

Verse Workshop

Definitions –

Verse – writing arranged with a metrical rhythm, can have a rhyme

Meter - the rhythm of a piece of poetry, determined by the number and length of feet in a line.

"the Horatian ode has an intricate governing metre"

"Feet" - The basic unit of measurement of accentual-syllabic meter. A foot usually contains one stressed syllable and at least one unstressed syllable.

The standard types of feet in English poetry are the iamb, trochee, dactyl, anapest, spondee, and pyrrhic (two unstressed syllables).

Shakespeare's verse is typically written in what we call iambic pentameter. An iambic foot is made up of two syllables, the first is unstressed, the second stressed. Pentameter is a line of verse consisting of five stressed beats, which in total is ten syllables.

We can notate these as short-long (unstressed – stressed) – For example

• – • – • – • – • –
TWO HOUSEHOLDS, BOTH ALIKE IN DIGNITY

Try speaking this out loud. Note how the metre helps or hinders how the line sounds, what meaning does it lend the sentence? Now try to notate and speak out loud the below –

TWO HOUSEHOLDS, BOTH ALIKE IN DIGNITY
IN FAIR VERONA, WHERE WE LAY OUR SCENE
FROM ANCIENT GRUDGE BREAK TO NEW MUTINY
WHERE CIVIL BLOOD MAKES CIVIL HANDS UNCLEAR.

Shakespeare often breaks his own rules for his verse. Why would he do this? What effect do you think it might have?

SONNET 18

(SHALL I COMPARE THEE TO A SUMMER'S DAY?)

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.
Sometime too hot the eye of heaven shines,
And often is his gold complexion dimmed;
And every fair from fair sometime declines,
By chance, or nature's changing course, untrimmed;
But thy eternal summer shall not fade,
Nor lose possession of that fair thou ow'st,
Nor shall death brag thou wand'rest in his shade,
When in eternal lines to Time thou grow'st.
So long as men can breathe, or eyes can see,
So long lives this, and this gives life to thee.

William Shakespeare 15641616

Hearing the language

Even though this is written in verse, the 'speaker' is saying something. What is it? How does the language they have chosen support/negate/deepen the message? How does the metre help?

When we act verse at some point we have to ask what is coming first, the thought or the words? Obviously it works best if they appear to happen together. If the thoughts are being discovered at the moment of speaking. The thoughts may have started some time before, but that this is the first time they are being voiced in this way, with these words.

Read the text again. Read it one phrase at a time, whilst walking in the space. First, try walking only a few steps at a time each time you hit a punctuation mark, and standing still to speak. Then, try

walking only whilst you speak, stopping on punctuation. Then progress to walking whilst speaking, changing direction or stopping when the thoughts change.

Structures to look out for

Antithesis – This is the contrasting of two ideas by using words of opposite meanings next to each other (either literally, or within two next to each other clauses), and the audience's understanding of what is being said hinges entirely on the actor's interpretation.

For example –

When my love swears that she is made of truth

I believe her, though I know she lies

Sonnet 138

There are two extremes, 'truth' and 'lies', but it also implies a whole world of in-betweens. It also hints at the inner turmoil of the 'speaker'.

What do you make of this? The Friar from Romeo and Juliet is trying to decide whether to help the lovers marry in secret –

The **day** to cheer and **night's** dank dew to dry,

The earth that's nature's **mother** is her **tomb**.

What is her burying **grave**, that is her **womb**;

For naught so **vile** that on earth doth live

But to the earth some special **good** doth give;

Ladders of thoughts

Shakespeare's prose and poetry are full of lists and ladders. He uses these when characters are intensifying an idea or feeling - when they are raising the stakes. In prose especially, a list or ladder helps to give form and unity to the text. Here is Rosalind from As You Like It:

ROSALIND There was never anything so sudden, but the fight of two
rams, and Caesar's thrasonical brag of I came, saw, and

overcame. For your brother and my sister *no sooner met, but
they looked; no sooner looked but they loved; no sooner
loved, but they sighed; no sooner sighed, but they asked one
another the reason; no sooner knew the reason, but they
sought the remedy...*

Modern Verse Storytellers

from Brand New Ancients

by *Kate Tempest*

In the old days,
the myths were the stories we used to explain ourselves
but how can we explain
the way we hate ourselves?
The things we've made ourselves into,
the way we break ourselves in two,
the way we overcomplicate ourselves?

But we are still mythical.

We are still permanently trapped
somewhere between the heroic and the pitiful.

We are still Godly,
that's what's made us so monstrous.

It just feels like we've forgotten

that we're much more
than the sum of the things that belong to us.

Every single person has a purpose in them burning.

Look again.

Allow yourself to see them.

Millions of characters

Each with their own epic narratives

Singing, 'it's hard to be an angel

Until you've been a demon'.

We are perfect because of our imperfections,

We must stay hopeful,

We must be patient;

When they excavate the modern day

They'll find us,

The Brand New Ancients.

All that we have here

Is all that we've always had.

We have jealousy,

tenderness,

curses and gifts.

But the plight of a people who have forgotten their myths

and imagine that somehow
now is all that there is –
is a sorry plight

all isolation and worry
but the life in your veins
it is Godly, heroic.

You were born for greatness.

Believe it,

know it –

take it from the tears of the poets.

there's always been heroes,
there's always been villains,
the stakes may have changed
but really there's no difference.

there's always been greed
and heartbreak and ambition.

jealousy, love,

trespass and contrition,

we're the same beings that began,
still living,
in all of our fury and foulness and friction.

Everyday odysseys.

Dreams vs decisions.

The stories are there if you listen.

The stories are here.

The stories are you

and your fear and your hope is as old

as the language of smoke,

the language of blood,

the language of languishing love,

the Gods are all here.

Because the Gods are in us.