

## 16 THE SOUNDS OF POETRY

A lot of what happens in a poem happens in your mind's eye, but some of it happens in your "mind's ear" and in your voice. Poems are full of meaningful sounds and silences as well as words and sentences. Besides choosing words for their meanings, poets sometimes choose words because they have certain sounds, and poems use sound effects to create a mood or establish a tone, just as films do. Sometimes the sounds of words are crucial to what is happening in the text of the poem.

Here is a poem that explores the sounds of a particular word, tries them on, and analyzes them in relation to the word itself.

HELEN CHASIN

### *The Word Plum*

The word *plum* is delicious  
pout and push, luxury of  
self-love, and savoring murmur  
full in the mouth and falling  
5 like fruit  
taut skin  
pierced, bitten, provoked into  
juice, and tart flesh  
question  
10 and reply, lip and tongue  
of pleasure.

1968

The poem savors the sounds of the word as well as the taste and feel of the fruit itself. It is almost as if the poem is tasting the sounds and rolling them slowly on the tongue. The second and third lines even replicate the *p*, *l*, *uh*, and *m* sounds of the word while at the same time imitating the squishy sounds of eating the fruit. Words like "delicious" and "luxury" sound juicy, and other words imitate sounds of satisfaction and pleasure—"murmur," for example. Even the process of eating is in part re-created aurally. The tight, clipped sounds of "taut skin /

pierced” suggest the way teeth sharply break the skin and slice quickly into the soft flesh of a plum, and as they describe the tartness, the words (“provoked,” “question”) force the lips to pucker and the tongue and palate to meet and hold, as if the mouth were savoring a tart fruit. The poet is having fun here re-creating the sensual appeal of a plum, teasing the sounds and meanings out of available words. The words must mean something appropriate and describe something accurately first of all, of course, but when they can also imitate the sounds and feel of the process, they can do double duty. Not many poems manipulate sound as intensely or as fully as “The Word *Plum*,” but many poems at least contain passages in which the sounds of life are reproduced by the human voice reading the poem. To get the full effect of this poem—and of many others—you *must read aloud*; that way, you can attend to the vocal rhythms and articulate the sounds as the poem calls for them to be reproduced by the human voice.

You will almost always enhance a poem’s effect by reading aloud, using your voice to pronounce the words so that the poem becomes a spoken communication. Historically, poetry began as an oral phenomenon, and often poems that seem very difficult when looked at silently come alive when turned into sound. Early bards in many cultures chanted or recited their verses, and the music of poetry—its cadences and rhythms—developed from this kind of performance. The presentation of primitive poetry (and some later work as well) was often accompanied by some kind of musical instrument. The rhythms of any poem become clearer when you say or hear them.

Poetry is almost always a vocal art, dependent on the human voice to become its full self (for some exceptions look at the shaped verse in chapter 19). In a sense, it only begins to exist as a real phenomenon when a reader reads and actualizes it. Poems don’t really achieve their full meaning when they exist merely on a page; a poem on a page is more a score or set of stage directions for a poem than a poem itself. Sometimes, in fact, it is hard to experience the poem at all unless you hear it; the actual experience of saying the words aloud or hearing them spoken is very good practice for learning to hear in your mind’s ear when you read silently. A good poetry reading might easily convince you of the importance of a good voice sensitive to the poem’s requirements, but you can also persuade yourself by reading poems aloud in the privacy of your own room. An audience is even better, however—an occasion to share the pleasure in the sounds themselves and what they imply. At its oral best, much poetry is communal.

MONA VAN DUYN

### *What the Motorcycle Said*

Br-r-r-am-m-m, rackety-am-m, OM, Am:  
 All—r-r-room, r-r-ram, ala-bas-ter—  
 Am, the world’s my oyster.

I hate plastic, wear it black and slick,  
 5 hate hardhats, wear one on my head,  
 that’s what the motorcycle said.

Passed phonies in Fords, knocked down billboards, landed  
on the other side of The Gap, and Whee,  
bypassed history.

- 10 When I was born (The Past), baby knew best.  
They shook when I bawled, took Freud's path,  
threw away their wrath.

- R-r-rackety-am-m. *Am*. War, rhyme,  
soap, meat, marriage, the Phantom Jet  
15 are shit, and like that.

Hate pompousness, punishment, patience, am into Love,  
hate middle-class moneymakers, live on Dad,  
that's what the motorcycle said.

- Br-r-r-am-m-m. It's Nowsville, man. Passed Oldies, Uglies,  
20 Straighties, Honkies. I'll never be  
mean, tired or unsexy.

Passed cigarette suckers, souses, mother-fuckers,  
losers, went back to Nature and found  
how to get VD, stoned.

- 25 Passed a cow, too fast to hear her moo, "I rolled  
our leaves of grass into one ball.  
*I am the grassy All.*"

- Br-r-r-am-m-m, rackety-am-m, OM, *Am*:  
*All—gr-r-rin, ooooohgah, gl-l-utton—*  
30 *Am*, the world's my smilebutton.

1973

Saying this poem as if you were a motorcycle with the power of speech (sort of) is part of the poem's fun, and the rich, loud sounds of a motorcycle revving up concentrate and intensify the effect and enrich the pleasure. It's a shame not to hear a poem like this aloud; you miss a lot if you don't try to imitate the sounds or to pick up the motor's rhythms. A performance here is clearly worth it: human being as motorcycle, motorcycle as human being.

And it's a good poem, too. It does something interesting, important, and maybe a bit subversive. The speaking motorcycle seems to take on the values of some of its riders, the noisy and obtrusive ones that readers most likely associate with motorcycles. The types of riders made fun of here are themselves somewhat mindless and mechanical; they have cult feelings about their group, they travel in packs, and they seem to have no life beyond their machines. The speaking motorcycle, like such riders, exults in power and speed, lives for the moment, and has little respect for people, the past, institutions, or anything beyond its own small world. It is self-centered, trendy, ignorant, and inarticulate; but it is proud as well, mighty proud, and it glories in the rough thunder of its own sounds. That's what the motorcycle says.

The following poem uses sound effectively, too.

## KENNETH FEARING

*Dirge*

1-2-3 was the number he played but today the number came 3-2-1;  
 Bought his Carbide at 30, and it went to 29; had the favorite at Bowie<sup>1</sup>  
 but the track was slow—

O executive type, would you like to drive a floating-power, knee-  
 action, silk-upholstered six? Wed a Hollywood star? Shoot the course  
 in 58? Draw to the ace, king, jack?

