

18

EXTERNAL FORM

Most poems of more than a few lines are divided into **stanzas**—groups of lines divided from other groups by white space on the page. Putting some space between groupings of lines has the effect of sectioning a poem, giving its physical appearance a series of divisions that often mark turns of thought, changes of scene or image, or other shifts in structure or direction. In Donne’s “The Flea” (chapter 14), for example, the stanza divisions mark distinct stages in the action: between the first and second stanzas, the speaker stops his companion from killing the flea; between the second and third stanzas, the companion follows through on her intention and kills the flea. In Nemerov’s “The Goose Fish” (chapter 17), the stanzas mark stages in the self-perception of the lovers: each stanza is a more or less distinct scene, and the scenes unfold almost like a series of slides. Not all stanzas are quite so neatly patterned as these, but any formal division of a poem into stanzas is important to consider; what appear to be gaps or silences may be structural markers.

Historically, stanzas have most often been organized by patterns of rhyme, and thus stanza divisions have been a visual indicator of patterns in sound. In most traditional stanza forms, the pattern of rhyme is repeated in stanza after stanza throughout the poem, until voice and ear become familiar with the pattern and come to expect and, in a sense, depend on it. The accumulation of pattern allows us to “hear” deviations from the pattern as well, just as we do in music. The rhyme thus becomes an organizational device in the poem—a formal, external determiner of organization, as distinguished from the internal, structural determiners we considered in chapter 17—and ordinarily the metrical patterns stay constant from stanza to stanza. (That is, a formal rhyme scheme is *external* to the unique inner logic of a poem’s narrative, descriptive, or discursive design.) In Shelley’s “Ode to the West Wind,” for example, the first and third lines in each stanza rhyme, and the middle line then rhymes with the first and third lines of the next stanza. (In indicating rhyme, we conventionally use a different letter of the alphabet to represent each rhyme sound; in the following example, if we begin with “being” as *a* and “dead” as *b*, then “fleeing” is also *a*, and “red” and “bed” are *b*.)

O wild West Wind, thou breath of Autumn’s being,	<i>a</i>
Thou, from whose unseen presence the leaves dead	<i>b</i>
Are driven, like ghosts from an enchanter fleeing,	<i>a</i>
Yellow, and black, and pale, and hectic red,	<i>b</i>
Pestilence-stricken multitudes: O thou,	<i>c</i>
Who chariotest to their dark wintry bed	<i>b</i>

The wingéd seeds, where they lie cold and low,	c
Each like a corpse within its grave, until	d
Thine azure sister of the Spring shall blow	c

In this stanza form, known as **terza rima**, the stanzas are linked to each other by a common sound: one rhyme sound from each stanza is picked up in the next stanza, and so on to the end of the poem (though sometimes poems in this form have sections that use varied rhyme schemes). This stanza form was used by Dante in *The Divine Comedy*, written in Italian in the early 1300s. Terza rima is not all that common in English because it is a rhyme-rich stanza form—that is, it requires many rhymes, and thus many different rhyme words—and English is, relatively speaking, a rhyme-poor language (not as rich in rhyme possibilities as Italian or French). One reason for this is that English is derived from so many different language families that it has fewer similar word endings than languages that have remained “pure”—that is, more dependent for vocabulary on the roots and patterns found in a single language family.

Many contemporary poets use rhyme sparingly, finding it neither necessary nor appealing, but until the twentieth century the music of rhyme was central to both the sound and the formal conception of most poems. Because poetry was originally an oral art (and its texts not always written down), various kinds of **memory devices** (sometimes called **mnemonic devices**) were built into poems to help reciters remember them. Rhyme was one such device, and most people still find it easier to memorize poetry that rhymes. The simple pleasure of hearing familiar sounds repeated at regular intervals may also help to account for the traditional popularity of rhyme, and perhaps plain habit (for both poets and hearers) had a lot to do with why rhyme flourished for so many centuries in so many languages as an expected feature of poetry. Rhyme also helps to give poetry a special aural quality that distinguishes it from prose, a significant advantage in ages that worry about decorum and propriety and are anxious to preserve a strong sense of poetic tradition. Some ages have been very concerned that poetry should not in any way be mistaken for prose or made to serve prosaic functions, and the literary critics and theorists in those ages made extraordinary efforts to emphasize the distinctions between poetry, which was thought to be artistically superior, and prose, which was thought to be primarily utilitarian. An elitist pride and a fear that an expanded reading public could ultimately dilute the possibilities of traditional art forms have been powerful cultural forces in Western civilization, and if such forces were not themselves responsible for creating rhyme in poetry, they at least helped to preserve a sense of its necessity. But rhyme and other patterns of repeated sounds are also important, for countless historical and cultural reasons, to non-Western languages and poetic traditions as well.

There are at least two other reasons for rhyme. One is complex and hard to state justly without long explanations. It involves traditional ideas about the symmetrical relationship of different aspects of the world and the function of poetry to reflect the universe as human learning has understood it. Many cultures (especially in earlier centuries) have assumed that rhyme was proper to verse, perhaps even essential. Poets in these ages and cultures would have felt themselves eccentric or even foolish to compose poems any other way. Some English poets (especially in the Renaissance) did experiment—often very successfully—with **blank verse** (that is, verse that did not rhyme but that nevertheless had strict metrical require-

