Poetry Primer

For Mother and her Student to Study Together

Poems are meant to be read aloud; poetry is an artform of sound *and* intellect. Your 3rd Year later knowledge student will be reading poetry for his Reading Aloud assignments for seven weeks this year, so it is time to dig a little bit deeper into this artform.

There are some elements of reading poetry that are unique to poetry, and for many mothers (suffering from our modern educations!), these elements might be absolutely foreign! Fear not, dear friends; this little primer will equip you and your student to make the most of this poetry unit. It might take an hour or two to go through this primer, so you might break it into pieces.

ON POETRY

A key element of classical education is literature, and no study of literature is complete without poetry.

I'm going to start by saying the same thing everyone's been telling you all along... but for completely different reasons, so hear me out...

Poetry is important.

(Yes, that's actually true.)

And if you can be patient with yourself and stick with it for awhile, you'll start to like it for yourself. (Yes, that's actually true, too; seriously, if it can happen to me, it can happen to anybody!)

For six thousand years, people have enjoyed poetry. Think about it—would *The Odyssey* and *Hamlet* and *The Life of King Arthur* and everything else have survived for centuries if the audiences of those times had said, *That's a poem? No, thanks!* ...? (Not that I'm recommending all of those books for our Christian children, but they make the point.)

Here's the thing. Mothers, the way we were taught poetry in our schooldays... we were robbed. The way they taught us about it, was as if the curriculum designers were intentionally trying to make sure young people couldn't understand and wouldn't like poetry. We never sat back and listened to good poems, like we listen to a good song. Instead, it was always an analytical exercise, like some weird math problem we couldn't understand.

But how about this? What is it that you like about "In Christ Alone"? We all love that modern hymn, right? The music's pretty good; I mean, it's no "O Holy Night", but it's not bad. But if the music isn't especially wonderful, why do we all love it so much? Read this out loud, without singing it, and just listen to each line:

> In Christ alone my hope is found;
> He is my light, my strength, my song.
> This cornerstone, this solid ground,
> Firm through the fiercest drought and storm.
> What heights of love, what depths of peace,
> When fears are stilled, when strivings cease.
> My comforter, my all in all;
> Here, in the love of Christ, I stand.

That's poetry.

There's something wonderful about choosing just the right words to say something, and arranging them in an artful way, and then adding the lovely sounds of rhyme and rhythm to it all, that is uplifting to the soul.

And this is not some fleshly invention humans devised to satisfy our sinful cravings. In the Garden of Eden, the first recorded words spoken by Man in all of history (still in a state of sinless perfection!) were poetry.

> This now is bone of my bones,
> And flesh of my flesh;
> She shall be called Woman,
> Because she was taken out of the man. (Genesis 2:23)

It's amazing to think that Adam, on his first day of life, was creating verse on the fly; God gives us that little glimpse into how brilliant Man was before the Fall.

But it doesn't stop there; you see poetry *throughout* the Bible. Jacob blesses his sons in poetry. Melchizedek blesses Abram in verse. The largest book of the Bible is entirely poetry—the psalms. In fact, all of the Wisdom books—Job, Psalms, Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, and Song of Solomon—are poety. And the Lord himself often uses poetry to speak to us in the Bible: God commands Abram to leave his father's house and go to where the Lord would lead him in poetic form, for example. And the Prophecy books... *most* of the words which the Lord commanded the prophets to speak to us were poetry.

And of course, outside of the Bible, there is a rich treasury of poetry to enjoy. Don't get me wrong; there's a lot of garbage out there, too, especially the stuff they made us study in high school. But there is a lot of beautiful poetry, and we're missing something wonderful if we can't enjoy or understand it. For example, if you want to read the original history of William Wallace and the battle for freedom in Scotland, it's an epic poem (Blind Harry's *Wallace*). In *The Lord of the Rings*, at poignant moments, the men break into poetry. (We shouldn't trudge through those songs; we should think they're some of the best parts!) And of course, John Milton's incomparable *Paradise Lost* is an epic poem. While we're at it, these are manly works, so let's tear down that straw man right here; poetry isn't for girls! It's a manly artform!

So... how did I go from mildly-skeptical-to-leery of poetry to being a full-fledged lover of it?

First, I ditched the modern stuff. I find that most of the modern poetry, including the stuff we studied in school, is one of two types: 1.) Humanist and anti-God, or 2.) Written by the same guys who made the emperor's new clothes, if you know what I mean. (In other words, it's really dumb.)

Second, I ditched the children's poetry. Don't get me wrong; there's a lot of cute and sweet stuff out there, but you're never going to get the same musical experience from "Mary Had a Little Lamb" as you do from Beethoven's 6th Symphony. Back when all I was reading to the children was *A Child's Garden of Verses*, I was still wondering what the big deal was about poetry. If the only music I'd ever heard was "Twinkle, Twinkle" or "Jingle Bells", I wouldn't be all that excited about music, either.

Third, I got a great volume and just started reading to the children every day.

Here's what that looked like. I got the Arthur Quiller-Couch edition of *The Oxford Book of English Verse*, and I just straight-out told the children, "We're going to read a poem every day. And I don't understand it very well, but we're just going to keep reading it, and I figure, as we keep reading it, at some point we'll start understanding it."

I started at the beginning of that book, which, in hindsight, may not have been the best idea, because it's arranged in chronological order, and the first few are in Middle English, which actually qualifies as another language! But the glossary at the bottoms of the pages helped, and many times I would finish by telling the children, "I'm not sure what that meant...!?"