O fellow with a will who won't take no, watch out for three cigarettes  
 on the same, single match; O democratic voter born in August under  
 Mars, beware of liquidated rails—

- 5 Denouement to denouement, he took a personal pride in the certain,  
 certain way he lived his own, private life,  
 But nevertheless, they shut off his gas; nevertheless, the bank foreclosed;  
 nevertheless, the landlord called; nevertheless, the radio broke,

And twelve o'clock arrived just once too often,  
 Just the same he wore one gray tweed suit, bought one straw hat, drank  
 one straight Scotch, walked one short step, took one long look, drew  
 one deep breath,  
 Just one too many,

- 10 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,

With who the hell are you at the corner of his casket, and where the  
 hell're we going on the right-hand silver knob, and who the hell cares  
 walking second from the end with an American Beauty<sup>2</sup> wreath from  
 why the hell not,

Very much missed by the circulation staff of the New York Evening Post;  
 deeply, deeply mourned by the B.M.T.<sup>3</sup>

- 15 Wham, Mr. Roosevelt; pow, Sears Roebuck; awk, big dipper; bop, summer  
 rain;  
 Bong, Mr., bong, Mr., bong, Mr., bong.

1935

1. A racetrack in Maryland. *Carbide*: stock in the Union Carbide Corporation. 2. A variety of rose.  
 3. A New York City subway line.

As the title implies, “Dirge” is a kind of musical lament, in this case for a certain sort of businessman who took many chances and saw his investments and life go down the drain in the depression of the early 1930s. Reading this poem aloud helps a lot, in part because of the expressive cartoon words here that echo the action, words like “oof” and “blooie” (which primarily carry their meaning in their sounds, for they have practically no literal or referential meaning). Reading aloud also helps us notice that the poem employs rhythms much as a song would and that it frequently shifts its pace and mood. Notice how carefully the first two lines are balanced, and then how quickly the rhythm shifts as the “executive type” is addressed directly in line 3. (Line 2 is long and dribbles over in the narrow pages of a book like this; the especially long lines and irregular line lengths here create some of the poem’s special sound effects.) In the direct address, the poem first picks up the lingo of advertising, which it recites in rapid-fire order rather like advertising phrases. In stanza 3 here, the rhythm shifts again, but the poem gives us helpful clues about how to read. Line 5 sounds like prose and is long, drawn out, and rather dull (rather like its subject), but line 6 sets up a regular (and monotonous) rhythm with its repeated “nevertheless,” which punctuates the rhythm like a drumbeat: “But nevertheless, *tub-tub-tub-tub-tub*; nevertheless, *tub-tub-tub-tub*; nevertheless, *tub-tub-tub-tub*; nevertheless, *tub-tub-tub-tub-tub*.” In the next stanza, the repetitive phrasing comes again, this time guided by the word “one” in cooperation with other words of one syllable: “wore *one* gray tweed suit, bought *one* straw hat, *tub one tub-tub*, *tub one tub-tub*, *tub one tub-tub*, *tub one tub-tub*.” And then a new rhythm and a new technique begin in stanza 5, which imitates the language of comic books to describe in violent, exaggerated terms the routine of the businessman’s life. You have to say words like “whop” and “zowie” aloud and in the rhythm of the whole sentence to get the full effect of how boring his life is, no matter how he tries to jazz it up with exciting words. And so it goes—repeated words, shifting rhythms, emphasis on routine and averageness—until the final bell (“Bong . . . bong . . . bong . . . bong”) tolls rhythmically for the dead man in the final clanging line.

Sometimes the sounds in poems just provide special effects, rather like a musical score behind a film, setting mood and getting us into an appropriate frame of mind. But often sound and meaning go hand in hand, and the poet finds words that in their sounds echo the action. A word that captures or approximates the sound of what it describes, such as “splash” or “squish” or “murmur,” is an **onomatopoeic** word, and the device itself is **onomatopoeia**. And poets can do similar things with pacing and rhythm, sounds and pauses. The punctuation, the length of vowels, and the combination of consonant sounds help to control the way we read so that we use our voice to imitate what is being described. The poems at the end of this chapter suggest several ways that such imitations of pace and pause may occur: by echoing the lapping of waves on a shore, for example (“Like as the waves”), or reproducing the rhythms of a musical style (“Dear John, Dear Coltrane”).

Here is a classic passage in which a skillful poet talks about the virtues of making the sound echo the sense—and shows at the same time how to do it:

*There are only three things  
 . . . that a poem must reach:  
 the eye, the ear, and what  
 we may call the heart or the  
 mind. It is the most important  
 of all to reach the heart of  
 the reader. And the surest  
 way to reach the heart is  
 through the ear.*

—ROBERT FROST

## ALEXANDER POPE

*Sound and Sense*<sup>4</sup>

- 337 But most by numbers<sup>5</sup> judge a poet's song,  
 And smooth or rough, with them, is right or wrong;  
 In the bright muse though thousand charms conspire,<sup>6</sup>
- 340 Her voice is all these tuneful fools admire,  
 Who haunt Parnassus<sup>7</sup> but to please their ear,  
 Not mend their minds; as some to church repair,  
 Not for the doctrine, but the music there.  
 These, equal syllables<sup>8</sup> alone require,
- 345 Though oft the ear the open vowels tire,  
 While expletives<sup>9</sup> their feeble aid do join,  
 And ten low words oft creep in one dull line,  
 While they ring round the same unvaried chimes,  
 With sure returns of still expected rhymes.
- 350 Where'er you find "the cooling western breeze,"  
 In the next line, it "whispers through the trees";  
 If crystal streams "with pleasing murmurs creep,"  
 The reader's threatened (not in vain) with "sleep."  
 Then, at the last and only couplet fraught
- 355 With some unmeaning thing they call a thought,  
 A needless Alexandrine<sup>1</sup> ends the song,  
 That, like a wounded snake, drags its slow length along.  
 Leave such to tune their own dull rhymes, and know  
 What's roundly smooth, or languishingly slow;
- 360 And praise the easy vigor of a line,  
 Where Denham's strength and Waller's<sup>2</sup> sweetness join.  
 True ease in writing comes from art, not chance,  
 As those move easiest who have learned to dance.  
 'Tis not enough no harshness gives offense,
- 365 The sound must seem an echo to the sense:  
 Soft is the strain when Zephyr<sup>3</sup> gently blows,  
 And the smooth stream in smoother numbers flows;  
 But when loud surges lash the sounding shore,  
 The hoarse, rough verse should like the torrent roar.

4. From *An Essay on Criticism*, Pope's poem on the art of poetry and the problems of literary criticism. The passage excerpted here follows a discussion of several common weaknesses of critics—failure to regard an author's intention, for example, or overemphasis on clever metaphors and ornate style.