ments), but the cultural pressure for rhyme was almost constant. Why? As noted above, custom or habit may account in part for the assumption that rhyme was necessary, but there was probably more to it than that. Rather, the poets' sense that poetry was an imitation of larger relationships in the universe made it seem natural to use rhyme to represent or re-create a sense of pattern, harmony, correspondence, symmetry, and order. The sounds of poetry were thus, they reasoned, reminders of the harmonious cosmos, of the music of the spheres that animated the planets, the processes of nature, the interrelationship of all created things and beings. Probably no poet ever thought, "I shall now tunefully emulate the harmony of God's carefully ordered universe," but the tendency to use rhyme and other repetitions or re-echoings of sound (such as **alliteration** or **assonance**) nevertheless stemmed ultimately from basic assumptions about how the universe worked. In a modern world increasingly perceived as fragmented and chaotic, there is less of a tendency to assert a sense of harmony and symmetry. It would be far too easy and too mechanical, of course, to think that rhyme in a poem specifically means that the poet has a firm sense of cosmic order, and that an unrhymed poem testifies to chaos, but cultural assumptions do affect the expectations of both poets and readers, and cultural tendencies create a kind of pressure on the individual creator. If you take a survey course (or a series of related "period" courses) in English or American literature, you will readily notice the diminishing sense that rhyme is an indispensable aspect of poetry. And similarly, other linguistic and national traditions vary usages in different times, depending on their own evolving philosophical and cultural assumptions.

One other reason for using rhyme is that it provides a kind of discipline for the poet, a way of harnessing poetic talents and keeping a rein on the imagination, so that the results are ordered, controlled, put into some kind of meaningful and

Concentration is the very essence of poetry.

—AMY LOWELL

recognizable form. Robert Frost said that writing poems without rhyme or regular meter was pointless, like playing tennis without a net. Writing good poetry does require a lot of discipline, and Frost speaks for many (perhaps most) traditional poets in suggesting that rhyme or rhythm can be a major source of that discipline. But neither one is the only possible source, and more recent poets have usually felt they would rather play by new rules or invent their own as they go along; they have, therefore, sought their sources of discipline elsewhere, preferring the sparer tones that unrhymed poetry provides. It is not that contemporary poets cannot think of rhyme words or that they do not care about the sounds of their poetry; rather, many recent poets have consciously decided not to work with rhyme and to use instead other aural and metrical devices and other strategies for organizing stanzas, just as they have chosen to work with experimental and variable rhythms instead of writing necessarily in the traditional English meters. Nevertheless, many modern poets have continued to write rhymed verse successfully in a more or less traditional way, finding that, in fact, rhyme can be a useful spur to the imagination—the search for a rhyme word can often lead to unexpected discoveries. It might well be, for example, that the need to find a rhyme for "dirt" led Theodore Roethke to the wonderful final line of "My Papa's Waltz" (chapter 15): "Still clinging to your shirt." A free-verse poet might have judged the poem complete after the previous line: "Then waltzed me off to bed."

The amount and density of rhyme vary widely in stanza and verse forms, from elaborate and intricate patterns of rhyme to more casual or spare sound repeti-

tions. The **Spenserian stanza**, for example, is even more rhyme-rich than terza rima, using only three rhyme sounds in nine rhymed lines, as in Keats's *The Eve of St. Agnes*:

Her falt'ring hand upon the balustrade,	<i>a</i>
Old Angela was feeling for the stair,	<i>b</i>
When Madeline, St. Agnes' charméd maid,	<i>a</i>
Rose, like a missioned spirit, unaware:	<i>b</i>
With silver taper's light, and pious care,	<i>b</i>
She turned, and down the agéd gossip led	<i>c</i>
To a safe level matting. Now prepare,	<i>b</i>
Young Porphyro, for gazing on that bed;	<i>c</i>
She comes, she comes again, like ring dove frayed and fled	<i>c</i>

On the other hand, the **ballad stanza** (as in "Sir Patrick Spens") has only one set of rhymes in four lines; lines 1 and 3 in each stanza do not rhyme at all:

The king sits in Dumferling toune,	<i>a</i>
Drinking the blude-reid wine:	<i>b</i>
"O whar will I get guid sailor,	<i>c</i>
To sail this ship of mine?"	<i>b</i>

Most stanza forms use a metrical pattern as well as a rhyme scheme. Terza rima, for example, involves **iambic meter** (unstressed and stressed syllables alternating regularly), and each line has five beats (**pentameter**). Most of the Spenserian stanza (the first eight lines) is also in iambic pentameter, but the ninth line in each stanza has one extra foot (thus, the last line is in iambic hexameter). The ballad stanza, also iambic, as are most English stanza and verse forms, alternates three-beat and four-beat lines; lines 1 and 3 are unrhymed iambic tetrameter (four beats), and lines 2 and 4 are rhymed iambic trimeter (three beats).

THE SONNET

The **sonnet**, one of the most persistent verse forms, originated in the Middle Ages as a prominent form in Italian and French poetry. It dominated English poetry in the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries and then was revived several times from the early-nineteenth century onward. Except for some early experiments with length, the sonnet has always been fourteen lines long, and it usually is written in iambic pentameter. It is most often printed as if it were a *single* stanza, although it actually has several formal divisions that represent its rhyme schemes and formal breaks. As a popular and traditional verse form in English for more than four centuries, the sonnet has been surprisingly resilient even in ages that largely reject rhyme. It continues to attract a variety of poets, including (curiously) radical and even revolutionary poets, who find its formal demands, discipline, and fixed outcome very appealing. Its uses, although quite varied, can be illustrated fairly precisely. As a verse form, the sonnet is contained, compact, demanding; whatever it does, it must do concisely and quickly. To be effective, it must take advantage of the possibilities inherent in its shortness and its relative rigidity. It is best suited to intensity of feeling and concentration of expression. Not too surprisingly, one subject it frequently discusses is confinement itself.

