CHAPTER 4

What You Need to Know About Poetry

Poetry Overview

Whether you abhor poetry or eat it for breakfast, whether you think poetry is cool or hot, scintillating or dull—none of that really matters on the AP exam. When you take the test, you'll be handed two or maybe three poems accompanied by roughly twenty-five multiple-choice questions. In addition, you'll be asked to write an essay that analyzes one or more additional poems. If poetry is in your blood, you'll probably deal deftly with the poetry sections of the exam. However, if poetry is something you can live without, this chapter may not change your attitude, but it can prepare you to score high in the poetry sections of the exam.

Before reviewing what you need to know, let's quickly dispense with what you can do without. Rest assured that you won't be asked to identify the title of any poems or recall facts about a poet's life. Nor will you need to dredge up information concerning the history of poetry or expound on the various schools of poetic criticism that have long flourished in academia. Because highly technical aspects of poetry are generally off limits on the exam, you won't be expected to have mastered the intricacies of poetic metrics and its baffling vocabulary—although it could be advantageous to know both the meaning of such terms as *iambic pentameter* and *dactyl* and the function of a poetic *foot.* Also, because the AP exam will never ask you to expound on the esoterica of versification, rhyme, and the multitude of poetic forms, you won't need to know more than the rudiments of each.

Most literate people would probably argue that poetry should be read for pleasure. The poems on the AP exam, however, are not put there for your enjoyment or appreciation. With luck you may enjoy reading them, but you needn't praise their artistry or revel in their emotion. Your task will be more mundane—to read each poem, figure out its meaning, examine its structure, and analyze the effects of poetic techniques that the poet brought to bear. In short, you'll pore over the anatomy of each poem and respond to questions. In Section I, the multiple-choice questions themselves will steer you through the poems, pointing out important features. In Section II, for better or worse, you'll be left to find and discuss them on your own.

What you need to know. AP test takers are expected to have a reasonably firm grasp of poetic structure, form, sound, and the other elements that give poetry the power to move, entertain, and enlighten. To put it plainly, you should be able to answer the question *How does a poem convey meaning?* In your English classes these past years, while studying the fundamentals of diction, metaphor, rhyme, and the other components of poetry, chances are you've been developing the background and acquiring the know-how to answer that question insightfully.

How to Read a Poem

Ideally, poems should be read aloud. Poetry, after all, is an oral art akin to music. Its sounds, rhythms, and rhymes are meant to be heard. Regrettably, you can't declaim a poem during the AP exam or an irate proctor will take you away. So you'll have to settle for the next best thing: Read it aloud to yourself—a paradox, to be sure, but also a piece of advice that means pronouncing each word in your mind's ear, skipping not a single syllable or mark of punctuation, paying attention to built-in pauses and to line and stanza breaks. In short, listen to yourself reciting the poem just as the poet wrote it.

Easier said than done? Perhaps, because the poems pitched to you during the exam are a world away from "Roses are Red/Violets are Blue" or "Casey at the Bat"—ditties that may share the name *poem* with "In Memorium" and "The Lovesong of J. Alfred Prufrock" but can't compare in artistry or in the authentic expression of human experience. Because poems on the exam tend to be far from transparent, count on reading them two or three times. With each reading, a poem should start to reveal its meanings. And, as you begin to answer the questions, the poem should become clearer still. Don't forget to note the title. It may contain just the clue you need to crack open the world within the poem. Reading poetry well is a skill like any other, and the more you practice, the better you'll get. That's why the best thing you can do to prepare for the exam is to read scores of poems—many more than appear in this book—and for each one, have a go at it using the ten generic questions below:

1. *Who is talking?* What can you tell about the speaker's age, gender, station in life, opinions, and feelings? What, if anything does the poem reveal about the speaker's character?

   Some speakers take on a distinct personality. The speaker in Andrew Marvell's "To His Coy Mistress," for example, is urgently "on the make," citing reasons his sweetheart should go to bed with him. Other speakers simply reflect on a theme; in e. e. cummings' "in Just," the speaker pays tribute to the coming of spring. Aside from that, we learn nothing of his character. Likewise, the speaker in "Pied Beauty" by Gerard Manley Hopkins meditates on the magnificent colors, shapes, and textures of God's creations. Beyond that, there's little to say about him or her.
2. *To whom is the speaker talking?* To the reader only? To someone else? If so, to whom, and what is the listener's relationship to the speaker?

   Some poems, such as Shelley's "Ozymandias," are addressed only to the reader. Others, like Blake's "A Cradle Song" are directed at a third person but focus so intently on the subject of the poem that they reveal nothing about the speaker's connection to his audience. Still others are dramatic monologues—poems that resemble a speech in a play. In such monologues speakers address a specific person and often respond to the listener's unspoken reactions. Matthew Arnold's "Dover Beach" and Tennyson's "Ulysses" are examples.
3. *What is the background of the poem?* Is there a reason or occasion for the poem? Is there any evidence of a setting, a time, place, season, or situation?

   For lyric poems the answer will most likely be *no* to those questions. Narrative poems, dramatic monologues, ballads, and other poems that tell or imply stories often provide background that helps to shape the poem's

effect and meaning. Frost's *"Out, Out—"* takes place on a farm during wood-cutting season. In Coleridge's "Rime of the Ancient Mariner," the speaker tells the story to guests at a wedding reception.

4. *What happens during the poem?* Do any events occur? Are they in the past or the present? Are they external or internal? Why are they important to the speaker or to a character in the poem? From what perspective does the speaker describe the events: as an omniscient narrator? as a participant? as an observer?

   The speaker in "The Twa Corbies," who happens to overhear two ravens talking about their next meal, has no vested interest in the conversation. In Wordsworth's "Composed upon Westminster Bridge," however, the speaker expresses his great affection for the city of London. Lyric poems, such as Keats's "Ode on a Grecian Urn," refer to no particular events, although it seems likely that the speaker is at that moment scrutinizing an ancient urn.

5. *What is the speaker's purpose and/or tone?* Does the speaker evince an attitude or bias regarding the subject matter of the poem? What imagery, diction, figures of speech, and choice of details contribute to the speaker's tone? Does the speaker use comparisons made via metaphors, similes, personification, or metonymy. Do you see any shifts in tone or perspective? Any contradictions?

   To understand a poem you must understand its tone. The tone of William Blake's "The Tyger" has long puzzled and intrigued readers. To this day, therefore, more than two centuries after it was written, the poem remains an enigma. In contrast, there's nothing elusive about the tone of "Counting-Out Rhyme" by Edna St. Vincent Millay and "Jabberwocky" by Lewis Carroll. Both poems are intended solely to entertain readers with collections of playful sounds. The types of poems you've studied in class as well as those that typically show up on AP tests fall somewhere between those two extremes.

6. *How does the language of the poem contribute to its meaning?* Is there anything distinctive about the poem's diction? Does the poet repeat words, sounds, phrases, and ideas? If so, to what purpose and effect? Which figures of speech and images are particularly potent? Do alliteration, assonance, consonance play a role in the poem?

   Since words are the lifeblood of poetry, look hard and long at the poem's language. Think of Macbeth's powerful words as he ponders his life: "Life's but a walking shadow . . . full of sound and fury, signifying nothing." Or consider a challenging poem like "Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Blackbird," in which Wallace Stevens embodies meaning in a series of intense, compact, and suggestive images. William Butler Yeats, spellbound by a fiercely independent woman, fills his love poem "No Second Troy" with language that alludes to Ireland's quest for freedom from England. Indeed, good poets bind language and meaning so tightly that altering a syllable would damage the poem's integrity.

7. *How is the poem organized?* Does it adhere to a closed form, such as a sonnet or villanelle? Or does it take liberties? Is it a free form? Does the verse structure contribute to meaning? Are the form and meaning related in some way? Does the ending contain some sort of resolution? How does organization contribute to the poem's meaning and effect?

The fourteen-line structure of a sonnet used by Shakespeare, Milton, Browning, and countless others has come to be considered the embodiment of human thought, just as the limerick seems just pithy enough to convey a whimsical idea with cleverly crafted rhymes. On the other hand, a more free-flowing organization is appropriate for "Ode to the Confederate Dead" by Allen Tate, a poem that takes place in the mind of a person wandering among the headstones in a Confederate cemetery and pondering the meaning of the soldiers' sacrifice.

8. *Do patterns of rhyme and rhythm contribute to the meaning and effect of the poem?* How does rhyme function in the poem? Are there patterns of sound that help to convey meaning or create effects? What does the meter contribute to the poem's meaning?

   Rhyme and rhythm that distract from the sense of a poem is a common flaw of second-rate poems. Thus, critics scorn Tennyson's "Charge of the Light Brigade" for its thundering hoof beats and repetitive rhymes that make the poem easy to remember but hard to take seriously. In high-quality poems, rhyme and meter are more than decorative features. They are a medium that subtlely enhances meaning and effect. Frequent shifts of meter in Shelley's "Ode to the West Wind," for example, suggest the wildness of the wind itself.

9. *What themes or motifs does the poem contain?* Are themes stated or are they implied? Can you draw a generalization about life or human nature from the poem?

   Poetic motifs are often vividly suggested or even stated outright. Anarchy, for instance, is evoked by a series of brief statements in William Butler Yeats' "The Second Coming": "The falcon cannot hear the falconer;/Things fall apart; the center cannot hold;/Mere anarchy is loosed upon the world."

   Themes, on the other hand, are rarely articulated. Instead, they must be inferred from the text. Sometimes a theme practically jumps off the page, as in the antiwar poems of Wilfred Owen (e.g., "Anthem for Doomed Youth"). In other poems, themes are less accessible. For example, "The Red Wheelbarrow" by William Carlos Williams consists of three visual images preceded by the words "so much depends/upon"—an altogether sparse amount of evidence from which to identify a theme. Yet it's sufficient. Williams' poem is about writing poetry. For him poems start with visual cues like "a red wheel /barrow" and "white/chickens."

10. *What was your initial response to the poem?* Did the poem speak to you? Touch you? Leave you cold? Confuse you? Anger you? Blow your mind? Cause you to pick up your cellphone and call a friend?

    More important, did your response change after reading the poem a second, third, or even a fourth time?

Ten meaty questions are far too many to keep in mind all at once. But they'll start to sink in as you use them over and over, and they can serve you well as you ready yourself for the AP exam.

First, however, find a poetry anthology such as *The Book of Living Verse* edited by Louis Untermeyer or *The Norton Anthology of Poetry.* Each contains a variety of poems—old, new, easy, hard, long, short. Taking your time, read a poem and run through the list of questions. Then read another and answer the

questions again. Then read a few more, and then still more. Repeat the routine the following day and again the day after. Read whenever you have a few spare moments—while waiting for the bus, on the john, standing in the cafeteria line. Gradually, the questions will sink in, and as you continue to read poems, you'll start reading them more deeply. For every poem you read deeply, you'll learn something about reading the next one. In time it will become second nature to read poetry adroitly. Not that you'll breeze through every poem you encounter, but you will have at your command a number of strategies for insightfully drawing out a poem's effects and meanings.

To start you off, here is a Walt Whitman poem followed by the ten questions and some possible answers.

WHEN I HEARD THE LEARN'D ASTRONOMER

When I heard the learn'd astronomer;
When the proofs, the figures, were ranged in columns before me,
When I was shown the charts and the diagrams, to add, divide,
Line and measure them,
(5) When I, sitting, heard the astronomer, where he lectured with
much applause in the lecture-room,
How soon, unaccountable, I became tired and sick,
Till, rising and gliding out, I wander'd off by myself,
In the mystical moist night-air, and from time to time,
(10) Look'd up in perfect silence at the stars.

(1865)

1. *Who is talking?*

   The speaker may be a student or perhaps the poet himself. In either case, he is someone who attends lectures and has no stomach for pedantry. Before the lecture ends, he stalks out of the room repulsed by both the astronomer's presentation and the audience's response.

2. *To whom is the speaker talking?*

   He is talking to the reader and also to himself, perhaps to justify or make sense of his impulsiveness.

3. *What is the background of the poem?*

   The speaker attends a lecture on the heavens given by a learned astronomer.

4. *What happens during the poem?*

   Hard facts and mathematical problems dominate the astronomer's presentation. Disappointed in both the lecture and the audience's receptivity to it, the speaker leaves the lecture hall. Outside, as if awestruck, he occasionally looks up at the stars, saying nothing.

5. *What is the speaker's purpose and/or tone?*

   The speaker distances himself from the lecturer's scholarly, scientific perspective in favor of a more personal one. In fact, he appears to disavow science by assuming an almost disdainful, holier-than-thou attitude toward the astronomer. He also objects to the audience, whose applause pays unwarranted homage to the learned lecturer.

6. *How does the language of the poem contribute to its meaning?*

   The "facts" of astronomy are represented by a barrage of hard, clipped words: "proofs," "figures," "charts," "diagrams." The repeated use of "When"

at the beginning of successive clauses suggests the astronomer's plodding delivery as well as an absence of concern for anything other than getting the facts across to his audience. The repetition of "lecture" (line 6) further emphasizes the spiritlessness of the astronomer's presentation.

In contrast, the speaker's view of the stars is couched in poetic language including such sound-rich phrases as "off by myself,/In the mystical moist night-air."

In the last line the speaker feasts his eyes on stars "in perfect silence," suggesting that words are not only unnecessary but inadequate to describe the mystery of what he observes. The speaker's silence also contrasts with both the lecture and the applause it elicited.

