Rhyme's Reason: A Guide to English Verse Study Guide

Rhyme's Reason: A Guide to English Verse by John Hollander

Contents

Plot Summary

"Rhyme's Reason" is an examination of the various forms and schemes used in English poetry written by John Hollander. Hollander's unique approach to describing these systems is to use self-referential poetry to both explain and provide examples of the systems he is discussing.

Hollander begins by defining five general types of verse; pure accentual verse that is based on a fixed pattern of accents, accentual-syllabic which combines regular patterns of accents with common syllabic length, Pure syllabic verse that has lines of a fixed number of syllables, free verse that does not hold to any formal pattern of meter or rhyme, and quantitative verse, an uncommon English form.

Focusing primarily on accentual-syllabic verse, which is the most common form in poetry written in English, Hollander moves on to discuss the terms used to refer to the "feet" in the most common meters. He explains how meter can affect the meaning of words and the tone of a poem by shifting emphasis to different parts of the verse.

After looking at the variations in meter, Hollander describes several verse types common in English poetry that use the accentual-syllabic form, including couplets, quatrains, sonnets and other types likely to be familiar to regular readers of poetry. Hollander also examines the various ways in which rhyme is used and offers critical advice to writers of verse on what makes a rhyme effective.

Hollander traces how several classical verse types taken from Greek and Latin verse were adapted by English writers to fit the particular elements of the language, and he provides several examples of original verse that illustrate how the "ghosts" of these older schemes survived even into modern verse.

Hollander completes the main portion of the book with short passages describing several other verse types, both common and uncommon, using verse that both illustrates and offers advice on the proper usage of each form. In an extensive appendix to the book, Hollander offers several examples of self-referential verse written by classical and modern poets like Alexander Pope, Wordsworth, Burns, Browning, Dante, John Ashbery and several others.

The book follows a general pattern of defining broader concepts then offering specific examples, but Hollander frequently digresses and backtracks to pick up earlier discussions. Throughout the book, Hollander maintains a light and humorous tone while offering advice to those composing verse on how to use rhyme, meter and the various verse forms to add emphasis and meaning to verse. A poet himself, Hollander holds some definite views on what poetry is, which he shares frequently. In the appendix he gives time to some opposing views about rhyme and meter offered by some of the best known names in poetry.

Introduction, Schemes and Verse Systems

Introduction, Schemes and Verse Systems Summary and Analysis

Hollander introduces the book as a "guide to verse," meaning the formal structure of poetry. This structure is required of poetry, he explains, but by itself the structures do not make a poem a poem. The structures are like forms that can be built into many different shapes, but not all of these shapes will constitute poetry. A shopping list, for example, might conform to the structure of a poem but not be poetry.

Unfortunately, Hollander writes, modern students are not as familiar with poetry as they once were required to be, and most people regard any formal structure of text to be poetry, particularly if it rhymes. He likens the world of poetry to a large and beautiful park that people one strolled through but in modern times which has been ignored, except around the edges, where it is least beautiful and often vandalized.

The author explains his intention for the book, which is to explore the "schemes and designs" of poetry. (p. 3) He intends furthermore to explore them by writing about them in verse, simultaneously giving examples of the structures as he describes them.

The schemes covered in the book will be those related to the structures of lines, rhyme patterns, word order and syntax, the grouping of lines into stanzas, and patterns of repetition. It will focus only on English verse.

Hollander describes five types of verse systems that will be examined. These are pure accentual verse, which is a common form in nursery rhymes, accentual-syllabic, the dominant system in English poetry, pure syllabic, such as haiku, free verse, and quantitative verse, which is a system not normally found in English.

Accentual Syllabic Verse, Versification and Accentual Meters

Accentual Syllabic Verse, Versification and Accentual Meters Summary and Analysis

The most common type of verse in English is accentual-syllabic, Hollander explains, and so he begins with a description of this type. Accentual syllabism occurs when a line of verse contains pairs or triads of syllables that alternate accent, usually with the words keeping the same accent as they do in normal speech. As an example, Hollander gives the line:

About about about about about. (p. 4)

This is an example of "iambic pentameter" where each line of verse has five "beats" or accents. This pattern of beats can hold true even when not made up of five identical words, Hollander explains, as with the example:

Almost the sound of the line of "abouts." (p. 4) where the accents do not alternate precisely as in the first example. In this case, the ear hears four beats when the line is spoken naturally, even though the line has ten syllables just like the first example. These variations add interest to a poem, Hollander explains. The lines of a poem will usually be of similar types, with the common rhythm and rhymes becoming more apparent as the reader goes through the verse.

