

# POETICALLY SPEAKING

Volume 2, Issue 7

April 2025

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## The Sound of Autumn

by Kenneth Daniel Wisseman

Analysis & Critique by Ferrick Gray

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### Prefatory Note

When it comes to using the descriptor *critique*, one needs to realize that critiques are not necessarily negative in their presentation or design. *Criticism* may of course be constructive or destructive. Destructive sounds very negative, but negative criticism may also work in a positive manner if the writer cares to accept it.

The poem I have chosen is written by **Kenneth Daniel Wisseman** (Wisseman from here on) and is included in his debut book—**To Look Upon Eurydice**. It is also written in one of my favorite forms, that of *terza rima*. Hopefully many will know of this form from Dante Alighieri's **La Divina Commedia** (The Divine Comedy).

The Italian is written as *hendecasyllabic*, being lines of eleven syllables appropriate to Italian, whereas in English verse the preference is almost always *iambic pentameter*. The rime scheme connects each succeeding stanza, and the canto or section is finished with a single verse (as in Dante), a couplet, or at times a quatrain depending on the preference of the poet. The rime scheme used by Wisseman in his poem is given by:

aba bcb cdc ded ee <sup>1</sup>

for each of the five parts to his poem. The end-rimes should be full-rimes, however there may be some variation by incorporating slant-rimes where appropriate.

I have chosen Wisseman's poem **The Sound of Autumn** <sup>2</sup> for a couple of reasons. I have previously reviewed his book that this poem is a part of, and now I have the opportunity to analyze it in more detail than would be appropriate for a general book review.

The aim of this critique is to undertake a metrical analysis of the poem and determine any variations to what would normally be expected, and to explain why these variations have been used. That is, *why verses are as they are and not otherwise*.

Due to the length of my review, each part will appear in separate articles. What follows is with respect to **Part I** only.

## Acknowledgement

Permission has been granted to write this critique and reproduce the poem in its entirety over five articles. Wisseman's book—**To Look Upon Eurydice**, is available from [Amazon](#).

# Metrics & Comments

## Part I

### Verses 1-3

- 1 O silent season sate with colors cast
- 2 As flames, in wildwoods, last of summer's kiss
- 3 On leaves, a remembrance of all things past;

The rime begins as expected **aba**, and the first thing we notice is the outstanding use of alliteration in the first verse. This adds to the rhythm giving a pronounced iambic nature.

- 1 Ō sī | lēnt sēa | sōn sāte | wīth cōl | ōrs cāst

This verse is a wonderful example of pure iambic pentameter. Depending upon the reading, a caesura may find its way after *season*. If so, this would be a traditional medial caesura since it breaks a metrical foot.

- 1 Ō sī | lēnt sēa | sōn  $\xi$  sāte | wīth cōl | ōrs cāst

However, it does not alter the nature or reading of the line, but may give an additional dramatic effect for the opening of the poem.

Verse 2 is an interesting verse in that it may be scanned as strict iambic pentameter.

- 2 Ās flāmes | īn wīld | wōōds lāst | ōf sūm | mēr's kīss

However, we find that this strict iambic flow produces two problems:

1. breaks the natural flow of **wildwoods**
2. creates too greater pause after **last**

The commas, although not metrically timed, do indicate the presence of the caesura. A lesser initial and stronger medial caesura are present in this verse. The presence of the caesuras would necessitate a break in the rhythm of the verse, and we can see quite clearly the presence of the **amphibrach** in the second foot and **anapest** in the third.

- 2 Ās flāmes  $\xi$  īn wīldwōōds  $\xi$  lāst ōf sūm | mēr's kīss

But depending on the reading, the third foot may appear as **cretic** and further highlight the five (possible) natural speech stresses aligned with metrical accents.

Reading verse 3, we hear four distinct speech stresses so there is little chance of the verse being pure iambic. There is also the initial caesura at the comma which breaks the rhythm. In this case, it is a traditional caesura due to the breaking of a metrical foot.

As stated there is little if any chance of the verse being pure iambic:

| 3   Ōn lēaves | ă rē | mēmbrānce | ǒf āll | thǐngs pāst

The metrical accents and speech stresses cannot be aligned. This is another example demonstrating that a ten-syllable verse is not necessarily iambic pentameter. In particular it is *remembrance* that will not fit the iambic rhythm. *Remembrance* sits much better by itself as the second amphibrach with the verse ending in iambs to regain the rhythm.

| 3   Ōn lēaves ǎ | rēmēmbrānce | ǒf āll | thǐngs pāst

It may seem a little odd to find that verses 2 and 3 only have four metrical feet whereas there expectation would be five. The reason in part is the caesura. Its use will **always** break the rhythm of the verse. This is not always a bad thing to do, because at certain times, **it is** necessary in conveying emotion and/or for dramatic effect.

