



Prose and poetry techniques: Blank verse

Form

Blank verse is unrhyming verse in iambic pentameter lines.

'Iambic pentameter' simply means that each normal line has ten syllables, five of them stressed, and that the rhythm is biased towards a pattern in which an unstressed syllable is followed by a stressed one.

Here is a regular iambic pentameter line:

It **little profits that** an **idle king** ,

The syllables here marked in bold are those on which the emphasis (stress) falls.

However, there is scope for considerable variation in the pattern of stresses. Here are the lines that follow the previous example:

By this **still hearth**, **among** these **barren crags**
Match'd with an **aged wife**, I **mete** and **dole**
Unequal laws unto a **savage race** ,
That **hoard**, and **sleep**, and **feed**, and **know** not **me**.

from 'Ulysses' by Alfred, Lord Tennyson

If you look at the beginning of each of the first two lines, you will see departures from the strict iambic pattern. It reasserts itself in the two lines that follow.

Characteristics

Blank verse poetry can contain any number of lines. It is the traditional metre for long narrative poems and verse drama. It is also often used for poems of description and reflection and for dramatic monologues: poems in the form of a speech by a single character.

A device typically found in well-handled blank verse is enjambment. This is where a grammatical unit (such as a statement or clause) is run on into the next line. These lines contain two examples of enjambment:

I cannot rest from travel: I will drink
Life to the lees: all times I have enjoy'd
Greatly ...

from 'Ulysses' by Alfred, Lord Tennyson

The breaks in these lines are called the caesuras. Notice that in each line the caesura is placed at a different point: in the first line after seven syllables, in the second after four.

Enjambment, with skilful variation in the placing of caesuras, helps to prevent blank verse from becoming monotonous. It also helps to create an illusion of natural speech.

History

Blank verse was introduced into England by the Earl of Surrey in about 1540. It is the principal metre of Shakespeare's plays and the metre of Milton's epic poems, as well as of many other major works of poetry.