

**Subject: ENGLISH**

**Class: B.A. Part 1 English Hons., Paper-1, Group B**

**Topic: The Importance of Rhythm in Poetry**

**Lecture No: 189**

**By: Prof. Sunita Sinha**

**Head, Department of English**

Women's College Samastipur

L.N.M.U., Darbhanga

**Email:** [drsunitasinha@gmail.com](mailto:drsunitasinha@gmail.com)

**Website:** [www.sunitasinha.com](http://www.sunitasinha.com)

**Mob No:** 9934917117



## **“The Importance of Rhythm in Poetry”**

### **What Is Rhythm?**

Rhythm is the use of stressed and unstressed syllables, which creates what you experience as a pattern of beats in the sound of the words. The word rhythm comes from the Greek word **rhythmos**, which can be translated as “measured motion. The best poems roll over our tongues with a tested and proven pathway, and that’s clearly not by accident: the writer intentionally crafted each line, designed to lure our souls into its magic. Experts in literature highly recommend young children be exposed to nursery rhymes and poetry from an early age because instills an appreciation for language that they will carry into adulthood. But if you

have not had that privilege, it's definitely not too late to learn how to write with rhythm.

## **Definition of Rhythm**

What is rhythm in poetry? Think of a song you like. What is it about that song that makes you tap your feet or want to dance? It is the rhythm of the song. In a similar way, all poems that are not written in free verse have rhythm, or a beat, as well. We also call that beat meter. Each specific syllable in a line of poetry is called a foot. This is also referred to as a unit of meter.

## **Rhythmic Patterns**

Words are made of syllables, and some syllables are louder than others. We call the loud syllables **stressed** and the soft syllables **unstressed**. Consider the word 'destroy.' The second syllable is louder than the first, so you could say that the word follows a pattern of unstressed, stressed. Poets have names for these patterns. A pair of syllables that follow the pattern unstressed, stressed is called an **iamb**. Figuring out patterns in poetry is called **scansion**. Skilled poets have a finely tuned ear to the sounds of syllables, and by stacking together stressed and unstressed syllables, they can create rhythmic patterns. If the lines of the poem follow a regular pattern, that's called **poetic meter**. Traditional poetry usually employs meter, and this quickly sets a poem apart from regular speech. Meter can also establish the mood or tone of a poem. Depending on the type of meter that's being used, a poem can be formal or playful, romantic or aggressive. Think of how drummers can set the mood for a song by varying their speed and volume. Poets do the same thing with meter.

## Types of Meter

There are five main types of beats, or meter, that we use in poetry. Here, we will take a brief look at each type. In poetry, rhythm is expressed through stressed and unstressed syllables. Take the word, poetry, for example. The first syllable is stressed, and the last two are unstressed, as in PO-e-try. Here are the most common types of meter in the English language:

1. **Iamb:** The iamb is a pattern of one unstressed syllable followed by one stressed syllable, as in the word: en-JOY.
2. **Trochee:** The trochee is one stressed syllable followed by one unstressed syllable, as in the word: CON-quer.
3. **Spondee:** Spondee is a pattern of two stressed syllables in poetry. The pattern may cross over from word to word in a poem. An example of spondee might be: GO! GO! Both 1-syllable words are stressed.
4. **Anapest:** The anapest is a combination of two unstressed syllables followed by one stressed syllable. Take this phrase: to the NORTH. The first two syllables are unstressed, while the final syllable is stressed.
5. **Dactyl:** The dactyl is the opposite of the anapaest, in that it has one stressed syllable followed by two unstressed syllables as in the phrase: FLY a-way.

These metrical units, or feet, make up the beat or rhythm of poetry. Now let's take a look at how rhythm is used in actual poems.

## Examples of Rhythm in poetry: -

Just as different beats in music have a different effect on listeners, different rhythms in literature also have a different effect on readers.

When you read aloud a poem, you tend to notice these differences. This gives a poet exceptional power in evoking the emotions that he or she

wants. A marching-beat type of rhythm is commonly used in poems about battles or war.

For example, read the passage below from the poem “Charge of the Light Brigade,” by Alfred Lord Tennyson:

**Half a league, half a league,  
Half a league onward,  
All in the valley of Death  
Rode the six hundred.  
“Forward, the Light Brigade!  
Charge for the guns!” he said.  
Into the valley of Death  
Rode the six hundred.**

Notice how the spondee rhythm’s consecutive stressed syllables evokes the sound of a soldier marching into battle, matching the theme of the written words.

Another example of the effective use of spondee is this line from Shakespeare’s *Troilus and Cressida*:

**“Cry, cry! Troy burns, or else let Helen go!”**

The use of double spondees gives an unmatched urgency to the line.

Then there’s this excerpt from *Hiawatha’s Childhood*, a portion of the epic poem by Henry Wadsworth Longfellow called *The Song of Hiawatha*:

**Then the little Hiawatha  
Learned of every bird its language,  
Learned their names and all their secrets,  
How they built their nests in Summer,  
Where they hid themselves in Winter,  
Talked with them whene’er he met them,  
Called them “Hiawatha’s Chickens.”**

The trochaic flow gives a sense of the relaxed explorations and fun of childhood. That's why trochee is a favorite tool among children's verse writers, because it is so simple and engaging for young readers.

In William Shakespeare's play *Macbeth*, most of the characters speak in iambic rhythm, giving them a conversational feel. In contrast, Shakespeare created the witches' dialogue in trochees, or trochaic rhythm, as shown below:

**'Double, double toil, and trouble;  
Fire burn and cauldron bubble.'**

This gives us an impression that they are not like the other characters, creating suspense and mystery by changing the rhythm of the words they speak.

The trochee is a rhythm that Shakespeare often used for supernatural characters in his plays. For example, the same rhythm is used in the words of the fairy creatures in *Midsummer Night's Dream*.

## Recognizing Rhythm in Literature

Starting with these three patterns, why not try your hand at identifying the rhythms in the passages below?

Read each passage aloud, and see if you can start to notice the stressed and unstressed syllables.

*If you can keep your head when all about you  
Are losing theirs and blaming it on you,  
If you can trust yourself when all men doubt you  
But make allowance for their doubting too  
— "If" by Rudyard Kipling*

If we put the stressed syllables in bold, it would look like this:

*If **you** can **keep** your **head** when **all** **about** **you**  
Are **losing** **theirs** and **blaming** it on **you**,*

*If you can trust yourself when all men doubt you*

*But make allowance for their doubting too*

Here is another example for you to try:

*Little Lamb who made thee*

*Dost thou know who made thee*

*Gave thee life & bid thee feed.*

*By the stream & o'er the mead;*

*Gave thee clothing of delight,*

*Softest clothing wooly bright;*

— "The Lamb" by William Blake

Just like most poems for children, "The Lamb" follows a basic trochaic rhythm.

\*\*\*

**By: Prof. Sunita Sinha**

Head, Department of English

Women's College Samastipur

L.N.M.U., Darbhanga

Email: [drsunitasinha@gmail.com](mailto:drsunitasinha@gmail.com)

Website: [www.sunitasinha.com](http://www.sunitasinha.com)

Mob No:9934917117