Hollander next turns to the definition of some of the terms used to describe accentual syllabic verse. A group of syllables is referred to as a "foot" in poetry. Iambs, trochees and spondees are feet with pairs of syllables. Syllabic pairs with the accent on the second syllable, such as the word "about," are called iambs. Trochees are pairs of syllables with the accent on the first syllable, such as in the example "Trochees simply tumble on and / Start with downbeats just like this one." (p. 8) Spondees have two stressed syllables together, such as in "Slow spondees are two heavy stressed downbeats." (p. 8)

"Pentameter" refers to the number of stressed syllables in the line, in this case five. "Iambic pentameter," then, is a type of verse with five iambs in each line, usually totaling ten syllables. This is a common form in English verse. Other forms include dimeter, trimeter and tetrameter, with 2, 3 and 4 feet per line.

There are two types of feet with three syllables called dactyls and anapests. A dactyl, taken from the Greek word for "finger", has one long syllable followed by two short ones, like the joints of a finger, although in English it is the accent and not the length of the syllable that is referred to. A dactyl has the first of the three syllables accented, such

as in the word "wonderful." An anapest is the reverse of a dactyl, with the final syllable of the three accented.

Accent can change the meaning or focus of a word in verse. Hollander gives the example of a spoken phrase like "the book" which in normal speech would be an iamb with the accent on "book." When we want to indicate we are speaking about a particular book, however, we say "THE book," and pronounce the word "the" as "thee," changing the meter to a trochee with the accent on the first syllable. These meanings can be conveyed in verse by paying attention to the meter.

Lines of verse can be divided in various ways to fit the meter. One method is called caesura, which is to put a stop in the middle of a line to set one part of it off from the other. Lines can also be "end-stopped" where the end of the phrase falls naturally at the end of the line, or they can show "enjambment" where the phrase is cut off at the end of the line and continued at the beginning of the next.

Before moving on to a discussion of rhyme schemes, Hollander mentions two ways in which syllables can relate to each other aside from rhyming directly. One method is by alliteration, where the same sound is repeated within words such as in his example "Alliteration lightly links / Stressed syllables with common consonants." (p. 13) A similar method using vowel sounds is called "assonance," such as with the example words rhyme, sigh and dies, which do not directly rhyme but share a vowel sound.

As an introduction to rhyming, Hollander presents several couplets, or pairs of rhyming lines, that illustrate some basic information about rhymes:

The weakest way in which two words can rhyme is when the rhyme is very close and predictable, as with the words "rhyme" and "chime," Hollander explains. It is stronger when the rhymed words do not appear to be so closely related, such as with "words" and "birds." Words can also rhyme visibly, such as the words "move," and "above."

Internal rhymes can be used to accentuate words within a line of verse:

Thus spring can jingle with its singing birds

Or summer hum with two resounding words (p. 14)

The couplet in iambic pentameter has been a staple in English verse for many years, Hollander explains, although couplets can be in any length, but shorter lines can sound less serious, while longer lines can sound plodding. Varying the length can vary the tone of the poem. It is also possible to insert an extra rhyming line into a poem of couplets to vary the design.

Tercets are groups of three rhymed lines. Quatrains have four lines, usually with alternating lines rhymed in the pattern abab, but also, as in some of Tennyson's poems, in the pattern abba. In the stanzas of ballads, often the first and third lines do not rhyme, only the second and fourth.

Hollander describes some other forms of stanzas in this section, including "rhyme royal," supposedly named after James I, and used by Chaucer. Rhyme royal has seven lines in the rhyme scheme ababbcc. A Spenserian stanza, named for the poet Spenser, has a scheme abab ababb cc.

The sonnet form has two main schemes, Hollander explains. The Elizabethan sonnet consists of three quatrains and a couplet for a total of 14 lines. The Italian sonnet has an octet of eight lines rhymed abba abba and a sestet of six line rhymed cde cde. These schemes are often varied upon.

Returning to the list of five systems given earlier, Hollander next explains pure accentual verse. In this kind of verse, there are no standard feet of fixed length, but each line has a fixed number of accents:

In accentual meter it doesn't matter

Whether each line is thinner or fatter;

What you hear (this matters more)

Is one, two, three four.

Pure Syllabic Verse, Free Verse and Aberrant Forms

Pure Syllabic Verse, Free Verse and Aberrant Forms Summary and Analysis

Pure syllabic verse contains lines that have a fixed number of syllables, regardless of meter. One popular form is the Japanese haiku, which has three lines of five, seven and five syllables. In English, the cinquain is traditionally a stanza of five lines with two, four, six, eight and two syllables.