But we kept going. And three years later, I find that Bunyan's poems are my favorite parts of *The Pilgrim's Progress*! (And if you just said, *What poems in* Pilgrim's Progress*?*, then your copy of *Pilgrim's Progress* is abridged; I recommend you find a copy of Bunyan's original work for your family.)

In a word, I started reading poetry on faith, and today I really understand and love it! So much so, that I encourage you to dig into it, too. I was missing something wonderful, all of the years when I thought poetry

was difficult and unpleasant. (And, again, that may have been because the poetry I was assigned to study in high school *was* difficult and unpleasant!) My life is richer today for having added poetry to it, and I'm delighted to share this treasure with my children.

Here's a taste, just to whet your appetite. It's one of Bunyan's gems in *The Pilgrim's Progress*.

> Whilst Christian is among his godly friends,
> Their golden mouths make him sufficient mends
> For all his griefs, and when they let him go,
> He's clad with northern Steel from top to toe.

What a picture he paints, in so few words, of the blessings of godly fellowship!

TEACHING YOUR STUDENT TO READ POETRY

Already Doing Great

Please don't let the poetry readings in this year's Reading Aloud assignments worry you. Your student has already been learning beautiful poetry during all of his years in *Grammar of Grace* and 1st and 2nd Year Later Knowledge, so he probably already likes and understands poetry better than you did when you were his age (whether or not he realizes it). So don't worry; even if nothing in this Primer makes sense to you, your student is already on a great track.

Reasonable Expectations

I'm going to offer some information about poetry here for you, and suggest that you in turn teach it to your student. But if you find it too confusing or overwhelming, just encourage and challenge your child to improve in the areas you are comfortable with (like enunciating, speaking up, using meaningful gestures, speaking with appropriate dramatic emphasis, etc.), and *don't worry about it*.

The Lord has fully equipped you to teach your children well! Part of that ability may include your continuing to learn more, yourself, but sometimes due to any number of circumstances, that is not possible or practical at a given time. If you find the following information helpful, please make use of it. If not, please do not look at it as a burden added to your shoulders, but let it go and keep up the good work you're already doing!

With those caveats out of the way, let's take a look at some poetry basics.

RIDDLES

When it comes to poetry, I always think of Solomon's introduction to the Proverbs, in which he invites the young person to *strive* to *understand* the words of the wise and their *riddles*.

Good writing always has beauty at the surface, and even more beauty the deeper you look below the surface, in imitation of God's creation. Poetry is like that.

The most important thing the student must do when reading anything is to make sure he understands what the author is saying. Mothers, our students all want to be intellectually lazy; they want to read their assigned reading, and if something doesn't immediately make perfect sense, they want to pass over it and keep on reading.

But that is *not* reading.

Reading is not empty, meaningless sounds. Reading is *understanding* what the author is communicating.

And poetry is where you will especially run into that problem. The words may all be rearranged into a different order. A richer vocabulary will be used (so we may have to look some words up in the dictionary!). And the author—if it's good poetry—is packing a lot of meaning into but few words.

In other words, poetry is written like a riddle. The reader has to puzzle on it to understand what it means. The meaning is often not clear until later in the poem—sometimes not until the very end of the poem. The student will need to think about all of the clues, all of the puzzle pieces, and keep rearranging them until every piece fits and it all makes sense.

Basically, we must teach our children not to do what we always did when we were reading poetry, which was to skip over the stuff we didn't understand, make a wild guess about what the whole thing was about, and then forget about it (or at least that's what I always did...!). As Christian Classical style homeschooling mothers, we've been teaching our children that they must pay attention to what they're reading and learn to understand it, all along; but it bears repeating since poetry usually requires a little extra mental effort, and our sweet little students are, as we've discussed before, prone to sin (laziness).

When your student reads a poem aloud to you, and you have trouble understanding what certain parts are about, that almost always means that your student doesn't understand what that part is about, either (which is why he's reading it so poorly that you can't follow the meaning). In those moments, as you've done so many times before, stop him, and ask him, "What does that mean?" (And if you didn't understand it, start thinking it through for yourself too, of course, so you can guide him there if necessary.)

Usually, the first problem is that the student didn't even bother to look up the words he didn't understand. Does he know the meaning of *every single word*? If not, then he can't possibly understand the sentence.

Next, once he understands the meaning of every word, if he still can't figure out what the sentence means, then he probably isn't using his knowledge of English grammar to understand how the words fit together in this sentence! Again, the words are probably in an unusual order, so it may take some thought to understand how the words work together. In that case, it's very helpful to make your student diagram it.

Finally, is he just being too lazy to think it through til he's solved the riddle? (That's the biggest problem at our home.) It is your duty to teach your student to put laziness away from him, put his thinking cap on, and to solve this riddle! "And whatsoever ye do, do it heartily, as to the Lord, and not to men..." (Colossians 3:23)

Well, let's have an example, then. Here is a short poem, "On Being Brought from Africa to America", by Phillis Wheatley (c. 1753–1784).

> 'Twas mercy brought me from my Pagan land,
> Taught my benighted soul to understand
> That there's a God, that there's a Saviour too:
> Once I redemption neither sought nor knew.
> Some view our sable race with scornful eye,
> "Their colour is a diabolic die."
> Remember, Christians, Negro's, black as Cain,
> May be refin'd, and join th' angelic train.