5. Meter, rhythm, sound. 6. Unite.

7. A mountain in Greece, traditionally associated with the Muses and considered the seat of poetry and music. 8. Regular accents. 9. Filler words, such as "do."

1. A line of six metrical feet, sometimes used in pentameter poems to vary the pace mechanically. Line 357 is an alexandrine.

2. Sir John Denham and Edmund Waller, seventeenth-century poets credited with perfecting the heroic couplet. 3. The west wind.

- 370 When Ajax<sup>4</sup> strives, some rock's vast weight to throw,  
 The line too labors, and the words move slow;  
 Not so, when swift Camilla<sup>5</sup> scours the plain,  
 Flies o'er th' unbending corn, and skims along the main.  
 Hear how Timotheus<sup>6</sup> varied lays surprise,  
 375 And bid alternate passions fall and rise!  
 While, at each change, the son of Libyan Jove<sup>7</sup>  
 Now burns with glory, and then melts with love;  
 Now his fierce eyes with sparkling fury glow,  
 Now sighs steal out, and tears begin to flow:  
 380 Persians and Greeks like turns of nature<sup>8</sup> found,  
 And the world's victor stood subdued by sound!  
 The pow'r of music all our hearts allow,  
 And what Timotheus was, is DRYDEN now.

1711

A lot of things are going on here simultaneously. The poem uses a number of echoic or onomatopoeic words, and in some lines pleasant and unpleasant consonant sounds underline a particular point or add some mood music. When the poet talks about a particular weakness in poetry, he illustrates it at the same time—by using open vowels (line 345), expletives (line 346), monosyllabic words (line 347), predictable rhymes (lines 350–53), or long, slow lines (line 357). And the good qualities of poetry he talks about and illustrates as well (line 360, for example). But the main effects of the passage come from an interaction of several strategies at once. The effects are fairly simple and easy to spot, but their causes involve a lot of poetic ingenuity. In line 340, for example, Pope achieves a careful cacophonous effect by repeating the *oo* vowel sound and repeating the *l* consonant sound together with (twice) interrupting the rough *f* sound in the middle; no one wants to be caught admiring that music, but the careful harmony of the preceding sounds has set us up beautifully. And the pace of lines 347, 357, and 359 is carefully controlled by clashing consonant sounds as well as by the use of long vowels. Line 347 moves incredibly slowly and seems much longer than it is because almost all the one-syllable words end in a consonant that refuses to blend with the beginning of the next word, making the words hard to say without distinct, awkward pauses between them. In lines 357 and 359, long vowels such as those in “wounded,” “snake,” “slow,” “along,” “roundly,” and “smooth” help to slow down the pace, and awkward, hard-to-pronounce consonants are again juxtaposed. The commas also provide nearly a full stop in the midst of these lines to slow us down still more. Similarly, the harsh lashing of the shore in lines 368–69 is accomplished partly by onomatopoeia, partly by a shift in the pattern of stress, which creates irregular waves in line 368, and partly by the dominance of rough consonants in

4. A Greek hero of the Trojan War, noted for his strength. 5. A woman warrior in Virgil's *Aeneid*.

6. The court musician of Alexander the Great, celebrated in a famous poem by John Dryden (see line 383) for the power of his music over Alexander's emotions.

7. In Greek tradition, the chief god of any people was often given the name Zeus (Jove), and the chief god of Libya (the Greek name for all of Africa) was called Zeus Ammon. Alexander visited his oracle and was proclaimed son of the god. 8. Similar alternations of emotion.

line 369. (In Pope's time, the English *r* was still trilled gruffly so that it could be made to sound extremely rrrrough and harrrrsh.) Almost every line in this passage demonstrates how to make sound echo sense.

As "Sound and Sense" and "Dirge" suggest, poets most effectively manipulate sound by carefully controlling the rhythm of the voice so that not only are the proper sounds heard, but they are heard at precisely the right moment. Pace and rhythm are as important to a good poem as they are to a good piece of music. The human voice naturally develops certain rhythms in speech; some syllables and some words receive more stress than others. Just as multisyllabic words put more stress on some syllables than others (dictionaries always indicate which syllables are stressed), words in the context of a sentence receive more or less stress, depending on meaning. One-syllable words are thus sometimes stressed and sometimes not. A careful poet controls the flow of stresses so that, in many poems, a certain basic pattern of rhythm (or **meter**) develops almost like a quiet percussion instrument in the background. Not all poems have meter, and not all metered poems follow a single dominant rhythm, but many poems employ one pervasive pattern, and it is useful to look for patterns of stress.

In the Western world, we can thank the ancient Greeks for systematizing an understanding of meter and giving us a vocabulary (including the words *rhythm* and *meter*) that enables us to discuss the art of poetry. *Meter* comes from a Greek word meaning "measure": what we measure in the English language are the patterns of stressed (or "accented") syllables that occur naturally when we speak, and, just as when we measure length, the unit we use in measuring poetry is the **foot**. Most traditional poetry in English uses the accentual-syllabic form of meter—meaning that its rhythmic pattern is based on both a set number of syllables per line and a regular pattern of accents in each line. The most common metrical pattern is **iambic**, in which each foot contains an unstressed syllable followed by a stressed one. Consider, for example, the first two lines of Alexander Pope's "Sound and Sense," here marked to show the stressed syllables:

But móst | by núm- | bers júdge | a pó- | et's sóng,  
And smóoth | or róugh, | with thém,| is ríght | or wróng.

These lines, like so many in English literature, provide an example of **iambic pentameter**—that is, the lines are written in a meter consisting of five iambic feet. Notice that there is nothing forced or artificial in the sound of these lines; the words flow easily. In fact, linguists contend that English is naturally iambic, and even the most ordinary, "unpoetic" utterances often fall into this pattern: "Please tell me if you've heard this one before." "They said she had a certain way with words." "The baseball game was televised at nine."

