

xiv lines

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# WORKING WITH ELIOT

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## THE NAMING OF CATS

by

T. S. Eliot

Metrical Analysis and Comments

by

Ferrick Gray

## A Note to the Reader

You should know that I am a great admirer of T. S. Eliot. I rank him as the greatest poet, dramatist, critic and perhaps even philosopher of the twentieth century, and now. Many things have been written about him, some true, some not so true but that happens with great people. I do not agree with everything he has to say, but that does not mean he is right, or I am wrong. There is a lot to do with opinion in many facets of poetry, drama, critique and philosophy. You may ask: *Who would dare criticize one of the greats?* It is easy to be critical, especially when the one you may criticize is no longer living, they have no chance to respond. However, I believe we are allowed. to provided we are respectful. Let's face it, none of us are going to achieve what Eliot achieved living or dead. Admittedly, he would likely think some of this is a total waste of time, but nevertheless it is interesting, even if it is just for me.

# Metrical Analysis of “The Naming of Cats”

This metrical analysis of Eliot’s **The Naming of Cats** demonstrates his keenness for traditional meters but stepping away from the stricter iambic pentameter. We must also realize that this and other poems were written for children, so it is expected that the meter will reflect the mood of the poem. For convenience, I have split the poem into quatrains for analysis. For most of the original, lines were indented to follow the rime scheme.

## Verses 1-4

**Thě Nāmīng | ǒf Cāts | ĩs ā dīf | fīcŭlt | mātĕr  
Īt ĩsn’t | jŭst ōne | ǒf yōŭr hōl | ĭdăy gāmes  
Yōu māy | thīnk āt fīrst | Ī’m ās mād | ās ā | hātĕr  
Whēn Ī tēll | yōŭ ā cāt | mŭst hāve THRĒE | DĪFFĒR | ĔNT NĀMES**

What is noticeable is that line lengths are not consistent. The fact is that this is not an issue in such a poem. We also notice that the verse construction is not consistent. Again, not an issue. There is a wonderful smattering of anapests which are responsible for the distinctive rhythm. Amphibrachs, iambs and trochees add their touch to alter the rhythm of some verses.

Some may disagree with the scansion of verses 1 and 3 in which I have indicated a promoted metrical accent. If you read these lines carefully, there is a slightly more emphasis at those points albeit very close to the preceding syllable.

## Verses 5-8

**Fīrst ǒf āll | thĕre’s thĕ nāme | thāt thĕ fām | ĭlŷ ūse | dāilŷ  
Sŭch ās | Pĕtĕr | Āugŭstŭs | Ālōnzō | ǒr Jāmes  
Sŭch ās | Vīctōr ǒr | Jōnāthān | Gēorge ǒr Bīll | Bāilĕy  
Āll ǒf thēm | sēnsīblĕ | ēverŷ | dăy nāmes**

Again, the anapest makes its presence known, but so too the dactyl which occurs to amplify expression and the names.

## Verses 9-12

**Thĕre āre | fāncĭĕr | nāmes ĭf yōu | thīnk thĕy sōund | swĕetĕr  
Sōme fōr thĕ | gĕntlĕmĕn | sōme fōr | thĕ dāmes  
Sŭch ās | Plātō | Ādmĕtŭs | Ĕlēctrā | Dĕmĕtĕr  
Bŭt āll | ǒf thēm | sēnsīblĕ | ēverŷ | dăy nāmes**

Anapests and dactyls dominate these verses, but the amphibrach makes its presence known with some of the names.

## Verses 13-16

Būt Ī | tēll yōu | ā cāt nēeds | ā nāme thāt's | pārticulār  
Ā nāme | thāt's pē | cūlīār | ānd mōre | dīgnīfīed  
Ēlse hōw | cān hē kēep | ūp hīs tāil | pērpēn | dīcūlār  
Ōr sprēad outh | hīs whiskērs | ōr chērīsh | hīs prīde

## Verses 17-20

Ōf nāmes | ōf thīs kīnd | Ī cān gīve | yōu ā | quōrūm  
Sūch ās | Mūnkūstrāp | Quōoxō | ōr Cōrī | ōpāt  
Sūch ās | Bōmbā | lūrīnā | ōr ēlse jēl | lylōrūm  
Nāmes thāt | nēvēr | bēlōng | tō mōre | thān ōne cāt

Verses 13 to 20 are very typical of an iambic rhythm or what I may call a *pentameter-pace*. Notice the various metrical substitutions.

## Verses 21-24

Būt ābōve | ānd bēyōnd | thēre's stīll ōne | nāme lēft | ōvēr  
Ānd thāt | īs thē nāme | thāt yōu nēv | ēr wīll gūess  
Thē nāme thāt | nō hūmān | rēsēarch cān | dīscōvēr  
Būt THĒ CĀT | HĪMSELF KNŌWS | ānd wīll nēv | ēr cōnfēss

These verses illustrate more of the tetrameter characteristics with their rhythm. Again, there are many metrical substitutions, mainly the anapest which gives these verses a pleasant sound.

## Verses 25-28

Whēn yōu nō | tīce ā cāt | īn prōfōund | mēdī | tātiōn  
Thē rēasōn | Ī tēll yōu | īs ālwāys | thē sāme  
Hīs mīnd īs | ēngāged | īn ā rāpt | cōntēm | plātiōn  
Ōf thē thōught | Ōf thē thōught | Ōf thē thōught | ōf hīs nāme

A similar pattern emerges from verses 13 to 28, mainly in terms of the anapest creating a melodic flow. The whole has become quite musical.

## Verses 29-31

Hīs īn | ēffāblē | ēffāblē  
Ēffānīn | ēffāblē  
Dēep ānd īn | scrūtāblē | sīngū | lār Nāme

In these last three verses the dactyls take charge and give a much faster rhythm. *Effanineffable* is an interesting word, but I am sure that you can work that one out. A little naughty.

I have read in a rather poor review of this poem stating that it was a whimsical poem written in iambic tetrameter. I cannot even see how this would be possible (the iambic tetrameter) or why it is whimsical. They produced no reason for either statement. However, depending on your reading there may be four stronger speech stresses which at best you might say is tetrameter, but this would require the introduction of some very uncommon metrical substitutions which would make it very wrong. Many poems of this form will make use of dactyl, amphibrach and mostly anapestic feet which are valid substitutions for the iamb. The best you could say here is *loose iambic pentameter* as an iambic rhythm can be detected in some verses. The reason is from the three-syllable feet and metrical accent promotion or demotion which sits well with speech stress. Around ten verses possess the tetrameter rhythm, but most lean toward the pentameter with the occasional verse of lesser feet at the end. However, there is no requirement to classify an entire poem as being composed of regular, specific feet.

## Interesting Facts

- **The Naming of Cats** originally appeared in a letter to Eliot's godson Tom Faber dated January 7, 1936. View the [first page here](#), and the [second page here](#). The name *Augustus* does not appear in the original version of the letter at verse 6. The letter contains the verse:

**Such as Victor, Alonzo, or Betty or James**

- Note that *Augustus* is not the full name of *Gus the Theatre Cat*. His name was *Asparagus*.
- Andrew Lloyd Webber's musical **Cats** is based on *Old Possum's Book of Practical Cats* by Eliot. His wife Valerie gave permission to change some poems for musical interpretation and to add others. [Listen to the cast](#) reciting **The Naming of Cats**. There is something quite eerie about it, and then [listen to Eliot](#) himself.
- *Old Possum* was Ezra Pound's nickname for Eliot.
- Eliot won Tony Awards for *Best Book of a Musical* and *Best Musical Score* (posthumous awards).