The types discussed so far, pure accentual, pure syllabic and accentual-syllabic, all rely on syllables or accents to determine the length of a line of verse. There are other methods, Hollander explains. In free verse, lines can be arranged of any length and variation in the lengths can be used to create the effect the poet is after. Short lines following longer lines can add emphasis, for example, however repeating several short or long lines together can be tedious.

Free verse can also be used to create an image with the printed words. Here Hollander gives an example of a poem arranged to form a solid circle of text. These are called pattern poems.

Another of these "aberrant" forms as Hollander calls them, is the concrete poem, which relies on a pun or special consideration of its printed form. As an example, he provides an illustration of a concrete poem of his own that is literally written in concrete. The words "TEXTURE BECOMES TEXT" is inscribed in a square slab of concrete with the final three letters of TEXTURE fading into the background. The poem and its form are integral, Hollander explains. A photograph of the poem is not the same thing as the poem. The texture of the concrete and of the inscribed letters are central to its meaning.

Ode Forms, Quantitative Verse and Classical Meters and Their Adaptions

Ode Forms, Quantitative Verse and Classical Meters and Their Adaptions Summary and Analysis

Before discussing the importance and predominance of repetition as a structure in modern verse, Hollander first looks at the very complex form of the Greek choral ode to provide contrast. Greek poetry used a system of syllable lengths rather than accents. Choral odes were performed during plays or at public events and were sung while the singers also danced. Choral odes are divided into sections called triads, with each triad having three parts. The first part of the triad is called the strophe, which means "turn." The dancers would sing the lines while moving, and stop their movements at the end of the first part. The second part, called the antistrophe, or "counterturn," repeated the same rhythm of syllables and motions as the first part, but performed in the opposite direction and with different words. The third part, called the epode, meaning "standing," was of a different rhythm and stood alone from the other two. An ode might have one or many triads like this.

The term ode is also used for another type of poetry, often in imitation of the poet Horace, that adopts an accentual-syllabic structure with two longer lines followed by two shorter lines.

This type of adaptation of the ode is an example of trying to fit English into the quantitative verse structure of ancient Greek. Ancient Greek did not rely on accented syllables, but added emphasis to vowel sounds by drawing them out into longer syllables. A dactyl in quantitative verse had a long vowel sound followed by two short syllables, for example. English poets during the Renaissance sought to connect with these ancient verse forms, Hollander explains, but English, which relies strongly on accented syllables to convey meaning and syntax, cannot easily be squeezed into the strict Greek structure. Poets substituted an accented syllable to replace the long syllable of the Greek meters and unaccented syllables stood in for the short syllables.

This experimentation and substitution took place during what Hollander calls the neo-classical period when poets and authors were rediscovering older forms of literature and adapting them to their own language. In this way, much modern verse still holds "ghosts" of these ancient structures, he explains.

Repetitive Structures, Comical Schemes and Rhetorical Schemes

Repetitive Structures, Comical Schemes and Rhetorical Schemes Summary and Analysis

Hollander next turns to repetitive structures. One early repetitive structure is the English carol, which was sung by an individual with dancers who moved around him and responded to each verse with a repeated refrain. Sometimes the refrains were complete verses, sometimes nonsense refrains like "fa-la-la-la-la."

Repetition of words or lines can reduce their importance, Hollander explains, particularly if they are expected or ordinary. However if the verses change the context surrounding the repeated portions, then repetition can make them more important.

Hollander describes two verse structures that make use of repetition. First is the villanelle, a medieval form originating in Provence. The villanelle is made up of six stanzas, with the first five having three lines with a rhyme scheme of aba and the last stanza of four lines with a scheme of abaa. In the vilanelle, one line is repeated at different places in the poem, creating a tone of speculation and introspection. The sestina is a similar form except that instead of an entire line, the final words from the first six-line stanza are repeated at the ends of the other stanzas as well. The sestina has six six-line stanzas and a final three-line stanza.

Similar forms are the ballade, which is a structure suited for light verse that repeats a refrain at the end of each stanza, the rondeau, which repeats the first words of the first line at different places in the verse, and the triolet, an eight-line structure that repeats the first line three times and the second line twice. A pantoum is a structure made up of quatrains, with each quatrain repeating the even-numbered lines as the odd-numbered lines of the next quatrain. Hollander also includes the structure of a typical blues lyric as a repetitive structure, with the first line often varied on slightly for the second line and the third line completing the thought or commenting on the first lines.

