

Explainer: Hark! I hear poetic meter

By Lucy Van, The Conversation, adapted by Newsela staff on 05.31.17

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Level **790L**



A poster for the 1884 American production of Shakespeare's play "Macbeth." Shakespeare's use of blank verse was an important part of his plays. Photo from Wikimedia.

In everyday life, the foot is nothing special. Feet just takes us where we need to go.

To poets, feet are something else. They're the unit of meter, the rhythm of poetry.

Like Acrobats Walking Across A Tightrope

Meter is all about syllables. "Water" has two syllables, for example: "wa" and "ter." When we speak, we emphasize, or stress, some syllables. The "wa" in "water" gets more stress than the "ter." Try sounding it out and listen for the difference.

A foot includes a stressed syllable and some unstressed syllables. Poets put one foot in front of another, like acrobats walking across a tightrope. They string together poetic feet to form lines of poetry.

There are several different kinds of feet, all with funny-sounding names: the trochee, the spondee, the dactyl, the iamb, the anapaest. Each has a different mix of stressed and unstressed syllables.

Likewise, there are several different kinds of lines: hexameter, pentameter, tetrameter, and so on. Their names tell how many feet each line contains. Take pentameter, for instance. In Greek, "Penta-" means "five;" so pentameter is a five-footed line.

Making Poetry Easier To Remember

Recognizing a poem's meter, counting its feet, is important to appreciating poetry. Let's examine these feet, closely.

Why do poets use meter? One reason has to do with memory. The first poets didn't write their poems down, they recited them.

Meter made poetic verse easier to remember. This let performers recite long, complicated poems by heart.

Meters Allow Poets To Express Themselves Differently

Meter was also used to express different meanings and feelings. Here are a few examples of traditional meters:

Heroic verse is formed by hexameters, lines of six feet. Traditionally, it was used for telling the great deeds of great men.

Ovid wrote the masterpiece "Metamorphoses" 2,000 years ago. It is written in heroic verse.

The style was also often used to flatter the rich and powerful. If poets needed to win favor with someone, they could write a poem about them in heroic verse. Everyone likes to feel like a hero, after all.

The elegiac style mixes meters. It has one line in hexameter with six feet, followed by a line in pentameter with just five feet. It feels like the last foot is missing.

Take, for example, these lines by poet Samuel Taylor Coleridge. He cleverly used elegiac meter, to write about elegiac meter:

*In the hexameter rises the fountain's
silvery column,*

In the pentameter aye falling in melody back.

Elegy in the past was often about love. Modern elegies, however, are usually about mourning a death.

What do love and death have in common?

For one thing, they both involve an absence, a longing for a missing thing. In love, one longs for what could be; in mourning, one longs for what has been. Thus, elegy, with its missing foot, can express themes of both.

The most common foot in English is the iamb. It has an unstressed-stressed beat pattern thought to resemble the natural rhythm of English speech.

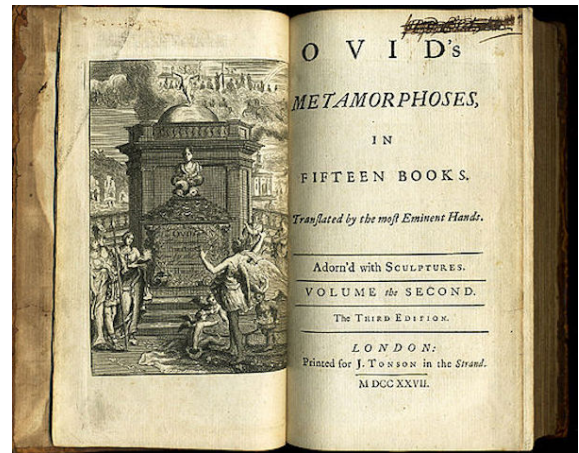
Shakespeare usually had his actors speak in blank verse: unrhymed lines of iambic pentameter. This rhythm helps actors remember dialogue, but it also opens up artistic possibilities.

The meter establishes an expectation that five feet (or 10 syllables) fall in each line. Shakespeare played with this expectation, for example by adding meaningful silences, as Lady Macbeth demonstrates:

That which that made them drunk hath made me bold;

What hath quench'd them hath given me fire.