So in the first line, the reader is thinking, "What pagan land?" The reader should not say, "I don't understand; I'll just read on." No, the reader should pause and work on the riddle. "What is the author saying? She says that she came from a pagan land." Also, did the reader ignore the title of the poem?! The reader should be thinking, "Hmm... probably Africa; the speaker in the poem has come from Africa? Let's keep reading and see if that's right."

Second line—*what* taught her benighted soul? Think; look back.

Yes, it was *mercy* that taught her benighted soul. If you didn't know what benighted means, did you look it up? Now, with that in mind, what is the state of a benighted soul? And of course you see that this line continues right on to the next.

Are you seeing that the reader is thinking about the meaning of every word, every rhyme, carefully trying to solve the riddle? Alright, so what do the second and third lines mean?

Quite right. Mercy taught her lost soul to understand that there's a God, and that there's a Savior. Very good; on to the next line.

What does line 4 mean? Is that a complete sentence by itself? No, certainly not. Where does this sentence start and end? Yes, good, these four lines all comprise a single sentence. Keep that in view, of course! Alright, then, what does line 4 mean? Think it through, and once you have your answer written down in the margin or on scratch paper, read on.

Alright, we see that in the first four lines, the speaker is saying that she was brought from a Pagan land where she had no knowledge of God or of his Christ, to this land, where she was taught about the true God and the Gospel; she had never dreamed of redemption and certainly never sought it, but now she knew it and rejoiced; therefore, she credits the Lord and his mercy for having brought her here, because it was through this means that she was saved. Moreover, based on the title, we're pretty sure that she came from Africa and was, therefore, taken as a slave to America. But her point is that although it was an evil act done by men on earth, it was actually an act of God's mercy, to save her eternal soul.

What do you think? Is that what you had? Do you buy that? Go back and read it again, and take every word carefully into account, and see if this meaning be right.

Onward. Read the second half of the poem, pay attention to every word, and write down what you think it means, and also if it confirms our understanding of the first four lines, or if we learn more information that causes us to rethink what the author had been saying in those lines. Once you've got it all written down, check your answer below.

Very well, let's see what you came up with. First, these lines only confirm that this poem is, indeed, about an African slave being brought to America, but looking on that sinful act on the part of men as an act of God's mercy toward her, to save her soul forever. Line 5 speaks of some Americans who are scornful toward Africans with dark skin like her, who say (line 6) that the African's black skin is a stain of the devil! In line 7, she reminds Christians that though a negro be black inwardly with a sinful, darkened heart (like Cain, who wasn't black outwardly), (line 8) he may be refined and join in the praises sung to God (just like any other person whose skin is lighter, she doesn't plainly say, but should be inferred by the discerning reader).

All riddles made clear... almost. Is there anything you're still wondering? If there is, write it down, because there's definitely one mystery still hanging out there.

Were you still wondering about anything? What was it?

The final mystery is... Is this poem about an imaginary person, or about the poet herself? That, given how easy life is with the internet today, I will leave to you to discover. Look up Phillis Wheatley, and find out the answer.

RHYME

I'm assuming that you already understand perfectly well what rhyme is. If this is not the case, a simple internet search will give you abundant information about rhyme.

For our purposes, suffice it to say that rhyme is an important part of most English poetry; typically the last word of each line will rhyme with the last word of another line, in a pattern that is predictable and pleasant. Rhyme is used to place emphasis on meaningful words and gives the whole poem a lovely sound, very pleasing to the senses.

The reader should bring out the rhyme of a poem in a way that is clear, but not overdone or forced. It should sound natural and pleasing; this usually comes very easily to the reader who puts but minimal thought into

it. The two ditches to avoid are (1) to ignore the rhyme and (2) to overdo it. Stay out of those ditches, and it will sound lovely.

METER

English poetry is written in a **meter**, or a *measured* number of syllables. Music is written the same way; you can tap your foot along to it, and you can tell when a line is probably going to end. You can even count 1-2-3-4, 1-2-3-4, or 1-2-3, 1-2-3 along with the music. Poetry is just like that. In poetry, every line has a certain number of syllables (or beats), called the **meter**, and that is part of what makes poetry have a musical sound to it.

There are all sorts of different meters in poetry. But it's just as simple as counting up the syllables; let's give it a try.

We'll start with "Joy to the World", by Isaac Watts (1674–1748). Let's take the first verse; read it out loud:

> Joy to the world! the Lord is come:
> Let earth receive her King;
> Let every heart prepare him room,
> And heav'n and nature sing.

1. **How many syllables (beats) are in the first line? ____**
2. **How many syllables (beats) are in the second? ____**
3. **How many beats are in the third line? (This one's a little trickier, because you're not sure if *every* counts as 2 beats or 3 beats. Write down both possible answers.) _____**
4. **And in the fourth? ____**

So at this point, you should see a pattern, right? 8-6-8-6. (And that is the way we would write this meter.)

But you're not quite sure you have it right, because the 3rd line could have gone a couple of different ways, depending on if Watts wanted you to say "every" with all three syllables, "ev-er-y", or the way we often do in normal speech, with only 2 syllables, "ev-'ry". When it's not quite clear how many syllables the poet intended for you to count in a line, go on to the next stanza, and see what the poet did there. The pattern will be regular. Let's count up the syllables for each line in the second verse (especially that 3rd line):

> Joy to the earth! the Saviour reigns:
> Let men their songs employ;
> While fields and floods, rocks, hills, and plains
> Repeat the sounding joy.