7. *How is the poem organized?*

The poem is structured like a short story with a beginning (lines 1–4), middle (5–8), and end (9–10). The lecture serves as the stimulus for the speaker's response and escape from the lecture room. The episode is resolved as the speaker looks up at the stars in silence. All parts of the poem work together to tell a brief anecdote and to convey the speaker's disapproval of both the astronomer's approach to his subject and the audience's reaction.

8. *Do patterns of rhyme and rhythm contribute to the meaning and effect of the poem?*

As an example of "free verse," the poem ignores customary patterns of meter or rhyme. It creates its effect via the words, images, subtle variations in rhythm and length of the lines. The account of the lecture, for example, consists of lengthy, prosaic lines. Only at the end does the speaker's poetic voice reassert itself. For a poem about a person who rejects conventionality, free verse seems an appropriate choice.

9. *What themes or motifs does the poem contain?*

The speaker, a romantic, seems to believe that rationality robs nature of beauty and mystery. As someone with an antiscientific bent, he prefers to contemplate the stars in silence. On one level, the speaker's silence is literal, but it also implies a sense of isolation. While others in the audience applaud the astronomer, the speaker disapprovingly slinks out of the room to commune with the stars. Ironically, his silence is a sham because it is trumpeted loud and clear by this poem.

10. *What was your initial response to the poem?*

The answer to this question will vary from reader to reader.

Practice in Reading Poems

For practice in reading and dissecting poems, answer the questions accompanying each of the following three selections. Write your responses in the spaces provided, and compare your answers to those on pages 71–77.

POEM A

A POISON TREE

I was angry with my friend:
I told my wrath, my wrath did end.
I was angry with my foe:
Line I told it not, my wrath did grow.

(5) And I watered it in fears
Night and morning with my tears,
And I sunned it with smiles
And with soft deceitful wiles.

And it grew both day and night,
(10) Til it bore an apple bright,
And my foe beheld it shine,
And he knew that it was mine—

And into my garden stole
When the night had veiled the pole;
(15) In the morning, glad, I see
My foe outstretched beneath the tree.

(1794)

1. *Who is talking?*

2. *To whom is the speaker talking?*

3. *What is the background of the poem?*

4. *What happens during the poem?*

5. *What is the speaker's purpose and/or tone?*

6. *How does the language of the poem contribute to its meaning?*

7. *How is the poem organized?*

8. *Do patterns of rhyme and rhythm contribute to the meaning and effect of the poem?*

9. *What themes or motifs does the poem contain?*

10. *What was your initial response to the poem?*

POEM B

A SOLITARY REAPER

Behold her, single in the field,
Yon solitary highland lass!
Reaping and singing by herself;
Line Stop here, or gently pass!
(5) Alone she cuts and binds the grain,
And sings a melancholy strain;
O listen! for the vale profound
Is overflowing with the sound.

No Nightingale did ever chaunt
(10) More welcome notes to weary bands
Of travelers in some shady haunt,
Among Arabian sands:
A voice so thrilling ne'er was heard
In spring-time from the cuckoo-bird,
(15) Breaking the silence of the seas
Among the farthest Hebrides.

Will no one tell me what she sings?—
Perhaps the plaintive numbers flow
For old, unhappy, far-off things,
(20) And battles long ago:
Or is it some more humble lay,
Familiar matter of to-day?
Some natural sorrow, loss, or pain,
That has been, and may be again?

(25) Whate'er the theme, the Maiden sang
As if her song could have no ending;
I saw her singing at her work,
And o'er the sickle bending;—
I listen'd, motionless and still;
(30) And, as I mounted up the hill
The music in my heart I bore,
Long after it was heard no more.

(1805)

1. *Who is talking?*

2. *To whom is the speaker talking?*

3. *What is the background of the poem?*

4. *What happens during the poem?*

5. *What is the speaker's purpose and/or tone?*

6. *How does the language of the poem contribute to its meaning?*

7. *How is the poem organized?*

8. *Do patterns of rhyme and rhythm contribute to the meaning and effect of the poem?*

9. *What themes or motifs does the poem contain?*

10. *What was your initial response to the poem?*

POEM C

THE CAMBRIDGE LADIES

the Cambridge ladies who live in furnished souls
are unbeautiful and have comfortable minds
(also, with the church's protestant blessings
daughters, unscented shapeless spirited)
they believe in Christ and Longfellow, both dead,
are invariably interested in so many things—
at the present writing one still finds
delighted fingers knitting for the is it Poles?
perhaps. While permanent faces coyly bandy
scandal of Mrs. N and Professor D
. . . . the Cambridge ladies do not care, above
Cambridge if sometimes in its box of
sky lavender and cornerless, the
moon rattles like a fragment of angry candy

(1923)

Line (5) *(10)*

1. *Who is talking?*

2. *To whom is the speaker talking?*

3. *What is the background of the poem?*

4. *What happens during the poem?*

5. *What is the speaker's purpose and/or tone?*

6. *How does the language of the poem contribute to its meaning?*

7. *How is the poem organized?*

8. *Do patterns of rhyme and rhythm contribute to the meaning and effect of the poem?*

9. *What themes or motifs does the poem contain?*

10. *What was your initial response to the poem?*

Answers to Practice Questions

Some questions invite interpretation. Therefore, don't expect your answers to be precisely the same as those below. If any of your responses differ markedly from these, however, be sure that you can defend your position with specific evidence drawn from the poem.

POEM A "A Poison Tree" by William Blake

1. *Who is talking?* The speaker may be the poet himself. Considering his villainy, however, he is more likely an invention of the poet's imagination.
2. *To whom is the speaker talking?* First and foremost, he addresses the reader. His self-incriminating revelations suggest that he may be seeking forgiveness from some sort of father confessor. Either way, he has taken the audience into his confidence.
3. *What is the background of the poem?* For an unspecified reason the speaker has been miffed by both a friend and a foe. He makes peace with the friend but not with the foe.
4. *What happens during the poem?* The speaker comes to terms with his friend. But with respect to his foe, he keeps rage bottled up inside where it festers and grows into an obsession to kill. While feigning friendship, he hatches a plot to tempt his foe into stealing and eating a poison apple. Seeing the corpse of his foe sprawled beneath the apple tree gladdens the speaker's heart.
5. *What is the speaker's purpose and/or tone?* The speaker describes two contrasting relationships, one with a friend, the other with a foe. In explaining the latter, he takes pride in how he disposed of his enemy

through guile and deceit. Lacking a trace of remorse, he appears unaware of his own malevolence.

6. *How does the language of the poem contribute to its meaning?* Simple and straightforward language, the kind that a friend might use to talk about everyday events, dominates the poem. An off-handed expression of deceit disguises the speaker's diabolical nature. The incongruity between his language and the subject matter underscores his callousness. The speaker's joy after killing his foe adds still another dimension to his perversity. Nothing the speaker says contains the slightest hint that he deserves sympathy or redemption. In that sense, he is no less a victim of evil impulses than his unfortunate foe.

   In relating his experience, the speaker alludes to an "apple" and a "garden," words that call to mind the biblical story of man's fall from innocence. The speaker tempts his foe just as Satan tempted Adam and Eve to eat the forbidden fruit.

7. *How is the poem organized?* Each stanza adds another dimension to the speaker's self-portrait. First the speaker represents himself as someone capable of both good and evil. But in the lines that follow, he flaunts only his maliciousness. At the end of the third stanza, the speaker briefly turns his attention to his foe's behavior, and in the last line we are shown the speaker at the height of his depravity, rejoicing at the consequences of his efforts.

8. *Do patterns of rhyme and rhythm contribute to the meaning and effect of the poem?* The poem's regular rhymes and steady, singsongy rhythm disguise its dark subject matter and imply the speaker's insensitivity to his own wickedness. Indeed, the incongruity between the speaker's message and the means by which it is delivered heightens the poem's emotional impact.

   Lines 1 and 3, in which the speaker expresses his anger, are trochaic. Lines 2 and 4, which tell of the speaker's action, are iambic, a sequence that sets up a brief dialogue between feelings and action. The only other all-iambic line is the last line, in which the speaker celebrates his deadly achievement. The change in rhythm intensifies the climax of the poem by setting it apart from the other lines in the stanza.

9. *What themes or motifs does the poem contain?* Biblical overtones expand the poem's meaning. By tempting an innocent to eat a poison apple, the speaker takes on Satan-like characteristics. At the same time, the speaker plays God by taking another's life. Paradoxically, then, he is an amalgam of evil and good, as he himself suggests early in the poem. Thereby, he represents humankind both before and after the fall from innocence.

   An altogether different interpretation is that the poem may be little more than a recipe for vengeance or a warning to readers against the dangers of insincerity.

10. *What was your initial response to the poem?* The answer will vary from reader to reader.

POEM B "A Solitary Reaper" by William Wordsworth

1. *Who is talking?* The speaker is a traveler on horseback passing by a field in the highlands. He is deeply moved by the singing of a country lass harvesting grain. His blasé allusions to far-off places (Arabia and the Hebrides) suggest he is well traveled, perhaps even weary of his aimless roaming

across deserts and oceans. As the poem begins, he is ready to be awakened to more profound aspects of both himself and the human condition.

2. *To whom is the speaker talking?* Unable to contain himself, the speaker must tell someone—the reader in this case—about the singing he heard in the highlands.
3. *What is the background of the poem?* Because the lass "cuts and binds the grain" (line 5), it is harvest time, presumably the late summer or fall.
4. *What happens during the poem?* Passing a field, a traveler hears a song being sung by a solitary peasant girl harvesting grain. Deciding to stop and listen rather than continue on his way, the speaker is struck by the beauty of the song. He compares it to other beautiful sounds—the song of a nightingale and the song of a cuckoo-bird. The speaker begins to muse on the possible meaning of the song but can discern only its sorrowful tone. Finally, he rides away haunted by the music he has heard.
5. *What is the speaker's purpose and/or tone?* The speaker tries to determine why he has been deeply touched by the melancholy strains of the girl's song. Recognizing only the song's plaintiveness (line 18) and its "sorrow, loss, or pain" (line 23), he carries the music away with him, harboring sorrow in his heart, even long after he can no longer hear the notes (line 32). His reaction seems to be a kind of epiphany, as though he has been suddenly awakened to his inner self and now understands the sorrows of others.
6. *How does the language of the poem contribute to its meaning?* Two exclamations (in lines 1–2 and in line 4) not only add drama to the opening of the poem but suggest that the speaker has been suddenly energized by the sound of the girl's singing. How deeply he has been affected, however, is not made clear until the third and fourth stanzas. By emphasizing solitude ("single in the field," "singing by herself," "alone she cuts . . ."), the speaker visually and emotionally keeps the girl at a distance, but by the end of the poem, she and her song have sunk into his soul. This shift from outside to inside the speaker begins with the word "melancholy" (line 6) and accelerates during the third stanza, nudged along by the girl's "plaintive," and "unhappy" song.

   The poem's diction, like the peasant girl of the title, is generally plain and simple, but in the second stanza the speaker's words turn more exotic and fanciful: "chaunt," "shady haunt," "Arabian sands"—words and phrases befitting the stanza's more imaginative subject matter.

   The use of the past tense in the last stanza signals the climax of the poem. The fading image of the girl contrasts to her song, which shall never end. The concluding lines show the traveler changed by his brief encounter with a mythic, symbolic figure. The music has awakened him to the universality of human woe, an artifact of which is now lodged in his heart.

   The final couplet contains the simplest language in the poem. Almost entirely monosyllabic, it captures the essence of the speaker's transformation. His discovery that sorrow is a common aspect of everyday experience is conveyed in common, everyday words. Containing sounds that echo the sense, the words repeat a long *o* (b*o*re, l*o*ng, m*o*re) that resonates with the girl's music and reiterates the set of *o*-sounds that simulate the girl's song in lines 7–8. As the traveler continues on his way, a series of mellow *m*-sounds capture his subdued mood.

Calling the girl a "reaper" is an irony. Yes, she reaps grain, but the word is commonly associated with "grim reaper," the proverbial personification of death. Here, of course, the reaper is a young lass, a life-affirming figure, not a spectre of death. With her song, she unwittingly lays to rest some of the speaker's encrusted attitudes and endows him with new life, or at least with a new vision of the world.

7. *How is the poem organized?* Initially, the speaker confronts melancholy singing that sweeps through the valley. Next, he compares the music to the call of birds in far-off places, using images that awaken his desire to understand the meaning of the melody. Recognizing that sorrow can "have no ending" (line 26), he continues on his way with the music buried deep in his heart. All told, then, the poem begins with the speaker's external, sensual response to the music, goes on to explore his intellectual reactions, and concludes with a deeply felt self-realization.

   These events, which occur at a confluence of two different worlds—that of a simple peasant girl and that of a worldly and superficially successful traveler—reflect the poem's symmetry. Each of four eight-line stanzas is composed of two quatrains, each devoted to a different aspect of the traveler's experience. The first four lines of the poem, for example, show what the man sees, the second four tell what he hears. This arrangement parallels the dramatic structure, for the poem is an account of a man's transformation. Before the change, he is an aimless, world-weary traveler. Afterwards, having realized not only that sorrow pervades the world but that he must share in that sorrow, he has become enlightened.