Next Hollander turns to comical schemes, the most popular of which is probably the limerick, he explains. Limericks have a rhyme scheme of aabba, with the third and fourth lines shorter than the other two and usually setting up the last line as the punch line of the joke. A variation on the limerick are those of Edward Lear, who usually simply repeated the rhyme from the first line in the last line, making the two short lines the end of the joke.

Hollander moves on to describe several rhetorical schemes used in poetry, including the epic simile, which was important in early Greek poetry to illuminate unknown subjects by comparing them to known things. Hollander also describes anaphora, a scheme that

repeats the opening words of a line to drive home the meaning of the poem. Similarly, homoeoteleuton repeats the ending word or words for emphasis.

Chiasmus is a rhetorical scheme that reverses the order of two elements in various ways. One method might reverse simple vowel sounds as in:

Resounding syllables

In simple nouns (p. 49)

where "resounding" and "nouns" share a vowel sound, as do "simple" and "syllable." The reversal forms an X shape when the elements are connected and the term comes from the X-shaped Greek letter chi. Chiasmus can also be used to reverse syntactical elements or even repeat words such as in "imagined mirrors mirror imagining." (p. 49)

Variation and Mimesis, More on Rhyming and Uncommon Schemes

Variation and Mimesis, More on Rhyming and Uncommon Schemes Summary and Analysis

Sticking too close to a fixed rhythm or accent pattern can make verse boring and sound like the relentless ticking of a clock, Hollander explains. Adding variation can prevent the verse from becoming too predictable and make it more enjoyable. Variation can be employed using many of the methods described earlier by Hollander, such as by using caesura and enjambment to break lines up in varying ways and introducing small variations in the meter to hold the reader's interest.

Mimesis is a term that refers to the imitative sounds found in verse where the words make reference to their own meaning. As an example, Hollander quotes from Shakespeare, "When you do dance, I wish you / A wave o' the sea, that you might ever do / Nothing but that..." which adopts a dancing rhythm of "dah diddy dah" that imitates the movement of a dance. In another example, he quotes Keats, "The hare limped trembling through the frozen grass..." In this example, the strong "massed" syllables formed by the m-p and m-b combinations in limped and trembling imitate the dragging rhythm of the limping hare. Hollander also give an example from Tennyson, "First as in fear, step after step, she stole / Down the long tower stairs, hesitating." The rhythm of the lines imitate the character they describe, making regular steps down a staircase, then, when she stops and hesitates, the rhythm breaks.

Hollander returns to the subject of rhyme once again, warning authors not to reach too far in trying to create rhymes. These will end up sounding unnatural and distract the reader. He also points out the role that differences in pronunciation can have on rhymes. He gives an example of a old poem that matches "desert" with "start, but explains that in the dialect of the author at the time, "desert" was commonly pronounced "desART," and so it rhymed. In addition to changes in pronunciation over time, there are also regional differences. In the US, for example, the words "marry," "fairy," and "ferry" all rhyme when spoken in a flat Midwestern accent, but in some parts of the country, the vowel sounds are quite different.

One method of rhyming that became popular in the 1930s, Hollander explains, is matching words that do not quite rhyme completely, such as "pursued" and "poised." A similar method rhymes a so-called "feminine" ending of a line, which is when a line ends on a down beat accent, with a partially rhyming "masculine" ending, where the line ends on an up beat accent. "Ruthless" might be rhymed with "truth," for example. Lines of verse will sometimes be indented to indicate lines that rhyme with one another, as a kind of visual cue of which lines are grouped together by sound. This convention can be subverted, however, creating a visual connection between lines that do not rhyme at all.

Hollander concludes the main portion of the book with a discussion of uncommon verse schemes. "Metaphysical" poetry during the Stuart period in England used a series of couplets with the first line longer than the second, creating a kind of stuttering rhythm. The Russian writer Pushkin invented a form of sonnet of three quatrains and a couplet where the rhyme schemes of the quatrains varied in each stanza.

One variation similar to the sestina is the canzone, originally an Italian form, adapted with difficulty into English. It is made up of five stanzas of twelve lines each, and ends with a stanza of five lines. The rules of construction are complex and involve the repetition of five words taken from the first stanza in a prescribed way. Hollander calls the form "painful." (p. 59)

The rondeau, described earlier in the book, has several variations. Some of them repeat only one line from the first stanza while varying the number of other lines in each stanza. Another variant repeats each line from the first stanza exactly once each at the end of each subsequent stanzas.

Other unusual adaptations of non-English schemes include an accentual hexameter sometimes used by English and German poets like Longfellow and Goethe that has a steady, "bumpity-bump" rhythm meant to approximate Greek epic poetry. Another unusual form based on a Greek structure is rhopalic verse, which means "club like," where the lines get longer as the poem goes on.