The second point on this is that the **amphibrach**, **anapest** and **dactyl** are all appropriate substitutions for the iamb. We may include the **cretic**, but it is less common. Regardless, care needs to be taken with how many times this is done in a verse, stanza or indeed poem as this may lead to the loss of a consistent structure. As in verses 2 and 3, the use of two three-syllable feet will reduce the overall length of the verse to four metrical feet with a resulting four speech stresses. This will also allow for metrical promotion and/or demotion.

Comparing the construction and rime for the companion verses 1 and 3:

| 1   ˘- . ˘- . ˘- . ˘- . ˘- (cast)  
3   ˘- ˘- . ˘- ˘- . ˘- . ˘- (past)

We notice the final two feet in each verse match and so help maintain the iambic rhythm, and that the rime is full.

## Verses 4-6

| 4   'Tween wintry winds, in stygian nights abyss,  
5   And summer's light to Autumn's shadows turn  
6   A deeper hue, 'tis then—it's you I miss;—

The rime continues with **bcb**. Verse 4 may indeed be scanned as iambic pentameter provided the pronunciation of **stygian** is taken as two syllables. This is effectively *blurring* the vowel sounds of *-ia-* to a single *-a-*.

| 4   'Twēēn wīn | trȳ wīnds ǎ in stȳg | ǎn nīghts | ăbȳss

The caesura at the comma may make the pronunciation of **stygian** with two syllable sound odd or malformed. **Stygian** is more inclined to be part of an amphibrach taking advantage of all three syllables.

| 4   'Twēēn wīn | trȳ wīnds ǎ in stȳgĭ | ăn nīghts | ăbȳss

It may seem more natural to choose the dactyl. Whereas the word itself may be dactyl, its position in the verse (and the caesura) forces it towards the amphibrach. We find this same movement involving the anapest. The verse still retains five metrical feet and five natural stresses which allows to maintain the rhythm.

We have analyzed verses 2 and 4. Normally we would expect the same verse construction for the companion rimes over two consecutive tercets, in this case verses 2, 4 and 6. A comparison will be made after analyzing verses 5 and 6.

Verse 5 is of typical iambic pentameter with both metrical accent and speech stress perfectly aligning.

5    Ānd sūm | mēr's līght | tō Aū | tūmn's shād | ōws tūrn

There is an initial caesura in verse 6, but it creates only a slight pause and does not disrupt the rhythm.

6    Ā dēp | ěr hūe ̣'ṭis thēn | ĭt's yōu | Ĭ mīss

The dashes play little in this verse other than presentation. The verse could easily use the comma and omit the final dash, but overall any changes would only affect the appearance of the verse and not the rhythm.

What may be of more interest is how verses 2, 4 and 6 compare with regards to rhythm. Of most concern are the final feet and rime.

2	˘-˘.˘-˘.˘-˘.˘-˘	(kiss)
4	˘-˘.˘-˘.˘-˘.˘-˘.˘-˘	(abyss)
6	˘-˘.˘-˘.˘-˘.˘-˘.˘-˘	(miss)

The comparison shows very little difference albeit verse 4 having a slight but valid variation being amphibrach for iamb. Thus overall, the rhythm and construction has been well preserved. As previously noted, the variation in pronouncing **stygian** will result in strict iambic pentameter for the three verses. Overall, the rime and final feet of the companion verses work together very well.

## Verses 7-9

7    Memories of love like these leaves which burn  
 8    Aflame so red, a flame so brightly hues,  
 9    For you, in my twilight's sojourn, I yearn;

The rime continues with **cdc**, but any attempt to have verse 7 as iambic pentameter will fail. Clearly there are other metrical feet in play.

7    Mēmō | rīēs ōf | löve līke | thōse lēaves | whīch būrn

Metrical accent and speech stress are misaligned throughout and emphases lay on unimportant words in the verse such as **of** and **like**. We should note that the first syllable of **memories** must take the initial stress. There are a couple of interpretations here, one involving the eliding of **memories**.

7    Mēm'rīēs | ōf löve | līke thōse lēaves | whīch būrn

Now it is in these cases where we need to question how the word is to be pronounced. Not all poets will indicate the elision, and there are reasons for this. Elision can be very distracting within a verse and the poet leaves the interpretation to the reader. In the case of **memories**, the pronunciation commonly used or what we hear is that of two syllables *mem-ries*. So this is a possible interpretation which sits very well. We will also notice the presence of the **anapest** which sits perfectly in the third foot.

The final variation is if Wisseman intends the pronunciation of all three syllables *mem-o-ries* as it appears.

