

Rhythm

Rhythm is a pattern of accent. Watch the six-year-old skip out to play. Watch the ten-year-old jump rope. Watch the sixteen-year-old hoeing corn. You have watched rhythm. Rhythm is a pattern of fast and slow, loud and soft, strong and weak that makes work smoother and more efficient. Speech itself is a mixture of fast and slow, loud and soft, strong and weak. Shout to the echoing hills, "The Lord is my shepherd." You will find that you shout some pieces of this phrase much more loudly than others. The LORD is my SHEPherd. We call the pieces of our language syllables, and as we speak, we accent some pieces more than others.

Actually, as we speak, we accent our syllables with many varying degrees of intensity from very light to very heavy. But in poetry we think of accent as either on or off. Our syllables are either accented or unaccented. Look again at the sentence, The LORD is my SHEPherd. *Lord* and *shep* are accented. *The*, *is*, and *my* are not accented. When we decide which syllables are accented and which are unaccented in a poem, we say we are scanning the poem. We mark the pattern with an accent mark (´) for the accented syllables and a breve (˘) for the unaccented syllables. Then we call this pattern the scansion. Let's mark the scansion of the line below.

Thē - Lórd - is - mý - shép - hērd. Í shall nóť wánt.

If you cannot decide how to scan a line, say it very loudly. You may even shout it.

Psalm 23, you will notice, is not written in regular rhythm. Hebrew poetry has rhyme and rhythm of ideas rather than of

accents and sounds. Because there is not a regular pattern to the accented syllables, we can accent it in different ways, depending on what meaning we want to convey.

When we write a poem, we want our poem to follow the pattern of accent which is the most natural. Readers should feel the rhythm of our poem and enjoy it without really knowing it is there. Rhythm in a poem should be the enjoyable slide down a sliding board rather than the unpleasant jolting over a rough railroad crossing. Poor or forced rhythm jars us, detracting our attention from the meaning of the poem.

All one-syllable words are accented when we say them alone—*the, he, leads, by, stream, me*. But when we put them into a sentence, the little words lose their accent.

Hē leáds mē bý thē stréam.

Some one-syllable words are almost always accented. They are nouns, verbs, adjectives, and adverbs. Other one-syllable words are almost never accented. They are conjunctions, prepositions, and articles. Pronouns may be used either as accented or unaccented words, depending on the words which surround them. Other parts of speech may also change from their natural accent depending on their surrounding words, but the smoothest poetry follows natural accent.

Rhythm, remember, is pattern, and pattern is repetition plus variety. Rhythm is developed by repeating varied units of accented and unaccented syllables. Poetry has four main units of light and heavy accent patterns, called meters. A foot of poetry includes one accented syllable followed or preceded by one or two unaccented syllables. Each line of poetry includes one or more feet of a certain metrical rhythm pattern. Here are the four basic types of rhythm patterns or meters with examples of words to illustrate each meter:

Iambic meter— unaccented accented bésíde

Trochaic meter— accented unaccented shépherd

Anapestic meter— unaccented unaccented accented ˘ and thy staff

Dactylic meter— accented unaccented unaccented com'forted

Read the following list of iambic words. Can you feel the rhythm?

alive	depend	giraffe	July
become	event	humane	kebab
collapse	forbear	intend	lament

Iambic words plod along at a very sedate, sober pace.

The shadows wrap their grimy gauze

Around the evening's eerie halls.

Read and feel these trochaic words.

aster	dollar	giver	jumper
butter	ever	hover	kinder
cover	fuller	inner	lighter

Trochaic words stride along at a joyous, hopeful gait.

Morning flings her quilts aside,

Yawns and stretches, sparkle-eyed.

EXERCISE 1

Read the next list of mixed iambic and trochaic words one right after the other. Notice how they jolt you. They lack rhythm because there is little repetition of accent.

See if you can label the words below iambic or trochaic. Then compare your answers with page 23.

___ a. maketh	___ e. evil	___ i. above	___ m. begin
___ b. supply	___ f. prepare	___ j. below	___ n. follow
___ c. valley	___ g. table	___ k. pastures	___ o. allow
___ d. shadow	___ h. presence	___ l. waters	___ p. imply

If the first foot or pattern of two syllables is iambic, probably the whole line will continue with the same pattern.

Sometimes an iambic line ends with an extra unaccented syllable,

The stéep̃le strétchēs skýward̃.

Or a trochaic line may end with an accented syllable.

Béams of moon plāy hídē and séek.

EXERCISE 2

Try to identify the following lines of poetry as either iambic or trochaic. To decide, always go by the first foot. The first foot still sets the pace. Mark the scansion above each line to help you decide.

a. I am Jesus' sheep, and Jesus is my Shepherd.

b. A sheep am I in Jesus' fold.

c. The morning pours her liquid gold across the hills.

d. Over hills of cedar, morning melts her gold.

Occasionally, however, a line turns to iambic after one trochaic foot.

Dárknēss dēscēnds líkē rávēn wíngs

Ūpón ā dýing dáy.

These trochaic syllables or inverted feet at the beginning of a line lend variety. But you should first conquer perfectly smooth rhythm before attempting such variation.

Now read and feel the two lists below.

Anapestic phrases:

to the hills	with the Lord	of the earth
in a day	on a path	or a stream
at the top	through the woods	if you please

Dactylic words and phrases:

actually	exited	India
bitterest	favorite	jumping to
character	gustily	king of the
dominant	heavily	life is a

Anapestic and dactylic meters skip along merrily and light-heartedly. Few hymns use these meters.

Anapestic—*If you ever have eaten a pie of persimmons,*

Dactylic—*Kittens, all cottony,
scatter monotony.*

Because the second word of an English sentence is generally a noun, many anapestic lines begin with only one unaccented syllable and then lapse into their correct pattern after the first foot.

Ī knów/thát Hē lóves/mē thóugh shád/óws sŭrróund.

Often both anapestic and dactylic lines end with incomplete feet.

Anapestic—*Thēre ĩs jóy/ĩn thē sí/lēnce of mórning.*

Dactylic—*Nóah wás/cálling thē/cóws and thē/cróws.*

Two unaccented syllables beside each other in the middle of a line will tell you that a line is anapestic or dactylic. An unaccented syllable at the start of the line tells you then that it is anapestic, and an accented syllable tells you the rhythm is dactylic.

EXERCISE 3

Try to identify the following lines as either anapestic or dactylic.

- a. *Beauty surrounds me and fills me and thrills me.*
- b. *Oh, the earth is the Lord's and the fulness thereof.*
- c. *As a hart who has panted for brooks, I have sought.*
- d. *Over our land lies the love of our Lord.*

EXERCISE 4

Now try to match the four types of poetry with the four lines below. Remember to check your answers with page 23.

- a. *The Lord my Shepherd is. I shall be well-supplied.*
- b. *The Lord is my Shepherd. No want shall I know.*