WILLIAM WORDSWORTH

Nuns Fret Not

- Nuns fret not at their convent's narrow room;
 And hermits are contented with their cells;
 And students with their pensive citadels;
 Maids at the wheel, the weaver at his loom,
 5 Sit blithe and happy; bees that soar for bloom,
 High as the highest Peak of Furness-fells,¹
 Will murmur by the hour in foxglove bells:
 In truth the prison, unto which we doom
 Ourselves, no prison is: and hence for me,
 10 In sundry moods,'twas pastime to be bound
 Within the sonnet's scanty plot of ground;
 Pleased if some souls (for such there needs must be)
 Who have felt the weight of too much liberty,
 Should find brief solace there, as I have found.

1807

Most sonnets are structured according to one of two principles of division. On one principle, the sonnet divides into three units of four lines each and a final unit of two lines, and sometimes the line spacing reflects this division. On the other, the fundamental break is between the first eight lines (called an octave) and the last six (called a sestet). The 4-4-4-2 sonnet is usually called the **English** or **Shakespearean sonnet**, and ordinarily its rhyme scheme reflects the structure: the scheme of *abab cdcd efef gg* is the classic one, but many variations from that pattern still reflect the basic 4-4-4-2 division. The 8-6 sonnet is usually called the **Italian** or **Petrarchan sonnet** (the Italian poet Petrarch was an early master of this structure), and its "typical" rhyme scheme is *abbaabba cdecde*, although it too produces many variations that still reflect the basic division into two parts, an **octave** and a **sestet**.

The two kinds of sonnet structures are useful for two different sorts of argument. The 4-4-4-2 structure works very well for constructing a poem that wants to make a three-step argument (with a quick summary at the end), or for setting up brief, cumulative images. "That time of year thou mayst in me behold" (chapter 16), for example, uses the 4-4-4-2 structure to mark the progressive steps toward death and the parting of friends by using three distinct images, then summarizing. "Let me not to the marriage of true minds" (page 611) works very similarly, following the kind of organization that in chapter 18 was referred to as the 1-2-3 structure—and doing it compactly and economically.

Here, on the other hand, is a poem that uses the 8-6 pattern:

1. Mountains in England's Lake District, where Wordsworth lived.

HENRY CONSTABLE

[My lady's presence makes the roses red]

- My lady's presence makes the roses red,
 Because to see her lips they blush for shame.
 The lily's leaves, for envy, pale became,
 And her white hands in them this envy bred.
 5 The marigold the leaves abroad doth spread,
 Because the sun's and her power is the same.
 The violet of purple colour came,
 Dyed in the blood she made my heart to shed.
 In brief: all flowers from her their virtue take;
 10 From her sweet breath their sweet smells do proceed;
 The living heat which her eyebeams doth make
 Warmeth the ground and quickeneth the seed.
 The rain, wherewith she watereth the flowers,
 Falls from mine eyes, which she dissolves in showers.

1594

The first eight lines argue that the lady's presence is responsible for the color of all of nature's flowers, and the final six lines summarize and extend that argument to smells and heat—and finally to the rain that the lady draws from the speaker's eyes. That kind of two-part structure, in which the octave states a proposition or generalization and the sestet provides a particularization or application of it, has a variety of uses. The final lines may, for example, reverse the first eight and achieve a paradox or irony in the poem, or the poem may nearly balance two comparable arguments. Basically, the 8-6 structure lends itself to poems with two points to make, or to those that wish to make one point and then illustrate it.

Sometimes the neat and precise structure is altered—either slightly, as in Wordsworth's "Nuns Fret Not," above (where the 8-6 structure is more of an 8½-5½ or 7-7 structure), or more radically as particular needs or effects may demand. And the two basic structures certainly do not define all the structural possibilities within a fourteen-line poem, even if they do suggest the most traditional ways of taking advantage of the sonnet's compact and well-kept container.

During the Renaissance, poets regularly employed the sonnet for love poems, and many modern sonnets continue to be about love or private life. And many continue to use a personal, apparently open and sincere tone. But poets often find the sonnet's compact form and rigid demands equally useful for many varieties of subject, theme, and tone. Besides love, sonnets often treat other subjects: politics, philosophy, discovery. And tones vary widely too, from the anger and remorse of "Th' expense of spirit in a waste of shame" (chapter 17) and righteous outrage of "On the Late Massacre in Piedmont" (chapter 14) to the tender awe of "How Do I Love Thee?" Many poets seem to take the kind of comfort Wordsworth describes in the careful limits of the form, finding in its two basic varia-

tions (the English sonnet, such as “That time of year,” and the Italian sonnet, such as “On First Looking into Chapman’s Homer” [chapter 21]) a sufficiency of ways to organize their materials into coherent structures.

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DANTE GABRIEL ROSSETTI

A Sonnet Is a Moment’s Monument

A Sonnet is a moment’s monument—
 Memorial from the Soul’s eternity
 To one dead deathless hour. Look that it be,
 Whether for lustral² rite or dire portent,
 5 Of its own arduous fullness reverent.
 Carve it in ivory or in ebony,
 As Day or Night may rule; and let Time see
 Its flowering crest impearled and orient.³
 A Sonnet is a coin: its face reveals
 10 The soul—its converse, to what Power ’tis due—
 Whether for tribute to the august appeals
 Of Life or dower in Love’s high retinue,
 It serve; or ’mid the dark wharf’s cavernous breath,
 In Charon’s palm it pay the toll to Death.⁴

1881

- In Rossetti’s metaphor comparing the sonnet to a coin (lines 9–14), what are the two “sides” of a sonnet?

JOHN KEATS

On the Sonnet

If by dull rhymes our English must be chained,
 And like Andromeda,⁵ the sonnet sweet
 Fettered, in spite of pained loveliness,
 Let us find, if we must be constrained,
 5 Sandals more interwoven and complete

2. Purificatory. 3. Sparkling.

4. In classical myth, Charon was the boatman who rowed the souls of the dead across the river Styx. Ancient Greeks put a small coin in the hand of the dead to pay his fee.

