

Connections ♦ Blank Verse

Blank verse describes unrhymed poetry whose lines share the same meter; for English poetry, practically speaking, it is generally safe to assume that the meter is iambic pentameter. In short, blank verse is unrhymed iambic pentameter. (Do not confuse blank verse with *free verse*, which does not have a regular meter.) Blank verse is frequently said to mirror the roughly iambic speech patterns of conversational English. It does so to a point, but of course the formal rules governing blank verse create a more regular, controlled sound than truly conversational speech.

English poets began to use blank verse in the sixteenth century. Late in that century, Christopher Marlowe, an older contemporary of Shakespeare, wrote influential dramas in blank verse. Shakespeare followed Marlowe's example; though Shakespeare's plays include a variety of prose and verse forms, the bulk of their conversational and thoughtful language consists of blank verse. Shakespearean blank verse relies heavily on substitutions of three-syllable feet that create rhythmic variation. Here are the opening lines of Hamlet's most famous soliloquy:

To be, or not to be: that is the question:
Whether 'tis nobler in the mind to suffer
The slings and arrows of outrageous fortune,
Or to take arms against a sea of troubles,
And by opposing end them? To die: to sleep;
No more; and by a sleep to say we end
The heart-ache and the thousand natural shocks
That flesh is heir to, 'tis a consummation
Devoutly to be wish'd.

Note how many of these lines contain eleven syllables. Where is Shakespeare adding those spare syllables to his blank verse, and what effects do they create?

In the seventeenth century, John Milton altered the associations of blank verse by making it the form of *Paradise Lost*, his great epic poem. Milton took care to justify his unconventional use of the form, and we can hardly argue with his choice, but later writers re-established the conventional use of blank verse as a mode for representing sincere, conversational sentiments.

At the end of the next century, for instance, William Wordsworth and Samuel Taylor Coleridge published *Lyrical Ballads*. (See the [ballad](#) section for commentary on the ballads included in that collection.) The poems in *Lyrical Ballads* use a variety of forms to portray speech from different historical periods and narrators. When the poets wanted to present sincere meditations in his own "voice," however, they generally employed blank verse. Here, for instance, are the opening lines of "Lines Composed a Few Miles above Tintern Abbey . . .," the poem that ended the first edition of *Lyrical Ballads* in 1798:

Five years have past; five summers, with the length
Of five long winters! and again I hear
These waters, rolling from their mountain-springs
With a soft inland murmur.--Once again
Do I behold these steep and lofty cliffs,
That on a wild secluded scene impress
Thoughts of more deep seclusion; and connect
The landscape with the quiet of the sky.
The day is come when I again repose
Here, under this dark sycamore, and view
These plots of cottage-ground, these orchard-tufts,
Which at this season, with their unripe fruits,
Are clad in one green hue, and lose themselves
'Mid groves and copses. Once again I see
These hedge-rows, hardly hedge-rows, little lines
Of sportive wood run wild: these pastoral farms,
Green to the very door; and wreaths of smoke
Sent up, in silence, from among the trees!
With some uncertain notice, as might seem
Of vagrant dwellers in the houseless woods,
Or of some Hermit's cave, where by his fire
The Hermit sits alone.

Coleridge also wrote a series of "conversation poems," as he called them, which used easy, flowing blank verse to construct meditations arising from everyday situations. See, for instance, ["Frost at Midnight."](#)

This section closes with a longer selection from one of the twentieth-century masters of formal writing, the American poet Robert Frost. This poem takes its title from Macbeth's comment on the news of his wife's death: "Out, out, brief candle!"

Out, Out--

The buzz-saw snarled and rattled in the yard
And made dust and dropped stove-length sticks of wood,
Sweet-scented stuff when the breeze drew across it.
And from there those that lifted eyes could count
Five mountain ranges one behind the other
Under the sunset far into Vermont.
And the saw snarled and rattled, snarled and rattled,
As it ran light, or had to bear a load.
And nothing happened: day was all but done.
Call it a day, I wish they might have said
To please the boy by giving him the half hour
That a boy counts so much when saved from work.
His sister stood beside them in her apron
To tell them "Supper." At the word, the saw,
As if to prove saws knew what supper meant,
Leaped out at the boy's hand, or seemed to leap—
He must have given the hand. However it was,
Neither refused the meeting. But the hand!
The boy's first outcry was a rueful laugh,
As he swung toward them holding up the hand
Half in appeal, but half as if to keep
The life from spilling. Then the boy saw all—
Since he was old enough to know, big boy
Doing a man's work, though a child at heart—
He saw all spoiled. "Don't let him cut my hand off—
The doctor, when he comes. Don't let him, sister!"
So. But the hand was gone already.
The doctor put him in the dark of ether.
He lay and puffed his lips out with his breath.
And then—the watcher at his pulse took fright.
No one believed. They listened at his heart.
Little—less—nothing!—and that ended it.
No more to build on there. And they, since they
Were not the one dead, turned to their affairs.

Consider the formal characteristics of this poem in relation to its content, given the associations of blank verse presented above.