greimas (1983 [1966]); Culler (1975: chI.4).

Thematic analysis usually begins with an attempt to collect expressions that constitute an isotopy – either by co-reference or common set membership. Titles, repetitions, parallelisms, oppositions and contrasts are important pointers to central isotopies. Hopefully, when all relevant themes have been identified, the inter-thematic links (which are also isotopies) will ultimately constitute a text's global message.

3.7. Exercise. In 3.5, a stanza from Fearing's "Dirge" was cited as an example of a coherent text. Establish the main isotopies in this text and relate them to the title of the poem. Note that the somewhat unusual occurrences of "pow", "wow", "biff" etc also constitute a recurrent thematic level. Where do these 'words' come from, what if anything do they mean, and how are they related to the other themes of the poem?

3.8. Consider the following programmatic poem by William Wordsworth, a poet of the Romantic era.

My heart leaps up when I behold
 A rainbow in the sky:
 So was it when my life began,
 So it is now I am a man,
 So be it when I shall grow old
 Or let me die!
 The Child is Father of the Man;
 And I could wish my days to be
 Bound each to each by natural piety.

Highlight the text's isotopically related expressions. For instance, find the co-referential expressions identifying the speaker's various states of existence. How is the theme of "when my life began" (line 3) taken up again in the poem? Is it related to larger themes that are linked by a common semantic denominator? What is meant by "The Child is Father of the Man" (line7)? Technically, this is a paradox, a seemingly nonsensical statement. To explain a paradox, you have to show that what the speaker means is not at all nonsensical. Finally, what is the meaning of "natural piety" in the last line? If you cannot relate it to anything that has been mentioned before your interpretation misses out on an important isotopy.

3.9. Read Spenser's sonnet "One day I wrote her name upon the strand" (1595), and present a thematic analysis.

One day I wrote her name upon the strand,
 But came the waves and washèd it away:
 Again I wrote it with a second hand,
 But came the tide, and made my pains his prey.
 "Vain man," said she, "that dost in vain assay,
 A mortal thing so to immortalize;
 For I myself shall like to this decay,
 And eke my name be wipèd out likewise."
 "Not so," (quoth I) "let baser things devise
 To die in dust, but you shall live by fame:
 My verse your virtues rare shall eternize,
 And in the heavens write your glorious name:
 Where whenas death shall all the world subdue,
 Our love shall live, and later life renew."

Hint: begin by marking and drawing connecting lines between all expressions that designate, broadly, a medium of language. Find one or more parallels for "washed it away". Identify the themes of life and death (remember that opposites are important pointers to isotopies); note the link between these themes and make a list of all textual allusions to them as they occur in the text. After a while, your copy will be

marked by a crisscross of lines of correspondence which goes to show (a) that Spenser's sonnet is a highly coherent text and (b) that your thematic analysis is on the right track. Finally, adding up all themes, formulate a concise statement that summarizes the message of the poem and might serve as a title.³

3.10. Imagery: comparison, simile, and metaphor

Using the concepts of thematic analysis, let us finally turn to **imagery**, a central subject in both literary analysis and linguistic theory (see Jakobson 1987, Ortony, ed. 1979, Lakoff and Turner 1989, Fauconnier and Turner 1998, also the studies listed under 'metaphor' below). The following account combines classical comparison theory (Levinson 1983: ch3.2.5) and Greimas's theory of isotopies.

- A **rhetorical comparison** compares a thing A (the *primum comparandum* 'the thing to be compared') to a thing B (the *secundum comparatum* 'the thing it is compared to') on the basis of a common feature or similarity (the *tertium comparationis*). The comparison pattern can usually be formulated as either *A is like B with respect to C*, or *A is as C as B*, or *A is like B because both are, or do, or look like, C*. Variant terms for *primum comparandum* are tenor, target, recipient field; for *secundum comparatum*: vehicle, source, donor field. In the present context I will stick to the Latin terms or simply A, B, and C.

Typically, a rhetorical comparison presents an unexpected or even unlikely introduction of B, often as a replacement of A, seemingly making the text incoherent. Facing an apparent rupture in textual coherence, the reader's task is to establish an isotopy that supplies the missing link, usually by guessing a suitable C (the *tertium comparationis*).

