

THE CRAFT OF POETRY: The Sounds of Poetry

The lines laid out here are from pieces I've written over a life time. Most are rewritten from their original state as I've learned to write with rhythm. Without getting too much into iambs, monometers, tetrameters, and such, I'd like to show how I write poetry with sound/music. Simplicity is MY key to writing. And, so, without further ado, I give you my version of The Sounds of Poetry.

Alliteration, or the repetition of consonant sounds, is a tool used by poets. Notice the alliteration in these lines:

“sandy soil sifted through my sandals;
cornfields rustled all around
overripe and brown.”

Say it out loud. Hear the repetition of the “s” and “r” sounds. Notice how the music tugs at your senses? It's like feeling, seeing and touching the words. The music here is contemporary, relaxing. Each line is one beat (accented syllable) shorter than the preceding line. It lets you down slowly.

How about these lines. Say them out loud. Can you hear the music heighten with each word?

“I swish through Sinners, Psalms and Holy
Proverbs singing
Silent Night.”

Do you feel the crescendo? Building, building, taking us to new heights, until the final words are delivered and we are satisfied.

In the following lines can you hear a sort of lullaby? Can you feel the warmth? Can you feel the chair rocking? The music is soft, quiet, sensitive. But it's not just the alliteration. It's also the rise and fall of the lines. The first line has 5 syllables, the second 7 and the last 5.

“how the sun-warmed wood
of the weathered-white pillars
soothes my bony back.”

In these next lines, I have a mix of **alliteration**, **internal rhyme** and **end rhyme**. It still has the sound of music but notice how it's choppy like rap music with the lines having a syllable count of 14-10-10-10-14-14.

“I tell you he's a primeval, stone-aged Neanderthal
who keeps the whole town in an upheaval.
He's a wild, savage, untamed animal
who makes all of us run for survival.
He is one ignorant, illiterate ignoramus
who was born when I looked up a word in my
thesaurus.”

In these next lines I used **end rhyme (AABBCC)** but also gave much thought to **rhythm** with my syllable counts of 7-6-6-7-6-6.

“Painting castles in the air
with strands of angel hair,
her thoughts are lofty, high
as they float in bluey sky.
She dreams of perfection
for her life's rejection.

Formal poetry is written in **metrical feet**. A foot is a metrical unit in poetry commonly consisting of one accented syllable preceded or followed by one or two unaccented syllables. When analyzing the metrics of a poem, the foot is usually set off by a vertical line as in the following lines by John Donne:

“Send home | my long | strayed eyes | to me,
Which O! | too long | have dwelt | on thee;”

Each of these lines has four iambic feet (an unaccented syllable followed by an accented syllable.) This iambic tetrameter gives the lines a metric (measured) rhythm.

It's important that we read our poetry out loud to hear the sound. Sometimes I read my poetry into a tape player. It's easier to hear the music if I'm not concentrating on reading while listening. Try it! You'll be surprised at how different it sounds when you can concentrate on listening.

These are just a few simple ways I've learned to write with sound, but I know that sound alone does not make a poem. There are many tools we use to write a poem.

All the tools are important. But if your poem does not have the rhythmic sound of music, it may not be a poem at all.

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