Besides the iamb, other metrical feet include the following:

**trochee**—an accented syllable followed by an unstressed one ("méter," "Hómer")  
**anapest**—two unaccented syllables followed by a stressed one ("comprehénd," "after yóu")  
**dactyl**—an accented syllable followed by two unstressed ones ("róundabout," "dínnertime")

Line lengths are sometimes described in terms of the number of syllables: a *decasyllabic* line, for example, is ten syllables long; an *octosyllabic* is eight, etc. Much



more commonly though, lines are described in terms of the number of feet. It is possible to write regular lines using any of the feet shown above:

**iambic pentameter**—"In sé- | quent tóil | all fóir- | wards dó | con- | ténd . . ."  
(William Shakespeare)

**trochaic octameter**—"Ónce u- | pón a | mídníght | dréary, | whíle I | póndered,  
| wéak and | wéary . . ." (Edgar Allan Poe)

**anapestic tetrameter**—"There are mán- | y who sáy | that a dóg | has his dáy . . ."  
(Dylan Thomas)

**dactylic hexameter**—"Thís is the | fórest pri- | méval. The | múrmuring | pínes  
and the | hémlocks . . ." (Henry Wadsworth Longfellow)

Notice that this final example is perfectly regular until the final foot, a trochee. Few poems, in fact, are written entirely in regular lines, and substitution of one metrical foot for another—to accommodate idioms and conversational habits or to create a special effect or emphasis—is quite common, especially in the first foot of a line. Shakespeare often begins an iambic line with a trochee:

Líke as | the wáves | make towáreds | the péb- | bled shóre . . .

The poet may introduce a **spondee**, for example—a pair of accented syllables. Consider this line from John Milton's *Paradise Lost*, a poem written mainly in iambic pentameter:

Rócks, cáves, | lákes, féns, | bógs, déns, | and Shádes | of Déath . . .

Here Milton substitutes three spondees for the first three iambs in a pentameter line. John Dryden's "To the Memory of Mr. Oldham" begins with two spondees:

Fárewéll, tóo líttle, and tóo láttely knówn

A **caesura**, a short pause often (though not always) signaled by a mark of punctuation such as a comma, may interrupt a line, as in the example from Poe's "The Raven," above, or in most lines of more than five or six syllables. (Sometimes, other even more elaborate accentual variations are used—*amphybrachs*, for example, involve an unstressed syllable, a stressed one, and then another unstressed one—but such hybrids are seldom used in English verse.)

In traditional metrical poetry, the poet's art, just like the musician's, consists of establishing metrical patterns and then varying the patterns without breaking them. With just the few rhythmic building blocks shown above, poets can create an almost infinite variety of rhythms.

Here is a poem that names and illustrates many of the meters. If someone read it aloud and you charted the stressed (–) and unstressed (˘) syllables, you would have a chart similar to that done by the poet himself in the text.

## SAMUEL TAYLOR COLERIDGE

*Metrical Feet*

## Lesson for a Boy

- Trōchēe trīps frōm lōng tō shōrt;<sup>9</sup>  
 From long to long in solemn sort  
 Slōw Spōndēe stālks; strōng fōot! yet ill able  
 Ēvēr tō cōme ūp with Dāctyl trīsŷllāblē.
- 5 Īambīcs mārċ frōm shōrt tō lōng—  
 With ā leāp ānd ā bōūnd thē swift Ānāpēsts thrōng;  
 One syllable long, with one short at each side,  
 Āmphibrāchŷs hāstes wīth ā stātelŷ stride—  
 Fīrst ānd lāst bēīng lōng, mīddlē shōrt, Āmphīmācer
- 10 Strīkes hīs thūndērīng hōofs like ā prōūd hīgh-brēd Rācer.  
 If Derwent<sup>1</sup> be innocent, steady, and wise,  
 And delight in the things of earth, water, and skies;  
 Tender warmth at his heart, with these meters to show it,  
 With sound sense in his brains, may make Derwent a poet—
- 15 May crown him with fame, and must win him the love  
 Of his father on earth and his Father above.
- My dear, dear child!
- Could you stand upon Skiddaw,<sup>2</sup> you would not from its whole ridge  
 See a man who so loves you as your fond S. T. COLERIDGE.

1806

The following poem exemplifies **dactylic** rhythm (– ∪ ∪ or stressed syllable followed by two unstressed ones).

## WENDY COPE

*Emily Dickinson*

- Higgledy-piggledy  
 Emily Dickinson  
 Liked to use dashes  
 Instead of full stops.
- 5 Nowadays, faced with such  
 Idiosyncrasy,  
 Critics and editors  
 Send for the cops.

1986

9. The long and short marks over syllables are Coleridge's.

1. Written originally for Coleridge's son Hartley, the poem was later adapted for his younger son, Derwent.

2. A mountain in the lake country of northern England (where Coleridge lived in his early years), near the town of Derwent.

Limericks rely on **anapestic** meter (˘ ˘ –, or two unstressed syllables followed by a stressed one), although usually the first two syllables are in iambic meter (see below).

### ANONYMOUS

There was a young girl from St. Paul,  
 Wore a newspaper-dress to a ball.  
     The dress caught on fire  
     And burned her entire  
 Front page, sporting section and all.

The following poem is composed in the more common **trochaic** meter (– ˘, a stressed syllable followed by an unstressed one).

### SIR JOHN SUCKLING

#### *Song*

Why so pale and wan, fond Lover?  
     Prithee why so pale?  
 Will, when looking well can't move her,  
     Looking ill prevail?  
 5   Prithee why so pale?  
  
 Why so dull and mute, young Sinner?  
     Prithee why so mute?  
 Will, when speaking well can't win her,  
     Saying nothing do 't?  
 10   Prithee why so mute?  
  
 Quit, quit, for shame, this will not move,  
     This cannot take her;  
 If of her self she will not love,  
     Nothing can make her,  
 15   The Devil take her.

Like Pope's "Sound and Sense," the following poem uses the English language's most common poetic meter, **iambic** (˘ –, an unstressed syllable followed by a stressed one, which some would argue is the most "natural" rhythm for English).

JOHN DRYDEN

*To the Memory of Mr. Oldham*<sup>3</sup>

- Farewell, too little, and too lately known,  
 Whom I began to think and call my own;  
 For sure our souls were near allied, and thine  
 Cast in the same poetic mold with mine.  
 5 One common note on either lyre did strike,  
 And knaves and fools we both abhorred alike.  
 To the same goal did both our studies drive;  
 The last set out the soonest did arrive.  
 Thus Nisus fell upon the slippery place,  
 10 While his young friend performed and won the race.<sup>4</sup>  
 O early ripe! to thy abundant store  
 What could advancing age have added more?  
 It might (what nature never gives the young)  
 Have taught the numbers<sup>5</sup> of thy native tongue.  
 15 But satire needs not those, and wit will shine  
 Through the harsh cadence of a rugged line.<sup>6</sup>  
 A noble error, and but seldom made,  
 When poets are by too much force betrayed.  
 Thy generous fruits, though gathered ere their prime,  
 20 Still showed a quickness; and maturing time  
 But mellows what we write to the dull sweets of rhyme.  
 Once more, hail and farewell; farewell, thou young,  
 But ah too short, Marcellus<sup>7</sup> of our tongue;  
 Thy brows with ivy, and with laurels bound;  
 25 But fate and gloomy night encompass thee around.