8. *Do patterns of rhyme and rhythm contribute to the meaning and effect of the poem?* Rhyme and meter support the poem's basic symmetry. The second and third stanzas contain identical rhyme schemes: *a-b-a-b-c-c-d-d.* The others differ only in the third line, an exception that softens the effects of a consistent and assertive rhyme. The pairs of rhyming couplets that end each stanza serve as a kind of coda that creates a climactic emotional surge.

   Most lines are written in iambic tetrameter, a rhythm akin to everyday speech and appropriate to a poem about an ordinary country girl singing in the fields. With the occasional intrusion of dactyls such as *reaping* (line 3) and *breaking* (line 15), a rhythmic tension is created, a tension that reflects the state of the speaker's emotions. In addition, there are pauses, or caesuras, in mid-line, as in "Behold her" (line 1) and "Stop here" (line 4), suggestive of the pause taken by the traveler on his journey.

9. *What themes or motifs does the poem contain?* Two related motifs—solitude and melancholy—dominate the poem. The first is introduced by the title and by such references to the girl's isolation as "singing by herself" (line 3). From solitude it is a short step to melancholy, and the speaker dwells on images of sadness and sorrow. While these motifs are used to describe the girl and her song, the speaker, too, is a solitary figure, who, by listening to the music, becomes attuned to the melancholy nature of life.

   While these motifs help to establish the mood of the poem, the third stanza, consisting largely of a series of questions, holds the key to the poem's main theme. Lines 21–24 ask what amounts to a rhetorical question about the nature of sorrow: Is it something that "has been, and may be again?" In a flash, the speaker realizes that sadness and pain "have no end-

ing" (line 26). That is to say, suffering is part of the human nature. As he rides off, the traveler understands that private, internal events attest far more vividly to a man's humanity than such superficial experiences as globetrotting.

10. *What was your initial response to the poem?* This answer will vary from reader to reader.

POEM C "The Cambridge Ladies" by e. e. cummings

1. *Who is talking?* The speaker is either the poet or a spokesman for the poet. The phrase "at the present writing" (line 7) suggests that the speaker may be a journalist or a researcher-type preparing a sociological article or exposé.
2. *To whom is the speaker talking?* To the reader.
3. *What is the background of the poem?* Evidently, the speaker has had occasion to observe or to talk with this group of women he deprecatingly calls the "Cambridge ladies." Lacking individuality, they are given a collective persona that serves as an easy target for satire.
4. *What happens during the poem?* The speaker paints an unflattering portrait of the ladies' values, manners, and characteristics. He comments directly or indirectly on their hypocrisy, their conventional minds, their shallowness and superficiality. He also targets their banal efforts to help others, their tendency to gossip, and their mindless indifference to everything but keeping up appearances.

   Of all their faults, hypocrisy may arguably be the most egregious. The ladies pretend to be Protestants (note the lowercase *p,* implying the ladies' hollow piety). They act in un-Christianlike ways, unaware of their mean-spiritedness as they gossip "coyly" about the scandalous behavior of Mrs. N and Professor D, presumably two of their Cambridge neighbors. Also, because it is fashionable to do so, they "believe" in Christ and Longfellow, a pairing that both demeans Christ and elevates Longfellow. Regardless, the speaker pointedly declares them "both dead," not unlike the ladies' adherence to Christ's teachings and their comprehension of Longfellow's poetry. The ladies voluntarily knit for "is it the Poles?/perhaps." But their altruism is a sham, done to impress others rather than to help the needy.
5. *What is the speaker's purpose and/or tone?* The speaker intends to mock the women using satire and in-your-face sarcasm. Ultra-cynical, even destructive, he endows the ladies with not a single redeeming quality. In the last four lines, the speaker turns indignant, condemning the group for not caring about anything except their social standing. Even the moon, a symbol rich in meaning for people everywhere, means nothing to them. They view it as a piece of candy rattling around in a mostly empty (like the ladies themselves) lavender box.
6. *How does the language of the poem contribute to its meaning?* The language of the poem is off-beat. It takes liberties with syntax (". . . one still finds/delighted fingers knitting for the is it Poles?"), punctuation ("unscented shapeless spirited"), capitalization ("protestant"), and diction ("unbeautiful"). The quirkiness of the language stands in stark contrast to the ladies, who revere conventionality.

The phrase "furnished souls" (line 1), implying that the ladies are virtual automatons, introduces a concept built up and reinforced throughout the poem. The women possess "comfortable minds," that never question, think, or probe. Absent an imagination or dreams, and lacking both creativity and curiosity, they have been programmed by their provincial society to go to church, knit, and talk about other people. Meanwhile, they wear "permanent faces" and never consider what their various activities add up to. In effect, they are the living dead, a notion that bestows ironic overtones on the verb "live" in line 1.

Occasional fragments of conversation reveal still more about the ladies. Their claim to be "interested in so many things" (line 6) reflects their pedantry. The phrase "knitting for the is it Poles?" (line 8) indicates that their volunteer work is nothing more than a perfunctory duty.

7. *How is the poem organized?* In order to mock the ladies, the poet contrives an organization that mimics but fails to follow the conventions of the traditional sonnet. Like a sonnet, "The Cambridge Ladies" contains fourteen lines, but it ignores the customary arrangement of ideas. Very loosely, however, the initial eight lines (the octave) present a spuriously objective account of the ladies, while the last six lines (the sestet) are overtly judgmental. In fact, the speaker's undisguised scorn emerges in the final four lines.

   Structurally, the poem, which begins with a general description of the ladies, becomes increasingly specific. Sweeping generalities in the first lines evolve into examples of the ladies' behavior, which abruptly give way to the speaker's perception of what goes on—or more accurately, what fails to go on—inside the ladies' heads.

8. *Do patterns of rhyme and rhythm contribute to the meaning and effect of the poem?* Playful patterns of rhyme and rhythm help cast the ladies in a comic light. There are no rhymes in the first six lines, but lines 7 and 8 rhyme with lines 2 and 1 respectively. The poet has rhymed the last six lines *g-g-f-f-g-g*, but in each couplet an unstressed syllable is paired with a stressed one, as in "bandy" and "Professor D." Instead of employing consistent end rhymes, then, the poet scatters internal rhymes throughout, relying on, among other techniques, alliteration and assonance. Line 6, for example, contains four instances of "in": "*in*variably *in*terested *in* so many th*in*gs—." Line 9 contains two words beginning with "per," and ends with a pair of similar words, "coyly bandy." In the following line, the consonants *n* and *d* in "scandal" are echoed in the names of "Mrs. N and Professor D." And in the poem's final line, the "rattle" of the moon is onomatopoetically represented by "a fragment of angry candy."

   The poem's rhythms are equally capricious. Five-foot lines prevail, but the final quatrain contains two four-foot lines and a culminating six-footer. In other words, the poem is a kind of mischievous romp of sound and rhythm, its eccentricities contrasting vividly with its subject.

9. *What themes or motifs does the poem contain?* The main theme is the conventionality of the Cambridge ladies, whose lives follow a preordained pattern. Each of the ladies' flaws and foibles becomes a mini-theme in the poem. Thus, the allusion to Christ and Longfellow suggests that the ladies' values are skewed toward the dead, implying further that the ladies themselves are emotionally and intellectually insensible.

10. *What was your initial response to the poem?* This answer will vary from reader to reader.

What to Listen for in Poetry

Here is a fact you *don't* need to know for the AP exam: Every pattern of rhyme and rhythm has a name.

Here's another fact, one that you *should* know for the exam: What is important in analyzing poems is not the names of various patterns of rhyme and rhythm, but that rhyme and rhythm contribute to the meaning and effect of a poem. If you can tell a slant rhyme from a spondee, more power to you, but what counts on the exam is your ability to describe the function of slant rhyme in a particular place or to explain the effect of a given spondee.

Because a feature of any good poem is unity, its sounds cannot be separated from its themes, structure, imagery, and so forth. That's why rhyme, rhythm, the use of repetition, and each of several other sound-related techniques are more than abstractions. They are integral to a poem's totality.

Rhyme

Rhyme is perhaps the most easily recognized characteristic of poetry, particularly *end rhyme,* the repetition of identical sounds at the end of successive lines, as illustrated by this excerpt from W. H. Auden's "It's No Use Raising a Shout":

> A long time ago I told my *mother*
> I was leaving home to find *another:*
> I never answered her *letter*
> But I never found a *better*
> Here am I, here are *you:*
> But what does it mean? What are we going to *do?*

Equally vivid end rhymes may occur in alternating lines, as in this fragment of Lord Byron's "She Walks in Beauty":

> She walks in beauty like the *night*
> Of cloudless climes and starry *skies*
> And all that's best of dark and *bright*
> Meet in her aspect and her *eyes:*

Another common rhyming pattern consists of end rhymes in only the second and fourth lines of a four-line stanza, illustrated in the anonymously written "The Dying Airman":

> Take the cylinders out of my kidneys,
> The connecting-rod out of my *brain,*
> Take the cam-shaft out of my backbone,
> And assemble the engine *again.*

Types of rhymes. Customarily, rhyme is produced by one syllable words (*fat/cat*) or by the final syllables of multisyllabic words *(prevail/entail; disclosure/composure).*

Sounds that are close but not exact duplicates of one another are called, among other things, *slant* rhymes, *off* rhymes, and *near* rhymes *(seen/been; ill/all; summer/somewhere).* A major function of slant rhymes is to help avoid the monotony of repetitious conventional rhyme. The slant offers a change of pace, a small but welcome deviation, as in the concluding lines of this fragment from F. T. Prince's "To a Friend on His Marriage":

> A beautiful girl said something in your praise.
> And either because in a hundred ways
> I had heard of her great worth and had no *doubt*
> To find her lovelier than I *thought*
> And found her also cleverer, or *because*
> Although she had known you well it *was* . . .

Rhymes that end with accented syllables are *masculine (unloose/reduce; rehearse/perverse);* those that end in unstressed syllables are *feminine (sleeping/leaping; center/tormenter).* Words with two unstressed rhyming syllables are called *double feminine* rhymes *(monocle/chronicle).* Poets have occasionally been moved to use *triple* rhymes *(intellectual/henpecked you-all)* and *quadruple* rhymes *(Mephistopheles/with the most awful ease),*[1] but such linguistic contortions call so much attention to themselves that they are shunned by serious poets.

[1]Examples from John Ciardi and Miller Williams, *How Does a Poem Mean?* Houghton Mifflin, 1975, p. 138.

Sometimes, an individual line of poetry contains two or more words that rhyme. Examples of such an *internal rhyme* are found in Tennyson's "Blow, Bugle, Blow":

> The splendour *falls* on castle *walls*
> And snowy summits old in story:
> The long light *shakes* across the *lakes*
> And the wild cataract leaps in glory.

Poets may include internal rhymes for emphasis or additional unity. If used excessively, however, internal rhymes could create monotony rather than interest.

Rhyme scheme. A rhyme scheme is the pattern of rhyming words within a given stanza or poem. For convenience, each similar end rhyme is usually identified with a letter of the alphabet, here illustrated by Francis Cornford's "The Watch":

I wakened on my hot, hard bed,	*a*
Upon the pillow lay my head;	*a*
Beneath the pillow I could hear	*b*
My little watch was ticking clear.	*b*
I thought the throbbing of it went	*c*
Like my continual discontent,	*c*
I thought it said in every tick:	*d*
I am so sick, so sick, so sick;	*d*
O death, come quick, come quick, come quick,	*d*
Come quick, come quick, come quick, come quick.	*d*

This shorthand technique applies to rhymes in any poem. The rhyme scheme of "It's No Use Raising a Shout" is simply *a-a-b-b-c-c;* of "She Walks in Beauty": *a-b-a-b;* and of "The Dying Airman": *a-b-c-b*. On the AP exam, you are not likely to be asked about rhyme scheme unless it is germane to the effect or meaning of a particular poem. "The Watch," though hardly more than fluff, illustrates how rhyme can support and enhance meaning. By ending the poem with four rhyming lines, the speaker simulates the relentless and repetitive ticking of a mechanical timepiece.

Lines that come in pairs *(couplet)* often rhyme, as do three lines, or *triplets* (or *tercets*) as in Tennyson's "The Eagle":

> He clasps the crag with crooked *hands*;
> Close to the sun in lonely *lands*,
> Ringed with the azure world he *stands*, . . .

In a distinct group of four lines (sometimes called *quatrain,* or *stanza,* rhymes can vary enormously from a-a-a-a to a-b-a-b, a-b-c-b, and so on. And in stanzas of a greater number of lines, rhyming possibilities are virtually endless.

On the AP exam you're not likely to be required to describe the rhyme scheme or distinguish one type of rhyme from another, but when you write your essay on a given poem, it may be useful to discuss rhymes that contribute to the poem's meaning or effect.

Onomatopoeia. Using *onomatopoeia,* words that virtually replicate sound, poets often create vivid effects. Is there a more expressive word than *moan,* for example, to make the sound of . . . well, a moan? Likewise, *murmur* resembles the sound of a murmur. And numerous other words, too—*boom, buzz, clang, crack,* and so on—all echo their sense. Because sound can cause words to crawl or race, flow smoothly or stumble along, express beauty or ugliness, poets often choose words according to the effects they wish to create. Meaning ordinarily takes precedence over sound, but an astutely picked onomatopoetic word may add both sense and sensuality to an image or phrase, as in these lines by W. H. Auden:

> And the fenders grind and heave,
> And the derricks clack and grate, as the tackle hooks the crate,
> And the fall-ropes whine through the sheave . . .