3.11. Rhetorical comparisons come in two forms: similes and metaphors.

- A **simile** is a rhetorical comparison in which *primum comparandum* and *secundum comparatum* are linked by an explicit comparison word such as "like" or "as" (typically, "A is like B"). Example:

My love is like a red red rose
That's newly sprung in June:
My love is like the melodie
That's sweetly played in tune. (Burns)

The speaker's "love" (this is the woman he is in love with, not the emotion as such) is here compared to, first, a rose, and then a "melodie". Regarding the first simile, how is a woman like a plant (a seeming incoherence)? The ensuing line "That's newly sprung in June" suggests that the *tertium comparationis* (and the linking isotopy the text intends to establish) is something like freshness – the woman I love, the speaker suggests, is as fresh as a rose. Note that in another context the *tertium comparationis* of the identical simile might well be beauty, thorniness, or dangerousness.

- A **metaphor** is a rhetorical comparison that leaves out the comparison particle (hence, "my love is a rose" would be a metaphor). Frequently, the *secundum comparatum* simply replaces the *primum comparandum* ("My [wife, who is as beautiful as a] rose kissed me and said"). Here are some less silly examples:
 - "[My dog's] backbone (A) was a bended bow (B)" (Nash) – the metaphor asserts the dog's youthful sprightliness.
 - "That time of year (B) thou mayst in me behold" (Shakespeare) – the current stage in a man's life, (A), is compared to a season (B). Further context indicates that the season alluded to is autumn and that the common feature is decay, imminent death, etc.

³ Possible answers: (a) Our love, documented in the lasting medium of my poetry, will outlive us and everything, and eventually provide the impulse to create new life; (b) Love Conquers Death.

- "Forests (B) at the bottom of the sea" (Whitman) – the speaker suggests that there are underwater growths (A) that look like (C) forests (B).

For more recent directions in metaphor theory, which also includes a treatment of simile and metonymy (4.4), see Ortony, ed. (1979), Lakoff and Johnson (1980), Levinson (1983: ch3) [pragmatic approach; critique of comparison theories], Lakoff and Turner (1989), Fauconnier and Turner (1998), and the special issue of *Poetics Today* 20.3, ed Fludernik/Freeman/Freeman 1999, also Fludernik, ed 2011 and Fludernik 2015: ch3). Many of the more recent accounts rely on an approach called 'conceptual integration' or 'blending'.

3.12. Exercises on coherence and imagery.

- 1) Discuss the main subject of Elton John's song "A Candle in the Wind". There are two versions: the first one begins with the line "Goodbye Norma Jean" (Norma Jean who, better known as?), and the more recent one begins with the words "Goodbye England's rose". But, I take it, the second version is neither about candles nor roses. In other words, what is the A that is here replaced by B on the basis of which C? Here are the first two stanzas:

Goodbye England's rose
 May you ever grow in our hearts
 You were the grace that placed itself
 Where lives were torn apart
 You called out to our country
 And you whispered to those in pain
 Now you belong to heaven
 And the stars spell out your name

And it seems to me you lived your life
 Like a candle in the wind
 Never fading with the sunset
 When the rain set in
 And your footsteps will always fall here
 Along England's greenest hills
 Your candle's burned out long before
 Your legend ever will

- 2) Karl Shapiro's "The Fly" begins, strangely enough, with the words "O hideous little bat" – and thus immediately confronts the reader with an apparent incoherence. Analyze the poem's imagery and work out its contribution to the text's overall thematic structure and message.

THE FLY

O hideous little bat, the size of snot,
 With polyhedral eye and shabby clothes,
 To populate the stinking cat you walk
 The promontory of the dead man's nose,
 Climb with the fine leg of a Duncan-Phyfe
 The smoking mountains of my food
 And in a comic mood
 In mid-air take to bed a wife.

Riding and riding with your filth of hair
 On gluey foot or wing, forever coy,
 Hot from the compost and green sweet decay,
 Sounding your buzzer like an urchin toy—
 You dot all whiteness with diminutive stool,

In the tight belly of the dead
 Burrow with hungry head
 And inlay maggots like a jewel.

At your approach the great horse stomps and paws
 Bringing the hurricane of his heavy tail;
 Shod in disease you dare to kiss my hand
 Which sweeps against you like an angry flail;
 Still you return, return, trusting your wing
 To draw you from the hunter's reach
 That learns to kill to teach
 Disorder to the tinier thing.