1684

**Scanning** a poem line by line—that is, sorting out its metrical pattern—can be hard work, and few people enjoy the process (which is called **scansion**). Doing it right involves listening carefully to your voice as you read aloud, marking the

3. John Oldham (1653–1683), who like Dryden (see lines 3–6) wrote satiric poetry.

4. In Virgil's *Aeneid* (Book 5), Nisus (who is leading the race) falls and then trips the second runner so that his friend Euryalus can win. 5. Rhythms.

6. In Dryden's time, the English *r* was pronounced with a harsh, trilling sound.

7. Nephew of the Roman emperor Augustus who died at twenty, celebrated by Virgil in the *Aeneid*, Book 6.

stressed and unstressed syllables, counting the syllables and feet, and checking the rhyme patterns. Though there is no easy substitute for this work, there is often a major payoff in seeing the subtleties of a poet's craft as well as in hearing the poetry itself more fully and resonantly. If, for example, you chart "To the Memory of Mr. Oldham," you will notice some extraordinary variations in the basic iambic pattern, variations that signal special emphasis on certain key terms and that indicate structural changes and directions. Even the first line is highly irregular—even though no pattern has yet been established in our ears. (Often, in fact, you will need to scan several lines before you can be sure of the "controlling" metrical pattern of a poem.) Possibly as many as seven syllables in this first line are stressed, rather than the expected five in a regular iambic pentameter line, and the effect is both to strongly emphasize Oldham's relatively unknown status (*too lit-tle and too late-ly known*) and to draw out, lengthily, in conjunction with the use of a series of long vowels, the reading of the line.

Hearing a poem properly involves practice—listening to others read poetry and especially to yourself as you read poems aloud, so that you get used to hearing your voice, so that you become confident about where the stresses fall, and so that the rhythms begin to play themselves out "naturally." Your dictionary will show you the stresses for every word of more than one syllable, and the governing stress of individual words will largely control the patterns in a line: if you read a line for its basic sense (almost, for a moment, as if it were prose), you will usually see the line's basic pattern. But single-syllable words can be a challenge because they may or may not get a stress depending on their syntactic function and the full meaning of the sentence. Normally, important functional words, such as nouns and verbs of one syllable, get stressed (as in normal conversation or in prose); but conjunctions (such as *and* or *but*), prepositions (such as *on* or *with*), and articles (such as *an* or *the*) do not. But you often need to make decisions as you say words aloud, decisions based on what the words actually convey and what the sentence means. Listen to yourself as you read aloud and be prepared for uncertainties. Sometimes you will even find your "normal" pronunciation being influenced or modified by the pattern your voice develops as you hear basic rhythms. The way you actually read a line, once you have "heard" the basic rhythm, is influenced by two factors: normal pronunciations and prose sense (on the one hand) and the predominant pattern of the poem (on the other). Since these two forces are constantly in tension and are sometimes contradictory, you can almost never fully predict the actual reading of a line, and good reading aloud (like every other art) depends less on formula than on subtlety and flexibility.

Because scanning lines is an imprecise craft, sometimes very good readers plausibly disagree about whether or not to stress certain syllables. Then, too, some stresses are stronger than others: the convention of calling syllables "stressed" or "unstressed" fails to measure degrees of stress—and meaning often dictates that some syllables be stressed *much* more heavily than others.

In addition, not every poem relies on a formal pattern of stresses. As we saw in "Sound and Sense" and "To the Memory of Mr. Oldham," a poem dominated by iambic meter might incorporate trochaic, anapestic, spondaic, or dactylic feet in one place or another to create a stylistic effect. Beyond that, a poet tired of or resistant to traditional vocal patterns might follow or create other patterns—or employ patternlessness—to form the sound of a poem. Counting only the number of syllables (and *not* stresses) in a line is one common variation, which early-

twentieth-century poets such as Marianne Moore were especially fond of. Even more widespread is **free verse**, which does without any governing pattern of stresses or line lengths.

• • •

## EDGAR ALLAN POE



### *The Raven*

Once upon a midnight dreary, while I pondered, weak and weary,  
Over many a quaint and curious volume of forgotten lore,  
While I nodded, nearly napping, suddenly there came a tapping,  
As of some one gently rapping, rapping at my chamber door.

- 5 “’Tis some visitor,” I muttered, “tapping at my chamber door—  
Only this, and nothing more.”

Ah, distinctly I remember it was in the bleak December,  
And each separate dying ember wrought its ghost upon the floor.  
Eagerly I wished the morrow;—vainly I had sought to borrow

- 10 From my books surcease of sorrow—sorrow for the lost Lenore—  
For the rare and radiant maiden whom the angels name Lenore—  
Nameless here for evermore.

And the silken sad uncertain rustling of each purple curtain  
Thrilled me—filled me with fantastic terrors never felt before;

- 15 So that now, to still the beating of my heart, I stood repeating  
“’Tis some visitor entreating entrance at my chamber door;—  
Some late visitor entreating entrance at my chamber door;  
This it is, and nothing more.”

Presently my soul grew stronger; hesitating then no longer,

- 20 “Sir,” said I, “or Madam, truly your forgiveness I implore;  
But the fact is I was napping, and so gently you came rapping,  
And so faintly you came tapping, tapping at my chamber door,  
That I scarce was sure I heard you”—here I opened wide the door;—  
Darkness there, and nothing more.

- 25 Deep into that darkness peering, long I stood there wondering, fearing,  
Doubting, dreaming dreams no mortal ever dared to dream before;  
But the silence was unbroken, and the darkness gave no token,  
And the only word there spoken was the whispered word, “Lenore!”  
This I whispered, and an echo murmured back the word, “Lenore!”—

- 30 Merely this, and nothing more.

Back into the chamber turning, all my soul within me burning,  
Soon I heard again a tapping somewhat louder than before.

“Surely,” said I, “surely that is something at my window lattice;  
Let me see, then, what thet is, and this mystery explore—

- 35 Let my heart be still a moment and this mystery explore;—  
       'Tis the wind and nothing more!"

Open here I flung the shutter, when, with many a flirt and flutter,  
 In there stepped a stately raven of the saintly days of yore;  
 Not the least obeisance made he; not an instant stopped or stayed he;  
 40 But, with mien of lord or lady, perched above my chamber door—  
 Perched upon a bust of Pallas<sup>8</sup> just above my chamber door—  
       Perched, and sat, and nothing more.