5. According to Greek myth, Andromeda was chained to a rock so that she would be devoured by a sea monster. She was rescued by Perseus, who married her. When she died she was placed among the stars.

To fit the naked foot of Poesy:⁶
 Let us inspect the lyre, and weigh the stress
 Of every chord,⁷ and see what may be gained
 By ear industrious, and attention meet;
 10 Misers of sound and syllable, no less
 Than Midas⁸ of his coinage, let us be
 Jealous of dead leaves in the bay-wreath crown;⁹
 So, if we may not let the Muse be free,
 She will be bound with garlands of her own.

1819

- What is the rhyme scheme of this poem? How well does this unusual structure meet the challenge implied by the poem?

GWENDOLYN BROOKS

First Fight. Then Fiddle.

First fight. Then fiddle. Ply the slipping string
 With feathery sorcery; muzzle the note
 With hurting love; the music that they wrote
 Bewitch, bewilder. Qualify to sing
 5 Threadwise. Devise no salt, no hempen thing
 For the dear instrument to bear. Devote
 The bow to silks and honey. Be remote
 A while from malice and from murdering.
 But first to arms, to armor. Carry hate
 10 In front of you and harmony behind.
 Be deaf to music and to beauty blind.
 Win war. Rise bloody, maybe not too late
 For having first to civilize a space
 Wherein to play your violin with grace.

1949

- After advising “First Fight. Then fiddle,” the speaker discusses first music, then conflict. Why do you think the poet has arranged her argument this way?

6. In a letter that contained this sonnet, Keats expressed impatience with the traditional Petrarchan and Shakespearean sonnet forms: “I have been endeavoring to discover a better sonnet stanza than we have.”

7. Lyre string; *Meet*: proper.

8. The legendary king of Phrygia who asked, and got, the power to turn all he touched to gold.

9. The bay tree was sacred to Apollo, god of poetry, and bay wreaths came to symbolize true poetic achievement. The withering of the bay tree is sometimes considered an omen of death. *Jealous*: suspiciously watchful.

ROBERT FROST

Range-Finding

The battle rent a cobweb diamond-strung
 And cut a flower beside a groundbird's nest
 Before it stained a single human breast.
 The stricken flower bent double and so hung.
 5 And still the bird revisited her young.
 A butterfly its fall had dispossessed,
 A moment sought in air his flower of rest,
 Then slightly stooped to it and fluttering clung.
 On the bare upland pasture there had spread
 10 O'ernight 'twixt mullein stalks a wheel of thread
 And straining cables wet with silver dew.
 A sudden passing bullet shook it dry.
 The indwelling spider ran to greet the fly,
 But finding nothing, sullenly withdrew.

1916

- What is the “battle” of line 1? What is the poem’s actual subject?

WILLIAM WORDSWORTH

London, 1802

Milton! thou should'st be living at this hour:
 England hath need of thee: she is a fen
 Of stagnant waters: altar, sword, and pen,
 Fireside, the heroic wealth of hall and bower,
 5 Have forfeited their ancient English dower
 Of inward happiness. We are selfish men;
 Oh! raise us up, return to us again;
 And give us manners, virtue, freedom, power.
 Thy soul was like a star, and dwelt apart:
 10 Thou hadst a voice whose sound was like the sea:
 Pure as the naked heavens, majestic, free,
 So didst thou travel on life's common way,
 In cheerful godliness; and yet thy heart
 The lowliest duties on herself did lay.

1802

- What is Wordsworth asserting about the power of poetry in this sonnet? Why do you think he chose the sonnet form for this poem?

JOHN MILTON

[When I consider how my light is spent]

- When I consider how my light is spent,
 Ere half my days, in this dark world and wide,
 And that one talent which is death to hide¹
 Lodged with me useless, though my soul more bent
 5 To serve therewith my Maker, and present
 My true account, lest he returning chide;
 “Doth God exact day-labor, light denied?”
 I fondly ask; but Patience to prevent²
 That murmur, soon replies, “God doth not need
 10 Either man’s work or his own gifts; who best
 Bear his mild yoke, they serve him best. His state
 Is kingly. Thousands at his bidding speed
 And post o’er land and ocean without rest:
 They also serve who only stand and wait.”

1652?

- Paraphrase the speaker’s question and Patience’s reply. Does knowing that Milton was blind alter your interpretation of this poem?

ELIZABETH BARRETT BROWNING

*[When our two souls stand up]*

- When our two souls stand up erect and strong,
 Face to face, silent, drawing nigh and nigher,
 Until the lengthening wings break into fire
 At either curvèd point,—what bitter wrong
 5 Can the earth do to us, that we should not long
 Be here contented? Think. In mounting higher,
 The angels would press on us and aspire
 To drop some golden orb of perfect song
 Into our deep, dear silence. Let us stay
 10 Rather on earth, Belovéd,—where the unfit
 Contrarious moods of men recoil away
 And isolate pure spirits, and permit
 A place to stand and love in for a day,
 With darkness and the death-hour rounding it.

1897

1. In the parable of the talents (Matthew 25), the servants who earned interest on their master’s money (his talents) while he was away were called “good and faithful”; the one who simply hid the money and then returned it was condemned and sent away. 2. Forestall. *Fondly*: foolishly.

- Explain the metaphor of this poem's first four lines. What will cause "the lengthening wings" to "break into fire"?