My peace is your disaster. For your death
 Children like spiders cup their pretty hands
 And wives resort to chemistry of war.
 In fens of sticky paper and quicksands
 You glue yourself to death. Where you are stuck
 You struggle hideously and beg,
 You amputate your leg
 Imbedded in the amber muck.

But I, a man, must swat you with my hate,
 Slap you across the air and crush your flight,
 Must mangle with my shoe and smear your blood,
 Expose your little guts pasty and white,
 Knock your head sidewise like a drunkard's hat,
 Pin your wings under like a crow's,
 Tear off your flimsy clothes
 And beat you as one beats a rat.

Then like Gargantua I stride among
 The corpses strewn like raisins in the dust,
 The broken bodies of the narrow dead
 That catch the throat with fingers of disgust.
 I sweep. One gyrates like a top and falls
 And stunned, stone blind, and deaf
 Buzzes its frightful F
 And dies between three cannibals.

3.13. Present an isotopical analysis of Yeats's poem and sum up its overall message in one sentence.⁴

THE COMING OF WISDOM WITH TIME

Though leaves are many, the root is one;
 Through all the lying days of my youth
 I swayed my leaves and flowers in the sun;
 Now I may wither into the truth. (W.B. Yeats)

⁴ Possible summary: *Only in his old age has the speaker become able to distinguish the one unpleasant truth from the many pleasant falsehoods that his earlier life was based on.* The poem also expresses an antithesis to Keats's famous line "Beauty is truth, truth Beauty".

3.14. James Stephens, "In Waste Places" (1912)

Write an introductory paragraph on Stephens's poem, replying to the cues provided.

Give us a topic sentence stating what this poem is about.

Stephens's poem is a reflection on the nature of fear including its causes, its effects, and its possible cure.

Be a bit more specific.

The poem shows this by letting its speaker tell a story in which he is walking naked in a desert (the "waste places" of the title, "desert", line 2) and is pursued by a lion.

Show that fear is an important theme in the poem.

Fear and many other expressions related to fear – the isotopy of fear-related expressions, as Greimas would call it – is mentioned repeatedly and forms the constant focus of the text ("sore afraid", "frightened", "terrors", "despair", "agony", etc).

You mentioned the "nature and effects" of fear?

One interesting aspect mentioned by the speaker, in stanza 3, is that if the lion senses the speaker's fear (as indeed predatory animals do), the situation becomes more threatening. In other words, fear can increase the danger of the situation and produce more fear.

What about "causes" and "possible cure"?

The causes of fear are addressed in the closing two stanzas, where the speaker, in a flash of insight, recognizes that his fear, though related to an external occasion, actually originates within himself, in his imagination.

Which lines in particular prove your point?

"I am the lion and his lair!", the speaker says, and "I am the fear that frightens me!", lines 21-22, stanza 6).

Can fear be cured?

The speaker realizes that, in order to overcome his fear, he must be able to confront (or "dare", 27) it. Then, in the functional imagery of the poem, the lion will turn into a harmless cat, come at the speaker's command, and lick his hand.

IN WASTE PLACES

As a naked man I go
Through the desert sore afraid,
Holding up my head although
I'm as frightened as a maid.

The couching lion there I saw
From barren rocks lift up his eye;
He parts the cactus with his paw,
He stares at me as I go by.

He would follow on my trace
If he knew I was afraid,
If he knew my hardy face
Hides the terrors of a maid.

In the night he rises and
He stretches forth, he snuffs the air;
He roars and leaps along the sand,
He creeps and watches everywhere.

His burning eyes, his eyes of bale,
Through the darkness I can see;
He lashes fiercely with his tail,
He would love to spring at me.

I am the lion in his lair;
I am the fear that frightens me;
I am the desert of despair
And the nights of agony.

Night or day, whate'er befall,
I must walk that desert land,
Until I can dare to call
The lion out to lick my hand.

3.15. e.e. cummings, "anyone lived in a pretty how town" (1940)

Make an attempt to crack the code of this famous poem.

Although the poem uses a highly unusual language, in which not a single sentence is grammatical, it paints a picture of a couple's life and death in an urban community.