What was the pattern in the second stanza? _____

You should have come up with 8-6-8-6. Looks like we've got it, but let's count out the meter on the third verse, just to make sure. And—hey—it's fun and easy anyway, and good practice, so it's no trouble.

> No more let sin and sorrows grow,
> Nor thorns infest the ground;
> He comes to make his blessings flow
> Far as the curse is found.

What was the pattern in the third stanza? _____

There it is, for sure: 8-6-8-6. So now we know for sure that the first two stanzas were also 8-6-8-6, and having gone through three out of four stanzas of the entire poem, we see that this is, indeed, the meter for the entire poem. Excellent.

Let's try another example. This is the first stanza of "If—", by Rudyard Kipling (1865–1936).

If you can keep your head when all about you
  Are losing theirs and blaming it on you,
If you can trust yourself when all men doubt you,[1]
  But make allowance for their doubting too;
If you can wait and not be tired by waiting,
  Or being lied about, don't deal in lies,
Or being hated, don't give way to hating,
  And yet don't look too good, nor talk too wise:

What is the pattern of syllables in this stanza? _____

I got 11-10-11-10-11-10-11-10; how about you? Are you starting to get the hang of this? Meter is crazy easy, right?

Let's try something a little more advanced, where the poet uses a more complicated pattern than just ABABAB. Let's look at the opening stanza of "On the Morning of Christ's Nativity", by John Milton (1608–1674). Count the syllables (beats) in each line (don't forget to read out loud!):

This is the month, and this the happy morn,
  Wherein the Son of Heav'n's eternal King,
Of wedded Maid, and Virgin Mother born,
  Our great redemption from above did bring;
  For so the holy sages once did sing,
    That he our deadly forfeit should release,
    And with his Father work us a perpetual peace.

Line 1: ___

Line 2: ___

Line 3: ___

Line 4: ___

Line 5: ___

Line 6: ___

Line 7: ___

Whoa; could that be right? Let's check the next stanza and see what we get on that one:

That glorious Form, that Light unsufferable,
  And that far-beaming blaze of Majesty,
Wherewith he wont at Heav'n's high council-table,
  To sit the midst of Trinal Unity,
  He laid aside, and here with us to be,
    Forsook the courts of everlasting day,
    And chose with us a darksome house of mortal clay.

Line 1: ___ (This one you might be unsure about, because *glorious* might be 2 or 3 beats, and *unsufferable* might be 4 or 5, right? Just underline those words and put down your best guess.)

Line 2: ___

Line 3: ___

[1] It must be pointed out that this line should not be taken literally, as if one should trust in himself or believe in himself, as the world proclaims in our time; but the poet's intention, rather, was to point out the necessity of holding fast to your convictions—derived, ultimately, from trusting in the *Lord*—even when all around you doubt and naysay against the truth.

Line 4: ___

Line 5: ___

Line 6: ___

Line 7: ___

So in the first stanza, we had 10-10-10-10-10-10-12. And in the second, 10-10-11-10-10-10-12. Let's look at the next stanza, so see if it can help us find out for sure what pattern Milton is using with this poem.

Say Heav'nly Muse, shall not thy sacred vein
Afford a present to the Infant God?
Hast thou no verse, no hymn, or solemn strain,
To welcome him to this his new abode,
Now while the heav'n, by the Sun's team untrod,
Hath took no print of the approaching light,
And all the spangled host keep watch in squadrons bright?

Line 1: ___

Line 2: ___

Line 3: ___

Line 4: ___

Line 5: ___

Line 6: ___

Line 7: ___

Perfect; we've got this figured out! The meter of this poem is 10-10-10-10-10-10-12. But what about the third line in the second stanza, which had 11 syllables? Sometimes poets have to squeeze a syllable in, here or there, so make it work. When you're reading it, you just squeeze it in, in a way that naturally fits the rhythm of the poem. Which brings us to...

RHYTHM

When you tap your foot along with some music, your foot naturally goes down-up-down-up-down-up-down-up. (Or up-down-up-down, if you prefer.)

And the beat is steady. If you're trying to tap along to some music, and the beat doesn't keep steady, pretty soon you start getting kind of irritated because you can't tap along to it. You can't dance to music that doesn't have a steady beat. Honestly, no one enjoys music that doesn't keep a steady beat. (There are times when it is appropriate to speed up or slow down, but the *rule* is a steady beat.)

And that is a critical component of reading poetry, too.

But it's not just every beat boom-boom-boom-boom steadily trudging along. There are downbeats and upbeats.

Again, think about tapping your foot down-up-down-up. Let's try tapping our foot, down-up-down-up while saying these lines by A.A. Milne (1882–1956; not an example of Christian, uplifting poetry, but some simple stuff that will be good for helping you learn rhythm):

A bear, however hard he tries,
Grows tubby without exercise.

Try it a few times. Where do you think you ought to tap your foot ("down")? Say it a few times, until you think you have the right beat, and then write down your answer by underlining the syllables where you tap you foot DOWN.

A bear, however hard he tries,
Grows tubby without exercise.

N.B. In testing this primer, in the places where there are directions for the reader to read a certain passage *out loud*, *several times*, the people who did *not* read it out loud, or who only did it once or twice, were the ones who would say, at these very points, "I don't get it." But when they were reminded about the directions, everything fell into place for them.

Let's check your answer. You should have had:

A bear, how-ev-er hard he tries,
Grows tub-by with-out ex-er-cise.

