

The Sounds of Poetry

Poems are full of meaningful sounds and silences as well as words and sentences. Besides choosing words for their meanings, poets choose words because they have certain sounds, and poets use sound effects to create a mood or establish a tone, just as films do. Historically, **poetry** began as an oral phenomenon. Early bards in many cultures chanted or recited their verses, often accompanied by a musical instrument of some kind, and poetry remains a vocal art, dependent on the human voice. Often poems that seem very difficult when looked at silently come alive when turned into sound. The music and rhythms become clearer, and saying the words aloud or hearing them spoken is very good practice for learning to hear in your mind's ear when you read silently.

Rhyme - repetition or correspondence of the terminal sounds of words - is perhaps the single most familiar of sound devices poets use, though of course not all poems use it. Early English poetry used **alliteration**, instead of rhyming words at the end of the poetic lines, to balance the first and second half of each line, and much, if not most, modern poetry is written in **free verse** - that is, without rhyme or regular **meter**. Because poetry was originally an oral art many poems were only later written down, various kinds of memory devices (sometimes called **mnemonic devices**) were built into poems to help reciters remember them. **Rhyme** was one such device, and most people still find it easier to memorize poetry that rhymes. The simple pleasure of hearing familiar sounds repeated at regular intervals may help account for the traditional popularity of **rhyme**. **Rhyme** also gives poetry a special aural quality that distinguishes it from prose. According to the established taste in eras before our own, there was a decorum or proper behavior in poetry as in other things. A poem should not in any way be mistaken for prose, which was thought to be artificially inferior to poetry and primarily utilitarian.

- **Rhyme** provides a kind of discipline for the poet, a way of harnessing poetic talents and keeping a rein on the imagination.

End Rhyme - When we think of **rhyme** in poetry, what we likely think of first is the most common type - **end rhyme**, which occurs when the last words in two or more lines of a poem rhyme with each other. When we speak of a poem's rhyme scheme, we refer to its particular pattern of **end rhymes**. To indicate **rhyme scheme**, we conventionally assign a different letter of the alphabet to each rhyme sound, reusing the same letter every time the same terminal sound repeats in later lines.

Internal Rhyme - Though **end rhyme** alone determines the rhyme scheme of a poem, it isn't the only kind: **Internal rhyme** occurs when a word within (and thus internal to) a line rhymes with another word in the same or adjacent lines.

Full Rhyme - also called perfect or true rhyme; requires that words share consonants and vowel sounds.

Slant Rhyme - When words share one but not the other, we have a version of what's variously called off, half, near or slant rhyme, a rhyme slightly "off" or only approximate.

Eye Rhyme - As much a visual as an aural device, it occurs as its name suggests, when words look like they should rhyme, but don't: ex: bear and ear

Onomatopoeia, Alliteration, Assonance, and Consonance

Sometimes the sounds in poems just provide special effects, rather like a musical score behind a film, setting the mood and getting us into an appropriate frame of mind. But often sound and meaning go hand in hand, and the poet finds words whose sounds echo the action or make a point by stressing the relationship among words and the things they signify.

A single word that captures or approximates the sound of what it describes, is an **onomatopoeia** word and the device itself is **onomatopoeia**.

But poets can also turn sound into sense by choosing and ordering words so as to create distinctive, meaningful **aural patterns**. **Rhyme** is one such device but three other important ones are:

- **Alliteration** - the repetition of usually initial consonant sounds through a sequence of words
- **Consonance** - the repetition of consonant sounds, especially at the end of words or syllables without the correspondence of vowel sounds necessary to create rhyme.
- **Assonance** - the repetition of vowel sounds in a sequence of words with different endings.

Used effectively, **word devices** can be powerful tools, generating meaning, as well as creating mood or simply providing emphasis.