Then this ebony bird beguiling my sad fancy into smiling,  
 By the grave and stern decorum of the countenance it wore,  
 45 "Though thy crest be shorn and shaven, thou," I said, "art sure no craven,  
 Ghastly grim and ancient raven wandering from the Nightly shore—  
 Tell me what thy lordly name is on the Night's Plutonian<sup>9</sup> shore!"  
       Quoth the raven, "Nevermore."

Much I marvelled this ungainly fowl to hear discourse so plainly,  
 50 Though its answer little meaning—little relevancy bore,  
 For we cannot help agreeing that no living human being  
 Ever yet was blessed with seeing bird above his chamber door—  
 Bird or beast upon the sculptured bust above his chamber door,  
       With such name as "Nevermore."

55 But the raven, sitting lonely on the placid bust, spoke only  
 That one word, as if his soul in that one word he did outpour.  
 Nothing farther then he uttered—not a feather then he fluttered—  
 Till I scarcely more than muttered "Other friends have flown before—  
 On the morrow *he* will leave me, as my hopes have flown before."  
 60       Then the bird said "Nevermore."

Startled at the stillness broken by reply so aptly spoken,  
 "Doubtless," said I, "what it utters is its only stock and store  
 Caught from some unhappy master whom unmerciful Disaster  
 Followed fast and followed faster till his songs one burden bore—  
 65 Till the dirges of his Hope that melancholy burden bore  
       Of 'Never—nevermore.' "

But the raven still beguiling all my sad soul into smiling,  
 Straight I wheeled a cushioned seat in front of bird and bust and door;  
 Then, upon the velvet sinking, I betook myself to linking  
 70 Fancy unto fancy, thinking what this ominous bird of yore—  
 What this grim, ungainly, ghastly, gaunt, and ominous bird of yore  
       Meant in croaking "Nevermore."

This I sat engaged in guessing, but no syllable expressing  
 To the fowl whose fiery eyes now burned into my bosom's core;  
 75 This and more I sat divining, with my head at ease reclining  
 On the cushion's velvet lining that the lamplight gloated o'er,

8. Athena, the Greek goddess of wisdom.   9. Dark; Pluto was god of the underworld.

But whose velvet violet lining with the lamplight gloating o'er,  
*She* shall press, ah, nevermore!

Then, methought, the air grew denser, perfumed from an unseen censer  
 80 Swung by angels whose faint foot-falls tinkled on the tufted floor.  
 "Wretch," I cried, "thy God hath lent thee—by these angels he hath sent thee  
 Respite—respite and nepenthe<sup>1</sup> from thy memories of Lenore!  
 Quaff, oh quaff this kind nepenthe and forget this lost Lenore!"  
 Quoth the raven, "Nevermore."

85 "Prophet!" said I, "thing of evil!—prophet still, if bird or devil!—  
 Whether Tempter sent, or whether tempest tossed thee here ashore,  
 Desolate, yet all undaunted, on this desert land enchanted—  
 On this home by Horror haunted—tell me truly, I implore—  
 Is there—is there balm in Gilead?<sup>2</sup>—tell me—tell me, I implore!"  
 90 Quoth the raven, "Nevermore."

"Prophet!" said I, "thing of evil—prophet still, if bird or devil!  
 By that Heaven that bends above us—by that God we both adore—  
 Tell this soul with sorrow laden if, within the distant Aidenn,<sup>3</sup>  
 It shall clasp a sainted maiden whom the angels name Lenore—  
 95 Clasp a rare and radiant maiden whom the angels name Lenore."  
 Quoth the raven, "Nevermore."

"Be that word our sign of parting, bird or fiend!" I shrieked upstarting—  
 "Get thee back into the tempest and the Night's Plutonian shore!  
 Leave no black plume as a token of that lie thy soul hath spoken!  
 100 Leave my loneliness unbroken!—quit the bust above my door!  
 Take thy beak from out my heart, and take thy form from off my door!"  
 Quoth the raven, "Nevermore."

And the raven, never flitting, still is sitting, still is sitting  
 On the pallid bust of Pallas just above my chamber door;  
 105 And his eyes have all the seeming of a demon's that is dreaming,  
 And the lamp-light o'er him streaming throws his shadow on the floor;  
 And my soul from out that shadow that lies floating on the floor  
 Shall be lifted—nevermore!

1844

- Describing the composition of "The Raven," Poe wrote of the need to use sounds "in the fullest possible keeping with that melancholy which I had predetermined as the tone of the poem." List at least five of the sound effects (e.g., rhyme, alliteration, etc.) that Poe uses in "The Raven." How does each of these contribute to the poem's tone of "melancholy"?

1. A drug reputed by the Greeks to cause forgetfulness or sorrow (pronounced "ne-PEN-thee").

2. See Jeremiah 8.22. 3. Eden.



## WILLIAM SHAKESPEARE

[*Like as the waves make towards the  
pebbled shore*]

- Like as the waves make towards the pebbled shore,  
 So do our minutes hasten to their end,  
 Each changing place with that which goes before,  
 In sequent toil all forwards do contend.<sup>4</sup>  
 5 Nativity, once in the main<sup>5</sup> of light,  
 Crawls to maturity, wherewith being crowned,  
 Crooked<sup>6</sup> eclipses 'gainst his glory fight,  
 And Time that gave doth now his gift confound.<sup>7</sup>  
 Time doth transfix<sup>8</sup> the flourish set on youth  
 10 And delves the parallels<sup>9</sup> in beauty's brow,  
 Feeds on the rarities of nature's truth,  
 And nothing stands but for his scythe to mow.  
 And yet to times in hope<sup>1</sup> my verse shall stand,  
 Praising thy worth, despite his cruel hand.  
 1609

- Which lines in this poem vary the basic iambic metric scheme? What is the effect of these variations?

## JAMES MERRILL

*Watching the Dance*

1. BALANCHINE'S<sup>2</sup>  
 Poor savage, doubting that a river flows  
 But for the myriad eddies made  
 By unseen powers twirling on their toes,  
 Here in this darkness it would seem  
 5 You had already died, and were afraid.  
 Be still. Observe the powers. Infer the stream.

4. Struggle. *Sequent*: successive. 5. High seas. *Nativity*: newborn life. 6. Perverse. 7. Bring to nothing.  
 8. Pierce. 9. Lines, wrinkles. 1. In the future.  
 2. George Balanchine (1904–1983), Russian-born ballet choreographer and teacher.

## 2. DISCOTHÈQUE

Having survived entirely your own youth,  
 Last of your generation, purple gloom  
 Investing you, sit, Jonah,<sup>3</sup> beyond speech,

- 10 And let towards the brute volume VOOM whale mouth  
 VAM pounding viscera VAM VOOM  
 A teenage plankton luminously twitch.