Alexander Pope, in this verse from "An Essay on Criticism," encapsulates the use of onomatopoeia and other sounds in poetry:

'Tis not enough no harshness gives offense,
The sound must seem an echo to the sense:
Soft is the strain when Zephyr gently blows,
And smooth stream in smoother numbers flows;
But when the loud surges lash the sounding shore,
The hoarse, rough verse should like the torrent roar:
When Ajax strives some rock's vast weight to throw,
The line too labors, and the words move slow;

Other sound-related poetic techniques, more subtle than onomatopoeia, are those that involve repetition through alliteration, assonance, and consonance.

Alliteration. Alliteration is the repetition of initial sounds in words and syllables. Sometimes such repetition is merely ornamental, but skillful poets use it to intensify effects, add weight to an idea, and in the process make the verse easier to remember.

From Gerard Manley Hopkins's "Spring" come these alliterative lines emphasizing the beauty of the season:

Nothing is so beautiful as spring—
When weeds, in wheels, shoot long and lovely and lush;
Thrush's eggs look little low heavens, and thrush
Through the echoing timber does so rinse and wring
The ear, it strikes like lightning to hear him sing;

Overused, alliteration sounds silly, as in this deliberately exaggerated excerpt from Shakespeare's *A Midsummer Night's Dream*:

Whereat, with blade, with bloody blameful blade,
He bravely broach'd his boiling bloody breast;

Assonance. Assonance is the repetition of similar vowel sounds. It is generally ornamental, but because it can also create a near, or slant, rhyme, it may engender subtle poetic effects. Such rhymes include *earth* and *hearth, willow* and *yellow, peer* and *fur, little* and *beetle.*

Wilfred Owen relies heavily on assonance in the opening stanza of "Futility," a poem about a soldier fatally wounded in World War I:

Move him into the sun—
Gently its touch awoke him once,
At home, whispering of fields unsown.
Line Always it woke him, even in France,
(5) Until this morning and this snow.
If anything might rouse him now
The kind old sun will know.

The word "touch" in the second line is in assonance with "sun" (lines 1 and 7) and to "unsown," "once," and "Until." Also the "*o*" in "awoke" (line 2) is echoed in "unsown," "woke," "snow," "old," and "know."

Assonance is rarely as obvious as alliteration, but vowel sounds that resonate throughout a poem contribute a melodic effect and subtlely bind the lines to

each other. Also, assonance combined with alliteration may produce engaging rhymes, such as "blossom" and "bosom" in these two lines from "Patterns" by Amy Lowell:

> For the lime-tree is in blossom
> And one small flower has dropped upon my bosom.

Similarly, observe the assonantal rhymes in lines 2 and 4 of this stanza from "Captain Carpenter" by John Crowe Ransom:

> Captain Carpenter mounted up one day
> And rode straight way into a stranger rogue
> That looked unchristian but be that as it may
> The Captain did not wait upon prologue.

Consonance. Consonance is the repetition of consonants appearing within a line or at the end of words. In combination with certain vowels, a series of similar sounds creates subtle harmonies. A few examples are *odds* and *ends*, *"struts* and *frets"* (Shakespeare), and the *"d"* and *"l"* sounds in this couplet from Gerard Manley Hopkins's "God's Grandeur":

> And all is seared with trade; bleared smeared with toil;
> And wears man's smudge and shares man's smell: the soil

Because the technique sometimes goes by such names as *dissonance, half rhyme,* and *oblique rhyme,* it creates considerable confusion among students of poetry. Not to fret, however. The odds are one in a million that you'd be asked about consonance on the AP exam.

Meter and Rhythm

Patterns of rhythm in poetry are based on *meter,* a word synonymous with "measure." Using the poetic *foot* as the unit of measurement, the meter of any line of poetry can be analyzed according to the number and arrangement of its stressed and unstressed syllables. Poetic *feet* may consist of two syllables (disyllabic) or three syllables (trisyllabic), and have names based on the order in which the syllables appear.

In analyzing meter, a vertical slash (/) is used to separate poetic feet. A ∪ represents an unstressed syllable, and a – stands for a stressed syllable.

- An *iamb* (∪ –) is a two-syllable foot, the first syllable unstressed, the second stressed. All of the following words are *iambic:* re-spect, extent, e-nough, at-tack, mis-judge. In a line of poetry, however, the syllables of a multisyllabic word may belong to different feet, as in:

  > From eve/ry room / descends/ the pain/ted face.

- A *trochee* (– ∪) is a two-syllable foot, the first syllable stressed, the second unstressed. The following words are *trochaic:* mit-ten, gun-shot, cryp-tic, aud-it, ap-ple. In a poem, two syllables of the same word may fall into different feet. In the couplet below *re/ceive* is such a word.

  > Johnny/ Jones is/ laid to/ rest
  > Earth re/ceive an/ honored/ guest;

- A *spondee* (– –) is a two-syllable foot consisting of two equally stressed syllables. Spondees are often found at the end of a poetic lines, as in:

  High on the shore sat the great god Pan.

- A *dactyl* (– ∪ ∪) is a three-syllable foot composed of a stressed syllable and two unstressed ones, as in pos-sib-le, crock-e-ry, crim-i-nal, trav-el-er. The following line contains three dactyls:

  Red were her/ lips as the / berry that/ grows. . .

- An *anapest* (∪ ∪ –) is a three-syllable foot containing two unstressed syllables followed by a stressed one, as in ling-er-ie, pal-is-ade, le-mon-ade, reg-u-late. All six feet in this line are anapests:

  At the top/ of the mount/ ain were ap/ ples, the big/ gest that ev/ er were seen/

To help you remember the names and structure of poetic feet, here is a mneumonic device[1] using women's names:

***I**rene* in an iamb.
***T**anya* is a trochee
***S**ue-Ann* is a spondee
***D**eborah* is a dactyl
***A**ntoinette* is an anapest

[1]Contributed by English teacher Marti Kirschbaum, Falls Church, Virginia.

It happens that roughly ninety percent of poems in English use the iamb as the basic metrical unit, most probably because it best fits the structure, syntax, and rhythm of the language. You'll never be asked directly to name the characteristics of poetic feet on the AP exam, but do yourself a favor and develop the habit of *scanning* the poems you read. If you become adept at *scansion,* the process of analyzing meter, you can discuss in your essay how meter contributes to the meaning and effect of the poem in question. Hordes of students can accurately label metrical techniques, but only an elite few have the wherewithal to explain why poets use them. Your ability to insightfully interpret poetic meter will never fail to impress AP essay readers.

You've no doubt inferred by now that lines of poetry consist of one or more feet. A line of a single foot—a rarity in English verse—is called *monometer.* Two-foot lines are *dimeter,* followed by *trimeter, tetrameter, pentameter, hexameter* (sometimes called *alexandrines*), *heptameter,* and *octameter.* The bulk of poetry in English, including much of Chaucer, most works by Browning and Milton, and the plays of Shakespeare and Marlowe, is written in five-foot lines, or *pentameter.* For its flexibility and majesty, *iambic pentameter* is the most widely employed rhythmic pattern. This fact, however, won't take you far on the AP test. It's more important to know how meter can influence the tone, meaning, structure, and overall texture of a poem. Verses written in iambic pentameter are most likely to echo ordinary speech. A work, say, in dactylic dime-

ter or anapestic trimeter is apt to sound odd, as though written by someone in need of a cold shower. In the end, off-beat scansion best suits poems trying hard to make an off-beat statement.

While scanning poems, be aware of *elisions,* or unstressed syllables omitted for the sake of meter. Functioning as ordinary contractions, most elisions turn two-syllable words into words of a single syllable, as in *o'er* (over), *ne'er* (never), and *'ere* (before). Also note that poems would plod along monotonously like *Mary Had a Little Lamb* if they contained only one metric pattern. Attempting to animate their verse, poets often shift from one foot to another, thereby simulating the rhythms of speech. Rhythmic shifts also permit poets to pause, add asides, express emotions, speed up, slow down—in other words, give verse a human voice. Poets sometimes interweave a second rhythm, just as a musician may add counterpoint to a melody. If the poetic rhythms are too complex, however, or if they change too rapidly, the poem may end up sounding more like prose than poetry. In any case, don't frustrate yourself while scanning poems. Scansion is far from a precise science.

Caesura and enjambment. Some lines of poetry call for internal pauses, called *caesura,* that are usually indicated by a period, a semicolon, a dash, or other mark of punctuation. Such pauses mimic human speech, as in the first and third lines of this excerpt from James Stephens's "What Thomas An Buile Said in a Pub":

I saw God. Do you doubt it?
Do you dare to doubt it?
I saw the Almighty Man. His hand
Line Was resting on a mountain, and
(5) He looked upon the World and all about it:
I saw Him plainer than you see me now,
You mustn't doubt it.

Punctuation at the end of lines 1, 2, 5, and 6 also cues the reader to pause briefly before going on. Lines containing these so-called *end-stops* contrast with *enjambed* lines (3 and 4). *Enjambment,* often called *run-on,* is indicated by an absence of punctuation and eliminates the need to pause. Sentence structure most often determines enjambment, but a poet may deliberately use it to let words tumble uncontrollably perhaps to suggest the speaker's emotional state.

Still other effects can be achieved by changing the lengths of various lines. In *Dr. Faustus,* for example, Christopher Marlowe breaks up lines 3, 4, 5, and 6 with caesura and varies the accents to evoke the speaker's intense passion for the beauteous Helen of Troy:

Was this the face that launched a thousand ships,
And burnt the topless towers of Ilium? —
Sweet Helen, make me immortal with a kiss, —
Line Her lips suck forth my soul; see, where it flies!
(5) Come, Helen, come, give me my soul again.
Here will I dwell, for heaven is in these lips,
And all is dross that is not Helena.

Free verse. As the name suggests, free verse ignores conventions of meter and rhythm. Poems in free verse may derive their effects from subtle variations of cadence, irregular length of line, and recurring imagery. Sound patterns such as alliteration, assonance, internal rhyme, and even a scattering of end-rhymes may also compensate for the absence of regular meter.

The following excerpt from Amy Lowell's "Lilacs" uses line breaks as a means to create rhetorical effect:

> Lilacs,
> False blue,
> White,
> Purple,
> Color of lilac,
> Your great puffs of flowers
> Are everywhere in this my New England.

Almost every line is an image that comes to a dead stop. Each stands more or less alone and receives equivalent emphasis.

Blank verse. Unlike free verse, blank verse, or unrhymed verse, incorporates conventional meter. It is often associated with the verse patterns in most of Shakespeare's plays and in Milton's *Paradise Lost,* a sample of which follows:

> The sun was sunk, and after him the star
> Of Hesperus, whose office is to bring
> Twilight upon the Earth, short arbiter
> *Line* 'Twixt day and night, and now from end to end
> *(5)* Night's hemisphere had veiled the horizon round,
> When Satan, who late fled before the threats
> Of Gabriel out of Eden, now improved
> In meditated fraud and malice, bent
> On man's destruction, maugre, what might hap
> *(10)* Of heavier on himself, fearless returned.

Notice that even without rhyme, Milton controls the texture of the verse with meter (iambic pentameter) and with alliteration (lines 1, 9–10), personification (2–3), and allusion (2, 6, 7). Perhaps you can detect additional poetic devices.

Stanzas. Foremost among structural patterns in poetry is the *stanza,* grouped lines of verse that serve as a poem's building blocks. Ordinarily, the structure of the first stanza sets the pattern for those that follow. If it consists of four lines, five feet per line, and a particular rhyme scheme, those qualities, perhaps with minor variations, will usually be repeated.

Variations between stanzas often enlarge a poem's meaning, but word-for-word repetition may have the same effect. Stanzas are described by the number of lines they contain: *couplet* (two lines), *tercet*—also called *terza rima* (three), *quatrain, cinquain, sestet,* and so on. In many poems, stanzas end with a *refrain* of lines or phrases, a pattern probably left over from the days when poetry was sung. Refrains, while often decorative, can also unify a poem or reiterate the poem's main theme.

The Language of Poetry

Diction—the poet's choice of words—is the living force of poetry. The words of a good poem carry meaning on both a literal and an abstract level. Literal meaning is what people agree a word stands for. Take, for instance, the everyday word *square*, the name of a four-sided polygon with 90-degree corners and equal sides. *Square* also stands for an open space in the middle of town, a kind of dance, a roofer's unit of measurement, and much more. A good dictionary may contain a dozen or more definitions, or denotative meanings, of the word. But all the definitions become useless when *square* is used as an adjective describing a person. Suddenly, *square* becomes an abstraction, connoting a respectable, law-abiding, tradition-bound personality. It may also evoke images of a stick-in-the-mud, old-fashioned, totally un-cool, nerdy individual—perhaps someone like you back in third grade. In short, *square*, along with countless other words, teems with meaning and when used in a poem may carry a good deal of weight. Not only does the poet's choice of words provide clues to the values, attitude, personality, and intent of the speaker, it may also reveal the speaker's background, education, time of life, gender, and more. On an elemental level, then, in diction lies the essence of poetry.

