

Lyric

Definition of Lyric

A lyric poem is a short, emotionally expressive poem with a songlike quality that is narrated in the first person. Unlike narrative poetry, which recounts events and tells a story, lyric poetry explores the emotions of the speaker of the poem. Lyric poetry originated in ancient Greek literature and was originally intended to be set to music, accompanied by a musical instrument called a lyre, which resembles a small harp. Lyric poetry traditionally follows strict formal rules, but because there have been many different types of lyric poetry over centuries, there are now various different forms of lyric poetry.

Lyric is a collection of verses and choruses, making up a complete song, or a short and non-narrative poem. A lyric uses a single speaker, who expresses personal emotions or thoughts. Lyrical poems, which are often popular for their musical quality and rhythm, are pleasing to the ear, and are easily put to music.

What Are the Origins of Lyric Poetry?

Ancient Greek philosopher Aristotle created three distinctions of poetry: lyrical, dramatic, and epic. The lyric poem, in ancient Greece, was specifically meant to be accompanied by music from a lyre. The Greek poet Pindar was one of the first famous lyric poets. When Romans translated lyric poetry to Latin in the classical period, and the poems came to be recited and not sung, the meter and structure of the poems remained. In Europe, during the Renaissance, poets created lyric poetry with influence from ancient Greece, Persia, and China.

In the sixteenth century, William Shakespeare popularized lyric poetry in England. It remained dominant in the seventeenth century thanks to poets like Robert Herrick, and later, in the nineteenth century, through the work of poets including Percy Bysshe Shelley, John Keats, and later on in the century, Alfred Lord

Tennyson.

Lyric poetry only began to go out of style with the arrival of modernist poets like Ezra Pound, T. S. Eliot, and William Carlos Williams, who questioned its relevance and rebelled against its constraints.

The term lyric originates from the Greek word “lyre,” which is an instrument used by the Grecians to play when reading a poem. Lyrical poets demonstrate specific moods and emotions through words. Such moods express a range of emotions, from extreme to nebulous, about life, love, death, or other experiences of life. Read on to learn more about lyric in literature.

What Are the Common Meters Used in Lyric Poetry?

Lyric poetry follows a formal structure that dictates a rhyme scheme, meter, and verse form, but there is a lot of variety in the types of meter poets choose to follow. The most common meters used in lyric poetry include:

Iambic meter. In poetry, an iamb is a two-syllable “foot” with stress on the second syllable. Iambic pentameter, by far the most common lyric form in English lyric poetry, is a meter in which each line has five iambs. Think of the rhythm as sounding like a heartbeat: da-DUM, da-DUM, da-DUM, da-DUM, da-DUM. For example, take this line from Shakespeare’s *Romeo and Juliet*:

But soft! What light through yonder window breaks?

Trochaic meter. Trochaic meter is the inverse of iambic meter. Each trochaic foot, or trochee, consists of a long, stressed syllable followed by a short,

unstressed syllable: DUM-da. In trochaic tetrameter, each line has four trochaic feet: DUM-da, DUM-da, DUM-da, DUM-da. For example, take this passage spoken by Oberon in Shakespeare's *A Midsummer Night's Dream*:

Flower of this purple dye,
Hit with Cupid's archery,
Sink in apple of his eye.
When his love he doth espy,
Let her shine as gloriously
As the Venus of the sky.
When thou wakest, if she be by,
Beg of her for remedy.

Pyrrhic meter. This meter consists of two unstressed syllables, also known as a dibrach. Pyrrhic meter is not enough on its own to construct an entire poem but appears when the rhythm of a line has two short syllables followed by longer, stressed syllables. It is notated as "da-dum." Not all poets agree with the classification of a Pyrrhic meter. Edgar Allen Poe, for example, negated the existence of Pyrrhic meter, saying that "The pyrrhic is rightfully dismissed. Its existence in either ancient or modern rhythm is purely chimerical..." However, the poet Alfred Lord Tennyson used Pyrrhic meter frequently. For example, in this line from his poem *In Memoriam*, notice how the words "when the" and "and the" are two soft, unstressed syllables:

When the blood creeps and the nerves prick.

Anapestic meter. An anapest is two short, unstressed syllables followed by one long, stressed syllable: da-da-DUM. Because this structure lends itself to musical verse with a rolling lilt, examples abound throughout history. Shakespeare, in his later plays, began to substitute anapests in iambic pentameter, breaking from the strict structure of five iambs and inserting an extra syllable occasionally. Anapestic meter can also be found in the lyric poetry of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, and in comic poetry. The limeric, for example, is created using anapests. Much of the poetry of Dr. Seuss uses anapestic meter. The classic poem "A Visit From St. Nicholas" by Clement Clarke Moore is a great example of this type of verse:

Twas the night before Christmas and all through the house, Not a creature
was stirring, not even a mouse.

Dactylic meter. A dactyl is a long, stressed syllable followed by two short, unstressed syllables: DUM-da-da. It is the inverse of an anapest. For example, the first two lines of Robert Browning's poem "The Lost Leader" show dactylic meter in action. Browning starts each line with three dactyls:

Just for a handful of silver he left us Just for a riband to stick in his coat.

Spondee meter. A spondee, or a spondaic foot, consists of two long, stressed syllables. Spondaic meter can be interspersed with other kinds of verse to create variation in lyric poetry. For example, in Shakespeare's *Troilus and Cressida*, this line begins with two spondees, and then three iambs:

Cry, cry! Troy burns, or else let Helen go.

Types of Lyric

There are several types of lyric used in poems such as given below:

Elegy

An elegy is a mournful, sad, or melancholic poem or a song that expresses sorrow for someone who has been lost, or died. Originally, it followed a structure using a meter alternating six foot and five foot lines. However, modern elegies do not follow such a pattern, though the mood of the poem remains the same.

Ode

An ode is a lyric poem that expresses intense feelings, such as love, respect, or praise for someone or something. Like an elegy, an ode does not follow any strict format or structure, though it uses refrains or repeated lines. It is usually longer than other lyrical forms, and focuses on positive moods of life.

Sonnet

A sonnet uses fourteen lines, and follows iambic pentameter with five pairs of accented and unaccented syllables. The structure of a sonnet, with predetermined syllables and rhyme scheme, makes it flow off the tongues of readers in way similar way to a song on the radio.

Dramatic Monologue

A dramatic monologue has theatrical quality, which means that the poem portrays a solitary speaker communing with the audience, without any dialogue coming from other characters. Usually, the speaker talks to a specific person in the poem.

Occasional Poetry

Poets write occasional poetry for specific occasions such as weddings, anniversaries, birthdays, victories, and dedications, such as John Dryden's "Annus Mirabilis," and Edmund Spenser's "Epithalamion."