CHRISTINA ROSSETTI

In an Artist's Studio

One face looks out from all his canvases,
 One selfsame figure sits or walks or leans;
 We found her hidden just behind those screens,
 That mirror gave back all her loveliness.
 5 A queen in opal or in ruby dress,
 A nameless girl in freshest summer-greens,
 A saint, an angel—every canvass means
 The same one meaning, neither more nor less.
 He feeds upon her face by day and night,
 10 And she with true kind eyes looks back on him
 Fair as the moon and joyful as the light:
 Not wan with waiting, not with sorrow dim;
 Not as she is, but was when hope shone bright;
 Not as she is, but as she fills his dream.

1856

- What do you think is "The same one meaning" the speaker sees in every portrait in the studio?

EDNA ST. VINCENT MILLAY

[What lips my lips have kissed]

What lips my lips have kissed, and where, and why,
 I have forgotten, and what arms have lain
 Under my head till morning; but the rain
 Is full of ghosts tonight, that tap and sigh
 5 Upon the glass and listen for reply,
 And in my heart there stirs a quiet pain
 For unremembered lads that not again
 Will turn to me at midnight with a cry.
 Thus in the winter stands the lonely tree,
 10 Nor knows what birds have vanished one by one,
 Yet knows its boughs more silent than before:
 I cannot say what loves have come and gone;
 I only know that summer sang in me
 A little while, that in me sings no more.

1923

- What are the poem's principal parts? Why does the Petrarchan model suit this sonnet?

GWEN HARWOOD

In the Park

She sits in the park. Her clothes are out of date.
 Two children whine and bicker, tug her skirt.
 A third draws aimless patterns in the dirt.
 Someone she loved once passes by—too late

- 5 to feign indifference to that casual nod.
 “How nice,” et cetera. “Time holds great surprises.”
 From his neat head unquestionably rises
 a small balloon . . . “but for the grace of God . . .”

- They stand a while in flickering light, rehearsing
 10 the children’s names and birthdays. “It’s so sweet
 to hear their chatter, watch them grow and thrive,”
 she says to his departing smile. Then, nursing
 the youngest child, sits staring at her feet.
 To the wind she says, “They have eaten me alive.”

1963

- What is the implication of the “small balloon” that rises from the head of the man who passes by?

WILLIAM SHAKESPEARE

[My mistress’ eyes are nothing like the sun]

- My mistress’ eyes are nothing like the sun;
 Coral is far more red than her lips’ red;
 If snow be white, why then her breasts are dun;³
 If hairs be wires, black wires grow on her head.
 5 I have seen roses damasked⁴ red and white,
 But no such roses see I in her cheeks;
 And in some perfumes is there more delight
 Than in the breath that from my mistress reeks.
 I love to hear her speak, yet well I know
 10 That music hath a far more pleasing sound;
 I grant I never saw a goddess go;⁵
 My mistress, when she walks, treads on the ground.
 And yet, by heaven, I think my love as rare
 As any she belied with false compare.

1609

- In addition to the speaker's mistress, what might be another subject of this poem?

HELEN CHASIN

Joy Sonnet in a Random Universe

Sometimes I'm happy: la la la la la la la
 la la la la la la la la la la la la la la la
 la la la la. Tum tum ti tum. La la la la la la
 la la la la la la la la la la la la la la la.
 5 Hey nonny nonny. La la la la la la la la la
 la la la la la la la la la la. Vo do di o do.
 Poo poo pi doo. La la la la la la la la la la
 la la la la la la la la la la la la la la la
 la la. Whack a doo. La la la la la la la. Sh-
 10 boom, sh-boom. La la la la la la la la la la
 la la la la la la la la la la la la la la la
 la la. Dum di dum. La la la la la la la la la
 la la la la la la la la la. Tra la la. Tra la la
 la la la la la la la la la. Yeah yeah yeah.

1968

- Is Chasin's poem a sonnet? Why or why not?

BILLY COLLINS

Sonnet

All we need is fourteen lines, well, thirteen now,
 and after this one just a dozen
 to launch a little ship on love's storm-tossed seas,
 then only ten more left like rows of beans.
 5 How easily it goes unless you get Elizabethan
 and insist the iambic bongos must be played
 and rhymes positioned at the ends of lines,
 one for every station of the cross.
 But hang on here while we make the turn
 10 into the final six where all will be resolved,
 where longing and heartache will find an end,
 where Laura will tell Petrarch to put down his pen,
 take off those crazy medieval tights,
 blow out the lights, and come at last to bed.

1999

- In what respects is Collins's poem a traditional sonnet? In what respects is it not?

STANZA FORMS

Many stanza forms are represented in this book. Some have names, because they have been used over and over by different poets. Others (such as Poe's stanza form for "The Raven" [chapter 16]) were invented for a particular use in a particular poem and may never be repeated again. Most traditional stanzas are based on rhyme schemes, but some use other kinds of predictable sound patterns; early English poetry, for example, used alliteration to construct a balance between the first and second half of each line (see Earle Birney's "Anglosaxon Street" [later in this chapter] for a modern imitation of this principle). Sometimes, especially when poets interact with each other within a strong community, highly elaborate *verse forms* have been developed that set up stanzas as part of a scheme for the whole poem. The poets of medieval Provence were especially inventive, subtle, and elaborate in their construction of complex verse forms, some of which have been copied by poets ever since. The **sestina**, for example, depends on the measured repetition of words (rather than just sounds) in particular places; see, for example, Bishop's "Sestina" (later in this chapter) and try to decipher the pattern. (There are also double and even triple sestinas, tough tests of a poet's ingenuity.) And the **villanelle**, another Provençal form, depends on the patterned repetition of whole lines (see Dylan Thomas's "Do Not Go Gentle into That Good Night," on the next page). Different cultures and different languages develop their own patterns and measures—not all poetries are parallel to English poetry—and they vary from age to age as well as nation to nation.