What makes the language of the poem special is the fact that it scrambles ordinary language patterns very much as happens in dreams or slips of the tongue. The distortions often concern fixed phrases which are quite common. For instance, in ordinary English there is an "X by X" phrase, which one finds in combinations such as "little by little", "bit by bit", "step by step", "side by side", etc. Both "side by side" and "little by little" actually occur in the text (lines 27-28), but the poem also surprises us with "when by now", "tree by leaf", "bird by snow", "stir by still", "all by all", "deep by deep", "more by more", "earth by april", "wish by spirit", and "if by yes".

Something very similar occurs in sentences which involve characters. Basically, there are three groups of people in the poem: a large group consisting of an urban community of "women and men", a second group consisting of children, and a third group consisting of two individuals identified as "he" and "she".

Although "he" and "she" do not, at first glance, refer to any specific individuals, the key to the poem's meaning actually lies in establishing the pronominal reference. Looking closely at "*anyone* lived in a pretty how town [...] *he* sang his didn't" (lines 1 and 4), it is tempting to assume that the male character is in fact named "Anyone". Similarly, if one considers the sequence "*noone* loved him more by more [...] *she* laughed his joy *she* cried his grief" (lines 12, 14), it looks as if the female character's name is "Noone". Naming characters in this manner is not entirely unknown; for instance, Odysseus used the name "Nobody" to hide his identity. Once one associates "he" and "Anyone" as well as "she" and "Noone", the main difficulty of the poem disappears. "Anyone", it seems, is an outsider in the community ("Women and men . . . cared for anyone not at all"), but "Noone" falls in love with him anyway. Then Anyone dies (and "noone stooped to kiss his face"), and when Noone dies, too, "folk buried them side by side".

The last stanza moves back to the normal activities of the people belonging to the larger community, where life goes on as usual, following the cycle of the seasons.

anyone lived in a pretty how town
(with up so floating many bells down)
spring summer autumn winter
he sang his didn't he danced his did.

Women and men(both little and small)
cared for anyone not at all
they sowed their isn't they reaped their same
sun moon stars rain

children guessed(but only a few
and down they forgot as up they grew
autumn winter spring summer)
that noone loved him more by more

when by now and tree by leaf
she laughed his joy she cried his grief
bird by snow and stir by still
anyone's any was all to her

someones married their everyones
laughed their cryings and did their dance
(sleep wake hope and then)they
said their nevers they slept their dream

stars rain sun moon
(and only the snow can begin to explain
how children are apt to forget to remember
with up so floating many bells down)

one day anyone died i guess
(and noone stooped to kiss his face)
busy folk buried them side by side
little by little and was by was

all by all and deep by deep
and more by more they dream their sleep
noone and anyone earth by april
wish by spirit and if by yes.

Women and men(both dong and ding)
summer autumn winter spring
reaped their sowing and went their came
sun moon stars rain

4. Minima Rhetorica

The following brief survey of classical rhetorical figures is based on Korte and Jahn (1985), a 10-page handout used at the English Department of the University of Cologne. When we compiled that selection, our main sources were Abrams (1981), Holman (1977), Preminger (1975), and Shipley (1971); we also consulted some standard dictionaries such as *Webster's Collegiate* and the *Shorter Oxford English*. For our main organizational principle of grouping the figures by their dominant linguistic effect we are indebted to Plett (1975). A more recent standard handbook is Lanham (1991).

4.1. Phonological figures (sound-oriented figures)

- **alliteration** Repetition of initial consonant sounds in neighboring words. A subtype of 'consonance' (see below).
 - He clasps the crag with crooked hands (Tennyson)
 - Love's Labour's Lost (Shakespeare)
 - Peter Piper picked a peck of pickled pepper
- **assonance** Repetition of vowel sounds.
 - mad as a hatter
 - I saw old autumn in the musty morn (T. Hood)
- **consonance** Repetition of consonant sounds.
 - last but not least.
 - Has your soul *sipped*/ Of the sweetness of all *sweets*?/ Has it well *sipped*/ But yet hungers and *sweats*? (W. Owen)
- **onomatopoeia** Imitation of the sound associated with a thing or an action.
 - Cock a doodle doo! My dame has lost her shoe. (Nursery rhyme)
 - The moan of doves in immemorial elms/ And murmuring of innumerable bees (Tennyson)

