

# POETICALLY SPEAKING

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## WHAT IS THIS THING CALLED METER?

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*Meter—Something modern poets try to avoid.<sup>1</sup>*

### MUSIC FOR COMPOSITION

When we talk of meter in accentual-syllabic verse, it is not something that should be obvious. If it is obvious, then your work will be of little interest. After listening to over-emphasized syllables, it will become dull and boring.

When you read formal (structured or metrical) verse<sup>2</sup>, you are feeling the rhythm of the piece. Like a song which in many ways befits a poem. You might invent a tune to write to. I call it a tune because there is always a musical quality attached to a poem. Well, a good poem — a bad poem is horrendous.

A complex tune can be difficult to write to, while a shorter and repetitious tune is easier. This is why iambic tetrameter and iambic pentameter lines make pleasant musical pieces. There are other metrical feet capable of producing a musical quality for your poem. If you do not have an ear for music, it is likely you have no ear for poetry.

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<sup>1</sup> Now this may need some explanation. Many modern poets live the fictitious belief in what they know as free verse. Like all other matters in poetry, there are different interpretations of the fiend. The short of it is that the current understanding is nothing like the original. Most of what we read today is nothing more than butchered prose and pithy sayings. This tendency results in something substandard for poetry. These proponents try to avoid any mention or use of meter. Their ignorance will not allow them to recognize every verse having the quality of meter. That is, every verse will have a rhythm of sorts. Thus, my reasoning that the original free verse no longer exists. Today, everyone thinks they are a poet because they can jot down some random thought.

<sup>2</sup> There are four accepted metrical systems. They are accentual (including alliterative), accentual-syllabic, syllabic and quantitative.

## RHYTHM

Rhythm itself can come in many guises to your poetry, and so you must set about organizing the rhythm. The underlying structure used is the meter. It is an abstract pattern running through the lines to control the rhythm. We say that meter is the organization of rhythm. Hence the rhythm felt in the reading will accord to a chosen pattern. If the meter is too complex, the rhythm will be difficult to keep, and the reader will give up. This can occur when inventing a formula of sorts.

## METRICAL FEET

The English nomenclature is different to the traditional Greek and Latin. The latter paid more attention to the quality and duration of vowel sounds. English metrical verse concentrates on the stress we place on syllables. Not every syllable will have the same emphasis or duration.

The comparison of the two goes as far as for the stressed and unstressed to be long and short vowels. The English definitions are odd to say the least. It is impossible to say that unstressed syllables exist. The only way of understanding this is by how the surrounding syllables compare to each other in a line of verse.

There are few metrical feet that are of any real use in English metrical verse. Those in common usage consist of two or three syllable units. They are a combination of stressed and unstressed units. Not all Greek or Latin feet transfer into English verse. Our language is different, and we do not write as they did. To do so would make our verse unintelligible, or at least unusual.

There are five metrical feet that suffice to make up English metrical verse. These are the **iamb**, **trochee**, **anapest**, **dactyl**, and **amphibrach**. Two other feet some consider are the *pyrrhic* and *spondee*.<sup>3</sup>

## WHAT AFFECTS RHYTHM?

There are two factors to consider when writing metrical verse:

1. *Metrical accent*; and
2. *Speech stress*.

**Metrical accent** is stress placed on a syllable following an abstract metrical pattern. **Speech stress** is the emphasis placed on a syllable following natural pronunciation. These are everyday speech patterns.

A conflict between the two will lead to an undesirable rhythm, if any rhythm at all. The problem occurs when it is not clear which syllable should or should have stress. The intention of the poet may also be ambiguous. It may also be that the poet is not well practiced in the choice and placement of their words. Such a conflict can result when a word or syllable that would not have stress in normal speech does so in a line of verse.

The two qualities do not always conflict, and the promoted or demoted stress is quite proper. This is the case when we use mono-syllabic words.

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<sup>3</sup> My opinion of the pyrrhic and spondee feet is that they do not and cannot exist in English verse.

Uncommon stresses on one or more syllables will create difficulties. This can occur with disyllabic and trisyllabic words. In other words, the accepted primary stress does not occur at the expected place for the meter. In these cases we lose the rhythm.

## FINAL WORDS

For formal (metrical or structured) verse, a well-defined rhythm is important. Variations or metrical substitutions still need a well-defined rhythm. Finding the rhythm can be daunting, but with practice this difficulty can be overcome.

The accentual-syllabic metrical system requires that syllables correspond to stresses or lack thereof. Yes, there are little tricks and techniques that can help. There are some things beyond the poet's control. One such problem may be regional differences in pronunciation. We should expect an educated reader to realize the difference after a perusal of the work.

Regardless of the difficulties, realize that meter is only a way to organize the rhythm of the line. This carries over to the poem itself. Words with variations of stress can combine in such a way to produce a beautiful melody or a sinister dirge. Whichever is your liking.