You can probably deduce the principles involved in each of the following stanza or verse forms by looking carefully at a poem that uses it; if you have trouble, look at the definitions in the glossary.

heroic couplet	"Sound and Sense"	chapter 16
tetrameter couplet	"To His Coy Mistress"	chapter 14
limerick	"There was a young girl from St. Paul"	chapter 16
free verse	"Dirge"	chapter 16

What are stanza forms good for? What use is it to recognize them? Why do poets bother? Matters discussed in this chapter so far have suggested two reasons: (1) Breaks between stanzas provide convenient pauses for reader and writer, something roughly equivalent to paragraphs in prose. The eye thus picks up the places where some kind of pause or break or change of focus occurs. (2) Poets sometimes use stanza forms, as they do rhyme itself, as a discipline: writing in a certain kind of stanza form imposes a shape on the act of imagination. But visual spaces and unexpected print divisions also mean that poems sometimes *look* unusual and require special visual attention, attention that does not always follow the logic of sound patterns or syntax. After the following poems illustrating some common stanza forms, you will find a section on poems that employ special configurations and shapes, using spaces and print in other ways, to establish their meanings and effects.

DYLAN THOMAS

*Do Not Go Gentle into That Good Night*¹

Do not go gentle into that good night,
Old age should burn and rave at close of day;
Rage, rage against the dying of the light.

Though wise men at their end know dark is right,
5 Because their words had forked no lightning they
Do not go gentle into that good night.

Good men, the last wave by, crying how bright
Their frail deeds might have danced in a green bay,
Rage, rage against the dying of the light.

10 Wild men who caught and sang the sun in flight,
And learn, too late, they grieved it on its way,
Do not go gentle into that good night.

Grave men, near death, who see with blinding sight
Blind eyes could blaze like meteors and be gay,
15 Rage, rage against the dying of the light.

And you, my father, there on the sad height,
Curse, bless, me now with your fierce tears, I pray.
Do not go gentle into that good night.
Rage, rage against the dying of the light.

1952

- What do the wise, good, wild, and grave men have in common with the speaker's father? Why do you think Thomas chose such a strict form, the villanelle, for such an emotionally charged subject?

1. Written during the final illness of the poet's father.

MARIANNE MOORE

Poetry

- I, too, dislike it: there are things that are important beyond all this fiddle.
 Reading it, however, with a perfect contempt for it, one discovers in it after all, a place for the genuine.
 Hands that can grasp, eyes
 5 that can dilate, hair that can rise
 if it must, these things are important not because a high-sounding interpretation can be put upon them but because they are useful. When they become so derivative as to become unintelligible, the same thing may be said for all of us, that we
 10 do not admire what
 we cannot understand: the bat
 holding on upside down or in quest of something to eat, elephants pushing, a wild horse taking a roll, a tireless wolf under a tree, the immovable critic twitching his skin like a horse that feels a flea, the base-
 15 ball fan, the statistician—
 nor is it valid
 to discriminate against “business documents and school-books”²; all these phenomena are important. One must make a distinction
 however: when dragged into prominence by half poets, the result is not poetry,
 20 nor till the poets among us can be
 “literalists of the imagination”³—above
 insolence and triviality and can present
 for inspection, “imaginary gardens with real toads in them,” shall we have
 25 it. In the meantime, if you demand on the one hand,
 the raw material of poetry in

2. *Diary of Tolstoy* (Dutton), p. 84. “Where the boundary between prose and poetry lies, I shall never be able to understand. The question is raised in manuals of style, yet the answer to it lies beyond me. Poetry is verse: Prose is not verse. Or else poetry is everything with the exception of business documents and school books” [Moore’s note].

3. Yeats, *Ideas of Good and Evil* (A. H. Bullen, 1903), p. 182. “The limitation of [William Blake’s] view was from the very intensity of his vision; he was a too literal realist of imagination, as others are of nature; and because he believed that the figures seen by the mind’s eye, when exalted by inspiration, were ‘eternal existences,’ symbols of divine essences, he hated every grace of style that might obscure their lineaments” [Moore’s note].

all its rawness and
 that which is on the other hand
 genuine, you are interested in poetry.

1921

- Is this poem more about the reading or the writing of poetry? What does the poem suggest is the relationship between poetry and “the genuine” (line 3)?

ELIZABETH BISHOP

Sestina

September rain falls on the house.
 In the failing light, the old grandmother
 sits in the kitchen with the child
 beside the Little Marvel Stove,
 5 reading the jokes from the almanac,
 laughing and talking to hide her tears.

She thinks that her equinoctial tears
 and the rain that beats on the roof of the house
 were both foretold by the almanac,
 10 but only known to a grandmother.
 The iron kettle sings on the stove.
 She cuts some bread and says to the child,

It's time for tea now; but the child
 is watching the teakettle's small hard tears
 15 dance like mad on the hot black stove,
 the way the rain must dance on the house.
 Tidying up, the old grandmother
 hangs up the clever almanac

on its string. Birdlike, the almanac
 20 hovers half open above the child,
 hovers above the old grandmother
 and her teacup full of dark brown tears.
 She shivers and says she thinks the house
 feels chilly, and puts more wood in the stove.

25 *It was to be,* says the Marvel Stove.
I know what I know, says the almanac.
 With crayons the child draws a rigid house
 and a winding pathway. Then the child
 puts in a man with buttons like tears
 30 and shows it proudly to the grandmother.

But secretly, while the grandmother
 busies herself about the stove,
 the little moons fall down like tears
 from between the pages of the almanac
 35 into the flower bed the child
 has carefully placed in the front of the house.

Time to plant tears, says the almanac.
 The grandmother sings to the marvellous stove
 and the child draws another inscrutable house.

1965

- Try to derive from “Sestina” the “rules” that govern the sestina form. Why do you think Bishop chose this form for her poem?