4.2. Morphological figures (word-oriented figures)

- **anadiplosis** Use of the last word of the previous verse or sentence to begin a new verse or sentence.
 - Love give me strength! and strength shall help afford. (*Romeo and Juliet*)
 - She walks with Beauty - Beauty that must die (Keats)
- **anaphora** Repetition of a word or expression at the beginning of successive phrases, sentences, or verses.
 - Help! I need somebody/ Help! Not just anybody/ Help! You know I need someone (Song)
 - And she forgot the stars, the moon, and sun,/ And she forgot the blue above the trees,/ And she forgot the dells where waters run,/ And she forgot the chilly autumn breeze. (Keats, "Isabella")
- **archaism** Use of an old-fashioned word.
 - He holds him with his skinny hand,/ 'There was a ship,' *quoth* he./ 'Hold off! unhand me, grey-beard loon!'/ *Eftsoons* his hand dropped he. (Coleridge)
- **enallage** Unusual combination of words.
 - And with Sansfoy's dead dowry (Spenser)
- **epanalepsis** Use of the same word to begin and end verses, phrases, or sentences.
 - Live and let live.
- **epiphora** Repetition of a word or expression at the end of successive phrases, sentences, or verses.
 - Little Lamb, who made thee?/ Dost thou know who made thee? (Blake, "The Lamb")
 - Whirl your pointed pines/ Splash your great pines (H.D.)
- **figura etymologica** The repetition of a word's root, involving different word categories (often, verbs + nouns).
 - I name no names.
 - Speak the speech, I pray you (*Hamlet*)

- **geminatio** Doubling of a word.
 - Tiger, tiger, burning bright (Blake)
- **polyptoton** The repetition of a word in a differently inflected form, involving a change in case, gender, number, tense, person, mood, or voice.
 - There's nothing you can *do* that can't be *done*,/ Nothing you can *sing* that can't be *sung*. (The Beatles)
- **tautotes** Frequent repetition of a word.
 - O wonderful, wonderful, and most wonderful/ wonderful! And yet again wonderful,/ and after that, out of all hooping! (*As You Like It*)
 - To-morrow, and to-morrow, and to-morrow. (*Macbeth*)

4.3. Syntactical figures (arrangement figures)

- **ellipsis** Omission of a word or phrase.
 - Beauty is truth, truth Beauty (Keats)
- **zeugma** The merging or overlap of two normally distinct constructions (such as *take counsel* and *take tea* below).
 - Here thou, great Anna! whom three realms obey,/ Dost sometimes counsel take – and sometimes tea. (Pope)
- **inversion** Deviation from normal word order.
 - No living man/ all things can.
 - Strange fits of passion have I known. (Wordsworth)
- **hysteron proteron** Inversion of the natural order of events.
 - Let us die and rush into battle (Virgil)
- **parallelism** Repetition of syntactical units (phrases, clauses, sentences).
 - easy come, easy go. Out of sight, out of mind.
 - O well for the fisherman's boy,/ That he shouts with his sister at play!/ O well for the sailor lad,/ That he sings in his boat on the bay! (Tennyson)
- **chiasmus** Cross-wise (or mirror-image) arrangement of elements.
 - Fair is foul, and foul is fair. (*Macbeth*, I.i)
 - with wealth your state/ your mind with arts improve. (Donne)
- **asyndeton** Unusual omission of conjunctions.
 - O, what a noble mind is here o'erthrown/ The courtier's, soldier's, scholar's, eye, tongue, sword (*Hamlet*)
- **polysyndeton** Use of (unnecessarily) many conjunctions.
 - it runs and runs and runs. (Advertisement)
 - When you are old and grey and full of sleep. (Yeats)

4.4. Semantic figures (meaning-related figures)

- **antonomasia** (a) Use of a proper name in place of an ordinary word; (b) Use of a descriptive phrase in place of a proper name.
 - (a) a hoover, a xerox, a Croesus, ...
 - (b) The Bard, The Swan of Avon (= Shakespeare)
- **periphrasis** Use of a descriptive phrase (circumlocution) in place of a simple expression.
 - Season of mist and mellow fruitfulness (Keats, "To Autumn")
- **euphemism** Use of an inoffensive expression in place of an unpleasant one.
 - to be under the weather (ill); passed away (dead)
 - Remember me when I am gone away,/ Gone far away into the silent land. (C. Rossetti)
- **oxymoron** Combination of incongruous words.
 - O heavy lightness! serious vanity!/ Mis-shapen chaos of well-seeming forms!/ Feather of lead, bright smoke, cold fire, sick health! (*Romeo and Juliet*)
- **catathresis** Use of an inappropriate word; incompatible imagery (mixed metaphor).
 - take arms against a sea of troubles (*Hamlet*, III.i)

