

Volume 24, Number 4, April 2014

Teaching notes

Rhyme and reason

Luke McBratney

'Poetry and sound effects' by Richard Danson Brown offers ways to consider the functions of features like alliteration and rhyme in poetry. Offering two contrasting examples, he shows opposite ways in which sound effects can be used.

Integral or ornamental?

His comments pose the following questions, which we should ask ourselves every time we read a poem:

- To what extent are the sound effects integral to the poem (as in MacNeice's 'Soap Suds')?
- To what extent are those effects there because they sound good (as in Spencer's *The Shepheard's Calender*)?

As Danson Brown offers his thoughts on these matters, he uses a wealth of useful literary terms, which you should aim to have in your active vocabulary. Most are listed below. I also include variants of some terms so that you can use them flexibly in your writing, rather than be dependent on the single forms, such as the noun alliteration.

Definitions

Alliteration: the repetition of the same sound at the start of nearby words is a well-recognised feature, but few students use the term so flexibly as to comment on sounds that *alliterate*, or are *alliterated*, or indeed can comment on an *alliterative* pattern. It is worth practising using the various forms of the word alliteration. Consider the extent to which a poem makes heavy use of alliteration, which may be indicative of an ornamental use of alliteration.

Assonance is the repetition of similar (or identical) vowel sounds. In an instance of assonance, the vowel sounds can be said to *assonate* or be *assonating*.

A **diphthong** is a gliding vowel, formed when two vowel sounds join in one syllable, such as in 'joy', 'house' and 'tower'

End rhyme occurs when a rhyming word is positioned at the end of a line; **internal rhyme** occurs when one of the rhyming words is positioned in the middle of a line.

Perfect rhyme or **full rhyme** is when the sound of both rhyming words corresponds exactly.

Half rhyme occurs when the sounds of words are similar but do not correspond exactly; for example, swan and stone or park and work.

Free verse is a type of poetry that does not have a regular meter.

Examples

Bear Richard Danson Brown's caveat in mind as you consider the effects of rhyme. For example, while it is sometimes possible to talk about resonant, happy uses of full rhyme, or half rhymes that suggest dissatisfaction, it is often just as useful to consider how rhyme works in combination with other effects or to think about the effects produced when rhyming patterns change. For example, Philip Larkin's 'Talking in Bed' is comprised of four three-line stanzas. The first three are tercets, which use half rhyme in the first and third lines. These half rhymes might be said to suit the dissatisfied feelings of the couple in the poem, who lie in bed uncommunicative.

But notice what happens in the last. It is a triplet, not a tercet: every line rhymes. Yet, rather than sounding happy notes of union between the couple, the strength of the rhymes brings the nature of their inability to communicate into sharper focus.

In the final rhymes, the rhyming words are bi-syllabic and almost identical — 'and kind'/'unkind' — but despite this closeness they close the poem with a sense of dissatisfaction. Perhaps this underscores something in the couple's relationship: is there is something about their physical closeness that produces, or amplifies, discontent?

Another example of a shifting rhyming pattern can be found in 'Toads Revisited'. Here Larkin returns to a topic that he explored in 'Toads': his ambivalent feelings towards work. The poem is written in quatrains that are each comprised of two couplets, each of which usually has an unobtrusive half rhyme. This suits the gloomy, ruminant tone of the poem, but this is varied in the second stanza:

Blurred playground noises
Beyond black-stockinged nurses –
Not a bad place to be.
Yet it doesn't suit me,

The full rhyme in the final couplet marks a shift in mood as the speaker voices a more strongly held belief: life without work is unsuitable and unpleasant. It is not just the full rhyme that leads us to this interpretation, though. Notice the use of 'Yet' — an adversative conjunction — which introduces a statement that opposes the previous one. After this, the speaker offers examples such as 'hare-eyed clerks', 'palsied old step-takers' and 'wax-fleshed out-patients' that contrast with the earlier favourable ones such as 'sunshine', 'grass' and 'black-stockinged nurses'.

Larkin's use of rhyme, however, helps to lighten the tone of the poem in places, while retaining its uncomfortable message. The conceit of work being a 'toad' is an amusing as well as frightening concept and humour comes through in lines like 'Turning over their failures / By some bed of lobelias'. This adds bathos, as we move from the seriousness of the abstract noun 'failures' rather unexpectedly to the everyday bed of 'lobelias' (a group of bright-flowered plants). Such use of rhyme is cleverly inventive and creates black comedy. A similar effect is achieved right at the end of the poem when the speaker concludes:

Give me your arm, old toad;
Help me down Cemetery Road.

The full rhyme — the only use of one since 'Not a bad place to be./Yet it doesn't suit me,' — sounds a conclusive and cheery note as the speaker invites the toad to join him on a journey as if he is an old friend. It is also heightens the sense of comedy, as the reader imagines the absurd image of the speaker linking arms with a *Wind in the Willows*-type character as the pair of them head off down the

road together. But, amusing though it may be, the comedy is still dark. Despite the cheerful-sounding full rhyme, we recognise the inherent ambiguities of the speaker's feelings about work, since the destination that work is helping the speaker toward is death ('Cemetery Road').

Further reading

The following link contains a helpful range of definitions of many types of rhyme:

http://web.cn.edu/kwheeler/lit_terms_R.html

This link, from the same site, offers thoughts on alliteration:

http://web.cn.edu/kwheeler/lit_terms_A.html

Podcasts

Exploring the ways in which rhyme underscores meaning in poetry, this five-minute talk responds to 'Mirror in February' by Thomas Kinsella: <http://www.tes.co.uk/teaching-resource/The-Patterns-of-Poetry-Podcasts-for-Students-6075798/>

Another podcast from the same series — this time on alliteration:

<http://www.sccenglish.ie/2010/09/patterns-of-poetry-3-alliteration.html>