Another foreign style that has been adapted to English is the Japanese tanks form which is similar to haiku except that it adds two extra lines of seven syllables afterward. Luc-bat is Vietnamese for six-eight, and is an adapted form of traditional Vietnamese poetry that has alternating lines of six and eight syllables. The Persian ghazal is a form that uses several couplets, whereby the first two lines end with the same refrain that is then repeated in the second line of the remaining couplets.

Appendix

Appendix Summary and Analysis

Hollander ends the book with an appendix made up of examples of other poets who have composed verse about the structure of poetry, as he has done throughout his own book. He begins with a poem by Alexander Pope, who criticizes the common practice of judging poetry by how closely it sticks to the form it adopts:

But most by numbers judge a poet's song,

and smooth or rough, with them, is right or wrong;

In the bright Muse though thousand charms conspire,

Her voice is all these tuneful fools admire,

Hollander agrees with pope's assessment that it is foolish to only judge a poem by its "voice." Later in the poem, Pope writes:

'Tis not enough no harshness gives offense,

The sound must seem an echo to the sense. (p. 69)

The verse must fit the subject, Pope explains. When the tone of the poem is light, the words should flow smoothly. When the subject is rage or a crashing storm, the words and the tone of the poem should reflect that as well.

Ben Jonson wrote a poem that Hollander includes here called "A Fit of Rime Against Rime" in which he argues that rhyming, which was absent in Greek and Latin poetry, is a corruption of English and ought not to be used:

Wresting words from their true calling;

Propping verse for fear of falling

To the ground.

Jointing syllables, drowning letters,

Fastening vowels, as with fetters

They were bound! (p. 71)

Jonson's criticism is partly tongue-in-cheek, Hollander explains, as his poem complaining about rhyme is written in a rhymed scheme, and he also used rhyme in

some of his own works. Thomas Campion took the avoidance of rhyme more seriously, he writes, and he includes a sample of Campion's free verse explaining it:

Go, numbers, boldly pass, stay not for aid

Of shifting rhyme, that easier flatterer,

Whose witchcraft can the ruder ears beguile. (p. 72)

Hollander includes three short passages by Samuel Taylor Coleridge from poems written in and about hexameter. One entitled The Homeric Hexameter goes:

Strongly it bears us along in swelling and limitless billows,

Nothing before and nothing behind but the sky and the ocean. (p. 73)

Another example by Coleridge is called The Ovidian Elegiac Metre:

In the hexameter rises the fountain's silvery column;

In the pentameter aye falling in melody back.

Hollander next includes several sonnets about sonnets, by Wordsworth, John Keats, Dante and Edwin Arlington Robinson. He concludes his examples about sonnets with one by Robert Burns which begins, "Fourteen, a sonneteer they praises sings; / What magic myst'ries in that number lie!"

Hollander next gives some examples of sestinas, which he explains is the most enduring of the lyrical French forms. He includes examples from Edmund Gosse, Donald Hall, John Ashbery and Alan Ansen, all contemporary poets.

Hollander completes the appendix with examples of a roundel by Swinburne and a rondeau by Don Marquis, as well as a villanelle by W. E. Henley and two triolets by Henley and Marquis.

Characters

Greek Poets

The ancient Greek poets were an influential source to poets of the Renaissance era in Italy, France and England. The earliest Greek poetry was not written but sung or spoken, and the meter was quantitative, meaning it varied between long and short syllables. Later Greek poetry was used as part of dramatic plays, where a chorus of dancers recited poetry while moving in set patterns. Many of the terms used to describe poetry are borrowed from Greek, although the meanings of many of the terms has changed. Greek poetry is also the source of the heroic simile, a commonly used method in poetry to compare something unknown to something known by the reader.

Elizabethan Poets

Poets of the Elizabethan era in the 16th century built upon the traditions put in place during the English Renaissance a hundred years earlier when classic poetic forms from the Greek and Latin were adapted to suit the accentual style of English. Well known poets and playwrights such as Ben Jonson and William Shakespeare were active during the Elizabethan era, and produced poetry that is still widely read and admired in English. The Elizabethan sonnet of 14 lines was developed during this time and is one of the most enduring forms.

John Milton

John Milton was a prominent poet in the early 17th Century. He created a "tailed sonnet" of 20 lines based on the earlier Elizabethan 14-line form.

Alfred Lord Tennyson

Tennyson was a poet of the Victorian era in England. Hollander uses a quotation from Tennyson's poem "Lancelot and Elaine" to illustrate mimesis, where the pattern of words matches the action being described.