- **synesthesia** (Illogical) combination of sense-impression terms.
 - Have you ever seen such a beautiful sound? (Advertisement)
 - The eye of man hath not heard, the ear of man hath not seen, man's hand is not able to taste, his tongue to conceive, nor his heart to report, what my dream was. (*Midsummer Night's Dream*)
- **pleonasm** (Unnecessary) accumulation of expressions that mean the same thing.
 - I have a daughter, have while she is mine. (*Hamlet*)
- **antithesis** Parallel arrangement of opposite terms.
 - Fair without, foul within.
 - Ars longa, vita brevis - Art is long, and Time is fleeting.
 - My words fly up, my thoughts remain below. (*Hamlet*)
- **paradox** Seemingly nonsensical or illogical statement; resolvable contradiction.
 - The child is father of the man. (Wordsworth) ([3.8](#) for discussion)
 - In the midst of life we are in death.
- **simile** A comparison of things or actions introduced by "like" or "as". See [3.11](#) for detailed discussion.
 - Like a bridge over troubled water/ I will lay me down.
 - I wandered lonely as a cloud (Wordsworth)
 - My love is like a red red rose (Burns)
- **metaphor** A comparison of things or actions *not* introduced by "like" or "as". See [3.11](#) for a detailed discussion.
 - You are a machine. (Shaw)
 - The apparition of these faces in the crowd;/ Petals on a wet, black bough. (Pound)
 - Sometime too hot the eye of heaven (= the sun) shines (Shakespeare)
 - The ship ploughs the waves.

(A **dead metaphor** is an unoriginal metaphor, one that is in common use, e.g., *You are the apple of my eye.*)
- **personification** Attribution of human qualities to a thing or an abstraction.
 - Fortune is blind.
 - The dish ran away with the spoon.
 - Because I could not stop for Death --/ He kindly stopped for me (E. Dickinson)
- **metonymy** Substitution of a word by a spatially or causally related term.
 - to read Shakespeare (= Shakespeare's works)
 - The crown will find an heir (= the monarch will ...) (*Winter's Tale*)
 - What action has Whitehall (= the British Government) taken?
- **synecdoche** Substitution of a part for the whole or the whole for a part; use of a narrower or wider concept (*pars pro toto* or *totum pro parte*).
 - Let's count noses; there were many new faces at the meeting. (= people)
 - The western wave (= sea) was all aflame. (Coleridge)
- **hyperbola** Use of an exaggerated expression.
 - An hundred years should go to praise/ Thine eyes, and on thy forehead gaze./ Two hundred to adore each breast;/ But thirty thousand to the rest. (Marvell)
 - this/ fine specimen of hypermagical/ ultraomnipotence (Cummings)
- **litotes** Ironical understatement; often expressed by a double negation.
 - he is not a bad sort.
 - Nor are thy lips ungraceful,/ Sire of Men, Nor Tongue ineloquent. (Milton)
- **hendiad** Use of a combination of two words to express a single idea.
 - law and order; aims and objectives
 - Even in the afternoon of her best days,/ Made *prize and purchase* of his wanton eye,/ Seduced the *pitch and height* of his degree. (*Richard III*)
- **paronomasia, pun** A play on words exploiting similarity in writing or sound ('homonymy').
 - Tu be or not Tu be. (*Hamlet* on the London Underground)

- When I am dead I hope it may said:/ His sins were scarlet, but his books were read. (Belloc)
- Much science fiction offers a horrorscope.
- These times of woe afford not time to woo. (*Romeo and Juliet*)
- **climax** A list of expressions arranged in increasing order of importance.
 - Veni, vidi, vici: I came, I saw, I conquered.
 - thou motive of stars, suns, systems. (Whitman)
- **anticlimax** A list of expressions culminating in an unexpectedly trivial or ludicrous element.
 - Nearly all of our best men are dead! Carlyle, Tennyson, Browning, George Eliot ... I'm not feeling well myself! (*Punch*)

