

POETICALLY SPEAKING

Volume 2, Issue 14

September 2025

A BRIEF DISCOURSE ON RIME

Ferrick Gray

Prefatory Remarks

One of the biggest complaints today stems from formal poetry, particularly the use of **rime**. What is it about rime that creates so many arguments among poets? For whatever reason, modern poets have a greater aversion to using rime. Their reasons are many; some are justified, while others are not.

What many fail to realize is that the use of rime in poetry is not necessarily bad, and it makes little difference to what style you write. The most common complaint against rime is that it is **unnatural**. However, is it truly unnatural? Another is that the rime is often **predictable**. On this point, I would tend to agree. Not all riming is done in the best way.

Regardless, there are also advantages to using rime. Its importance in formal poetry is that stanzas follow a rime scheme. It may also help to remember verses (think back to elementary school), and the brain is also attuned to seeking rime in poetry. However, all these advantages rely on the skill of the poet. We have good poetry, bad poetry, and rubbish.

Before proceeding, it will be best to explain the significance of rime and, in some manner, define what it means in terms of **rhythm**.

The Three Levels of Rhythm

With all poetry, more obviously in formal poetry, there are three levels of rhythm. Rime can be a very complicated quantity to deal with in poetry. Before delving into too much detail at the start, it is best to see how rime fits into the overall picture of rhythm. What follows is more suited to **formal poetry**, but it can be applied to such styles as **vers libre**.

Primary Rhythm

Primary rhythm is marked by a regular beat or ictus, generally occurring on a heavier syllable at the end of each foot. What we are considering here is the use of the **iamb** and **anapest**; **trochaic** and **dactylic** verses are uncommon in English poetry compared to the other meters.

Secondary Rhythm

Secondary rhythm is associated with the verse (line), and the most common way to end a unit of secondary rhythm is by the recurrence of similar sounds of the same quality, but not always identical. The metrical construction of verse is generally perceptible by rime.

Tertiary Rhythm

Tertiary rhythm is the grouping of verses having a regular structural arrangement. This structure is called a **stanza**, and this follows what is normally known as a **rime-scheme**.

The Functions of Rime

As we see, rime plays an important role in the rhythmic effect of a poem. It may also be the case that the rime may not concur with metrical pauses. If we continue this discussion under each of the three functions of rime, we may gain a greater insight into its use and purpose.

As a result of rime, there is a pleasing sound. However, if not carefully orchestrated, rime can make the verses come across as soulless. This means there is no pleasure to the sound due to the wrong emphasis on words for the rime. Words that are rich in association will be well-suited for riming and should apply to **all** the companion verses.

Structural

Rime will signal the end of metrical sections and verses. Hence, the secondary rhythm. It will also mark the grouping of verses into stanzas known as the tertiary rhythm. Rime plays a role in both secondary and tertiary rhythm, and is not a quantity easily ignored in formal English poetry.

Generally, rime will occur at the end of a verse where it is most obvious, and should have the greatest impact in terms of meaning and purpose. Enjambment is common in English poetry for several reasons. Its main purpose is to extend a single verse to allow the poet greater scope in conveying thoughts and imagery.

The problem with enjambment occurs when the rime falls on unimportant words, and the expected effect of rime is lost, resulting in dullness and disappointment from the reader. Do not for a moment assume that it is only the beginning poet who does this. Notables such as Shakespeare, Milton, Keats, and Shelley are also guilty of the incorrect choice in rime.

Melodic

The primary use of time is to produce a pleasing repetition of sounds. The accepted rule is that the rime should never fall on an unimportant word, or part of a word, as this will always diminish the poetic value of the verse, so too the poem. For some traditional forms, this rule is applied more strictly, such as sonnets.

However, rime is produced by other poetic devices, and these fall under **alliteration**, **assonance**, and **full-rime**.

Alliteration

Alliteration occurs when two or more syllables are in proximity and begin with the same consonant sound. The syllables are also noticeably stressed.

