

What Do Poets Know? (Part 1)  
4/21/11  
Writer's Cramp PDX-Lesson 1

Because there are a few days left in National Poetry Month, I thought I'd explore how poetry affects every day writing, and how any writer can learn from a poet. There are a lot of things a writer can learn from poets and poetry, so this is just the first installment.

No matter what genre you like best to write in, learning a few poetic moves can make your writing spry! Poetry, as a form, predates most of the written word we see today. Poetry was used to tell stories both true and fictional. It was used to share news, teach history, entertain, and worship. Poetry, originally was meant to be spoken aloud (not read silently from a page), and poetic devices like rhyme and metaphor facilitate understanding and memorization. Much like the lyrics to a song that get stuck in your head, good poems stay with you. The word "lyric" is as a description of poetic subgenre—lyric poetry—and sets of lines interrupted by a chorus is a poetic device that might be as old as written language.

The long history of poetry feeds our current ideas of language and meaning. Though contemporary prose may seem far from the typical poetic examples one might have forcibly consumed during grade school—Shakespeare, Donne, Keats—much can be gained by using basic poetic devices in regular prose writing. Some of them include meter, rhythm, rhyme, (sound familiar?), word choice, structure, metaphor, alliteration/assonance, and quite a few others. (Here is a site that has a pretty exhaustive list: [http://web.cn.edu/kwheeler/lit\\_terms\\_i.html](http://web.cn.edu/kwheeler/lit_terms_i.html))

Writers often rely on the content, actual meanings of the actual words, to create meaning. Poets, because they work fewer words and even structure constraints, have to economize. Using words that maximize meaning and structures that allow for multiple meanings allow poets to squeeze a lot of information out of relatively few words.

Excellent prose writers also do this. Ideally, each word in a given prose piece should carry weight. This is hard to accomplish when there are so many, but even working in a few multifaceted words can really kick your writing up a notch, no matter what the subject.

Today, I'll talk little about **rhyme** and how you can incorporate it into your writing.

Most anyone who was a child (that's all of us...I hope) can recognize **end rhyme**. This is when the last line of a poem rhymes with another line in a poem. Sometimes it's the next line, or every other line, or some other predetermined pattern that repeats throughout. Think "Roses are red..."

End rhyme is standard issue and it's the most stereotypical way to recognize a poem from prose. But of course, rhyme can be used in a variety of ways.

Poets also use **slant or inexact rhyme, internal rhyme, interlaced rhyme** (and quite a few more listed here: [http://web.cn.edu/kwheeler/lit\\_terms\\_R.html](http://web.cn.edu/kwheeler/lit_terms_R.html).)

Slant rhyme refers to words that sound similar, but that do not rhyme exactly. Words that appear within lines may rhyme with other words in other lines. The poet might use this tactic to add subtle emphasis

to a word (and its meaning...especially if it has multiple possible meanings). According to the site listed above, slant or inexact rhymes are

“created out of words with similar but not identical sounds. In most of these instances, either the vowel segments are different while the consonants are identical, or vice versa. This type of rhyme is also called **approximate rhyme, pararhyme, slant rhyme, near rhyme, half rhyme, off rhyme, analyzed rhyme, or suspended rhyme**. The example below comes from William Butler Yeats:

*Heart-smitten with emotion I sink down  
My heart recovering with covered eyes;  
Wherever I had looked I had looked upon  
My permanent or impermanent images.*

(The underlining is my own.)

In this example, the lines are **end rhyme**, but because they don't rhyme exactly, they are smoother to read. Note that “down” and “upon” have similar connotations, and “eyes” and “images” are also similar. Each pairing is deliberate, but subtle. They are not set together in an obvious way, especially if you were hearing the poem read aloud. You might not catch all the exact devices that Yeats used, instead, you would feel the unity of ideas in the context and meaning of the poem that is reinforced by the poet's literary mechanics.

**Internal rhyme** is the most likely choice for a prose writer trying to incorporate poetic devices. Internal rhyme refers to words that rhyme, either exactly or inexactly, that appear within a line of poetry or within a sentence. I pulled another example from the website listed above. (The underlines are my own.)

“Internal rhyme appears in the first and third lines in this excerpt from Shelley's "The Cloud":

*I silently laugh at my own cenotaph,  
And out of the caverns of rain,  
Like a child from the womb, like a ghost from the tomb,  
I arise and unbuild it again.*

In this poem, the writer uses the rhyme internally to emphasize a word and the idea behind it without interrupting the thought with a line break. To break the line at end rhyme would make it sound choppy and distracting.

The paired rhymes (like the Yeats example) also draw attention to each other. Consider laugh/cenotaph. These are conflicting ideas. Laughing is light-hearted, while a cenotaph is a monument to a deceased person (not generally laughable.) The womb/tomb pairing represents opposites, too, in referring to the two ends of the life spectrum.

The poet purposely picked these pairs to rhyme because they each offer a contrasting tone to the idea of the other word. Again, it's deliberate and not rhyming for rhyming sake. The rhyming words are important words and contribute directly to the meaning of the poem.

Rhyming can be used in prose writing, too, to create unity between two sentences, or two parts of a sentence (clauses), or two paragraphs, etc. Writers can try to elicit certain ideas, feelings, or tone from the words without directly calling attention to them. Depending on how obvious you want to be about the importance of the two words (or phrase) who want to rhyme, you can pick perfect or slant rhyme. Slant rhyme is a little harder to pick up noticeably while directly reading. Think of exact/perfect rhyme as pointing the reader in the direction of your meaning. Think of slant rhyme as manipulating the subconscious of your reader. Each approach works for different reasons.

Example:

My creative writing professor, Tina May Hall, recently published a book of prose that makes liberal use of poetic devices. Here is an example from the book *The Physics of Imaginary Objects* that I think demonstrates how rhyme in prose that create unity without interruption. Read it a few times through, and then underline the rhymes. I'm not going to do it for you this time. This is from the piece called "A Crown of Sonnets Dedicated to Long-Gone Love" on page 45.

2

Winter came and hovered. And with it, a roll call for my lovers:  
the sculptor dead, his boot beside the highway, body where? The  
boy who wrote me songs, whose guitar-calloused palms went  
dark to fair. And back again depending on the season—at night,  
dreaming of chords and basketball, those hands would shudder.  
Next, there was a poet turned to science, and a second poet, and  
another. And him, the thick turned thin, a starling in my attic  
(heaven), a single coffee mug, a pair. Him, the one that mis-  
placed somewhere. Except for him, each one I've lost, I've found  
again—as with omens, names, healed-over skin, to forget is to  
discover.

Exercise:

Write a short piece using rhyming words in a subtle by intentional manner to enhance meaning and create unity. We'll share at the end.

Next week, we'll tackle another device that affects the sound of words in a written piece:

**alliteration**-repetitive consonant sounds

**assonance**-repetitive vowel sounds.

We'll go into that next time! If you want to do some more research, check out prose poems, poetic devices in prose, etc. There is a ton of information on the web about these devices. (Here's one I found: <http://www.poetsnw.com/Writing%20Poems-Prose.htm>.)