UNDERSTANDING POETRY

Stanza Structure

stanza |ˈstanzə| ***noun***
a group of lines forming the basic recurring metrical unit in a poem; a verse.

One of the most basic and fundamental structural elements of a poem is the *stanza*. Generally speaking, the stanza is the arrangement of lines into groups, separated by an empty line - similar to verses, or paragraphs.

Types of stanzas:

One way to understand stanza structure is to count the number of lines in a stanza. There are names for stanzas with different numbers of lines:

2 lines: **Couplet**
3 lines: **Tercet**
4 lines: **Quatrain**
5 lines: **Cinquain**
6 lines: **Sestet**
7 lines: **Septet**
8 lines: **Octave**

Note:

Some poems will stick to a rigid stanza structure with each stanza consisting of the same number of lines, while other poems may be composed of a mix of different lengths of stanzas.

Stanzas are also often characterised by a certain rhyme scheme. For example, a **couplet** typically is two lines of the same length which rhyme.

Is the stanza structure of a poem significant?

How a poet choses to structure their words is important. Stanzas are often deliberately organised to serve a purpose. This may be in order to group ideas or images together, to indicate a change in tone, idea or focus, or the stanza breaks can be used as a pause for thought or to create a brief silence, which holds meaning. Similarly, a poem may not be broken up into individual stanzas, because the poet doesn't want you to pause while reading.

Have a look at an example:

Examine the stanza structure of the poem below:

The Tide Rises, the Tide Falls
by: Henry Wadsworth Longfellow

The tide rises, the tide falls,
The twilight darkens, the curlew calls;
Along the sea-sands damp and brown
The traveller hastens toward the town,
And the tide rises, the tide falls.

Darkness settles on roofs and walls,
But the sea, the sea in the darkness calls;
The little waves, with their soft, white hands,
Efface the footprints in the sands,
And the tide rises, the tide falls.

The morning breaks; the steeds in their stalls
Stamp and neigh, as the hostler calls;
The day returns, but nevermore
Returns the traveller to the shore,
And the tide rises, the tide falls.