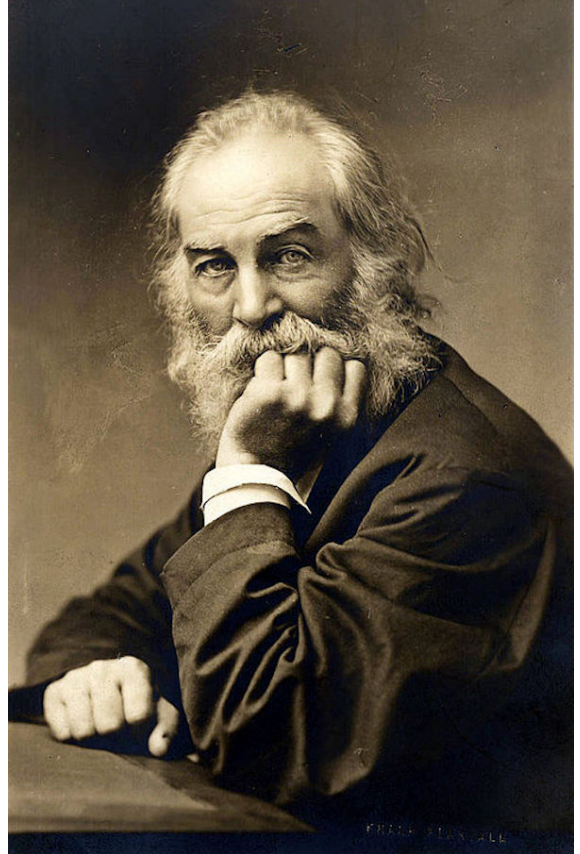
Hark! Peace!



Actors know to take eight counts of silence before the sudden, alarming "Hark! Peace!" That enormous pause creates a dramatic effect on stage. And it's all communicated by meter.

Whitman Brought Poetry Out Of The Past

Walt Whitman was a great American poet in the 1800s. He thought traditional meter was limiting because it kept poetry rooted in the past. His verse had to be free to express his hopeful vision of American democracy. So he broke the rules and used a bold poetic style: free verse. Read this part of a Whitman poem "A Noiseless Patient Spider:"



A noiseless patient spider,

*I mark'd where on a little promontory it
stood isolated,*

*Mark'd how to explore the vacant vast
surrounding,*

*It launch'd forth filament, filament,
filament, out of itself,*

Ever unreeling them, ever tirelessly speeding them.

In free verse, there's no fixed foot and no fixed number of feet. A line can be long or short, depending on the thought it expresses.

Though he was not the first poet to write in free verse, Whitman pioneered free verse. America was a brand new country in the 1800s and it was growing quickly. Whitman's lines expand to an outreaching horizon, mapping the grassy prairies of the American frontier.

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Quiz

- 1 Read the paragraph from the section "Making Poetry Easier To Remember."

Recognizing a poem's meter, counting its feet, is important to appreciating poetry. Let's examine these feet, closely.

What does the author mean by "appreciating" poetry?

- (A) to enjoy the sound of it
 - (B) to have gratitude for it
 - (C) to understand it fully
 - (D) to admire its style
- 2 Read the selection from the section "Meters Allow Poets To Express Themselves Differently."

The style was also often used to flatter the rich and powerful. If poets needed to win favor with someone, they could write a poem about them in heroic verse.

Which word or phrase from the section helps you of "flatter"?

- (A) involve
 - (B) win favor
 - (C) remember
 - (D) opens up
- 3 Read the section "Whitman Brought Poetry Out Of The Past." Based on the photo and text in that section, what do we know about Walt Whitman?
- (A) He had a bold vision and style based on his hopes for the country.
 - (B) He thought traditional poetry was too hard to understand.
 - (C) He used free verse and plain language in his poems.
 - (D) He wanted to show how American democracy works.

- 4 Examine the image in the section "Meters Allow Poets To Express Themselves Differently." How does this image help you understand heroic verse better?
- (A) It provides visual cues that explain the subject of the poem.
 - (B) It includes a short explanation about verse from the writer.
 - (C) It highlights the formality and age of Ovid's classic text.
 - (D) It shows why the poem is called "Metamorphoses."