Think of a poem as you would a painting. Even the most realistic painting doesn't recreate or record reality. By selecting colors, devising shape, creating a composition, and applying paint in various ways, an artist interprets the subject, thereby expanding its meaning. Likewise, poets amplify the meaning of their works by choosing words that can be understood both on and below the surface.

In this poem by Emily Dickinson, observe how diction amplifies meaning far beyond its literal level:

THERE IS NO FRIGATE LIKE A BOOK

There is no frigate like a book
 To take us lands away,
Nor any coursers like a page
 Of prancing poetry.
This traverse may the poorest take
 Without oppress of toll;
How frugal is the chariot
 That bears the human soul.

(c.1875–80)

On the literal level, Dickinson compares reading books to traveling—hardly a unique idea. Her choice of conveyances, however, endows the poem with power. Instead of settling for ships and horses and coaches, the common forms of transportation in her day, she uses "frigate" and "coursers" and "chariot," words that conjure up images of romance and adventure, the very things readers often find in books.

But the poem contains still deeper dimensions. Notice the diction in the last four lines: "poorest," "oppress of toll," "frugal"—all money-related words meant to suggest the pecuniary benefits of vicarious travel. Finally, the speaker's reference to the "human soul" takes the poem to still another level of

meaning. Although books are cheap, they not only excite and broaden our vision, they possess enough power to alter our very nature.

"There Is No Frigate Like a Book" reaches far greater depths than you might have guessed after one reading. The fact is that ambiguities keep most poems from revealing all they have to give during an initial encounter. By reading the same poems over and over, however, you create opportunities to mine profound and rewarding treasures lurking below the surface.

It is often said that poetry is written in a double language. One language turns on the intellect; the other fires up emotions and the imagination. Driven by the power of suggestion and the allure of ambiguity, poetry speaks in two tongues, evinced by its ample use of figurative language.

Figurative Language

When the poet writes, "The road is a ribbon of moonlight," he is neither telling the truth nor lying. Rather, he is making a comparison that gives the reader an artistic representation of the truth.

Comparisons, in fact, serve as the foundation of several figures of speech, or *tropes,* as they are sometimes called, especially the metaphor, the simile, and the symbol.

Metaphors and similes. Foremost among figures of speech are the metaphor and the simile, each an effective means to describe one thing in terms of another. It may seem asinine to say one thing when you mean another, but metaphors and similes are meant to communicate complex ideas in understandable, concrete terms. Besides, they often pump life into notions that might otherwise be a bore.

In such metaphors as "the lake was a quicksilver mirror," and "the girl wafted into the room," resemblances between disparate things are implied (lake/mirror, girl/airborne object). A simile makes the comparison more explicit by using *like* or *as:* "the lake was *like* a quicksilver mirror;" "the girl wafted into the room *like* a feather." Because similes merely join two disparate ideas or images, they are generally less fertile than metaphors, which can evoke additional and fresh shades of meaning.

Most simple metaphors and similes are easily understood. It's no stretch to imagine what Robert Burns had in mind when he compared his love to "a red, red rose." Why Robert Frost chose to compare drops of snowmelt in the sun to "silver lizards" is equally apparent. But metaphors that invite several interpretations require more effort. "He has wild stag's feet" suggests speed and grace, but also daring and the spirit of adventure. Shakespeare's "All the world's a stage" conjures up any number of possible implications, among them man's pretentiousness and the unreality of the world. In "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock," T. S. Eliot writes "When the evening is spread out against the sky/ Like a patient etherized upon a table." The comparison may be striking but its meaning hardly jumps off the page. Once you read further into the poem, however, the simile not only makes sense but opens a window to the speaker's soul.

On the AP exam you may well find yourself dealing with a slew of metaphors and similes in both the multiple-choice section and the essay. You'll not only be asked to recognize such figures of speech but to interpret or explain their meaning. In the essay, in particular, you may wish to discuss why a poet included a particular simile or how a metaphor serves as an organic element in the poem. You may wish to comment on how a certain trope contributes to the poem's structure, or to its theme or tone. Keep in mind that simply identifying

a metaphor or simile usually won't be enough. What matters is your ability to analyze and explain its function.

Some poems contain an array of similes and metaphors. On occasion, a single metaphor is developed at length—hence, the name *extended metaphor.* Sustaining a metaphor gives the poet an opportunity to dig deeply into apt and meaningful resemblances between literal and figurative meanings, as illustrated in "Uphill," Christina Rossetti's poem in which the speaker uses a "day's journey" as a metaphor for approaching death.

Line	
	Does the road wind uphill all the way?
	Yes, to the very end.
	Will the day's journey take the whole long day?
	From morn to night my friend.
(5)	But is there for the night a resting place?
	A roof for when the slow dark hours begin.
	May not the darkness hide it from my face?
	You cannot miss that inn.
	Shall I meet other wayfarers at night?
(10)	Those who have gone before.
	Then must I knock, or call when just in sight?
	They will not keep you standing at that door.
	Shall I find comfort, travel-sore and weak?
	Of labour you shall find the sum.
(15)	Will there be beds for me and all who seek?
	Yea, beds for all who come.

(1858)

The questioner in the poem seeks to learn what lies ahead in her journey. Her respondent assures her that she needn't worry. All will be well, for many others have gone before (line 10). No one who shows up at death's door will be turned away (line 12), and "beds"—i.e., graves—are plentiful (lines 15–16). Although the traveler seems to fret about the journey itself, her anxiety implies more profound misgivings, perhaps apprehension about the slumber that precedes salvation and entry into Heaven.

While preparing for the AP exam, you might look up other poems using extended metaphors, among them "Because I Could Not Stop for Death" by Emily Dickinson and "A Hillside Thaw" by Robert Frost. Notice that a sustained comparison works best when it is appropriate to the subject matter of the poem and to the poet's tone. A metaphor must also seem natural and unforced, as though the comparison it makes were virtually inevitable.

Because metaphors and similes are widely used not only in poetry but in prose and in everyday speech, any number of them have lost their original freshness and have become clichés. In addition, metaphors roll off tongues so readily and mindlessly that *mixed metaphors,* that is, usages that leap to two or more illogical, inconsistent, often grotesque resemblances, have become bred in the bones of the common herd. Now, that's a pretty kettle of fish—if you'll pardon the expression.

Sensitive to the pervasiveness of trite metaphors in love poetry, Shakespeare wrote "My Mistress' Eyes Are Nothing Like the Sun," a sonnet that parodies the emptiness of conventional declarations of love. As you read it, underline all the speaker's allusions to hackneyed poetic usage.

My mistress' eyes are nothing like the sun;
Coral is far more read than her lips' red:
If snow be white, why then her breasts are dun;[1]
If hairs be wires, black wires grow on her head.
I have seen roses damasked,[2] red and white,
But no such roses see I in her cheeks;
And in some perfumes is there more delight
Than in the breath that from my mistress reeks.
I love to hear her speak, yet well I know
That music hath a far more pleasing sound:
I grant I never saw a goddess go,—
My mistress, when she walks, treads on the ground.
And yet, by heaven, I think my love as rare
As any she belied with false compare.

[1]brownish-gray
[2]of different colors

Symbol. A symbol is a figure of speech that communicates a second meaning along with its literal meaning. To put it another way, a symbol represents itself as well as something other than itself. Take, for example an ordinary roadside marker. Literally it is a piece of sheet metal mounted on a pole. But it also stands as a warning to drivers to slow down for the slippery pavement or the curve ahead.

A traffic sign, because it conveys a single meaning, is one of the simpler symbols. But others, like the American flag, can stimulate all kinds of responses, some alike, some contradictory. To many Americans, the flag symbolizes a country that stretches from sea to shining sea, one nation indivisible . . . and all that. But even to the most ardent patriot, the flag may also evoke dismay over some harmful or destructive governmental policy or practice. And to an anti-American, the Stars and Stripes can symbolize everything evil in the world. In short, some symbols acquire a multitude of meanings, some widely shared, others idiosyncratic, some contradictory, some conflicted, some ambivalent. In effect, a symbol, like a rock dropped into a pond, may send ripples in all directions.

At the beginning of a poem a symbol that seems simple may by the end brim with meaning. Consider the albatross in Coleridge's "Rime of the Ancient Mariner" as a case in point. A mere bird, the albatross symbolizes nature at the start. As the narrative develops, it acquires additional meanings: torment, guilt, terror, the abandonment of humane values, and the Mariner's fall from grace. The slaying of the albatross is a symbolic event that gradually transforms Coleridge's literary ballad about an ocean voyage into a soul's journey through a purgatory of horrors. No wonder that in everyday parlance *albatross* has been given a bad rap and has become synonymous with an unwanted burden or a pain in the neck.

On the AP test, you won't go symbol-hunting for its own sake. Instead, you should be prepared to determine how symbols contribute to a poem's meaning and effect. Start with the assumption that poets have reasons for including symbols in their work. The more integrated the symbol, the better, especially if it is bound tightly to the poem's main theme.

A powerful symbol stands at the heart of the William Blake poem "The Sick Rose." Without it, in fact, there would be no poem at all.

THE SICK ROSE

O Rose, thou art sick!
The invisible worm
That flies in the night,
In the howling storm,

Has found out thy bed
Of crimson joy,
And his dark secret love
Does thy life destroy.

(1794)

For over two centuries this poem has baffled readers lacking a sense of symbolism. Once the rose is identified as a symbol of love, however, the poem opens wide. In poetry, as well as in song and fiction, a rose has long stood as a symbol for love and passion. Reading the poem, you must ask what force (here called an "invisible worm") flies in the night and can sicken, and ultimately destroy, love? (*Worm* is an apt choice, isn't it, since a worm can sap the life out of a rose.) But what unseen, intangible power can drain the life out of love? Boredom? Maybe. Complacency? Perhaps. Jealousy? Aha, that must be it. Jealousy (a "dark secret love") has stealthily crept into the rose's bed and snatched away the love residing there.

In "Sea-Shell Murmurs" by Eugene Lee-Hamilton (1845–1907) the sounds of the ocean that we pretend to hear echoing in seashells become symbolic of another common self-deception, the expectation of a life after death:

The hollow sea-shell which for years hath stood
On dusty shelves, when held against the ear
Proclaims its stormy parent; and we hear
The faint far murmur of the breaking flood.

We hear the sea. The sea? It is the blood
In our own veins, impetuous and near,
And pulses keeping pace with hope and fear
And with our feelings' every shifting mood.

Lo, in my heart I hear, as in a shell,
The murmur of a world beyond the grave
Distinct, distinct, though faint and far it be.

Thou fool; this echo is a cheat as well,—
The hum of earthly instincts; and we crave
A world unreal as the shell-heard sea.

(c. 1890)

Image. Images are words and phrases that refer to something that can be seen, heard, tasted, smelled, or touched. In other words, an image is a figure of speech evocative of the senses. From John Masefield's "The West Wind" comes the following stanza invoking at least three of the five senses:

> It's a warm wind, the west wind, full of birds' cries;
> I never hear the west wind but tears are in my eyes.
> For it comes from the west lands, the old brown hills,
> And April's in the west wind, and daffodils.

In Louise Bogan's "Putting to Sea," an image-filled stanza reads this way:

> Motion beneath us, fixity above.
> O, but you should rejoice! The course we steer
> Points to a beach bright to the rocks with love,
> Where, in hot calms, blades clatter on the ear;

Imagery often helps to establish the tone and meaning of a poem. Because images are usually quite literal and concrete, regardless of their connotative values, they differ markedly from symbols.

Personification. First cousin to metaphor, personification occurs when the poet assigns human characteristics to a nonhuman object or to an abstraction such as love, death, envy, victory, and so on.

In "Rime of the Ancient Mariner," Coleridge personifies the sun:

> The sun came up upon the left,
> Out of the sea came he!

Emily Dickinson not only endows insects with human personalities but gives them the ability to read and write:

> Bee, I'm expecting you!
> Was saying yesterday
> To somebody you know
> That you were due.
>
> The frogs got home last week,
> Are settled and at work,
> Birds mostly back,
> The clover warm and thick.
>
> You'll get my letter by
> The seventeenth; reply,
> Or better, be with me.
> Yours,
> Fly.

Shakespeare personifies confusion when he has Macbeth say: "Confusion now hath made his masterpiece." And the speaker in e. e. cummings' "Gee I Like to Think of Dead" endows several objects with human characteristics:

> every
> old thing falls in rosebugs and jacknives and kittens and
> pennies they all sit there looking at each other having the
> fastest time because they've never met before

Poets' fondness for personification derives from the human tendency to ascribe human qualities to nonhuman objects. We project our emotions onto pets and other animals, we refer to cars and boats as "she," and assign human names to hurricanes. Through personification we breathe life into what might otherwise be lifeless and bestow on nonhuman objects a personality, willpower, the ability to think and feel and act in every way like a human being. While stimulating our imaginations, personification can also surprise us with insights.

Metonymy. A headline writer who says "White House Plans New Tax Cuts" uses metonymy, a figure of speech that substitutes a word or phrase that relates to a thing for the thing itself. In other words, the phrase" White House" stands not for the mansion on Pennsylvania Avenue but for its current occupants. The writer used one name with the intention that another be understood.

Shakespeare did it too: In saying "The crown will find an heir" he substituted "crown" for "king." In Houseman's "Is My Team Ploughing?" the speaker says "leather" when he means "a football":

> Is football playing
> Along the river shore,
> With lads to chase the leather,
> Now I stand up no more?