If you didn't get it right, that's okay; just say it out loud a few times the right way now, tapping your foot with every underlined syllable. Or you could tap your hand on your desk or on your leg; that's what I'm doing right now. Did you do it a few times? Do you feel really comfortable with how it sounds now?? (If not, do it some more.) Alright, you've got it; good.

Now, I want you to *think* about what you're doing here.

What's happening here is that all words (in all languages) have syllables that are **accented**, or **stressed**, and syllables that are **unaccented**, or **unstressed**. And the poet arranges the words in his poetry such that the words fall into a regular pattern of stressed and unstressed syllables, so that the poetry has a regular rhythm to it. And guess what it's called... it's called the "foot"! Because it's when you naturally tap your foot. Some of the poetry terms are funny, but that one is a piece of cake.

The foot in these A.A. Milne lines is the most common rhythm in poetry; it's called **iambic** foot (sounds like "I am bic.") **Iambic** is defined by the Poetry Foundation as, "A metrical foot consisting of an unaccented syllable followed by an accented syllable. The words 'unite' and 'provide' are both iambic. It is the most common meter of poetry in English (including all the plays and poems of William Shakespeare), as it is closest to the rhythms of English speech."

With that in mind, let's read more of this poem, and see if you can keep the foot (or the beat) going. Think of this foot (or rhythm) as saying, "Short-long, short-long, short-long, short-long", and the "long" is where you tap your foot, the downbeat. Here we go; read this stanza (aloud, of course!):

A bear, however hard he tries,
Grows tubby without exercise.
Our Teddy Bear is short and fat,
Which is not to be wondered at;
He gets what exercise he can
By falling off the ottoman,
But generally seems to lack
The energy to clamber back.

Are you getting the hang of it? Go back now, and underline every accented syllable (the long beats, or the beats where you tap your foot DOWN). (Don't look ahead at the answers; go back and do it, just to make sure you're getting this before we move onto harder poems.)

A bear, how-ev-er hard he tries,
Grows tub-by with-out ex-er-cise.
Our Ted-dy Bear is short and fat,
Which is not to be won-dered at;
He gets what ex-er-cise he can
By fal-ling off the ot-to-man,
But gen-er-al-ly seems to lack
The en-er-gy to clam-ber back.

You should have said a few words differently than you normally would have said them, because you were following the rhythm of the poetry. Did you notice that? You probably normally say "generally" as if it were three syllables; in normal speech, we do not typically enunciate all four syllables, "gen-er-al-ly". But because of the way Milne wrote that line in his poem, the rhythm called for speaking all four syllables clearly, and even placing some emphasis on the "al" of "generally", which you would never do in common speech.

Where else are we saying things differently, because we are following the foot of the poem? Mark every line where you pronounced a word in a slightly unusual way with a star.

Yes, in line 3, we would not normally accent "bear", because we usually say "teddy bear" as if it were one word, with only an accent on the first syllable. In line 4, we would not normally give an accent to "is" or "to". In line 6, we would not normally give an accent to "man" in "ottoman", and in line 8, we wouldn't usually accent "-gy" in "energy".

When you follow the rhythm the poet has written into his work—very thoughtfully, very intentionally—you will hear the musical quality of the poetry that comes from its rhythm and rhyme.

But if you're not *aware* that there ought to be a rhythm, and that you ought to follow it when you read the poetry, then your natural tendency would be to say the word "generally" in line 7 just as you normally would, and then the rhythm of the stanza would be broken. Try it, and see if you can hear how the musical quality of the poetry is ruined if you are not careful to observe the rhythm when you recite. Some lines come out with rhythm, others don't, and it doesn't make any musical sense.

Let's see if this is all starting to make sense to you. Here is the entire poem. Read it a few times, and see if you can keep the consistent rhythm of 8 beats in a line, with the short-long, short-long foot, for the entire poem. Tap your foot and keep the time; I bet you'll figure it right out!

TEDDY BEAR
A.A. Milne

A bear, however hard he tries,
Grows tubby without exercise.
Our Teddy Bear is short and fat,
Which is not to be wondered at;
He gets what exercise he can
By falling off the ottoman,
But generally seems to lack
The energy to clamber back.

Now tubbiness is just the thing
Which gets a fellow wondering;
And Teddy worried lots about
The fact that he was rather stout.
He thought: "If only I were thin!
But how does anyone begin?"
He thought: "It really isn't fair
To grudge one exercise and air."

For many weeks he pressed in vain
His nose against the window-pane,
And envied those who walked about
Reducing their unwanted stout.
None of the people he could see
"Is quite" (he said) "as fat as me!"
Then, with a still more moving sigh,
"I mean" (he said) "as fat as I!

One night it happened that he took
A peep at an old picture-book,
Wherein he came across by chance
The picture of a King of France
(A stoutish man) and, down below,
These words: "King Louis So and So,
Nicknamed 'The Handsome!'" There he sat,
And (think of it!) the man was fat!

Our bear rejoiced like anything
To read about this famous King,
Nicknamed "The Handsome." There he sat,
And certainly the man was fat.
Nicknamed "The Handsome." Not a doubt
The man was definitely stout.
Why then, a bear (for all his tub)
Might yet be named "The Handsome Cub!"

"Might yet be named." Or did he mean
That years ago he "might have been"?
For now he felt a slight misgiving:
"Is Louis So and So still living?
Fashions in beauty have a way
Of altering from day to day.
Is 'Handsome Louis' with us yet?
Unfortunately I forget."

