

We Got the Beat: Rhythm and Meter

Rhythms affect us powerfully. We are lulled asleep by a hammock's sway, awakened by an alarm clock's repeated yammer. Rhythm in poetry can move us just as powerfully. We already know that rhythm can be created by recurrent sounds, that is, sounds that are repeated. We have seen this in rhyme, alliteration, and assonance. But most often, when we speak of **rhythm**, we are speaking about the recurrence, or repetition, of stresses (or accents). A **stressed** syllable is when a greater amount of force or emphasis is given to one syllable over another. For example, in the words below, see if you can find the stressed syllable:

Wisdom Monster Inside Dominate Compare

You can see rhythm in most any Mother Goose rhyme:

*Jack and Jill went up the hill to fetch a pail of water.
Jack fell down and broke his crown and Jill came tumbling after.*

In the above example, the rhythm is created by alternating stressed and unstressed symbols, in a pattern. When we read a poem aloud, stressed and unstressed words and syllables are part of the sound, and help create the rhythm. When these stressed and unstressed words are in a pattern or order, then we call that **meter**. There are many examples of specific meters. Here are four examples:

<u>Foot</u>	<u>Meter</u>	<u>Example</u>
lamb	lambic	<i>Today</i>
Trochee	Trochaic	<i>Daily</i>
Anapest	Anapestic	<i>Intervene</i>
Dactyl	Dactylic	<i>Yesterday</i>

Read the following poem and see if you can describe the rhythm, or find and identify any meter.

Counting-Out Rhyme by Edna St. Vincent Millay (1892 – 1950) 1928

Silver bark of beech, and sallow
Bark of yellow birch and yellow
 Twig of willow.

Stripe of green in moosewood maple,
Color seen in leaf of apple,
 Bark of popple.

Wood of popple pale as moonbeam,
Wood of oak for yoke and barn-beam,
 Wood of hornbeam.

Silver bark of beech, and hollow
Stem of elder, tall and yellow
 Twig of willow.

When I was One-and-Twenty

A. E. Housman (1859 – 1936)

1896

When I was one-and-twenty
I heard a wise man say,
“Give crowns and pounds and guineas
But not your heart away;
Give pearls away and rubies
But keep your fancy free.”
But I was one-and-twenty,
No use to talk to me.

When I was one-and-twenty
I heard him say again,
“The heart out of the bosom
Was never given in vain;
'Tis paid with sighs a plenty
And sold for endless rue.”
And I am two-and-twenty,
And oh, 'tis true, 'tis true.

1. What is the meter for this poem?
2. What is the point A.E. Housman is trying to make?

We Real Cool

by Gwendolyn Brooks (1917 – 2000)

1959

The Pool Players.
Seven at the Golden Shovel.

We real Cool. We
Left school. We

Lurk late. We
Strike Straight. We

Sing sin. We
Thin gin. We

Jazz June. We
Die soon.

1. What is the meter for this poem?
2. What helps in giving this poem some rhythm?
3. What is the author trying to say?