John Keats

John Keats was a romantic poet of the early 19th Century. Hollander uses an example from his poem "The Eve of St. Agnes" to illustrate how consonant sounds can convey the proper tone in a poem.

Alexander Pope

A prominent writer and poet of the 18th Century. Hollander uses Pope as an example of a poet who makes especially effective use of the "heroic couplet," couplets of paired rhymed lines in iambic pentameter. Pope is the author of "An Essay on Criticism" from which Hollander quotes several lines of Pope's describing in humorous verse how inept poets attempt to use rhyme.

Henry Wadsworth Longfellow

A 19th century poet whose well-known poem "The Song of Hiawatha" Hollander uses as an example of free verse.

Johann Wolfgang von Goethe

A classical German poet of the late 18th and early 19th centuries. While Hollander is primarily interested in verse written in English, he notes that German shares some of English's speech patterns and he uses Goethe as an example.

William Shakespeare

A poet and playwright of the Elizabethan era, Shakespeare wrote many sonnets in the Elizabethan form which are still read widely today.

Ben Jonson

Ben Jonson was a writer contemporary with Shakespeare. Hollander uses a poem by Jonson, "A Fit of Rime against Rime" to illustrate the belief among some writers of the era that rhyme was artificial and should be excluded from English verse.

Objects/Places

Accentual-Syllabic Verse

Accentual syllabic verse is the dominant verse style in English poetry. It describes a style where each line has a defined number of metrical "feet," or groups of syllables, with each foot usually conforming to the same accentual pattern.

Pure Accentual Verse

Pure accentual verse is a style that sticks to a fixed number of accented syllables in a line with very little variation. Nursery rhymes are examples of pure accentual verse.

Pure Syllabic Verse

Pure syllabic verse is a style where each line has a fixed number of syllables, regardless of their accent. Japanese haiku is an example of pure syllabic verse.

Free Verse

Free verse is a style that does not stick to any particular meter or rhyme scheme. Lines are divided according to meaning, sound, or other purposes of the author.

Quantitative Verse

Quantitative verse is a style originally used in early Greek and Latin poetry where the meter of a poem was determined by the length of the syllables. Because English does not vary syllable lengths as those languages did, Quantitative verse is not often used in English poetry.

Meter

Meter is the rhythmic pattern of verse. Greek and Latin verse used long and short vowels to determine a poem's meter. in English, words vary according to the accent placed on each syllable, and meter is defined by the number of stressed syllables in a line. Meters are named for the number of similar groups of syllables in each line, thus "pentameter" describes lines of five groups of syllables with five "beats" per line.

Stanza

The word stanza comes from the Italian word for "room" and refers to a grouping of lines within a longer poem. Types of stanzas are usually named according to the number of lines in them. A couplet has two lines, a tercet has three, and a quatrain has four lines.

Rhyme

Rhyme is the matching of the sounds of words, frequently used in a consistent pattern in verse, and usually matching the last words of each line. This pattern is called the rhyme scheme of a poem. Rhyme can also be internal, where words within the same line rhyme with one another.

Assonance

Assonance refers to the similarity in vowel sounds between two words that do not quite rhyme, such as the words "rhyme" and "size."

Mimesis

Mimesis is a technique in poetry where the sound of the spoken word imitates the action being described. A description of someone walking down a flight of stairs might use a steady accentual meter that imitates the regular rhythm of that action.

Themes

Rhyme

Rhyme can be an important element of verse, Hollander explains, but it can also detract from the poem if done badly. On page 14, he addresses the subject in an extended poem made up of couplets.

Rhymes that are too obvious weaken the effect, he explains:

The weakest way in which two words can chime

Is with the most expected kind of rhyme -

(If it's the only rhyme that you can write,

A homophone will never sound quite right.)

It is better when rhymes are not too predictable. Rhyming words of different types or different parts of speech can add some unpredictability to the verse, strengthening the poem.

Rhyme can also be used to indicate the end of a phrase or line, or it can be used to connect two parts of a continuous sentence, as in:

Like a typewriter's final, right-hand bell,

A rhyme can stop a line or tell

The sentence to go on and do its best

Till, at the next line's end, it comes to rest.

Hollander warns against reaching too far in rhyming if one is trying to maintain a serious tone. "Cute" rhymes or rhymes of more than one syllable create a lighter tone that can ruin more serious verse:

(A serious effect is often killable

By rhyming with too much more than one syllable.)