Next morning (nose to window-pane)
The doubt occurred to him again.
One question hammered in his head:
"Is he alive or is he dead?"
Thus, nose to pane, he pondered; but
The lattice window, loosely shut,
Swung open. With one startled "Oh!"
Our Teddy disappeared below.

There happened to be passing by
A plump man with a twinkling eye,
Who, seeing Teddy in the street,
Raised him politely to his feet,
And murmured kindly in his ear
Soft words of comfort and of cheer:
"Well, well!" "Allow me!" "Not at all."
"Tut-tut! A very nasty fall."

Our Teddy answered not a word;
It's doubtful if he even heard.
Our bear could only look and look:
The stout man in the picture-book!
That 'handsome' King - could this be he,
This man of adiposity?
"Impossible," he thought. "But still,
No harm in asking. Yes I will!"

"Are you," he said,"by any chance
His Majesty the King of France?"
The other answered, "I am that,"
Bowed stiffly, and removed his hat;
Then said, "Excuse me," with an air,
"But is it Mr Edward Bear?"
And Teddy, bending very low,
Replied politely, "Even so!"

They stood beneath the window there,
The King and Mr Edward Bear,
And, handsome, if a trifle fat,
Talked carelessly of this and that....
Then said His Majesty, "Well, well,
I must get on," and rang the bell.
"Your bear, I think," he smiled. "Good-day!"
And turned, and went upon his way.

A bear, however hard he tries,
Grows tubby without exercise.
Our Teddy Bear is short and fat,
Which is not to be wondered at.
But do you think it worries him
To know that he is far from slim?
No, just the other way about -
He's proud of being short and stout.

Are you starting to get the hang of it? The good news is that, the more poetry you read, the easier it gets, until it really doesn't take any thought at all. So just stick with it and keep working at it, and before you know it, you'll wonder why everybody doesn't understand how to read poetry with good rhythm.

RHYTHM, PART II

Perhaps you remember that I told you that iambic rhythm was the most common foot of poetry... which implies that not all poetry is in iambic rhythm!

Yes, it's true; you cannot just recite all poetry in the same rhythm as "Teddy Bear". That is why I began by teaching you how to count the meter and rhythm for yourself, before telling you that "Teddy Bear" has 8 beats in a line, and that the foot is short-long, short-long, short-long, short-long. When you read a poem, you have to figure out what the rhythm and meter are for yourself; but it's natural, and you'll get the hang of it.

There are many different rhythms and meters, you will recall. The keys to it all, though, are:

1. That the poet will more or less follow the regular pattern of accented and unaccented syllables in normal speech, and

2. That the pattern will repeat throughout the poem, so if one line is tricky to figure out, you can skip on to another (easier) line to figure out what the correct pattern is, and then go back and make all of the difficult syllables in the tricky line fall into their correct rhythm.

The foot (or rhythm) will usually come in either *pairs* of syllables or *triplets*.

If each foot has pairs of syllables (two syllables), then there are only two possible rhythms: short-long (iambic), or long-short (trochee). (Note: You do not have to learn the poetic terms; I'm just including them for a bit of trivia.)

If each foot has three syllables, then there are two usual rhythms: long-short-short (dactyl), or short-short-long (anapest). There are other possibilities they teach about in literature class, but if you're on the lookout for these four meters, you'll be fully equipped to read 99% of poetry.

Here again, with poetry terms so you can win trivia games if you like, and example words from the Poetry Foundation:

- **Iamb.** 2 syllables: short-long (unaccented-accented). Ex.: unite, provide.
- **Trochee.** 2 syllables: long-short (accented-unaccented). Ex.: garden, highway, tiger, burning, raven.
- **Dactyl.** 3 syllables: long-short-short (accented-unaccented-unaccented). Ex.: poetry, basketball, syllable, metrical.
- **Anapest.** 3 syllables: short-short-long (unaccented-unaccented-accented). Ex.: overcome, underfoot.
- **Spondee.** 1 syllable in each foot, all accented; very rare. Ex.: hog-wild.

So let's practice finding the foot (or the beat)—the rhythm—in some different poems. Let's read another little bit from Phillis Wheatley. One of her most-beloved poems is the elegy she wrote in honor of George Whitefield when he died, entitled (it's a really long title!), "An Elegiac Poem On the Death of that celebrated Divine, and eminent Servant of Jesus Christ, the Reverend and Learned Mr. George Whitefield". Here's a bit from the opening.

> Unhappy we, the setting Sun deplore!
> Which once was splendid, but it shines no more;
> He leaves this earth for Heav'n's unmeasur'd height,
> And worlds unknown, receive him from our sight;

Okay, let's think this through. We'll take this one step at a time.

How many beats are in each line? ____

So what is the meter of this stanza? _____

You should have noticed that there are 10 beats in each line, and that, therefore, the meter is 10-10-10-10. If you didn't get it right, go back and try again, and see if you can figure out the correct answer for yourself, this time; keep at it until you understand why the meter is 10-10-10-10.

Alright, now, tap your foot along while you're saying the lines. **How many syllables are in each foot? Are there 2 syllables in each foot, or are there 3 syllables in each foot? ____**

Did you write down that there are 2 syllables in each foot? (If not, go back now that you know the answer, and see if you can understand how I got that answer!)