4.5. Pragmatic figures (speaker-hearer related figures)

- **apostrophe** Addressing an absent person or a personified object.
 - O wild West Wind, thou breath of Autumn's being (Shelley)
 - With how sad steps, O moon, thou climb'st the skies! (Sidney)
 - Milton! Thou should'st be living at this hour (Wordsworth)
- **rhetorical question** A question that has an obvious answer.
 - Hath not a Jew eyes? Hath not a Jew hands, organs, dimensions, senses, affections, passions? (*Merchant of Venice*)
- **irony** A statement that expresses the opposite of what is literally stated.
 - Wonderful day, isn't it? (it's really raining outside)
 - Here, under leave of Brutus and the rest -/ For Brutus is an honourable man;/ So are they all, all honourable men -/ Come I to speak in Caesar's funeral. (*Julius Caesar*)

4.6. Exercises on rhetorical figures

Identify the rhetorical figures used in the following items. Don't bother about alliterations and parallelisms, these are almost always present.

1. The things which I have seen I now can see no more. (Wordsworth)
2. Alone, alone, all, all alone,/ Alone on a wide wide sea! (Coleridge, *Ancient Mariner*)
3. For the sky and the sea, and the sea and the sky/ Lay like a load on my weary eye. (*Ancient Mariner*)
4. George the First was always reckoned/ Vile, but viler George the Second. (W.S. Landor)
5. Heard melodies are sweet, but those unheard are sweeter. (Keats, "Ode On a Grecian Urn")
6. Snip! Snap! Snip! the scissors go;/ And Conrad cries out Oh! Oh! Oh! ("The English Struwwelpeter")
7. I wasted time, and now doth time waste me. (*Richard II*, V.v)
8. The yellow fog that rubs its back upon the window-panes,/ The yellow smoke that rubs its muzzle on the window-panes. (Eliot, "Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock")
9. In every voice, in every ban,/ The mind-forged manacles I hear. (Blake, "London")
10. and it seems to me you lived your life/ like a candle in the wind.
11. Rain, rain go away, Come again another day.
12. It's the little things that make us bigger. (Advertisement)
13. Noise is the one thing you can't close your eyes to. (Advertisement)
14. Now is the winter of our discontent / Made glorious summer by this sun of York. (*Richard III*, I.1)
15. Where the bee sucks, there suck I. (*The Tempest*, V.1)
16. Lies have short legs. (Proverb)
17. Then, England's ground, farewell; sweet soil, adieu, / My mother and my nurse that bears me yet! (*Richard II*, I.iii)

18. A verbal contract isn't worth the paper it's written on. (S. Goldwyn)
19. Small birds on stilts along the beach/ Rose up with piping cry. (O. Nash)
20. I think I exist; therefore I exist, I think. (Graffito)
21. Little Big Man. (Film title)
22. Love is not love / Which alters when it alteration finds/ Or bends with the remover to remove. (Shakespeare, sonnet 116)
23. Some rise by sin, and some by virtue fall. (*Measure for Measure*, II.ii)
24. They have committed false reports; moreover, they have spoken untruths; secondarily, they are slanders. (*Much Ado About Nothing*, V.i)
25. The worst is death, and death will have its day. (*Richard II*, III.ii)
26. For you and I are past our dancing days. (*Romeo and Juliet*, I.v)
27. Antony: You wrong this presence; therefore speak no more./ Enobarbus: Go to, then; your considerate stone. (*Antony and Cleopatra*, II.ii)
28. We have seen better days. (*Timon of Athens*, IV.ii)
29. The cloud-capped towers, the gorgeous palaces,/ the solemn temples, the great globe itself,/ Yea, all which it inherit, shall dissolve. (*The Tempest*, IV.i)
30. Not presume to dictate, but broiled fowl and mushrooms - capital thing! (Dickens, *Pickwick Papers*)

4.7. Solutions

[The following solutions only identify figures *other* than alliterations and parallelisms.]