In the appendix to the book, Hollander presents an alternative opinion about rhyme put forth by some English poets of the 17th Century such as Ben Jonson, whose poem about rhyming is included. Jonson wrote during the Renaissance, when artists and writers looked to classical texts for inspiration. Greek and Latin verse did not rely on rhyme, Jonson noted, and he believed English verse should also not be constrained by the requirement that it rhyme.

Greek was free from rime's infection,

Happy Greek by this protection

Was not spoiled.

Whilst the Latin, queen of tongues,

Is not yet free from rime's wrongs,

But rests foiled. (p. 71)

Meter

Meter is a crucial element to English verse, Hollander explains, and most poetry in English adheres to some type of meter.

The most dominant verse form in English is called accentual-syllabic. This describes verse that is built around a regular pattern of lines with a set number of syllables, each with a similar pattern of accented syllables. The style of verse is named for these accent and syllable patterns. For example iambic pentameter, a very common style, contains five "feet" in each line, with each foot comprised of a two-syllable pattern called an iamb that has an accent on the second syllable. The basic example Hollander gives is the line "about about about about about," which the ear hears as having five "beats" when it is spoken aloud.

Hollander explains that different meters are suitable to different types of verse. Lines of four beats, for example, are shorter than the regular speech patterns of English and are more suitable to song or light verse. Some poets of epic tales used lines of fourteen syllables, giving ample room to vary the meter and tone within each long line.

Verse that adheres too closely to a set pattern of meter can quickly become boring to read, Hollander explains. Good poets introduce small variations in the meter of their verse so that the language does not become too unnatural or distracting to the reader.

The tradition of using meters comes from the Greek poets initially, Hollander explains, however they have been adapted to fit the English language. Unlike English, ancient Greek did not rely on stressed syllables but had vowel sounds of differing lengths. An iamb in ancient Greek poetry, for example, was one short sound followed by a longer one. English does not rely on varying syllable lengths but uses stressed syllables. The Greek terminology was adapted to English by substituting stressed syllables for long syllables and unstressed syllables for short ones. In this way the "ghost" of Greek meter still lives on in English verse.

Repetition and Variation

Repetition and variation are two edges of the same tool, which can be used to add emphasis and enhance the meaning of verse or which can, when used poorly, diminish the effect verse has on the reader.

A repeated phrase in poetry is called a "refrain." Hollander explains that old English carols were sung in a call-and-response style where a single singer would sing a verse and other singers would repeat a refrain together after each verse. The refrain was later adopted into verse forms as an imitation of this musical tradition. This repetition can have two different effects, Hollander explains.

"The structural richness of refrains in modern verse depends on one simple phenomenon: repeating something often may make it more trivial - because more expected and carrying less information as an engineer might put it - or, because of shifting or developing content in each stanza preceding, more important." (p. 38)

Simply repeating the same thing several times does not add richness to the verse, in other words. However words and phrases can shift in meaning depending on the context they appear in. By changing the context around repeated parts, a poem can illuminate these subtle differences in meaning, adding richness.

On the opposite side of repetition is variation. It is the variation in context from stanza to stanza that can make repetition of certain portions more important, for example. Variation of other aspects of verse can also add richness. A meter that is too uniform and steady can quickly become boring to the reader, and varying slightly from it will prevent it from becoming distracting. Meter can also be varied to reflect the subject matter of the verse, as when long sounds are used to describe a slowly-moving animal, in a practice called mimesis.

Too much variation can also be distracting to the reader, however. Meters that stumble when they should move smoothly, or vice versa, make verse less effective. Arbitrary variation of aspects such as line length and the arrangement of words on the page can make a poem too difficult to read effectively. A balance of the right amount of variation and repetition creates a connection with the reader without drawing too much attention to the verse itself.

Style

Perspective

The author of "Rhyme's Reason" is not only a critic but is a poet himself, who enjoys reading as well as writing poetry. He has his own definite ideas about what makes good poetry and his book is as much advice for other writers as it is a description of the traditional styles of English poetry. He provides a personal perspective on how rhyme, meter and structure have been used and how they should be used.

Hollander is a contemporary poet, however he provides historical perspective on the forms that English poetry has developed since the Renaissance. Many of these forms were consciously adapted from earlier Greek and Latin traditions that greatly influenced writers of the Renaissance period. These forms did not always fit nicely within the natural patterns and rhythms of spoken English, however and thus were changed to form a new distinctly English-language form based on the older ones. Hollander restricts his focus to the English language, but also acknowledges these older forms. He also acknowledges more recent influences on English verse that come from other language traditions such as the syllabic poetry of Japan, as well as forms borrowed from Persian and Malay. His intention is to provide a contemporary guide to writers and readers of English poetry that illustrates not only the various forms English verse can take, but to place those form in global and historical perspective.

