

## Blank Verse

“Blank verse” is a literary term that refers to poetry written in unrhymed but metered lines, almost always iambic pentameter. “Iambic pentameter” refers to the meter of the poetic line: a line of poetry written this way is composed of five “iamb,” groups of two syllables that fall into an “unstressed-stressed” pattern: famously, like a heartbeat: buh-BUM, buh-BUM.

Traditionally – say, in a Shakespeare sonnet – lines of iambic pentameter are then combined with end-rhymes to create various rhyming patterns. You can hear this very clearly in the famous opening quatrain-- the first four lines -- of Shakespeare’s Sonnet 18:

“Shall I compare thee to a summer’s day?

Thou art more lovely and more temperate.

Rough winds do shake the darling buds of May;

And summer’s lease hath all too short a date”

Blank verse is not a recent invention: Christopher Marlowe and Shakespeare, among others, popularized the use of blank verse in their plays. But the most famous early example of a *poem* composed in blank verse is without a doubt John Milton’s epic masterpiece, *Paradise Lost*, which appeared in its twelve-book form in 1674. In a prefatory note to the poem, Milton explains that he has chosen to write *Paradise Lost* in what he calls “English heroic verse without rhyme” – that is, in unrhymed iambic pentameter.

And Milton says that he’s done so because Homer and Virgil wrote their epics in unrhymed Greek and Latin, respectively. So Milton is very much setting himself up as their successor. Rhyme, he goes on, was “the invention of a barbarous age, to set off wretched matter and lame meter.” Some of Milton’s contemporaries use it pretty well, he admits, but he still finds that they do so because they are

“carried away by custom, but much to their own vexation, hindrance and constraint to express many things otherwise, and for the most part worse than else they would have expressed them.”

In other words, there will be no childish or vulgar rhymes for Milton in *Paradise Lost*, since that would be beneath his epic ambition and would constrain his ability to tell the story he wants to tell. The very fact that Milton felt the need to defend his decision suggests, of course, that readers of his day would have *expected* to read rhyming verse. Milton, instead, ends his prefatory note by telling readers that they should be thankful he has “recover[ed]” the “ancient liberty” that Classical authors enjoyed, and has subsequently rescued English poetry from what he calls, biting, “the troublesome and modern bondage of rhyming.”

So—what does blank verse allow Milton to do?

First, let’s keep in mind that the most common rhyme of Milton’s day was the couplet, or two-line rhyme. But couplets, while easily memorized, also tend to encourage their authors to keep their thoughts within the rigid demarcations of the rhyme itself. Consider the start of “To His Coy Mistress,” published in 1681 by Milton’s friend, Andrew Marvell: “Had we but world enough and time/ This coyness, lady, were no crime.” Here we have a complete thought, in a tidy couplet of iambic tetrameter.

Although it can be confusing to read Milton, then, it is never boring: because his blank verse forces the reader to work hard to follow what one critic calls “the play of syntax against lineation”: that is, the tension between the often unconventional order of Milton’s words, and the steady meter of the iambic pentameter that nonetheless carries each line along in a stately, elevated flow of pure language, free from the “bondage” of rhyme.

After the success of *Paradise Lost*, blank verse – now sometimes known as “Miltonic verse” – became more acceptable to poets and readers. But precisely because Milton had used it so imperiously and ambitiously, it was primarily deployed for serious and

elevated topics, usually of some length. If you wanted to be taken seriously as a poet, in other words, you had to use blank verse at some point.

And this is exactly what William Wordsworth does in one of the first major poems of his career: “Lines written a few miles above Tintern Abbey, On Revisiting the Banks of the Wye during a Tour, July 13, 1789” – or just “Tintern Abbey,” as it’s better known – first published in 1798. Here is how that poem begins:

“Five years have passed; five summers, with the length  
Of five long winters! and again I hear  
These waters, rolling from their mountain-springs  
With a sweet inland murmur. – Once again  
Do I behold these steep and lofty cliffs,  
Which on a wild secluded scene impress  
Thoughts of more deep seclusion; and connect  
The landscape with the quiet of the sky.

This is perhaps a little less complicated than Milton’s opening: we learn the subject of the verse – the first-person narrator “I” – in the second line, and there is a period near the end of the fourth line that creates two sentences out of these opening eight lines.

But again, without the constraint of end-rhymes, Wordsworth is able to form poetic lines that run into each other without stopping, compelling the reader to follow the flow of his memories as he returns after five years to the banks of the Wye river, and begins to contemplate what this pastoral scene has meant to him over the years.

I think it’s no coincidence that Wordsworth ends this opening passage with the observation that the border between land and sky

has become blurred, since this is nearly the exact spot in the opening of *Paradise Lost*, where Milton recalls the biblical creation story of “heaven and earth” being formed out of Chaos. Just as Milton used blank verse to signal the elevation of his Christian narrative to compete with the Classical [epics](#), so Wordsworth attests to the value and seriousness of his own “intellectual” development by putting it in the form of blank verse.