ARCHIBALD MacLEISH

*Ars Poetica*⁴

A poem should be palpable and mute
 As a globed fruit,
 Dumb
 As old medallions to the thumb,
 5 Silent as the sleeve-worn stone
 Of casement ledges where the moss has grown—
 A poem should be wordless
 As the flight of birds.
 A poem should be motionless in time
 10 As the moon climbs.
 Leaving, as the moon releases
 Twig by twig the night-entangled trees,
 Leaving, as the moon behind the winter leaves,
 Memory by memory the mind—
 15 A poem should be motionless in time
 As the moon climbs.
 A poem should be equal to:
 Not true.
 For all the history of grief
 20 An empty doorway and a maple leaf.

4. “The Art of Poetry,” title of a poetical treatise by the Roman poet Horace (65–8 B.C.E.).

For love
 The leaning grasses and two lights above the sea—
 A poem should not mean
 But be.

1926

- Can you summarize this poem's ideas about what poetry should be? How does the poem itself illustrate these principles?

THE WAY A POEM LOOKS

Stanza breaks and other kinds of print spaces are important, primarily to guide the voice and the mind to a clearer sense of sound and meaning. But sometimes poems are written to be seen rather than heard, and their appearance on the page is crucial to their effect. Cummings's poem "l(a)," for example, tries to visualize typographically what the poet asks you to see in your mind's eye.

E. E. CUMMINGS

[l(a)]

l(a
 le
 af
 fa
 5 ll
 s)
 one
 l
 iness

1958

Occasionally, too, poems are composed in a specific shape so that they look like physical objects. The poems that follow in this chapter—some very old, some more recent—illustrate ways in which visual effects may be created. Even though poetry has traditionally been thought of as oral—words to be spoken, sung, or performed rather than looked at—the idea that poems can also be related to painting and the visual arts is an old one. Theodoric in ancient Greece is credited with inventing **technopaegnia**—that is, the construction of poems with visual appeal. Once, the shaping of words to resemble an object was thought to have mystical power, but more recent attempts at **concrete poetry** or **shaped verse** are usually playful exercises (such as Hollander's "You Too? Me Too—Why Not? Soda Pop" [chapter 22])

that attempt to supplement (or replace) verbal meanings with devices from painting and sculpture.

Reading a poem like George Herbert's "Easter Wings" aloud wouldn't make much sense. Seeing is everything for a poem like that. A more frequent poetic device involves asking the eyes to become a guide for the voice. The following poem depends on recognition of some standard typographical symbols and knowledge of their names. We have to say those names to read the poem.

FRANKLIN P. ADAMS

Composed in the Composing Room

At stated .ic times
I love to sit and — off rhymes
Till ,tose at last I fall
Exclaiming "I don't ^ all."

5 Though I'm an * objection
By running this in this here §
This ☞ of the Fleeting Hour,
This lofty -ician Tower—

A ¶er's hope dispels
10 All fear of deadly ||.
You think these [] are a pipe?
Well, not on your †eotype.

1914

We create the right terms here when we verbalize, putting the visual signs together with the words or letters printed in the poem, for example making the word "periodic" out of ".ic" or "high Phoenician" out of "-ician" or "daguerreotype" out of "†eotype." Like "Easter Wings," "Composed in the Composing Room" uses typography in an extreme way; here the eyes (and mind) are drawn into a punlike game that offers more puzzle-solving pleasure than emotional effect. More often poets give us—by the visual placement of sounds—a guide to reading, inviting us to regulate the pace of our reading, notice pauses or silences, and pay attention both to the syntax of the poem and to the rhetoric of the voice, thus providing us a kind of musical score for reading.

appearance of line-ending words, as in sonnets and other traditional verse forms. Not all rhymes have similar spellings, of course, but similarities of appearance seem to imply a relationship of sound, too, and many poems hint at their stanza patterns and verse forms by their spatial arrangements and repeated patterns at ends of lines. The following poem takes advantage of such expectations and plays with them by forcing a letter into arbitrary line relationships, forcing words (“stew,” line 2) in order to create rhymes, setting up rhyme patterns and then breaking them (lines 9–11), using false or near rhymes (lines 10–11), and creating long lines with multisyllabic rhymes that seem silly (the final two lines).

STEVIE SMITH

The Jungle Husband

- Dearest Evelyn, I often think of you
 Out with the guns in the jungle stew
 Yesterday I hittapotamus
 I put the measurements down for you but they got lost in the fuss
 5 It's not a good thing to drink out here
 You know, I've practically given it up dear.
 Tomorrow I am going alone a long way
 Into the jungle. It is all grey
 But green on top
 10 Only sometimes when a tree has fallen
 The sun comes down plop, it is quite appalling.
 You never want to go in a jungle pool
 In the hot sun, it would be the act of a fool
 Because it's always full of anacondas, Evelyn, not looking ill-fed
 15 I'll say. So no more now, from your loving husband, Wilfred.

1957

Visual devices can be entertainments to amuse, bewilder, or tease readers of poetry whose chief expectations concern sound, but sometimes poets achieve surprising (and lasting) original effects by manipulations of print space. Stanzas—visual breaks in poems that indicate some kind of unit of meaning or measurement—ultimately are more than visual devices, for they point to structural questions and ultimately frame and formalize the content of poems. But they present—as do the similar visual patterns of words that rhyme—part of the “score” of poems, and suggest one more way that sight becomes a guide to sound in many poems.

• • •

GEORGE HERBERT

Easter Wings

Lord, who createdst man in wealth and store,²
 Though foolishly he lost the same,
 Decaying more and more
 Till he became
 Most poor:
 With thee
 O let me rise
 As larks,³ harmoniously,
 And sing this day thy victories:
 Then shall the fall further the flight in me.