1967

- When you read this poem aloud, which lines flow most easily, and which contain abrupt pauses? If the first stanza of the poem is an imitation of a dance choreographed by Balanchine, what might this dance look like?

## GERARD MANLEY HOPKINS

*Spring and Fall:**to a young child*

- Márgarét áre you grieving<sup>4</sup>  
 Over Goldengrove unleaving?  
 Leáves, like the things of man, you  
 With your fresh thoughts care for, can you?  
 5 Áh! ás the heart grows older  
 It will come to such sights colder  
 By and by, nor spare a sigh  
 Though worlds of wanwood leafmeal<sup>5</sup> lie;  
 And yet you will weep and know why.  
 10 Now no matter, child, the name:  
 Sórrow's springs áre the same.  
 Nor mouth had, no nor mind, expressed  
 What heart heard of, ghost<sup>6</sup> guessed:  
 It is the blight man was born for,  
 15 It is Margaret you mourn for.

1880

- How does this poem's heavy use of alliteration serve its themes of youth and age, life and death?

3. According to Jonah 4, Jonah sat in gloom near Nineveh after its residents repented and God decided to spare the city from destruction. 4. Hopkins's own accent markings.

5. Broken up, leaf by leaf (analogous to "piecemeal"). *Wanwood*: pale, gloomy woods. 6. Soul.

## EMILY DICKINSON

*[A narrow Fellow in the Grass]*

- A narrow Fellow in the Grass  
 Occasionally rides—  
 You may have met Him—did you not  
 His notice sudden is—
- 5 The Grass divides as with a Comb—  
 A spotted shaft is seen—  
 And then it closes at your feet  
 And opens further on—
- He likes a Boggy Acre  
 10 A Floor too cool for Corn—  
 Yet when a Boy, and Barefoot—  
 I more than once at Noon
- Have passed, I thought, a Whip lash  
 Unbraiding in the Sun  
 15 When stooping to secure it  
 It wrinkled, and was gone—
- Several of Nature's People  
 I know, and they know me—  
 I feel for them a transport  
 20 Of cordiality—
- But never met this Fellow  
 Attended, or alone  
 Without a tighter breathing  
 And Zero at the Bone—

1866

- How does Dickinson use sound devices such as alliteration to underscore the images and themes of the poem?

## WORDS AND MUSIC

People often associate poetry with music, and there are good reasons—both historical and theoretical—for doing so. The word **lyric**, for example—the standard term for a short, harmonious, pleasant, and often romantic poem—derives from the ancient Greeks' practice of reciting or singing (and perhaps composing) certain poems to the accompaniment of a stringed, harplike musical instrument, the lyre. Throughout history, poems have been set to music for voices or instruments, and many "lyrics" have been created specifically to fit musical compositions. Many poems, especially during the Renaissance, were simply called "Song" (or "Chan-

son” or “Lied” or similar terms in other languages), and some were constructed in hybrid musical-poetic forms such as the madrigal, the dirge, the hymn, and so on.

The most fundamental link between poetry and music involves their almost equal dependence on the principles of rhythm. Both art forms have a basis in mathematics—a regular beat or syncopated sound pattern predicts (and to some extent determines) their phrasing and formal movement. Not all composers of either poetry or music have mathematical knowledge, but their crafts depend on an ability to hear (almost instinctively and certainly habitually) paces, pauses, alternations, and relationships. Just as good musicians learn to listen and count so easily that it seems “natural,” poets often develop an ear for rhythm that makes their sound choices effortless and, seemingly, automatic. Readers, too, can develop such an ear, and hearing the rhythms of poems can be crucial to the total effects they create.

There are movements, of course, in both poetry and music to suppress or ignore regular patterns in favor of “freer” sounds and repetitions, but the tendency of both arts to use rhythm predictably makes some comparisons (and some common terminology) desirable and useful for describing strategies and effects. But the parallels are often *not* precise, the relationships metaphoric rather than actual. Both poetry and music use representational or imitative strategies to create the illusion of sounds—bells, waves, motorcycles, for example—but words operate referentially in a way that sounds normally do not, and their syntax is of a different kind from that in musical composition. Readers can better appreciate sound effects in poetry by hearing musical relationships, but the referential fact of language almost always alters the “pure” effects of sound (except in nonsense lyrics or in poems like “Joy Sonnet in a Random Universe” or “What the Motorcycle Said,” where simple sounds or tonal expressions are simply recorded and transliterated).

Poems composed to or for music tend to differ from poems that produce or rely on rhythmic, harmonic, or musical effects created solely by words themselves. Reading the lyrics of a song you know well (so that you, in effect, “hear” the music as you read the words) is quite different from reading words that have for you no musical association or history. You probably cannot stop yourself from hearing the music that accompanies lyrics by, say, the Beatles, and the music thus becomes for you, even when you just *read* the words, part of the total effect. But the “music” (or more exactly the percussive rhythms and patterns of sound) created by a poem itself can work in a similar way when there is no musical “source” or co-creation. To say that a poem makes or uses “music” can mean many different things.

The poems that follow were all written for, in conjunction with, or to imitate music. If you “update” this collection with lyrics from your favorite contemporary singers and groups, you may find that some lyrics that are very good when sung do not work well as “separate” poetic texts, whereas some make very good poems indeed. Can you, in the lyrics you know well, separate the actual musical implications from those of the words alone?

## THOMAS CAMPION

*When to Her Lute Corinna Sings*

When to her lute Corinna sings,  
 Her voice revives the leaden<sup>1</sup> strings,  
 And doth in highest notes appear  
 As any challenged<sup>2</sup> echo clear;  
 5 But when she doth of mourning speak,  
 Ev'n with her sighs the strings do break.  
  
 And as her lute doth live or die,  
 Led by her passion, so must I:  
 For when of pleasure she doth sing,  
 10 My thoughts enjoy a sudden spring;  
 But if she doth of sorrow speak,  
 Ev'n from my heart the strings do break.

1601

- How does Campion mimic an “echo” in this poem? What is the effect of this echoing?

## AUGUSTUS MONTAGUE TOPLADY

*A Prayer, Living and Dying*

## I

ROCK of ages, cleft for me,  
 Let me hide myself in Thee!  
 Let the Water and the Blood,  
 From thy riven Side which flow'd,  
 5 Be of sin the double cure;  
 Cleanse me from its guilt and pow'r.

## II

Not the labors of my hands  
 Can fulfill thy Law's demands:  
 Could my zeal no respite know,  
 10 Could my tears for ever flow,  
 All for sin could not atone;  
 Thou must save, and Thou alone.