Among modern poets, Hart Crane and Wallace Stevens are two of the best-known American practitioners of blank verse, even though by the middle of the twentieth century, many of their contemporaries were turning to free verse, which has neither set rhymes nor a constant meter.

# 'Couplet'

A **couplet** is a pair of successive lines of metre in poetry. A couplet usually consists of two successive lines that rhyme and have the same metre. A couplet may be formal (closed) or run-on (open). In a formal (or closed) couplet, each of the two lines is end-stopped, implying that there is a grammatical pause at the end of a line of verse. In a run-on (or open) couplet, the meaning of the first line continues to the second.<sup>[1]</sup>

The word "couplet" comes from the French word meaning "two pieces of iron riveted or hinged together". The term "couplet" was first used to describe successive lines of verse in Sir P. Sidney's *Arcadia* in 1590: "In singing some short coplets, whereto the one halfe beginning, the other halfe should answer."<sup>[2]</sup>

While couplets traditionally rhyme, not all do. Poems may use white space to mark out couplets if they do not rhyme. Couplets in iambic pentameter are called heroic couplets. John Dryden in the 17th century and Alexander Pope in the 18th century were both well known for their writing in heroic couplets. The Poetic epigram is also in the couplet form. Couplets can also appear as part of more complex rhyme schemes, such as sonnets.

Rhyming couplets are one of the simplest rhyme schemes in poetry. Because the rhyme comes so quickly, it tends to call attention to itself. Good rhyming couplets tend to "explode" as both the rhyme and the idea come to a quick close in two lines. Here are some examples of rhyming couplets where the sense as well as the sound "rhymes":

True wit is nature to advantage dress'd;  
What oft was thought, but ne'er so well express'd.

— Alexander Pope

Whether or not we find what we are seeking  
Is idle, biologically speaking.

— Edna St. Vincent Millay (at the end of a sonnet)

On the other hand, because rhyming couplets have such a predictable rhyme scheme, they can feel artificial and plodding. Here is a Pope parody of the predictable rhymes of his era:

Where-e'er you find "the cooling western breeze,"  
In the next line, it "whispers through the trees;"  
If crystal streams "with pleasing murmurs creep,"  
The reader's threatened (not in vain) with "sleep."

# ‘Diction’

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Diction is the choice of words writers use to communicate their ideas. They base their choice of diction on the content, type or piece of writing, and audience. When writers are making this decision, they focus on the connotation of the words rather than the denotation. Connotation concerns the feeling the word invokes, whereas denotation is the word's dictionary definition. Essentially, by incorporating certain types of diction, writers accomplish the following:

- **Tone:** Different types of writing can warrant different [tones](#). Diction allows writers to develop a tone appropriate for the subject matter (i.e., fiction vs. nonfiction). A short story, novel, or poem would contain different diction and writing style than a scientific report or persuasive essay.
- **Setting:** In fictional works, a writer's choice of diction can help identify the text's setting through the use of words native to the time and place in which the story takes place. By using careful diction, authors can create more authentic work.
- **Characterization:** The different words characters use in a literary work can help the author develop their identities. Diction can help identify characters' education, age, profession, etc., making them more realistic.

## • **Types of diction**

While there are multiple types of diction, the following categories are the most common:

- **Formal:** Formal diction uses sophisticated language that follows grammar rules and avoids personal pronouns and contractions.

Professional texts contain formal diction, such as research reports, legal documents, and scientific studies.

- **Informal:** Informal diction consists of everyday language. It uses slang words, contractions, and personal pronouns. People use this type of diction in casual conversations and when communicating with friends and family.
- **Colloquial:** Colloquial diction refers to words or expressions spoken in a specific time and place by a wide range of people. It incorporates informal diction and regional expressions (e.g., soda vs. pop).
- **Slang:** Slang is extremely informal and is often restricted to a certain group of people or professions. These words and phrases are often generational, and words are often replaced as generations shift (e.g., groovy vs. cool). While similar to colloquial language, slang is not as widespread and is not solely dictated by region.
- **Concrete:** Concrete diction is when a writer uses the literal definition (denotation). These words are not open to interpretation and do not create an emotional response.
- **Abstract:** Abstract diction consists of words that cannot be described using any of the five senses. This language describes intangible qualities like love, disgust, and happiness.
- **Pedantic:** Academic, technical, and highly detailed words are classified as pedantic. Pedantic characters often speak in a highly educated way, yet they sometimes correct even the smallest of errors, which irritates others. **Poetic:** Poetic diction involves the type of language used in poetry that differs from typical conversational diction. These words create the rhythm and rhyme incorporated into poetic verse.
- **Jargon:** Jargon is language dedicated to a specific field of study, which can include a profession, trade, or hobby.