Although metonymy resembles metaphor, it implies both a literal meaning and something else. But unlike metaphor, it narrows rather than expands meaning. Yet, an aptly conceived metonymy is a treat. With a single word or phrase, the poet opens readers' eyes and stimulates their imagination.

Synechdoche. Synechdoche resembles metonymy so closely that differentiating them is akin to splitting hairs. Although you probably won't be asked to distinguish between them on the AP exam, keep in mind that a synechdoche substitutes a part for a whole. When a man is called a "suit" or a woman a "skirt," that's synechdoche. So is the word "summers" in "She was a lass of twenty summers," since the summer is part of a year. William Cowper uses synechdoche by substituting "wave" for "sea" in these lines:

> Toll for the brave!
> The brave that are no more,
> All sunk beneath the wave . . .

In *Henry VI,* Shakespeare wrote "neck" as a synechdoche for "person," a particularly apt usage considering his subsequent reference to "yoke":

> Yield not thy neck
> To fortune's yoke, but let thy dauntless mind
> Still ride in triumph over all mischance.

Effective use of synechdoche can add a delightful and surprising aesthetic dimension to a poem.

Allusion. An allusion is a historical, literary, or cultural reference to a person, a place, or event. A well-chosen allusion can be enormously suggestive and richly symbolic, but only if the reader understands it. An allusion to Waterloo will be lost on someone clueless about Napoleon. On the other hand, an informed reader will make the connection between Waterloo and the notion of ultimate defeat and downfall. Because allusions can be drawn from anywhere, readiness to recognize them depends on familiarity with history, literature, the arts, and one's general fund of knowledge.

On the AP exam, instead of simply recognizing the source of an allusion, it may be more important for you to grasp its intent. For example, the title of Robert Frost's poem *"Out, Out—"* alludes to bitter words ("Out, out, brief candle, etc.") spoken by Macbeth following the untimely death of his wife. The poem's title prepares you for its subject matter: the death of a small boy. More importantly, though, Macbeth's words resonate through the poem's themes: the uncertainty of life, the waste of human potential, and the tragedy of a life suddenly snuffed out.

In *Doctor Faustus,* Christopher Marlowe asks:

> Was this the face that launched a thousand ships.
> And burnt the topless towers of Ilium?

This allusion contains a wealth of suggestiveness to one who knows the story of Helen and the fall of Troy. In a few words, Marlowe conveys the passion implicit in the tale of a woman whose beauty almost led to the destruction of a civilization.

Allegory. An allegory is a story or vignette that, like a metaphor, has both a literal and a figurative meaning. Many allegories use concrete images or characters to represent abstract ideas. To keep readers from missing the point, characters may actually bear the names of the ideas they stand for. For example, Good Deeds, Knowledge, Beauty, and Discretion are names in the *Dramatis Personae* of *Everyman,* a sixteenth-century allegorical play in verse by Anonymous. Other famous allegories include Spencer's "The Faerie Queen" and Tennyson's "Idylls of the King."

Oxymoron. An oxymoron is a phrase that seems self-contradictory or incompatible with reality: *eloquent silence, jumbo shrimp, free gift.* While oxymorons may be used just for fun, they are more frequently employed to suggest ambiguity or to develop a theme.

Paradox. A paradox is an apparently self-contradictory statement that under scrutiny makes perfect sense. It has the same effect as an oxymoron. Note the paradoxical quality of Hamlet's statement, "I must be cruel only to be kind," or Wallace Stevens's assertions in "Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Blackbird":

> It was evening all afternoon.
> It was snowing
> And it was going to snow.

Paradoxically, oxymorons and paradoxes contain both absurdity and truth at the same time. They invite the reader of a poem to cast aside conventional responses in favor of more whimsical interpretations. Should you find an oxymoron or paradox in a poem on the AP exam, start looking for the presence of subtexts and implied meanings.

Understatement. Understatement is a principal source of power in poetry. Think of Richard Cory, the eponymous character of Edwin Arlington Robinson's famous poem. Because no reason is given to explain why Cory put a bullet through his head, we are left to imagine the demons that drove him to it. Robinson, letting the action speak for itself, evidently understood the impact of understatement.

Another form of understatement is saying less than one means or using restraint in ironic contrast to what might be said. The speaker in "The Sum" by Paul Lawrence Dunbar, for example, attempts to capture several of life's momentous events in a brief phrase or two:

> A little dreaming by the way,
> A little toiling day by day;
> A little pain, a little strife
> A little joy,—and that is life.
>
> A little short-lived summer's morn,
> When joy seems all so newly born,
> When one day's sky is blue above,
> And one bird sings—and that is love.
>
> A little sickening of the years,
> The tribute of a few hot tears
> Two folded hands, and failing breath,
> And peace at last,—and that is death.
>
> Just dreaming, loving, dying so,
> The actors in the drama go—
> A flitting picture on a wall,
> Love, Death, the themes; but is that all?

One might argue that Dunbar's poem, with its singsongy rhythm and rhymes, trivializes life, but that may be just the point. Implying that we tend to exaggerate the gravity of everyday human experiences, the speaker aims to take a larger view—to be more circumspect. Yet, in the last line, he questions his own judgment, or at least allows that he could be understating the significance of life's defining themes.

Litotes. A teacher responding to your English essay by commenting "Not at all bad" is using litotes, a form of understatement in which a positive fact is stated by denying a negative one. You might retort with another litotes: "You are not a bad teacher."

In the funeral oration of *Julius Caesar,* Marc Antony uses litotes in "Not that I loved Caesar less . . ." The effect is to draw a sharp contrast with the second half of the statement, "but that I loved Rome more."

Writing about his birthday in "Anniversary," poet John Wain writes:

> As a little scarlet howling mammal,
> Crumpled and unformed, I depended entirely on someone
> Not very different from what I am to-day.

In the third line, the speaker makes the point that someone—presumably his mother—was much the same as he is today, but the sentiment, more emphatically expressed via litotes, is stated as a denial of its opposite.

Hyperbole or overstatement. Hyperbole is an exaggeration, a useful device for poets to intensify emotions, values, physical features, the weather, or virtually anything. W. H. Auden's "As I Walked Out One Evening," includes this hyperbolic declaration of love:

> I'll love you, dear, I'll love you
> Till China and Africa meet,
> And the river jumps over the mountain
> And the salmon sing in the street.

Macbeth, having murdered Duncan, uses hyperbole to express the horror he feels:

> Will all great Neptune's ocean wash this blood
> Clean from my hand? No. This my hand will rather
> The multitudinous seas incarnadine,
> Making the green one red.

Here's a piece of a folk ballad about a warrior. After being wounded in battle, the hero turns to his troops, and says hyperbolically:

> . . . "Fight on, my merry men all,
> And see that none of you be taine;
> For I will lie down and bleed awhile,
> And then I will rise and fight again."

Tone

Tone is the poet's or speaker's attitude toward the subject of the poem, toward the reader, or toward himself. Because tone derives from the sum total of the emotional and intellectual effects of a poem, comprehending the tone is tantamount to comprehending the whole thing. Tone carries so much weight in poetry explication, in fact, that it's virtually impossible to take the AP exam without having to deal with it, either in the multiple-choice questions or as a topic to discuss in an essay.

A single tone prevails in most poems, but a poet can't be stopped from changing his mind or altering the thrust of a poem in midstream. Therefore, the tone of many poems is multidimensional. This is as it should be. After all, feelings consist of an amalgam of impulses and reactions, sometimes ambivalent or contradictory.

What follows is an assortment of adjectives that might be used to describe the tone of various poems. No doubt you could expand the list many times over and perhaps cite examples from the repertoire of poems that you know well.

> brash, jovial, dour, playful, intimate, earnest, whimsical, grave, comic, urbane, fanciful, affected, rhapsodic, resigned, devotional, eulogistic, intemperate, fervent, elegaic, tender, sardonic, cynical, nostalgic, indignant, flippant, meditative, didactic, bitter, wry, sentimental, patronizing, extravagant

Because you can't hear the actual voice of the speaker in a poem, your interpretation of tone is a matter of decoding the evidence offered by the poem itself. Sometimes tone is most easily ascertained through figures of speech, at other times through rhymes and rhythms. Then, too, diction and word sounds may help you identify the tone of a poem. Unfortunately, there is no universal formula on which to rely. Because it takes the interaction of several ingredients, from imagery to structure, to create the tone of a poem, a thorough analysis works best to nail it down.

Using the following poem by Robert Browning, try your hand in determining tone:

MEETING AT NIGHT

The grey sea and the long black land;
And the yellow half-moon large and low;
And the startled little waves that leap
Line In fiery ringlets from their sleep,
(5) As I gain the cove with a pushing prow,
And quench its speed i' the slushy sand.

Then a mile of warm sea-scented beach;
Three fields to cross till a farm appears;
A tap at the pane, the quick sharp scratch
(10) And blue spurt of a lighted match,
And a voice less loud, through its joys and fears,
Than the two hearts beating each to each!

Before deciding on the tone of "Meeting at Night," consider what happens in the poem: Night has fallen. The speaker, seemingly a romantic youth, is rushing to a tryst with his ladylove. The route, first on the water, then across the land, is long. Arriving outside her window, he taps on the glass, then enters her room where the lovers fall into an embrace.

Using a series of sensual images, the poet tracks the young man's progress toward his destination and conveys his growing eagerness to get there. Early images ("grey sea and the long black land") reflect the state of the young man's humor as he starts out. Soon, in accord with his improving mood, the images brighten: "yellow half-moon," "fiery ringlets." Finally, a "blue spurt of a lighted match" marks the climactic meeting of the two lovers.

The first stanza, in which the young man rows slowly to a distant beach, consists almost entirely of watery images. Just like the "startled little waves" awakening from their sleep, the young man's hormonal juices begin to flow. As his anticipation grows, the journey, as well as the poem, speeds up. In two lines (7 and 8) he races across a mile-wide beach and traverses three fields. In rapid sequence, a tap on the window and a burst of light bring the journey to a swift end. Abruptly, all motion ceases. Movement gives way to the two lovers' pounding hearts, the repetition of "each" vaguely simulating the sound of their heartbeats.

Diction throughout the poem underscores the speaker's fervor. The repeated use of "and" at the beginning of lines 2, 3, 6, 10, and 11 resounds with breathlessness. In lines 7 and 8 the words flow one into the other. Only in line 9 is there a caesura that briefly slows down the verbal deluge and prepares the reader for the young man's arrival in his lover's arms.

If the tone of "Meeting at Night" were to be reduced to a single word, *breathless* is a worthy choice. Throughout his journey, the speaker is portrayed as someone beside himself with love, and panting with fervor to reach his lover's arms.

From a speaker consumed by love, let's turn to one who sees the world from an entirely different perspective. Read Arthur Hugh Clough's "The Latest Decalogue."

THE LATEST DECALOGUE[1]

Thou shalt have one God only; who
Would be at the expense of two?
No graven images may be
Line Worshipped, except the currency.
(5) Swear not at all; for, for thy curse
Thine enemy is none the worse.
At church on Sunday to attend
Will serve to keep the world thy friend.
Honour thy parents; that is, all
(10) From whom advancement may befall.
Thou shalt not kill; but need'st not strive
Officiously to keep alive.
Do not adultery commit;
Advantage rarely comes of it:
(15) Thou shalt not steal; an empty feat,
When it's so lucrative to cheat.
Bear not false witness; let the lie
Have time on its own wings to fly.
Thou shalt not covet, but tradition
(20) Approves all forms of competition.

(1862)

[1]The Ten Commandments

The speaker in this poem decries the morality of his time. He might simply have written a straightforward verse reproaching man's indifference to biblical teachings, but chose instead to express his disapproval through irony.

Even the title is ironic because the Ten Commandments are supposed to be a permanent, binding set of rules. To call them the "latest" suggests that modern men, while paying lip service to the word of God, adapt the rules for their convenience.

The poem devotes two lines, or two rhyming couplets, to each of the ten commandments ("Thou shalt not kill," "Thou shalt not steal," etc.). Each edict is undercut by a remark meant to show why the principle conflicts with the interests and values of contemporary society. In lines 19–20 ("Thou shalt not covet, but tradition/Approves all forms of competition") the speaker cynically declares that society's business has made quaint and obsolete what once was a guiding principle of moral behavior. Man's pursuit of money has forced each commandment to be cast aside or amended. Materialism is man's new religion. By implication, man worships Mammon (the god of money) instead of God, and the speaker doesn't like it.

Irony comes in many forms, from a chem teacher's sarcastic "Good work!" on a quiz you've flunked to an ironic twist of fate, such as the urban legend of the man who missed an airplane that crashed shortly after takeoff, but was killed on the highway during his drive home from the airport. A poet making use of irony is free to use any form, of course, but verbal irony is what poets seem to favor.

Basically verbal irony is an implicit contrast between what exists and what might be. Users of irony don't expect their words to be taken at face value. Rather, they hope that a reader will see the reality behind their pose. On the surface a poem may sound grave, but in actuality, the speaker may be poking fun at, say, a particular human foible or frailty. While lampooning hypocrisy, for example, the speaker may sound objective and emotionally uninvolved, but intense concern may underlie his posture. He may, in fact, feel so passionate or distraught about his topic that he cannot face it head on. He'd prefer to express his views indirectly, via irony, and thereby heighten the impact on the reader.