Finally, of the two syllables in each foot, is the pattern short-long, short-long; or is the pattern long-short, long-short? _____

Bonus points if you can give the poetry term for that foot: _____

Alright, the correct answer is short-long, or to use the poetry term, **iambic**. If you aren't getting these right, yet, no worries, just keep at it, and you'll get the hang of it!

Last step: Now read the stanza, following that short-long, short-long rhythm for the whole poem. Do it a few times, until you get the whole thing just right. Tap your foot while you do it. If you're doing it right,

you'll find yourself tapping an extra time at the end of every line; that's very good, you're finding the natural rhythm of the poem.

> Unhappy we, the setting Sun deplore!
> Which once was splendid, but it shines no more;
> He leaves this earth for Heav'n's unmeasur'd height,
> And worlds unknown, receive him from our sight;

Quite right.

Another example. This is "To my Dear and Loving Husband", by Anne Bradstreet (1612–1672).

> If ever two were one, then surely we.
> If ever man were lov'd by wife, then thee.
> If ever wife was happy in a man,
> Compare with me, ye women, if you can.
> I prize thy love more than whole Mines of gold
> Or all the riches that the East doth hold.
> My love is such that Rivers cannot quench,
> Nor ought but love from thee give recompence.
> Thy love is such I can no way repay.
> The heavens reward thee manifold, I pray.
> Then while we live, in love let's so persever
> That when we live no more, we may live ever.

1. **How many beats are in each line? ___**
2. **What is the meter? _____**
3. **How many beats in each foot? ___**
4. **What is the rhythm (pattern) of each foot? _____**
5. **Now, go back and read the entire poem again, using the foot you think is correct. Does it work? If not, check your answers again, and then try it again until it all falls into place.**

Eventually, you should have noticed 10 beats in each line, 10-10-10-10-etc. meter, 2 beats in each foot, and a short-long (iambic) foot for the rhythm.

Yes, it's the very same meter and rhythm that Phillis Wheatley's elegy to Whitefield had! This rhythm and meter actually have a special name—**iambic pentameter**, for the iambic foot, with 5 iambs in each line. It's very common in English poetry; virtually all of Shakespeare's works are written in iambic pentameter (just for your information, not by way of recommending Shakespeare).

But there were two tricky bits to this poem, weren't there? Okay, so this is the final step in finding the rhythm. Once you've figured out the foot, when there's a word or phrase that doesn't naturally quite fit into the foot, you have to try saying it a few ways until you can figure out how the poet intended for it to fit into the rhythm of the poem.

So, in Bradstreet's poem, where did the rhythm not work out quite right?

If ever two were one, then surely we.
If ever man were lov'd by wife, then thee.
If ever wife was happy in a man,
Compare with me, ye women, if you can.
I prize thy love more than whole Mines of gold
Or all the riches that the East doth hold.
My love is such that Rivers cannot quench,
Nor ought but love from thee give recompence.
Thy love is such I can no way repay.
The heavens reward thee manifold, I pray.
Then while we live, in love let's so persever
That when we live no more, we may live ever.

The 10th line is the first place where we stumble, right? It all goes wrong with "heavens". After that word, the rhythm goes all wrong. So what do you think Bradstreet had in mind? What do you think she meant for the reader to do? Read the line out loud a few different ways, and see if you can figure out how it's supposed to go.

What did you come up with?

If you squished "heavens" into one syllable, more like "heav'ns", you got it! (If not, go back and try it that way, and see if you can understand why that is the correct answer; don't worry, you really will get the hang of it!)

That is a very common device you'll see poets use—to squish a small syllable together with a larger one, in order to preserve the rhythm, in a tricky wording situation. Writing poetry is hard, and sometimes poets have to use tricks to make everything work out right.

Another correct answer would have been to keep "heavens" as a two-syllable word, but to squish it together with the "re-" in "reward", so that you had three syllables in that foot, as a long-short-short foot. (A dactyl foot for that one beat.) Can you see how that would work, too? That's another common solution poets employ—just squeezing in an extra unaccented syllable without interrupting the regular beat.

So, where was the other spot where the rhythm didn't go right? Yes, line 11, the very next line! Read lines 11 and 12 a few times, and see if you can figure our what Bradstreet had in mind.

What do you think the solution is?

This was a tricky one, but I wanted you to work through it for yourself, because sometimes the answers will not be clear to you (especially as you're getting started with reading poetry), and I want you to understand that doing your best, even if you can't perfectly figure it out, is just exactly what you ought to do!

In this case, I'm not entirely sure what Bradstreet had in mind, myself. There are two possible answers. First, she may be intending for us to pronounce "persever" just the way it's written—not saying "persevere", as we expect that we ought to, but instead to say "persever", rhyming with "live ever". Bradstreet was America's first poet, and it may be that 400 years ago the word was pronounced differently than it is today, or that she intentionally played with it (like with "heav'n" instead of "heaven") in order to make the rhythm and rhyme work.

The other possibility is a thing called **forced rhyme**, where the poet takes words that don't *really* rhyme, but kind of do, and uses them because there was just no other way to make the poetry work. In that case, you would pronounce "persevere" the way we normally do, except change up the foot a bit to fit the flow of the rhythm, and just try to say the forced rhyme, "live ever" and "persevere", as convincingly as possible. Try it both ways, and see which solution you like best.

Now, with all of those little tricky bits worked out, read the entire poem again and see if you can keep the rhythm flowing along nicely. Excellent! And isn't it beautiful?

