



Prose and poetry techniques: Rhyming stanzas

Form

This is poetry that is divided into stanzas or verses (groups of lines) in which all or some of the lines have a rhyme word at the end.

Rhyme schemes

Rhyme schemes are conventionally represented using letters. Thus, the stanza below rhymes aabb:

Sometimes I know the way	a
You walk, up over the bay;	a
It is a wind from that far sea	b
That blows the fragrance of your hair to me.	b

from 'Absence' by Charlotte Mew

This stanza rhymes ababcb:

And there's a hall in Bloomsbury	a
No more I dare to tread,	b
For all the stone men shout at me	a
And swear they are not dead;	b
And once I touched a broken girl	c
And knew that marble bled.	b

from 'Oak and Olive' by James Elroy Flecker

Stanza forms

Stanzas can be of any number of lines. Some types of stanza have special names. For example:

- a couplet has two lines that rhyme with each other
- a quatrain has four lines, rhyming in any pattern

The lines in rhyming stanzas can be of any length. However, it is quite common for them to be isometric, that is, for each of them to contain the same number of syllables. The stanza above by James Elroy Flecker is in regular eight-syllable lines: octosyllabics. By contrast, the stanza by Charlotte Mew is heterometric, meaning that the lines are of different lengths; in this case, of six, seven, eight and ten syllables.

It is common, but not at all essential, for all the stanzas in a poem to follow the same pattern with regard to:

- rhyme scheme
- number of lines
- the lengths of the lines in corresponding positions (for instance, first or last within the stanza)

Stanza forms may be very simple or they may be extremely complex. There are many traditional forms. It is also possible to invent new ones.

Licences

A perfect or full rhyme is one in which the two rhyme words sound exactly alike: as in 'chess'/'dress' and 'runner'/'gunner'. English is less rich in perfect rhymes than some other European languages.

As a result, it is common for English poets to take licences in their rhyming. These may include:

- half-rhymes where the end sounds are the same but the vowel sounds are different: 'chess'/'grass', 'rain'/'gun', 'jump'/'stamp', 'gallows'/'wallows' (common)
- assonance, or vowel rhyme, where the vowel sounds are the same but the consonants different: 'grape'/'state'/'make' or 'rain'/'name' (found in folk-song and ballad, becoming commoner in modern poetry)
- pararhyme, in which the consonants remain the same but the vowel sounds are different: 'ground'/'groaned', 'stump'/'stamp', 'fellow'/'follow'
- splitting a word of more than one syllable across two lines, as in 'twi-llight'/'fly' (rare before the twentieth century, becoming commoner)

History

Rhyme is what most English-speaking people think of first in relation to poetry. The origins of English rhymed verse lie somewhere in Anglo-Saxon times. Originally the device may have been borrowed from Irish poetry.