Poetic Styles and Forms

Below you will find a compilation of poetic terms that you should know for the AP exam. Although you won't be asked specifically to identify a sonnet or a villanelle or a dramatic monologue, knowing the basic characteristics of these and other poetic forms could give you a leg up in answering multiple-choice questions. As for writing an essay on poetry, a familiarity with basic terminology can give you a head start and as a bonus save you considerable time—time that could be spent polishing your essay instead of painstakingly describing a form that can be identified with a single word or phrase.

Narrative poem. True to its name, a narrative poem is a story. It adheres to no prescribed form, and while it may contain lyrical and descriptive passages, its primary purpose is to tell a tale. Epics such as *Gilgamesh, The Odyssey,* and *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* are narrative poems, each about a heroic adventurer. While some narrative poems are book-length epics, others may be just a few lines, such as this one by Herman Melville:

THE FIGURE HEAD

The *Charles-and-Emma* seaward sped.
(Named from the carven pair at prow)
He so smart, and a curly head,
She tricked forth as a bride knows how:
  Pretty stem for the port, I trow!

But iron-rust and alum-spray
And chafing gear, and sun and dew
Vexed this lad and lassie gay,
Tears in their eyes, salt tears nor few;
  And the hug relaxed with the failing glue.

But came in end a dismal night,
With creaking beams and ribs that groan,
A black lee-shore and waters white:
Dropped on the reef, the pair lie prone:
  O, the breakers dance, but the winds they moan!

(1888)

In three brief stanzas the speaker relates the story of the *Charles-and-Emma,* a sailing ship with a striking wood carving—an attractive bride and groom clinging to each other—at its prow. In time, the figures deteriorate, the glue that binds them dissolves, and the ship is wrecked. The pair ends up on a reef battered by water and wind. The tale is simple, but its subtext suggests the inevitable erosion of youth, love, and life.

Lyric poem. Ballads, sonnets, elegies, odes, villanelles—these and many other poetic forms are lyric. In fact, any poem that is neither dramatic nor narrative is lyric. Lyric poems express an individual's thoughts and emotions. They can be mystical, didactic, satirical, reflective, mournful; indeed, the possibilities are endless.

What follows is a brief Robert Herrick lyric that may at first seem like a public-service message about fire but is actually an emotion-laden statement by a speaker in some serious amatory trouble:

THE SCARE-FIRE[1]

Water, water I desire,
Here's a house of flesh on fire;
Ope' the fountains and the springs,
And come all to bucketings.
What ye cannot quench, pull down,
Spoil a house to save a town:
Better 'tis that one should fall,
Than by one to hazard all.

(1648)

[1]A sudden conflagration

Another lyric poem, this one by Marianne Moore, conveys the speaker's feelings about the subject of this chapter. Once you've read it, please return to the poem's first four words and ask yourself whether Moore meant them to be taken seriously.

POETRY

I, too, dislike it: there are things that are important beyond all this fiddle.
Reading it, however, with a perfect contempt for it, one discovers in
it after all, a place for the genuine.
Line Hands that can grasp, eyes
(5) that can dilate, hair that can rise
if it must, these things are important not because a

high-sounding interpretation can be put upon them but because they are
useful. When they become so derivative as to become unintelligible,
the same thing may be said for all of us, that we
(10) do not admire what
we cannot understand: the bat
holding on upside down or in quest of something to

eat, elephants pushing, a wild horse taking a roll, a tireless wolf under
a tree, the immovable critic twitching his skin like a horse that feels
a flea, the base—
(15) ball fan, the statistician—
nor is it valid
to discriminate against "business documents and

school books"[1]; all these phenomena are important. One must make a
distinction
however: when dragged into prominence by half poets, the result is
not poetry,
(20) nor till the poets among us can be
"literalists of
the imagination"[2]—above
insolence and triviality and can present

for inspection, "imaginary gardens with real toads in them," shall we have
(25) it. In the meantime, if you demand on the one hand,
the raw material of poetry in
all its rawness and
that which is on the other hand
genuine, you are interested in poetry.

(1921)

[1]Poet's note from Tolstoy's journal: "Where the boundary between prose and poetry lies, I shall never be able to understand. . . . Poetry is verse: prose is not verse. Or else poetry is everything with the exception of business documents and school books."
[2]Yeats said of Blake, "He was a too literal realist of the imagination."

The speaker, presumably the poet, doesn't dislike poetry at all. Rather, she takes a dim view of poems that can't be understood. In lines 2–8, she acknowledges that poems can be "useful," but not until line 24 is usefulness defined as

a poetic quality that enables readers to see "'imaginary gardens with real toads in them.'"

In writing this lyric about poetry, Moore relies on rather prosaic language. Were the text reformatted as a prose passage, a reader probably couldn't tell it was a poem in mufti. The piece appears to be almost antipoetic not only in its sentiment but in its free verse style. Moore ignores many features of conventional poetry: it has no rhymes, no discernible rhythm, no end-stops. But to avoid formlessness, she divides the poem into stanzas and for no reason other than perhaps to assert her individuality uses nineteen syllables for the first line of each one.

Based on "Poetry," how do you regard Moore as a poet? Is she a "half poet," alluded to in the fourth stanza, or is she one of the "literalists of the imagination" (lines 21–22)?

Metaphysical poetry. The word "metaphysical" describes the lyric poems of certain seventeenth-century men—Donne, Marvell, Herbert, and others—who, like poet-psychologists, were fond of writing highly intellectual and philosophical verses on the nature of thought and feeling. Their work, which also concerns ethics, religion, and love, blends emotion with intellectual ingenuity in a manner that modern readers often find farfetched if not downright obscure. To illustrate, here are two short poems by Richard Crashaw about "Infant Martyrs," an allusion that Crashaw's biblically literate audience would instantly have understood even without benefit of a footnote.

TO THE INFANT MARTYRS[1]

Go, smiling souls, your new-built ages break,
In heaven you'll learn to sing, ere here to speak
Nor let the milky fonts that bathe your thirst
Be your delay;
The place that calls you hence is, at the worst,
Milk all the way.

UPON THE INFANT MARTYRS

To see both blended in one flood,
The mothers' milk, the children's blood,
Make me doubt[2] if heaven will gather
Roses hence, or lilies rather.

(1646)

[1]The Holy Innocents, the newborns of Bethlehem murdered by Herod in a vain attempt to destroy the one who, according to prophesy, would grow up to be the ruler of Israel.
[2]wonder

Although written separately, the two poems complement each other. The first addresses the dead children with words of solace and comfort. The second laments the children's murder.

Romantic poetry. In everyday usage, romantic poems are love poems, verses that declare poets' feelings for their sweethearts. In literary parlance, however, *romances* are carefully structured metrical poems that originated in medieval France and told stories of chivalrous knights undertaking perilous journeys to rescue damsels in distress.

Romantic poetry, on the other hand, refers to the literary movement that peaked in England during the nineteenth century. Wordsworth, Coleridge, Keats, Shelley, and Byron are often linked as the five luminaries of the romantic period (maybe add Tennyson to make it six), but their differences are no less pronounced than their likenesses. In general, their work constitutes a protest against the classic formalism that had long pervaded poetry. Therefore, their poems tend to focus on inner experience and feelings, including dreams and the subconscious. Their work also deals with cultures of nonclassic lands: with nature, particularly in its wilder moods, with the pleasures of the exotic, with the supernatural, and with Christianity and transcendentalism. Above all, romantic poetry lionizes the individual hero, often a young man consumed by melancholy and ennui or a firebrand rebelling against traditional society. The poetry itself reflects individuality. It breaks with convention and rules in favor of spontaneity and lyricism. Much of it is ponderously dreamy and given to reverie and reflection.

The following excerpt taken from Wordsworth's "Lines Composed a Few Miles Above Tintern Abbey" provides a glimpse of the kinds of moods and subjects that inspired not only Wordsworth but any number of his contemporaries:

> And now, with gleam of half-extinguished thought,
> With many recognitions dim and faint,
> And somewhat of a sad perplexity,
> The picture of the mind revives again:
> While here I stand, not only with the sense
> Of present pleasure, but with pleasing thoughts
> That in this moment there is life and food
> For future years. And so I dare to hope,
> Though changed, no doubt, from what I was when first
> I came among these hills; when like a roe
> I bounded o'er the mountains, by the sides
> Of the deep rivers, and the lonely streams,
> Wherever nature led—more like a man
> Flying from something that he dreads, than one
> Who sought the thing he loved.

The speaker has returned to the country after a long absence and reflects on his now-vanished youthful spirit. Notice his idealization of nature and his trancelike preoccupation with himself.

Ballad. Originally sung, folk ballads tell engrossing stories about life, death, heroism, and, as in "The Twa Corbies," love, murder, and betrayal:

THE TWA CORBIES

As I was walking all alane,[1]
I heard two corbies[2] making a mane;[3]
The tane[4] unto t'other say,
"Where sall be gang[5] and dine today?"

[1]alone
[2]two ravens; [3]moan
[4]one
[5]shall we go

"In behint yon auld fail dyke,[6]
I wot[7] there lies a new-slain knight;
And naebody kens[8] that he lies there,
But his hawk, his hound, and his lady fair.

[6]old turf wall
[7]know
[8]knows

"His hound is to the hunting gane,
His hawk to fetch the wild-fowl hame,
His lady ta'en another mate
So we may mak our dinner sweet.

"Ye'll sit on his white hause-bane,[9]
And I'll pick out his bonny blue een;[10]
Wi ae[11] lock o' his gowden hair
We'll theek[12] our nest when it grows bare.

[9]neck bone
[10]eyes
[11]With one
[12]thatch

"Mony a one for him makes mane,
But nane shall ken where he is gane;
O'er his white banes when they are bare,
The wind sall blaw for evermair."

—Anon

The ravens in this ballad haven't a clue that they are telling us a tale of adultery and murder. They just have their eyes on a tasty meal.

The original authors of folk ballads remain anonymous, but literary ballads have known authors whose work may echo if not imitate the style and character of folk ballads. Coleridge's "Rime of the Ancient Mariner" is an example.

Cinquain. A five-line stanza or a five-line poem is called a cinquain, but *cinquain* is also the name of an idiosyncratic poetic form that is comprised of five lines that, respectively, are two, four, six, eight, and two syllables long.

Couplet. A couplet is made up of two rhymed lines, usually in the same meter, but not always, as illustrated by this two-line, slant-rhymed poem by Ezra Pound:

IN A STATION OF THE METRO

The apparition of these faces in the crowd;
Petals on a wet, black bough.

(1916)

Couplets rarely stand by themselves as complete poems. Rather, they are the building blocks of much longer works.

Heroic couplets, so called from their use in epics or heroic poetry, express a complete thought, with the second line often reinforcing the first. Because of this completeness, the couplet is said to be *closed* or *end-stopped.*

What follows is an excerpt from Alexander Pope's "Rape of the Lock." Belinda, the young heroine of the poem, has just been awakened by her personal maid and is about to have her makeup applied:

And now, unveiled, the toilet stands displayed,
Each silver vase in mystic order laid.
First, robed in white, the nymph intent adores,
Line With head uncovered, the cosmetic powers.
(5) A heavenly image in the glass appears;
To that she bends, to that her eyes she rears.
The inferior priestess, at her altar's side,
Trembling begins the sacred rites of pride.
Unnumbered treasures ope and once, and here
(10) The various offerings of the world appear.

(1712)

To avoid the monotony of regular rhymes and end-stopped lines, Pope varies his couplets with off-rhymes (lines 3–4) and enjambment (lines 9–10). He also breaks the steady rhythm of iambic pentameter with a short caesura in line 3. If you have been struck by the incongruity between the heroic tone of this excerpt and the triviality of its subject matter, that is just the point. "The Rape of the Lock" is a *mock epic.*

Dramatic monologue. A dramatic monologue is a poem spoken by one person to a listener who may influence the speaker with a look or an action, but says nothing. Although dramatic monologues differ from internal monologues and soliloquies, they can be equally effective in revealing the character of the speaker.

Robert Browning's dramatic monologues serve as models of the genre, including the one that follows:

MY LAST DUCHESS[1]

FERRARA

That's my last duchess painted on the wall,
Looking as if she were alive. I call
That piece a wonder, now; Frà Pandolf's hands
Line Worked busily a day, and there she stands.
(5) Will't please you to sit and look at her? I said
"Frà Pandolf" by design, for never read
Strangers like you that pictured countenance,
The depth and passion of its earnest glance,
But to myself they turned (since none puts you by
(10) The curtain I have drawn for you, but I)
And seemed as they would ask me, if they durst,
How such a glance came there; so, not the first

Are you to turn and ask thus. Sir, 'twas not
Her husband's presence only, called that spot
Of joy into the Duchess' cheek: perhaps
Frà Pandolf chanced to say "Her mantle laps
Over my lady's wrist too much," or "Paint
Must never hope to reproduce the faint
Half-flush that dies along her throat." Such stuff
Was courtesy, she thought, and cause enough
For calling up that spot of joy. She had
A heart—how shall I say?—too soon made glad,
Too easily impressed; she liked whate'er
She looked on, and her looks went everywhere.
Sir, 'twas all one! My favor at her breast,
The dropping of the daylight in the west,
The bough of cherries some officious fool
Broke in the orchard for her, the white mule
She rode with round the terrace—all and each
Would draw from her alike the approving speech,
Or blush, at least. She thanked men—good! but thanked
Somehow—I know not how—as if she ranked
My gift of a nine-hundred-years-old name
With anybody's gift. Who'd stoop to blame
This sort of trifling? Even had you skill
In speech—(which I have not)—to make your will
Quite clear to such a one, and say, "Just this
Or that in you disgusts me; here you miss,
Or there exceed the mark"—and if she let
Herself be lessoned so, nor plainly set
Her wits to yours, forsooth, and made excuse,
—E'en then would be some stooping; and I choose
Never to stoop. Oh, sir, she smiled, no doubt,
Whene'er I passed her; but who passed without
Much the same smile? This grew; I gave commands;
Then all smiles stopped together. There she stands
As if alive. Will't please you rise? We'll meet
The company below, then. I repeat,
The Count your master's known munificence
Is ample warrant that no just pretense
Of mine dowry will be disallowed;
Though his fair daughter's self, as I avowed
At starting, is my object. Nay, we'll go
Together down, sir. Notice Neptune, though,
Which Claus of Innsbruck cast in bronze for me!

