

## Meter

Meter (from the Greek *metron*, meaning measure) refers principally to the recurrence of regular beats in a poetic line. In this way, **meter** pertains to the structure of the poem as it is written.

The most common form of meter in English verse since the 14th century is *accentual-syllabic meter*, in which the basic unit is the **foot**. A foot is a combination of two or three stressed and/or unstressed syllables. The following are the four most common metrical feet in English poetry:

### Iambic

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(the noun is "iamb"): an unstressed syllable followed by a stressed syllable, a pattern which comes closest to approximating the natural rhythm of speech. Note line 23 from Shelley's "Stanzas Written in Dejection, Near Naples":

And walked | with in | ward glo | ry crowned

### Trochaic

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(the noun is "trochee"): a stressed followed by an unstressed syllable, as in the first line of Blake's "Introduction" to *Songs of Innocence*:

Piping | down the | valleys | wild

### Anapestic

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(the noun is "anapest"): two unstressed syllables followed by a stressed syllable, as in the opening to Byron's "The Destruction of Sennacherib":

The Assy | rian came down | like the wolf | on the fold

### Dactylic

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(the noun is "dactyl"): a stressed syllable followed by two unstressed syllables, as in Thomas Hardy's "The Voice":

Woman much | missed, how you | call to me | call to me

**Meter** also refers to the number of feet in a line:

<b>Monometer</b>	<b>one</b>
<b>Dimeter</b>	<b>two</b>
<b>Trimeter</b>	<b>three</b>
<b>Tetrameter</b>	<b>four</b>
<b>Pentameter</b>	<b>five</b>
<b>Hexameter</b>	<b>six</b>

Any number above six (hexameter) is heard as a combination of smaller parts; for example, what we might call heptameter (seven feet in a line) is indistinguishable (aurally) from successive lines of tetrameter and trimeter (4-3).

To **scan** a line is to determine its metrical pattern. Perhaps the best way to begin scanning a line is to mark the natural stresses on the polysyllabic words. Take Shelley's line:

And walked | with in | ward | glory | crowned

Mark the monosyllabic nouns, verbs, adjectives, and adverbs that are normally stressed:

And walked with in | ward | glory | crowned

Then fill in the rest:

And walked with in | ward | glory | crowned

Then divide the line into feet:

And walked with in | ward | glory | crowned

Then note the sequence:

iamb | iamb | iamb | iamb

The line consists of four iambs; therefore, we identify the line as **iambic tetrameter**.

## Rhythm

Rhythm refers particularly to the way a line is voiced, i.e., how one speaks the line. Often, when a reader reads a line of verse, choices of stress and unstress may need to be made. For example, the first line of Keats' "Ode on Melancholy" presents the reader with a problem:

*No, no, go not to Lethe, neither twist*

If we determine the regular pattern of beats (the **meter**) of this line, we will most likely identify the line as **iambic pentameter**. If we read the line this way, the statement takes on a musing, somewhat disinterested tone. However, because the first five words are monosyllabic, we may choose to read the line differently. In fact, we may be tempted, especially when reading aloud, to stress the first two syllables equally, making the opening an emphatic, directive statement. Note that monosyllabic words allow the meaning of the line to vary according to which words we choose to stress when reading (i.e., the choice of rhythm we make).

The first line of Milton's *Paradise Lost* presents a different type of problem.

*Of Man's First Disobedience, and the Fruit*

Again, this line is predominantly iambic, but a problem occurs with the word *Disobedience*. If we read strictly by the meter, then we must fuse the last two syllables of the word. However, if we read the word normally, we have a breakage in the line's metrical structure. In this way, the poet forges a tension between meter and rhythm: does the word remain contained by the structure, or do *we choose* to stretch the word out of the normal foot, *thereby disobeying the structure in which it was made*? Such tension adds meaning to the poem by using meter and rhythm to dramatize certain conflicts. In this example, Milton forges such a tension to present immediately the essential conflicts that lead to the fall of Adam and Eve.