1. Polyptoton. 2. Tautotes, anaphora, epanalepsis, geminatio. 3. Chiasmus, simile. 4. Polyptoton. 5. Paradox. 6. Onomatopoeia, geminatio. 7. Chiasmus, personification. 8. Anaphora, epiphora, personification. 9. Metaphor, inversion. 10. Figura etymologica, simile. 11. Geminatio, apostrophe, assonance. 12. Paradox. 13. Synesthesia. 14. Pun (sun/son), metonymy (*Duke of York*). 15. Chiasmus, polyptoton. 16. Personification. 17. Apostrophe, metaphor, hendiadys, paradox, pun ("bears": sustains/gives birth to). 18. Paradox. 19. Metaphor (stilts = legs). 20. Chiasmus. 21. Oxymoron. 22. Figura etymologica (twice). 23. Antitheses, chiasmus, inversion. 24. Pleonasm. 25. Anadiplosis. 26. Periphrasis. 27. Ellipsis (*I'll be your ...*), metaphor, enallage. 28. Litotes. 29. Climax; metaphor (cloud-capped towers); pun (globe/Globe Theater [[D4.2](#)]), antithesis. 30. Ellipsis.

5. An interpretation of Robert Graves, "Flying Crooked" (1938)

FLYING CROOKED

- The butterfly, the cabbage white,
 (His honest idiocy of flight)
 Will never now, it is too late,
 Master the art of flying straight,
 5 Yet has – who knows so well as I? –
 A just sense of how not to fly:
 He lurches here and here by guess
 And God and hope and hopelessness.
 Even the aerobatic swift
 10 Has not his flying-crooked gift.

At first glance, this seems to be an 'animal poem', basically describing the flight characteristics of a common butterfly (a "cabbage white", 1). Later in the text, the flying-animal isotopy is taken up again when the butterfly's manner of flight is compared and contrasted to that of "the aerobatic swift" (9). The poem's title adds an evaluative slant by calling the butterfly's flight "crooked"; later lines add to this derogatory judgment by using the term "idiocy of flight" (2), and describing the animal as lurching

about (7) in the manner of a drunkard. "Flying straight", in contrast, is termed an "art" (4) and clearly marked as a positive opposite to "flying crooked". The isotopy isolated so far suggests that the butterfly's way of flying is aimless, instable, inept, and haphazard.

And "yet" (5), though less noticeable at first, the poem also increasingly foregrounds certain redeeming qualities in the butterfly's way of flight, which is also a way of life. Already in line 2, the butterfly's "idiocy of flight" is accompanied by "honest", an unexpectedly positive term. In line 7, the butterfly is granted a "just sense of how not to fly", and when the speaker finally compares the butterfly and the swift, the concluding oxymoron of the butterfly's "flying-crooked gift" (15) surprisingly privileges the butterfly's erratic behavior over the mastery, artfulness and elegance of the swift. Overall, the poem's strategy is to reverse not only first impressions but also the 'natural' value judgments inherent in expressions like *crooked*, *straight*, *art*, *mastery* etc.

The poem's point is notably supported by syntactic and rhythmical formal features, mainly through a technique known as "expressive form". Most of the lines of the poem contain semantic or rhythmical stumbling blocks, reversals, and inconsistencies, imitating the erratic nature of the butterfly. For instance, line 2 is not linked either syntactically or isotopically to its preceding context. Line 7 offers the highly unusual collocation "here and here" in place of the more common "here and there". Lines 7-8 throw an incoherent polysyndetic list at the reader: "by guess/And God and hope and hopelessness". The significant exception, of course, is "Even the aerobatic swift" (9), a metrically fluid line which formally imitates the elegant and smooth flight of the swift.

The speaker's involvement in all this is already implied in his evaluative mode of description. Of course, there is also a striking parenthesis – "who knows so well as I?" (5) – which indicates that the speaker is not at all interested in a "neutral", objective or scientific account of the behavioral patterns of butterflies (so much, then, for its being purely an animal poem; but very few animal poems are pure in that sense anyway). One notes, too, that the butterfly is referred to not by the normal neuter pronoun but by "he", a rhetorical strategy that personifies the animal and makes it the speaker's counterpart. What the speaker is really concerned with, then, is a philosophical reflection on a style of living which he observes in the butterfly and which he, for bad *and* good (in exactly that order), recognizes in himself. Intriguingly, the speaker then fails to specify more explicitly what, for him, the flying-crooked gift might be. Indeed, it is this gap that makes Graves's poem so stimulating and thought-provoking. Clearly, what it lets the reader become aware of is that language-encased values are not final judgments and that it is not always the straight-and-logical way that leads to a goal, initiates a discovery,⁵ or creates an intriguing poem.

⁵ An afterthought: modern fighter aircraft are now designed to be unstable in flight in order to give them increased maneuverability.

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