(1849)

[1]The poem, set in Ferrara during the Renaissance, is meant to reflect values and attitudes of the time. Names do not refer to specific people but to types.

In this monologue the Duke of Ferrara takes pains to favorably impress the envoy of an unnamed count whose daughter he wishes to marry. The duke escorts the gentleman around his villa, pointing out the artwork, dropping names, and bragging about his aristocratic lineage. But mostly he talks about the

duchess. Through the duke's account of his late wife, we gain entrance into his mind, discovering that he is a jealous, possessive, and relentless martinet.

The use of heroic couplets in iambic pentameter—used in much heroic or epic poetry in English—attests to both the duke's pretentiousness and overblown self-esteem. Using a consistent rhyme scheme (a-a-b-b, etc.) he flaunts his expertise in language, undermining his self-effacing claim that he lacks skill in speech (lines 34–35). Intent on pumping himself up, the duke unwittingly lays bare his faults and foibles. Several instances of enjambment reveal an inability to reign in his emotions. His effort to flatter the envoy by saying that "none puts you by/The curtain I have drawn for you, but I," (lines 9–10) rings hollow. Although he stops short of explaining precisely how his late wife met her end, he is so convinced of his own rectitude that he recklessly hints that his "commands" (line 45) may have led to her demise. The envoy, seeing through the duke's lies and hypocrisy, attempts to take his leave (lines 53–54). Suspecting that the man will render an unfavorable report to his master, the duke in the last three lines of the poem shows off still more art and drops still another name in one last, desperate effort to win him over.

Elegy. An elegy, sometimes called a *dirge*, is a poem of mourning and meditation, usually about the death of a person but occasionally about other losses, such as lost love, lost strength, lost youth. Considering their subject matter, elegies are typically solemn and dignified.

The following elegy by the American author Ambrose Bierce, laments the death of President Ulysses S. Grant in 1885. Grant had made a name for himself as the victorious commanding general of the Union forces in the Civil War. As an eighteen-year-old, Bierce fought under Grant but left the army embittered, disillusioned, and virulently opposed to war. Twenty years later, however, he paid a prayerful tribute to his fallen leader:

THE DEATH OF GRANT

FATHER! whose hard and cruel law
Is part of thy compassion's plan,
Thy works presumptuously we scan
Line For what the prophets say they saw.

(5) Unbidden still, the awful slope
Walling us in, we climb to gain
Assurance of the shining plain
That faith has certified to hope.

In vain: beyond the circling hill
(10) The shadow and the cloud abide;
Subdue the doubt, our spirits guide
To trust the Record and be still;

To trust it loyally as he
Who, heedful of his high design,
(15) Ne'er raised a seeking eye to thine,
But wrought thy will unconsciously,

Disputing not of chance or fate,
Not questioning of cause or creed:
For anything but duty's deed
(20) To simply wise, too humbly great.

The cannon syllabled his name;
His shadow shifted o'er the land,
Portentous, as at his command
Successive cities sprang to flame!

(25) He fringed the continent with fire,
The rivers ran in lines of light!
Thy will be done on earth—if right
Or wrong he cared not to inquire.

His was the heavy hand, and his
(30) The service of the despot blade;
His the soft answer that allayed
War's giant animosities.

Let us have peace: our clouded eyes
Fill, Father, with another light,
(35) That we may see with clearer sight
Thy servant's soul in Paradise.

The speaker begins by addressing the Divinity, declaring his faith and trust in Him. Although he is grieved by Grant's death, he won't presume to fathom God's "hard and cruel law." Instead, he prays for the strength to remain faithful, hoping that, in spite of the "shadow and the cloud" that now hang over him, a "shining plain" (presumably a place in heaven) awaits those who subdue their doubt, keep quiet, and trust "the Record" (line 12) of God's ultimate goodness.

Having affirmed his faith, the speaker turns his attention to Grant, who rose above the doubts and concerns that beset ordinary mortals. Unlike the speaker, Grant sought no help from God, for he was blessed with godlike qualities and seemed divinely inspired to carry out God's will "unconsciously" (line 16). Accordingly, Grant, in the name of peace, plunged confidently into violent war ("The cannon syllabled his name;/His shadow shifted o'er the land/. . .He fringed the continent with fire,/The rivers ran in lines of light!"). Ever devoted to his "high design" (line 14), Grant, according to the speaker, never swerved from his duty, never wondered whether he did right or wrong, and by literally sticking to his guns, "allayed/War's giant animosities."

In the last stanza the speaker renews a prayerful attitude, beseeching God—as Grant never could or would—to give the general's soul a place in Paradise.

Limerick. Not considered a serious form of poetry, the limerick is one of the most popular lighter forms. Its simplicity—five lines built on two rhymes with the third and fourth lines shorter than the others—may explain why it is easy to recite and remember. Limericks often surprise readers with a curious rhyme or a pun in the last line, like this one by the ubiquitous Anon:

There was a young fellow named Hall,
Who fell in the spring in the fall;
'Twould have been a sad thing
If he'd died in the spring,
But he didn't—he died in the fall.

Ode. An ode, an ancient form of poetic song, is a celebratory poem. Highly lyrical or profoundly philosophical, odes pay homage to whatever the poet may hold dear—another person, a place, an object, an abstract idea.

The *Pindaric ode,* developed by and named after the Greek poet Pindar, has the following structure: The first stanza is called a *strophe,* the second an *antistrophe.* Both are structurally identical. Then comes an *epode,* with a different structure. This pattern—strophe, antistrophe, epode—once established may be repeated any number of times. Since Pindar's day, poets have taken great liberties with the form, writing what are now called *irregular* odes. In fact, none of the most widely read odes in English (Wordsworth's "Intimations of Immortality from Recollections of Early Childhood," and Keats's "Ode on a Grecian Urn" and "Ode to a Nightingale") is Pindaric. All employ an essentially uniform stanza throughout.

The same is true of the following ode by Alexander Pope:

ODE ON SOLITUDE

Happy the man whose wish and care
A few paternal acres bound,
Content to breathe his native air,
In his own ground.

Whose herds with milk, whose fields with bread,
Whose flocks supply him with attire,
Whose trees in summer yield him shade,
In winter fire.

Blest, who can unconcernedly find
Hours, days, and years slide soft away,
In health of body, peace of mind
Quiet by day,

Sound sleep by night; study and ease,
Together mixed; sweet recreation;
And innocence, which most does please
With mediation.

Thus let me live, unseen, unknown;
Thus unlamented let me die;
Steal from the world, and not a stone
Tell where I lie.

(c. 1709)

Any reader who ever longed to be left alone or wished to step away from the frenetic pace of modern life can appreciate Pope's heartfelt sentiment. The regular and consistent rhymes and rhythm, along with the plain diction and use of mellow sounds give the poem qualities resembling a pastoral or a lullaby.

On the AP exam you certainly won't be asked to recall the structure of a Pindaric ode. Should you be given an ode to read and dissect, however, at least you'll know its origins.

Sonnet. Sonnets come in many guises, but virtually all are fourteen-line lyric poems expressing one main thought or sentiment in iambic pentameter. The subject matter of sonnets ranges from love to politics. Any subject is fair game.

The *Italian sonnet,* developed by Petrarch and sometimes called the Petrarchian sonnet, is divided into two discrete units: an *octave*, consisting of the first eight lines rhymed *a-b-b-a a-b-b-a,* and a *sestet*—the remaining six lines commonly but not always rhymed *c-d-c-d-c-d* or *c-d-e-c-d-e.* The rhyme scheme usually corresponds with the progress of thought in that particular sonnet. In other words, the poet uses the octave to present a problem, question, story, or idea. The sestet resolves, contrasts with, or comments on the contents of the octave. If truth be told, when it comes to sonnets, nothing is truly fixed. Variations abound, especially in the sestet that tends to be more emotionally charged than the octave. The sonnet's malleability may explain why poets have turned to the form over and over as though drawn by an irresistible force.

How closely does the following sonnet by Milton resembles the Italian model?

ON HIS BLINDNESS[1]

When I consider how my light is spent
Ere half my days, in this dark world and wide,
And that one talent which is death to hide
Line Lodged with me useless, though my soul more bent
(5) To serve therewith my Maker, and present
My true account, lest he returning chide;
"Doth God exact day-labor, light denied?"
I fondly[2] ask: but Patience to prevent
That murmur, soon replies, "God doth not need
(10) Either man's work or his own gifts; who best
Bear his mild yoke, they serve him best. His state
Is kingly. Thousands at his bidding speed
And post o'er land and ocean without rest:
They also serve who only stand and wait."

(1652)

[1]By 1651, at age 43, Milton had completely lost his sight.
[2]foolishly

Early in Milton's sonnet, the speaker, presumably the poet himself, reflects on his untimely loss of sight. Being unable to see is devastating, but being unable to write is tantamount to death, and because his soul demands that he serve God by using his writing talents, he despairs over being deficient in the eyes of God. (Milton is alluding to the biblical parable of the talents in the book of *Matthew,* in which a servant is cast "into outer darkness" as punishment for burying his one God-given talent.) In an instant of spiritual blindness parallel-

ing his physical blindness, the speaker verges on asking his "Maker" whether as a blind man, he is expected to continue doing God's work. Patience, personified, holds the speaker back, assuring him that those who bear their burdens in silence serve God best. Besides, God has legions to do His bidding. Comforting the speaker still further, Patience affirms that "They also serve who only stand and wait."

"On His Blindness" adheres to the rhyme scheme of the Italian sonnet but ignores the customary break between the octave and sestet. Having already begun a response to the concerns expressed in the opening lines, Milton uses enjambment at the end of line 8. He also deviates from the Italian pattern by embedding a short but independent sentence into the sestet (lines 11–12). Thus, "On His Blindness" borders on the traditional Italian form but doesn't quite make it. Milton's variation, used frequently by other poets, is called as you might expect, the *Miltonian sonnet.*

The structure of the *English,* or *Shakespearean* sonnet differs still more from the Italian form. Instead of an octave and sestet as its basic building blocks, it consists of three quatrains and a climactic couplet with a new rhyme. Its typical rhyme scheme is *a-b-a-b-c-d-d-c-e-f-e-f-g-g,* a pattern that obliges the poet to look for seven different rhyming pairs. Since Shakespeare's time poets have changed and adapted the form to suit themselves. They've shortened or lengthened lines and occasionally scrapped iambic pentameter in favor of some other meter.

The following sonnet by Shakespeare, however, follows to the letter the form that bears his name. Three discrete quatrains end with periods. A concluding couplet clinches the poem's theme. Every line is five feet, or ten syllables long. Each rhyme is exact—no slant rhymes in sight. In other words, Shakespeare plays it straight in this sonnet, shunning deviations that could distract readers from enjoying his intricate word play.

SONNET 138

When my love swears that she is made of truth,
I do believe her, though I know she lies,
That she might think me some untutored youth,
Line Unlearnéd in the world's false subtleties.
(5) Thus vainly thinking that she thinks me young,
Although she knows my days are past the best,
Simply I credit her false-speaking tongue:
On both sides thus is simple truth suppressed.
But wherefore says she not she is unjust?
(10) And wherefore say not I that I am old?
Oh, love's best habit is in seeming trust,
And age in love loves not to have years told.
Therefore I lie with her and she with me,
And in our faults by lies we flattered be.

Villanelle. A villanelle is a nineteen-line poem with five three-line stanzas and a concluding quatrain. It is usually light in tone and is based on only two rhymes. Here is a villanelle by W. E. Henley about villanelles:

VILLANELLE

A dainty thing's the Villanelle.
Sly, musical, a jewel in rhyme,
It serves its purpose passing well.

Line
(5)
A double-clappered silver bell
That must be made to clink and chime,
A dainty thing's the Villanelle.

And if you wish to flute a spell,
Or ask a meeting 'neath the lime,
It serves its purpose passing well.

(10)
You must not ask of it the spell,
Of organs grandiose and sublime—
A dainty thing's the Villanelle.

And filled with sweetness, as a shell
Is filled with sound, and launched in time,
(15)
It serves its purpose passing well.

Still fair to see and good to smell
As in the quaintness of its prime,
A dainty thing's the Villanelle.
It serves its purpose passing well.

If you don't already know it, find and read Dylan Thomas's "Do Not Go Gentle into That Good Night." It's probably the best-known villanelle in modern English.