1. Heavy. 2. Aroused.

## III

Nothing in my hand I bring;  
 Simply to thy Cross I cling;  
 15 Naked, come to Thee for dress;  
 Helpless, look to Thee for grace;  
 Foul, I to the Fountain fly:  
 Wash me, SAVIOR, or I die!

## IV

While I draw this fleeting breath—  
 20 When my eye-strings break in death—  
 When I soar to worlds unknown—  
 See Thee on thy judgment-throne—  
 ROCK of ages, cleft for me,  
 Let me hide myself in Thee!

1776

- What aspects of this poem might make it suitable for communal singing by untrained singers?

## ROBERT HAYDEN

*Homage to the Empress of the Blues*<sup>3</sup>

Because there was a man somewhere in a candystripe silk shirt,  
 gracile and dangerous as a jaguar and because a woman moaned  
 for him in sixty-watt gloom and mourned him Faithless Love  
 Twotiming Love Oh Love Oh Careless Aggravating Love,

- 5 She came out on the stage in yards of pearls, emerging like  
 a favorite scenic view, flashed her golden smile and sang.

Because grey laths began somewhere to show from underneath  
 torn hurdygurdy<sup>4</sup> lithographs of dollfaced heaven;  
 and because there were those who feared alarming fists of snow  
 10 on the door and those who feared the riot-squad of statistics,

She came out on the stage in ostrich feathers, beaded satin,  
 and shone that smile on us and sang.

1962

- How do the two short stanzas beginning with “She came out” complete the thoughts of the longer stanzas that start with “Because”?

3. Bessie Smith (1894 [or 1898?]-1937); legendary blues singer whose theatrical style grew out of the black American vaudeville tradition. 4. A disreputable kind of dance hall.

## MICHAEL HARPER

*Dear John, Dear Coltrane*

*a love supreme, a love supreme*  
*a love supreme, a love supreme*<sup>5</sup>

- Sex fingers toes  
 in the marketplace  
 near your father's church  
 in Hamlet, North Carolina—<sup>6</sup>  
 5 witness to this love  
 in this calm fallow  
 of these minds,  
 there is no substitute for pain:  
 genitals gone or going,  
 10 seed burned out,  
 you tuck the roots in the earth,  
 turn back, and move  
 by river through the swamps,  
 singing: *a love supreme, a love supreme*;  
 15 what does it all mean?  
 Loss, so great each black  
 woman expects your failure  
 in mute change, the seed gone.  
 You plod up into the electric city—  
 20 your song now crystal and  
 the blues. You pick up the horn  
 with some will and blow  
 into the freezing night:  
*a love supreme, a love supreme—*  
 25 Dawn comes and you cook  
 up the thick sin 'tween  
 impotence and death, fuel  
 the tenor sax cannibal  
 heart, genitals and sweat  
 30 that makes you clean—  
*a love supreme, a love supreme—*  
*Why you so black?*  
*cause I am*  
*why you so funky?*  
 35 *cause I am*

5. Coltrane wrote "A Love Supreme" in response to a spiritual experience in 1957 that also led to his quitting heroin and alcohol. Mainly an instrumental improvisation featuring Coltrane's saxophone, the piece begins with the repeated chant of "a love supreme." The record was released in 1965.

6. Coltrane's birthplace. His family shared a house with Coltrane's grandfather, who was the minister of St. Stephen's AME Zion Church.

*why you so black*  
*cause I am*  
*why you so sweet?*  
*cause I am*  
 40 *why you so black?*  
*cause I am*  
*a love supreme, a love supreme:*

So sick  
 you couldn't play *Naima*,<sup>7</sup>  
 45 so flat we ached  
 for song you'd concealed  
 with your own blood,  
 your diseased liver gave  
 out its purity,  
 50 the inflated heart  
 pumps out, the tenor kiss,  
 tenor love:  
*a love supreme, a love supreme—*  
*a love supreme, a love supreme—*

1970

- In what ways is this poem, as suggested by the title, both a “Dear John” letter and a poem of praise?

### WILLIE PERDOMO

#### *123rd Street Rap*

A day on  
 123rd Street  
 goes a little  
 something like  
 5 this:  
 Automatic bullets bounce  
 off stoop steps  
 It's about time to pay  
 all my debts  
 10 Church bells bong for  
 for drunken mourners  
 Baby men growing on  
 all the corners

7. A song Coltrane wrote for and named after his wife, recorded in 1959.



Money that  
 15 ain't mine  
  
 Sun that  
 don't shine  
  
 Trees that  
 don't grow  
  
 20 Wind that  
 won't blow  
  
 Drug posses  
 ready to rumble  
  
 Ceilings starting  
 25 to crumble  
  
 Abuelas<sup>8</sup> close  
 eyes and pray  
  
 While they watch  
 the children play  
  
 30 Not much I  
 can say  
  
 Except day turns  
 to night  
  
 And I can't tell what's  
 35 wrong from what's right  
  
 on 123rd Street  
  
 1996

- Read “123rd Street Rap” first silently and then aloud. Does it “work” better one way or the other? Listen to the author reading this poem (on the CD). Has your opinion of it changed?

## SUGGESTIONS FOR WRITING

1. Read Pope’s “Sound and Sense” carefully twice—once silently and once aloud—and then mark the stressed and unstressed syllables. Draw up a chart indicating, line by line, exactly what the patterns of stress are, and then single out all the lines that have major variations from the basic iambic pentameter pattern. Pick out six lines with variations that seem to you worthy of comment, and write a paragraph on each in which you show how the varied metrical pattern contributes to the specific effects achieved in that line.
2. Try your hand at writing limericks in imitation of “There was a young girl from St. Paul”; study the rhythmic patterns and line lengths carefully, and imitate them exactly in your poem. Begin your limerick with “There once was a \_\_\_\_\_”

8. Grandmothers.

from \_\_\_\_\_” (using a place for which you think you can find a comic rhyme).

3. Read Poe’s “The Raven” aloud, paying particular attention to pacing. Do you find yourself speeding up as you continue through the poem? Does a quickening pace suit the speaker’s growing exasperation and madness? Write an essay in which you examine the way that Poe underlines the poem’s story and emotional flow with a range of poetic devices: line length, punctuation, rhyme, meter, and the sounds of words.
4. Write an essay in which you discuss any of the poems you have read in this book in which sound seems a more important element than anything else, even the meaning of words. What is the point of writing and reading this kind of poetry? Can it achieve its effects through silent reading, or must it be experienced aloud?
5. Is there a meaningful difference between poetry and song lyrics? between poetry and rap? Is hip-hop a form of literature? Write an essay in which you explore the definitions of “poetry” and “lyrics.” Be sure to cite enough examples to illustrate your ideas.