7 Mēmōriēs | ōf lōve | līke thōse lēaves | whīch būrn

This will still result in the **anapest** appearing in the third foot, but the **dactyl** will head the verse giving a quicker rhythm for the start.

Even the general reading of this verse finds only the four major speech stresses, so it comes as no surprise that we have four metrical feet. Thus we must accept at least the anapest in the third foot and leave the pronunciation of **memories** to the reader.

Verse 8 has an initial caesura, but it does not alter the rhythm of the verse which reads as pure iambic.

8 Āflāme | sō rēd ȝ ā flāme | sō brīght | lȝ hūed

There is also the beautiful repetition of **flame**, but in the context of adjective and noun, both creating a wonderful rhythm. The distinction may be lost when reading aloud.

For verse 9, there are three possibilities to consider. The first is to check for iambic pentameter:

9 Fōr yōu | ĩn mȳ | twīlīght's | sōjōurn | Ĩ yēarn

This is possible, but we find there are conflicts with metrical accent and speech stress in the second and third foot, and perhaps a little in the forth.

The word **twilight's** is of concern because the primary emphasis is on the first syllable which would necessitate the change of **my** to a lesser stress. **Sojourn** is capable of a major stress on either syllable, but by itself is normally on the first syllable. Thus the verse does not consists of purely iambs.

The second possibility:

9 Fōr yōu | ĩn mȳ twī | līght's sōjōurn | Ĩ yēarn

This resolves the conflict with **my** and **twilight's**. It remains to question the third foot. Is it really an **amphibrach**? Possibly, but with the position of **sojourn** at the end of the foot, there appears to be a greater stress on the second syllable.

Hence the third and best solution:

9 Fōr yōu | ĩn mȳ twī | līght's sōjōurn | Ĩ yēarn

This gives a very pleasant rhythm with the **anapests** surrounded by **iamb**s. The other point of interest is the rime created by **sojourn** and **I yearn**. Any pre-reading would lead us to the tendency of emphasizing the rime, and so stressing the final syllables of the third and fourth foot. This scansion resolves all issues we may have had with the verse.

Once again, we look for consistency with the companion verses. These being verses 5, 7 and 9.

5	˘- . ˘- . ˘- . ˘- . ˘- (turn)
7	- ˘ ˘ . ˘- . ˘ ˘ ˘ . ˘- (burn)
7	- ˘ . ˘- . ˘ ˘ ˘ . ˘- (burn)
9	˘- . ˘ ˘ ˘- . ˘ ˘ ˘ . ˘- (yearn)

Recall that there were two possibilities for verse 7 depending on the pronunciation of **memories**.

We notice that verses 7 and 9 have only four metrical feet, but they are not obvious in the reading due to appropriate substitutions. The final four metrical accents of each verse are identical, and along with rime give the consistency required.

## Verses 10-12

10	'Tis when I sit by waters quietude,
11	I hear your voice and see you dimly standin'
12	This time of year, in Nature's solitude:

Continuing with **ded**, verse 10 is typical iambic pentameter with both metrical accent and speech stress aligned.

10	'Tis whēn   Ĩ sīt   bŷ wāt   ěrs qūī   ětūde
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Verse 11 is interesting for two reasons. Firstly, it is the first feminine verse to appear thus far, and secondly the unusual use of the word **standin'**.

11	Ĩ hēār   yōŭr vōice   ānd sēē   yōū dīm   lŷ stāndin'
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The feminine verse is not an unusual variation. Whenever this occurs, especially with iambic pentameter, it is the presence of the **amphibrach** as the last foot in the verse. When executed, this variation is very pleasant and fits naturally with the expected rhythm.

Now to appreciate the use of what may appear very unusual, as in **standin'**, we need to consider its companion verses which are verses 13 and 14. In so saying, we will resume the discussion of **standin'** after analyzing verses 13 and 14.

Scanning verse 12 as iambic pentameter:

12	This tīme   ōf yēār   ĩn Nā   tŭre's Sōl   ĩtūde
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This sits very well although some may argue that **solitude** is a **dactyl**. Whereas by itself, it may well be, but its placement in this verse would necessitate a stronger emphasis on the final syllable due to the iambic rhythm.

Looking once again at the consistency of the companion verses 8, 10 and 12:

8	˘- . ˘- . ˘- . ˘- . ˘- (hued)
10	˘- . ˘- . ˘- . ˘- . ˘- (quietude)
12	˘- . ˘- . ˘- . ˘- . ˘- (Solitude)

We find all three verses are iambic pentameter with appropriate rime.

## Verses 13, 14

13	O, how in nature miss you sweet companion,
14	When love awakes the leaves with sweet abandon!

For the final couplet in this form (**ee**), verses 13 and 14 are considered together because we would expect there to be an identical construction. This meaning the expectation of feminine verses.