Let's try another little poem by Bradstreet; this one is called "To my Dear Children".

This book by any yet unread
I leave for you when I am dead
That being gone, here you may find
What was your living mother's mind.
Make use of what I leave in love
And God shall bless you from above

1. **How many beats are in each line? ___**
2. **What is the meter? _____**
3. **How many beats in each foot? ___**
4. **What is the rhythm (pattern) of each foot? _____**
5. **Now, go back and read the entire poem again, using the foot you think is correct. Does it work? If not, check all of your answers again, and try is all again until it all falls into place.**

Are you starting to get the hang of this? I hope you noticed that there are 8 beats in a line, 8-8-8-8-8-8-8-8 meter, 2 beats in a foot, and a short-long (iambic) foot. (I told you that this is the most common foot in English poetry!) If you didn't figure it all out the first time, try again until you can get the answers right for yourself; I know you're getting better at it already, whether you can tell it yet or not.

Let's take an example from John Bunyan. This is "Upon The Lord's Prayer". (Note: Spaces added between each stanza, to help you see the divisions more clearly.):

Our Father which in heaven art,
Thy name be always hallowed;
Thy kingdom come, thy will be done;
Thy heavenly path be followed

By us on earth as 'tis with thee,
We humbly pray;
And let our bread us given be,
From day to day.

Forgive our debts as we forgive
Those that to us indebted are:
Into temptation lead us not,
But save us from the wicked snare.

The kingdom's thine, the power too,
We thee adore;
The glory also shall be thine
For evermore.

1. **How many beats are in each line? _____**
   _____
2. **What is the meter? _____**
3. **How many beats in each foot? _____**
   _____
4. **What is the rhythm (pattern) of each foot? _____**
   _____
5. **Now, go back and read the entire poem again, using the foot (feet) you think is (are) correct. Does it work? If not, check all of your answers again, and try it all again until it falls into place.**
6. **Are there any tricky bits you need to work out? How did you solve them? _____**
   _____

I wish I could hear what you came up with! Let's check our answers.

I hope you noticed that there were 8 or 7 or 4 beats in every line.

And I super hope that you counted out the meter, and saw that it is 8-7-8-7, 8-4-8-4, 8-8-8-8, 8-4-8-4.

What is this? The different stanzas have different meters! Yes, absolutely. A great poet like Bunyan may change up the rhythm when he has good cause, and use the change to great effect.

Well, then, I suppose there must be variation in the foot of this poem, since the meter changes. What do you have for the foot in the different stanzas?

In the first stanza, there are two syllables in each foot, it's the short-long (iambic) foot. You got that, right? Easy! Did you notice that in lines 2 & 4, the shorter lines, you naturally tap out an extra beat (or pause in your reading for a beat) at the end of the line? Say it out loud and pay attention to how you do it naturally. That's exactly right! You just follow the natural flow.

In the second stanza, you had to think about it a little bit, didn't you? Lines 1 & 3 were just like the first stanza, easy peasy. But lines 2 & 4 are dramatically different, only 4 syllables.

The secret is to keep the steady tapping of your foot, and see where those four words naturally fit with your foot tapping. Try saying the whole stanza several times, keeping the steady beat with your foot, until you find a rhythm that works.

On that second line, now, "We humbly pray," where are you tapping your foot? Where are you downbeats, your accented syllables? Underline the syllables where you tap your foot.

I hope that after you tried saying the stanza aloud a few times, it was very natural for you to tap your foot with the syllables that are naturally accented, "We humb-ly pray." Did you get it??

Before we move on, let's just note what Bunyan has done here. For the first foot of this line, it is only one syllable (spondee foot); the next foot has two syllables, but it is a long-short foot (trochee); finally, there is another foot of only one syllable (spondee). So the beat stays steady, the foot tapping stays steady, but suddenly the words slow down.

Now, does that same pattern fit in line 4? Yes, it fits; yes, this must be the correct rhythm for these shorter lines.

Do you buy that? That is excellent problem solving! Remember, the two keys are:

1. That the poet will more or less follow the regular pattern of accented and unaccented syllables in normal speech, and

2. That the pattern will repeat throughout the poem, so if one line is tricky to figure out, you can skip on to another (easier) line to figure out what the correct pattern is, and then go back and make all of the difficult syllables in the tricky line fall into their correct rhythm.

It's so much simpler just to say this stuff out loud, than to write it out, so I hope you are saying these things out loud and beginning to get the rhythm and rhyme for yourself!

Well, then, let's finish up our Bunyan poem. What do you have for the rest? Double-check your answers and see if you want to change anything based on what we've learned so far.

Alright, let's see what you've got. In the third stanza, everything is very simple isn't it? Short-long, short-long, flowing right along. Very good!

And did you see that the fourth stanza goes just like the second? Good.

Can you see all of this for yourself? Go back and try saying it all again, just like that, and see if it makes sense now.

Notice, also, that in those short lines, every word is said more slowly, and gets extra emphasis. Are those words meaningful? Do you see that Bunyan used that device intentionally to make the listeners think a little extra about those words? Isn't that beautiful?

I'll say it again and again; it might seem complicated at first (especially when we're doing this in a book instead of face to face), but I promise that as you read more poetry, it will become very natural and easy for you to find the rhythm of each poem. I hardly ever have to count the syllables in a line anymore, because it seems so natural and easy.

It takes a little thinking, especially at first, but once you get the hang of it, you'll find it isn't difficult!