Tone

Hollander maintains a serious but light tone throughout the book. He is writing a non-fiction book about poetry and the various forms and structures is takes, however instead of providing dry, straightforward descriptions of these structures as in a text book, he takes a novel approach. Hollander composes entertaining poetry that both describes the structures he discusses as well as provide actual examples of the structure. This entertaining approach keeps the material from becoming too dull or dry. It also gives Hollander the opportunity to provide examples of poorly-constructed examples in a humorous way.

In a bit of advice to writers, Hollander gives this advice, for example:

Beware unrhyming nouns like "month" or "orange":

Bad writers mutilate poor words, and mar ing-

Enious measures to provide a rhyme,

Or, perhaps (but this only works one time),

Raise some dead actress, e.g., Una Merkle,

To fit inside the empty-sounding "circle."

The poem goes on to use several other examples of poor and strained attempts at rhyming words or dredging up archaic words or unrelated names simply to provide a rhyme. This poem illustrates the light touch that Hollander maintains throughout the book to keep the tone easy and entertaining.

Structure

"Rhyme's Reason" is a fairly short work that is not divided into formal chapters. Hollander instead uses page headings to refer to the main subject of each page. After a brief preface, Hollander opens with a general description of the central feature of his text, which is to provide examples in verse of the topics he wants to cover. He then moves on to describe in general terms five types of verse systems which he will elaborate on later in the book. He does not list the systems in any particular order, and he does not follow the order of his list for the rest of the book, starting instead with the second type on the list, accentual-syllabic verse, which is the most common type in English verse. From this point, Hollander moves on to the other four types while frequently digressing into other related topics. The general structure, aside from the occasional digressions, is to present the more commonly-used structures and systems first and then move on to more unusual and less-frequently used structures. Throughout the book, Hollander relies mainly on verse to describe and illustrate his descriptions.

After working through the various structures, Hollander adds an appendix that includes several examples of self-referential verse written by other poets. This section gives some balance to Hollander's own perspective and provides a wider focus on some of the subjects covered in the main section of the book.

Quotes

"This is a guide to verse, to the formal structures which are a necessary condition of poetry, but not a sufficient one." p. 1

"Both verse and prose, then, are schematic domains. Literacy used to entail some ability to write in both modes, without any presumption of poetry in the in the execution of skill in the former." P. 2

"But it should be remembered that all poetry was originally oral. It was sung or chanted; poetic scheme and musical pattern coincided, or were sometimes identical." p. 4

"Iambic meter runs along like this:
Pentameters will have five syllables
More strongly stressed than other ones nearby -
ten syllables all told, perhaps eleven." p. 8

"Trochees simply tumble on and
Start with downbeats just like this one
(Sorry, 'iamb' is trochaic). p. 8

"The kind of sonnet form that Shakespeare wrote
- A poem of Love, or Time, in fourteen lines
Rhymed the way these are, clear, easy to quote -
Channels strong feelings into deep designs." p. 19

"Cinquians
Have lines of four
Syllables, six and eight,
Ending, as starting, with a line
Of two;" p. 25

"Greek meter was based on syllabic quantities, rather than contrasting stresses; one long syllable (so determined by the length of the vowel, and by a few positional rules) was set equal to two short ones, like half notes and quarter notes in musical notation." p. 34

"A literary lyric poem is a song only metaphorically; it is designed to be spoken or read, and a formal refrain can often serve as a kind of reminder or substitute for an earlier relation to music." p. 38

"Ever so maddening in the pantoum,
The repetitions frame a subtle doom.
Evening has entered, her patches of gloom
Now settled in the corners of the room." p. 44

"Ballads from Scotland told stories and sang the news -
Ballads from Scotland told stories and sang the news,
But black America felt and thought the blues." p. 45

"Even as when some object familiar to us all -
A street, a spoon, a river, a shoe, a star, a toothache -
Is brought to our attention, called up from our memory
To light up the darkened surface of something we've barely known of
- So did the epic simile sing of a silent past." p. 48

Topics for Discussion

What role does rhyme play in poetry. Does poetry need to rhyme?

How does meter affect the tone of poetic verse?

What is mimesis, and how is it used in poetry?

How is the structure of English verse based on the ancient forms of Greek and Latin verse? How are they different?

Hollander says formal structure is required of poetry but that it is not the only requirement. What does he mean?

How are repetition and variation important in writing poetry? What purpose can they serve?

How is poetry like music? What makes it different?