

Talking about Poetry: Meter

Scansion means analyzing a passage of verse to determine its *meter*, which generally refers to a line's *type of foot* and *number of feet per line*.

Types of feet:

1) **Iambic**: a light syllable followed by a stressed syllable

Ex. The cur few tolls the knell of par ting day.

2) **Anapestic**: two light syllables followed by a stressed syllable (think of the sound of a horse's hooves)

Ex. The As syr ian came down like a wolf on the fold.

3) **Trochaic**: a stressed followed by a light syllable

Ex. There they are, my fif ty men and wo men.

Most trochaic lines lack the final unstressed syllable and so are called *catalectic*.

Ex. Ti ger ! Ti ger ! burn ing bright
In the fo rest of the night.

4) **Dactylic**: a stressed syllable followed by two light syllables

Ex. Eve, with her bas ket, was
Deep in the bells and grass.

Rising meter: strong stress is at the end (iambs and anapests)

Falling meter: strong stress is at the beginning (trochees and dactyls)

Duple meter: contains two syllables (iambs and trochees)

Triple meter: contains three syllables (anapests and dactyls)

Occasional variants from these four standard types of feet:

5) **Spondaic**: two successive syllables with approximately equal strong stresses

Ex. Good strong thick stu pe fy ing in cense smoke. (1st two feet)

6) **Pyrrhic**: two successive syllables with approximately equal light stresses

Ex. My way is to be gin with the be gin ning (2nd and 4th feet)

Naming metric lines according to number of feet per line:

Monometer: one foot

Dimeter: two feet

Trimeter: three feet

Tetrameter: four feet

Pentameter: five feet

Hexameter: six feet (*Alexandrine* = a line of six iambic feet)

Heptameter: seven feet

Octameter: eight feet

Other ways of describing meter (using the first five lines of Keats's *Endymion*):

--**feminine ending**: describes a line that ends with an unstressed syllable (lines 1, 2, 5)

--**masculine ending**: describes a line that ends with a stressed syllable (lines 3, 4)

--**end-stopped**: describes a line that ends at a natural pause in the reading, such as the end of a sentence, clause, or other syntactic unit (lines 1, 5)

--**enjambement** (run-on lines): describes a line that ends in an incompleting syntactic unit, so that it forces the reader to push into the next line (lines 2 through 4)

--**caesura**: a strong phrasal pause within a line (lines 2, 3, 4)

1 A thing of beauty is a joy for ever:
2 Its loveliness increases; it will never
3 Pass into nothingness, but still will keep
4 A bow'er quiet for us, and a sleep
5 Full of sweet dreams, and health, and quiet breathing.

Non-stress-based meter

Strong-stress meter: only the beat of the strong stresses counts in the scanning; number of unstressed syllables is highly variable. In Old English (and some Middle English) poetry, lines usually had four stresses that were emphasized by alliteration and often by medial caesura (known as *alliterative verse*).

Ex. In a somer seson, whan soft was the sonne,

 I shope me in shroudes, as I a shepe were,

 In habits like an heremite, unholy of workes,

 Went wyde in this world, wonders to here.

Sprung rhythm: a type of strong-stress verse invented by Gerard Hopkins in the late nineteenth century. Each foot begins with a stressed syllable and may contain from one to three light syllables. Number of light stresses is highly variable, and strong stresses are strikingly offset between lines.

Ex. The sour scythe cringe, and the bleak share come.

 Our hearts' charity's hearth's fire, our thoughts' chivalry's throng's Lord.

Free verse: lines have no or only occasional metric feet or uniform stress patterns.*

* Quoted and paraphrased from M. H. Abrams's *A Glossary of Literary Terms*, 6th ed. (New York: Harcourt Brace College Publishers, 1993), pp. 113-117.