 My tender age in sorrow did begin;
 And still with sicknesses and shame
 Thou didst so punish sin,
 That I became
 Most thin.
 With thee
 Let me combine,
 And feel this day thy victory;
 For, if I imp⁴ my wing on thine,
 Affliction shall advance the flight in me.

1633

- How do this poem's decreasing and increasing line lengths correspond to the meaning of the words? Why do you think Herbert has chosen to present the poem "sideways"?

2. In plenty. 3. Which herald the morning.

4. Engraft. In falconry, to engraft feathers in a damaged wing, so as to restore the powers of flight (*OED*).

ROGER McGOUGH

Here I Am

Here I am
 getting on for seventy
 and never having gone to work in ladies' underwear
 Never run naked at night in the rain
 5 Made love to a girl I'd just met on a plane
 At that awkward age now between birth and death
 I think of all the outrages unperpetrated
 opportunities missed
 The dragons unchased
 10 The maidens unkissed
 The wines still untasted
 The oceans uncrossed
 The fantasies wasted
 The mad urges lost
 15 Here I am
 as old as Methuselah
 was when he was my age
 and never having stepped outside for a fight
 Crossed on red, pissed⁵ on rosé (or white)
 20 Pretty dull for a poet, I suppose, eh? Quite.

1992

- What does this poem's shape suggest about its meaning?

EARLE BIRNEY

Anglosaxon Street

Dawn drizzle ended dampness steams from
 blotching brick and blank plasterwaste
 Faded housepatterns hoary and finicky
 unfold stuttering stick like a phonograph
 5 Here is a ghetto gotten for goyim
 O with care denuded of nigger and kike

5. Drunk.

- No coonsmell rankles reeks only cellarrot
 Ottar⁶ of carexhaust catcorpse and cookinggrease
- Imperial hearts heave in this haven
- 10 Cracks across windows are welded with slogans
 There'll Always Be An England enhances geraniums
 and V's for Victory vanquish the housefly
- Ho! with climbing sun march the bleached beldames⁷
 festooned with shopping bags farded⁸ flatarched
- 15 bighewed Saxonwives stepping over buttrivers
 waddling back wienerladen to suckle smallfry
- Hoy! with sunslope shrieking over hydrants
 flood from learninghall the lean fingerlings
 Nordic nobblecheeked⁹ not all clean of nose
- 20 leaping Commandowise into leprous lanes
- What! after whistleblow! spewed from wheelboat
 after daylight doughtiness dire handplay
 in sewertrench or sandpit come Saxonthehgs
 Junebrown Jutekings¹ jawslack for meat
- 25 Sit after supper on smeared doorsteps
 not humbly swearing hatedeeds on Huns
 profiteers politicians pacifists Jews
- Then by twobit magic to muse in movie
 unlock picturehoard or lope to alehall
- 30 soaking bleakly in beer skittleless
- Home again to hotbox and humid husbandhood
 in slumbertrough adding sleepily to Anglekin
 Alongside in lanenooks carling and leman²
 caterwaul and clip³ careless of Saxonry
- 35 with moonglow and haste and a higher heartbeat
 Slumbers now slumtrack unstinks cooling
 waiting brief for milkmaid mornstar and worldrise

Toronto 1942, revised 1966

- Read this poem aloud. How does the poem's appearance help to determine the tone and pacing of your reading?

6. Roselike fragrance. 7. Aged women. 8. Rouged. 9. Pimpled.

1. The Jutes were the German tribe that invaded England in the fifth century and spearheaded the Anglo-Saxon conquest. *Saxonthehgs*: freemen who provided military services for the Saxon lords.

2. Lover. *Carling*: old woman. 3. Embrace.

DAVID FERRY

Evening News

We have been there.
 Nothing has been there
 5 In what a beautiful silence
 In a dazzling distance
 And morning lights
 10 In the glistening
 It is by such sights

and seen nothing
 for us to see
 the death is inflicted
 in the fresh dews
 how radiantly
 the village is wasted.
 the eye is instructed.

1983

- How are the eye and the voice guided through this poem? How is the poem's appearance part of its content?

SUGGESTIONS FOR WRITING

1. Chart the rhyme scheme of Keats's "On the Sonnet," and then, after reading the poem aloud, mark the poem's major structural divisions. At what points do these divisions and the breaks in rhyme coincide? At what points do they conflict? Write an essay in which you discuss how these patterns and variations relate to the poem's meaning.
2. Consider the structure of Brooks's "First Fight. Then Fiddle." How do various uses of sound (rhyme, onomatopoeia, and alliteration, for example) reinforce the poem's themes and tones? Write an essay exploring the relationship between "sound and sense" in the poem.
3. Some of the sonnets in this book, such as Shakespeare's, adhere closely to the English model; others, such as Milton's "When I consider how my light is spent," follow the Italian model; and some, such as Chasin's "Joy Sonnet in a Random Universe," only slightly resemble either of the models. Take any four sonnets in this book as the basis for an essay in which you compare and contrast the various ways poets have used the sonnet form to achieve unique artistic purposes.
4. Trace the imagery of light and darkness in Thomas's "Do Not Go Gentle into That Good Night." How do we know that light represents life and darkness death (rather than, say, sight and blindness)? How does the poet use the formal requirements of the villanelle to emphasize this interplay of light and darkness? Write an essay in which you discuss the interaction of form and content in this poem.
5. Research Anglo-Saxon poetry and look at classic examples, such as *Beowulf* and "The Seafarer." What principles of sound and form do you see in these poems? Now consider Birney's "Anglosaxon Street." How successful is Birney in applying these principles to a modern poem? Is Birney's poem "serious"? Is it a parody? In light of your findings, write an essay discussing the sound patterns and form of "Anglosaxon Street."