

The Poetics of Robert Frost - Examples

Meter

Dimeter	Dust of Snow	The Rose Family	The Rabbit Hunter	I Will Sing You One-O	Gathering Leaves
Trimeter	Reluctance	Flower Gathering	Nothing Gold Can Stay	Neither Out Far Nor In Deep	Departmental
Tetrameter	Stopping by Woods	My November Guest	The Road Not Taken	Going for Water	Devotion
Pentameter	Acquainted with the Night	The Runaway	The Silken Tent	Mending Wall	Birches
Hendecasyllabics	For Once Then, Something				

Meter

Frost is often noted as a metricist. He said, "I would sooner write free verse as play tennis with the net down." Metered verse has prescribed rules as to the number and placement of syllables used per line. The meter of any poem is based on the predominant or prevailing meter. It is not required that every line be the same number and pattern. As in other poetics, Frost followed the rules and broke the rules.

The English language falls naturally into iambic patterns of accent or stress. Meter governs the placement of accents and the length of the line. Meter can be diagramed to examine these elements, which is called scansion. We scan the poem to discover the placement of accents. This helps us to read the poem correctly. Meter has a great influence on the flow and rhythm of the poem. Remember the TV advertisement where Ringo Starr asks, "Too many syllables?" Knowing how to manipulate meter is the essence of song-writing and rap (for those of you into that scene). A knowledge of meter helps one to write good sentences, especially in speech-writing. Meter makes it flow.

In poetry, Meter is determined by how many "feet" are written per line. Look at the foot at the end of your leg. A "foot" is the basic unit of measure, usually containing 2 or 3 syllables, a combination of accented and unaccented. A foot must have an accent. It's like music, the accent is used instead of the beat to make the rhythm. Say the lines below out loud and listen to the accents:

Dimeter: the line has two feet (the WAY a CROW)
 Trimeter: the line has three feet (NA-tures first GREEN is GOLD)
 Tetrameter: the line has four feet (whose WOODS these ARE i THINK i KNOW)
 Pentameter: the line has five feet (SOME-thing there IS that DOES-n't LOVE a WALL)
 Hendecasyllabics has 11 syllables per line. It is very unusual and Frost wrote only one poem in this meter.

English meters are almost always one of these 5 patterns.

Iambic

- 1) Iambic: 2 syl - first unaccented, second accented (- !) in LEAVES no STEP (two iambs)
- 2) Trochee 2 syl - first accented, second unaccented (! -) SOME-where AG-es (two trochee)
- 3) Spondee: 2 syl - both accented (! !) TWO ROADS. even though there are two accents, a spondee is one foot.

In an iamb, two syllables make up a "foot" (picture the foot at the end of your leg). Each step you take puts a "foot" down, a series of feet form the line of poetry. It's just like walking. This is what makes the rhythm. Frost often walked as he mentally composed his poetry. The footsteps made the beat. Get up and walk and say "whose WOODS these ARE i THINK i KNOW. That's perfectly iambic.

Triplets

- 4) Anapest: 3 syl - first and second unaccented, third accented (- - !)

with a SIGH. (one anapest)

5) Dactyl: 3 syl - first accented, second and third unaccented (! - -)

one trav - el / (er)

These three syllables make up a "foot", but the triplet is more like your finger.
Your finger is in three pieces.

Frost said, "There are only two meters "strict and loose iambic." In his terms, strict would be 1-2-3 (above) and loose would be 4-5. Iambic meter includes the trochaic inversion and spondee. Anapest and dactyl are considered variations of iambic meter.

Let's try to scan it. Remember there can be differences in the way we hear the poem.

First I always count the syllables in each line. The "meter" of the poem will be the prevailing meter.

Frost almost never wrote one meter throughout. Say this outloud but don't exaggerate the accents too much - it is supposed to be conversational. Stop and listen after the slashes to what you pronounced and you should hear it. The slash separates the feet in scansion. The Road Not Taken is written in tetrameter - 4 feet per line.

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The Road Not Taken

! ! - ! - - ! - !
Two roads / di **verged** / in a **yel** / low **wood**4 feet:
(spondee) (iambic) (anapest) (iambic)

- ! - - ! - ! - !
And **sor** / ry I **could** / not **trav** / el **both**..... 4 feet
(iambic) (anapest) (iambic) (iambic)

- ! ! - - - ! - !
And **be** / **one** trav el / er **long** / I **stood**4 feet
(iambic) (dactyl) (iambic) (iambic)

- ! - ! - ! - - !
And **looked** / down **one** / as **far** / as I **could**4 feet
(iambic) (iambic) (iambic) (anapest)

- ! - ! - - ! - !
To **where** / it **bent** / in the **un** / der **growth**..... 4 feet
(iambic) (iambic) (anapest) (iambic)

Anapest meter is quicker and lighter than iambic. The spondee on TWO ROADS reinforces the equal value of each road, just as the poem says. Frost liked getting this sort of thing to work out. Watch how his metrics reinforce the meaning of the poem. In some pieces, Frost deliberately mixes the meter from line to line for dramatic effect, as in Storm Fear where the short lines reinforce the fury of the storm. Frost created beautiful images in his poetry, with lovely rhymes and humanistic philosophy. Isn't it just amazing that the number of syllables work out too!

The only way to learn meter is to do it! It takes some work, but there is no faking it. Remember that we can hear the poem differently, but Frost was a great master at making you say his lines in a certain way. The **sense** of his poems drive the sound so that most of us say the poem intuitively with the accents in the right place.

Conclusion

Frost remarked over and over, "There are only two meters in English, strict and loose iambic." (He was speaking of iambic (strict) and the anapest and dactyl triplet variations (loose). The stresses should come naturally from within the word itself, as if one were speaking common English. Frost said, "Meter alone is too limited and monotonous to convey meaning through sound. The possibilities for *tune* from the dramatic tones of meaning struck across the rigidity of a limited meter are endless." This is what makes Frost's poetry memorable. ([Review tune](#))

Example: Birches: "It's when I'm **weary** of considerations." This line is perfect iambic pentameter, with an extra metrical (feminine) ending. (it's WHEN i'm WEAR - y OF con - SID - er - A (tions). There are 5 metrical beats on the line. The tune of the line impels extra stress on the word weary. The meaning and context make you say the line in a "tune" over the meter. Say it

outloud in a natural way and hear the way **weary** stands out.

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