13	Ō hōw   ĩn nā   tŭre mĭss   yōŭ swēet   cōmpānĭŃ
14	Whĕn lōve   āwākes   thĕ lēaves   wĭth swēet   ābāndŏn

With the recollection of verse 11:

11	Ĭ hēar   yōŭr vŏice   ānd sēe   yōŭ dĭm   lŷ stāndĭn'
----	---

we find that all three have the same construction with respect to rhythm. This is a **necessity** to maintain the rhythm of the verses.

As expected, the verses consist of four **iamb**s followed by the **amphibrach**. Although not impossible, other metrical substitutions within the verses would definitely disrupt the rhythm, and so with the feminine verse, it is the last foot which varies and produces a pleasing effect.

11	˘- . ˘- . ˘- . ˘- . ˘- (standin')
13	˘- . ˘- . ˘- . ˘- . ˘- (companion)
14	˘- . ˘- . ˘- . ˘- . ˘- (abandon)

The other factor to consider is the rime. Here we notice a slight variation of the double rime in the amphibrachs. Normally we would prefer them to rime on both penultimate and ultimate syllables.

In verses 11, 13 and 14 we have the penultimate:

-pan-, -ban-, -stand-
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there is a slight slant in the third, but this is negligible.

Looking at the ultimate:

-ion, -don, -in'
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we notice that they are slant, albeit they are close, they are different enough to be noticeable not only by sight, but also sound. In all fairness, Wisseman has done well to bring these words together. To pronounce the ultimate as they appear by themselves does not give a fair indication of how close they actually are in the words themselves.

It may seem odd to use **standin'**, but the effect is to shorten the vowel which in this case is effective in bringing the three closer. It is essentially eliding the gerund which produces this effect. For the difference, compare **standing** with **standin'**.

Although some may disapprove of such a use, I believe it is more the unexpected appearance rather than the sounding. Remember that elision itself can always be somewhat distracting, even in the most common of circumstances.

# Final Comments for Part I

A major and important point to reinforce at this point, is that this is not the entire poem. The previous analysis is only for the first part. Admittedly, we do not expect to see a great deal of variation, but it is still of importance to analyze the entire poem to be able to make a final comment of its overall structure.

Some further comments pertaining to **Part I** (below in its entirety):

O silent season sate with colors cast  
As flames, in wildwoods, last of summer's kiss  
On leaves, a remembrance of all things past;

'Tween wintry winds, in stygian nights abyss,  
And summer's light to Autumn's shadows turn  
A deeper hue, 'tis then—it's you I miss;—

Memories of love like these leaves which burn  
Aflame so red, a flame so brightly hued,  
For you, in my twilight's sojourn, I yearn;

'Tis when I sit by waters quietude,  
I hear your voice and see you dimly standin'  
This time of year, in Nature's solitude:

O, how in nature miss you sweet companion,  
When love awakes the leaves with sweet abandon!

At this point in the poem, a number of poetic devices have been implemented. Apart from rhyme which is a necessity in **terza rima**, we find alliteration (v1, 4), word repetition (v8) and words connecting other tercets. **Flame** from verse 2 and verse 8 as a fond remembrance. Then **leaves** connecting verses 1, 7 and 14 alluding to the nature of autumn itself. We also note the personification of **Autumn** and **Nature** in verses 5 and 12 whereas personification does not appear in verse 5 (summer's) or verse 13 (nature) because they are interpreted in a different context.

The use of the dashes here are not of any particular use and could well be dropped altogether, but they do add to the presentation and evoke a certain sense of melancholia. Generally, I would consider dashes at the end of a verse to mean little at all, as if there were nothing further to say, however this does not appear to be the case from the second to third tercet.

Thus far, I would say that this part gives a more *ode-like* emotion. This is due mainly to the speaker's reflection of the past. The rhythm of this poem (Part I) is very smooth and makes use of valid substitutions for the iamb, but still maintains an over iambic pentameter nature. The four foot verses that make their appearance, do not detract from the poem's overall flow or continuance through the four tercets and final couplet.

In general, I would say Wisseman has managed to skillfully combine his devices, substitutions and wording into a pleasant opening for **The Sound of Autumn**. What I do like is that Wisseman has not tried to imitate the **terza rima** of another poet, and has successfully stamped his originality upon this piece.

This analysis and critique will continue in my second article (on Part II) to be posted at a later time.

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1. Other variations can be **aba bcb cdc ded e** or **aba bcb cdc ded efef**. ↩

2. Rather than reproduce the poem as a whole, I will set this analysis for Part I, then the stanzas (tercets) and verses in question. ↩