Alliteration is said to be:

- **Simple**, when the same alliteration links two or more words in proximity.
- **Compound** is when there are two or more groups of alliterative words in succession.
- **Interlaced**, when alliterations of one group occur within another.

In Modern English, alliteration emphasizes the rhythm by coinciding with the ictus. Yet a more melodic effect is obtained when it does not coincide with a natural stress. This is generally achieved when the alliteration falls in the middle or at the end of words.

Assonance

Assonance is the correspondence between the **vowel sounds of words**, mainly of the **stressed syllable**, and with **different consonants**. In English poetry, assonance is almost always an internal feature rather than at the end of words.

Full-Rime

As previously stated, rime is a common way to end a unit of secondary rhythm using the recurrence of similar sounds of the same quality, but not always identical. Three conditions must be satisfied by full-rimes.

1. There must be **exactness** in the **last metrically stressed vowel** sounds. They must be alike in both quality and accentuation.
2. **All sounds**, consonant or vowel, **following** the first assonant vowel must be identical.
3. The consonant sounds **preceding** the first assonant vowel must be different.

Hence, we may say that full rime is a combination of assonance and alliteration. From these requirements, we may understand that present-day riming is not always carried out correctly. We must remember that rime is a sound effect, and the mere difference of meaning does not allow such rimes as **tee** and **tea**. These are called **identical rimes** and fail on the third point to be full-rimes.

Imperfect rimes arise from **eye-rimes** and changed pronunciation. **Eye-rimes** are those words that **look** like they should rime, but do not. For example, **move** and **love**. However, in some instances, it may be that words did rime, but with the changes in pronunciation over the centuries, they are now imperfect.

Rhetorical and Emotional

Rime reinforces the natural emphasis on important words and may add to the imaginative suggestion of feelings. It can also produce more musical effects.

There are variations to rime, such as **approximate rimes**, sometimes called **slant-rimes**, that are normally deliberate and for a reason. They should not be employed to any great extent in verses. The reasons are for variety and a clearer statement relating to imagery, but they can become quite obnoxious to the reader who may be expecting a full-rime.

Half-line rimes or **mid-rimes** add a musical quality to the verse. These verses are longer than the pentameter, but can be very successful with tetrameter. Their appearance is more common in lyrical verse.

Other forms of rime are not at first recognized as rime, as they involve the repetition of words or phrases at the beginning of a verse. This device is called **epanaphora**. Where the repetition of a verse occurs, the purpose is to mark off stanzas and is called a **refrain**. The refrain is generally used to emphasize an important or emotional aspect of the poem.

The Use of Rime in Narratives

The most flexible and appropriate form for a narrative is **blank verse**, and it is almost always written in **iambic pentameter**. There is not a great deal of application of rime since the end rime does not play a part in blank verse; however, some devices associated with rime may be employed by a skillful poet. Attempting to split this style of verse to implement rime is difficult and rarely successful.

In the case of longer poems or narratives, the lighter rime is welcome, but the variation required may then raise the question of the appropriateness of rime. Apart from blank verse, poets may choose the traditional **heroic couplet**. There are advantages and disadvantages to using this style. The strict heroic couplet is closed, meaning that each couplet represents an individual thought or statement. As a rule, there is no enjambment, and the verses are completed in full-rimes.

Enjambment of couplets is common in poetry today and allows the poet to extend their thoughts or imagery. In doing this for lengthy poems, riming begins to suffer. What we find is that the words chosen to rime are not of great importance in the verse, and the reader's attention can be distracted from the required meaning of the verses. To be able to sustain correct riming with enjambment is difficult, and there is a tendency for the reader to lose interest due to the number of verses combined using enjambment.

Conclusion

Whatever you think of rime, it can be a difficult aspect of poetry to apply effectively **all** the time. Some poets are prepared to sacrifice the precision of rime for that of clarity. This is where a more personal approach is taken to rime than accordance with definitions. Regardless of opinions, rime can always be used to give meaning and pleasure to poetry.