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# Poetic Form: Freeing our Minds

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In a world where people want everything now, poetry seems to be a dying breed. Reciting well thought-out verses has turned to blunt song lyrics in every genre possible. Poets who perfected the use of form are being replaced by musicians with predictable rhyming schemes. Most poets now lean toward free verse poetry instead of forms like sonnets and sestinas because there's nothing new to say with them.

When I interviewed several students (who are studying subjects other than English), they had mixed views. Yes, they liked poetry, but when there was a choice between reading poetry or a novel, most preferred a novel. When the choice was poetry or a movie, they preferred a movie. One student responded, "When you're watching a movie you don't have to think. You can escape" (Audra Mulleneaux). People want poetry to tell them straight out what it is saying. If they have to analyze too much, they think it is not worth it. The student then added, "People write poetry and think it's modern beauty, when in all actuality it's complete nonsense." The beauty of form is being lost in a wave of modern innovation. But poetic forms can give poets direction, as well as make a poem easier to understand. When readers take the time to understand the separate parts of a poem, it is more fun and understandable. Due to the size of this subject, we will just look at how rhyme, stanza, and meter emphasize and add to poetry through examples in the villanelle and sonnet forms.

# Rhyme

Rhyme has always been a major part of poetry. Even with the popularity of free verse, the general population's idea of a poem is still that of a few lines that end in rhyme. Charles B. Wheeler, of Ohio State University, states, "[T]he poet merely takes advantage of something that already exists, waiting to be used" (241). Rhyme continues to be effective because it takes advantage of the little quirks of a language. Because it is something simple, anyone can quickly identify a rhyme. The similarities we hear bring us a sense of pleasure, and poets use this to win their audiences. William Shakespeare's sonnet 141 begins, "In faith, I do not love thee with mine eyes/For they in thee a thousand errors note/But 'tis my heart that loves what they despise/Who, in despite of view, is pleas'd to dote" (Reed 71). When reading these lines, a reader gets a sense of satisfaction from the abab rhyme scheme. The message in the third and fourth lines is emphasized because the rhymes allow a reader to pause. This pause lets him enjoy the sounds referring him to the endings of the first two lines, and lets him take a moment to process what he has just read.

Rhyme is especially effective because it appeals to the ear, as Shakespeare's sonnet just demonstrated. Poetry is made to be heard, though it is mostly just read now. Once you take the words and put them in the open, they are much more pleasing. A good poet will study not only words in his head, but words out loud. He notices what people say. Those little language quirks we talked about earlier become shining moments in his next poem. This is because "the poet takes advantage of [our bits] of absentmindedness by turning [them] to his own ends, and we on our part appreciate his ingenuity" (Wheeler 246). Everyone has found delight in unintentional alliterations, puns, and even jokes. Poets strive to keep giving us the same delight with new and unexpected rhymes.

# Stanza

Like rhyme, stanza still plays a huge role in poetry. However, free verse poetry has also affected its use. What once was more regular is now set aside for lines that flow more like prose. A poem can have couplets, tercets, and quatrains all mixed together in no discernible pattern. It is no wonder that the common person would rather read a novel; a poem's format has become so confusing that people do not want to get headaches from trying to figure out what the poet wants to say.

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In W.H. Auden's Villanelle, the lines, "Time will say nothing but I told you so," and "If I could tell you I would let you know," keep the poem unified and less confusing ([677] Villanelle). Like a well-written paper, each stanza connects to a main idea. Auden, as well as other poets using the villanelle form, does not let his reader forget the main point of the work. This repetition, along with rhyme, lets a reader again take time to focus closely on a single part of the poem. After looking closely at how the beginning leads to the end, the poem as a whole makes more sense. Comparatively, Sylvia Plath repeats the lines, "I shut my eyes and all the world drops dead," and "(I think I made you up inside my head)" (Mad Girl's). As

a reader gets deeper into the poem, each stanza adds a new scene to Plath's repeated lines. Repetition, just like rhyme, gives a reader something to hold onto. In this case, it is the familiar. And though the lines are familiar, each bit of new information transforms what those lines mean. This is where a reader begins to understand a poem's message.

In contrast, today's poets do not want a lot of poems featuring the forms they feel have been practically beaten to death in the centuries before. But Wheeler looks at the relation to older poets in this way:

In a sense this poet is competing with the older ones, but he is also joining them: they are in it together [. . .] What [the poem] could add to the tradition, it has added. Its value has not diminished in the least with time, and it contributes still to the life of this art-indirectly, now--by its example, the solid achievement of the past is the best guarantee of the future. (264)

Really, they have a problem with conforming. They ask themselves, "Why do I have to do it exactly like that? Why do I need rules to write poetry?" They want to write with no restraint. They want to write something completely random. They want a poem with no form; however, there is no such thing as a poem without a form (Wheeler 262). Every poem does have a form, even though it may be a little crazy and illogical. Though poets are trying to break the mold, by calling their workmanship "poems" they will always be placing their own idea of what poetry is in their work. In reality, it is not the need to have any and all options open to them. Poets would rather focus on the literary elements within their poems than spending hard thinking time trying to fit their ideas into a predetermined form. If the poem does not blend well with the form chosen, a reader will see that the poet has no control over it (Wheeler 240).

## Meter

The last basic characteristic of poetic form is meter. We still see much of this in song lyrics and children's first attempts at poetry. Rhyme also works with meter, as it does stanzas. It lets a reader distance himself from the poem and, therefore, lets him see the differences it has compared to life as it is (Wheeler 246). Basically, the meter sets a rhythm with which rhyme, and even stanzas, coordinate. A reader sees where the poem differs from his own personal experiences, or how it is the same, but nonetheless knows that it is not real. Dylan Thomas's *Do Not Go Gentle into that Good Night* shares with the reader Thomas's feelings about his father dying (128). Though it is completely real to the poet, the reader still reads it as fiction due to the rhythmic way it is presented. The last stanza especially catches the reader's attention as the meter unknowingly slows his digestion of the conclusion's meaning.

Sonnets take special consideration with meter, as well. They seem very complex to craft due to the combination of rhyme, stanza, and meter plus using other literary elements. Sonnet 116 says, "O no! it [love] is an ever-fixed mark/ That looks on tempests and is never shaken/ It is the star to every wandering bark/Whose worth unknown, although his height be taken" (Reed 58). This passage is easy to understand because of the meter it takes on; however, it most likely took time and thought to arrange into the set amount of syllables. If taken at

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a slower pace, as the meter attempts to do, a reader will not have a great deal of trouble taking in the subject Shakespeare addresses.

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Rhyme, stanza, and meter are truly important to the identity of poetry. Without them, it would have been difficult for poetry to flourish as an art. And these aspects of poetic forms can help a reader understand a poem if he will take the time to follow the directions they give, such as pausing, emphasizing, and slowing down. A poet's talent is much like other talents, which need some kind of technique practice in order to stay precise and sharp. Writing in forms is really hard if a poet does not do it often, but if he does, the good habits it teaches will spread into other poetry he chooses to write, whether it be free verse, lyrics, or something else. Wheeler tells us, "[T]hough the poet is actively engaged at every moment of the process, his role is rather to encourage [the poem] than to bend it to his will. In this he is like the sculptor who liberates the statue implicit block of wood or stone by letting his chisel follow the grain of the substance" (Wheeler 239). When poets and readers try to force a poem somewhere, it will not likely end well. Understanding how to handle and work within poetic forms will not only free our minds to see many interpretations, but also free them as we look at the world around us and ask ourselves what we have overlooked in real life.

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