Introduction to Poetry

“In a poem the words should be as pleasing to the ear as the meaning is to the mind.”

-- Marianne Moore
The Human Brain

- Divided into 2 parts
- Each half has its own function

Left Brain:
- Logic
- Reality

Right Brain:
- Creativity
- Emotions
To clarify . . .

When you are looking at big puffy clouds . . .

Your right brain tells you, “Hey! That one looks like a bunny.”

While your left brain tells you . . .
It’s a cloud, Stupid!
So, which half do you use when studying poetry?

Here are a few hints:

• Poetry requires creativity
• Poetry requires emotion
• Poetry requires an artistic quality
• Poetry requires logic

Survey says ...
both
For the Left Brain:

Recognizing certain devices used within a poem will give the left brain something to concentrate on.

We’ll start with the *sound* devices:
The repetition of sounds

Example: hat, cat, brat, fat, mat, sat

My Beard

by Shel Silverstein

My beard grows to my toes,
I never wears no clothes,
I wraps my hair,
Around my bare,
And down the road I goes.
When reading a poem out loud, you may notice a sort of “sing-song” quality to it, just like in nursery rhymes. This is accomplished by the use of rhythm. Rhythm is broken into seven types.

- Iambic
- Anapestic
- Trochaic
- Dactylic
- Monosyllabic
- Spondaic
- Accentual

Less Common

Most Used
These identify patterns of stressed and unstressed syllables in a line of poetry.

That means one syllable is pronounced stronger, and one syllable is softer.

iambic:  \( \ldots / \) 
anapestic:  \( \ldots / \ldots / \) 
trochaic:  \( / \ldots / \) 
dactylic:  \( / \ldots / \ldots / \)
The length of a line of poetry, based on what type of rhythm is used.

The length of a line of poetry is measured in metrical units called “FEET”. Each foot consists of one unit of rhythm. So, if the line is iambic or trochaic, a foot of poetry has 2 syllables. If the line is anapestic or dactylic, a foot of poetry has 3 syllables.
(This is where it’s going to start sounding like geometry class, so you left-brainers are going to love this!)

Each set of syllables is one foot, and each line is measured by how many feet are in it. The length of the line of poetry is then labeled according to how many feet are in it.

1: **Monometer**

2: **Dimeter**

3: **Trimeter**

4: **Tetrameter**

5: **Pentameter**

6: **Hexameter**

7: **Heptameter**

8: **Octameter**

*there is rarely more than 8 feet*
She Walks in Beauty—Lord Byron

She walks in beauty, like the night
Of cloudless climes and starry skies;
And all that’s best of dark and bright
Meet in her aspect and her eyes:
Thus mellowed to that tender light
Which Heaven to gaudy day denies.

II.
One shade the more, one ray the less,
Had half impaired the nameless grace
Which waves in every raven tress,
Or softly lightens o’er her face;
Where thoughts serenely sweet express,
How pure, how dear their dwelling-place.

III.
And on that cheek, and o’er that brow,
So soft, so calm, yet eloquent,
The smiles that win, the tints that glow,
But tell of days in goodness spent,
A mind at peace with all below,
A heart whose love is innocent!

Reading this poem out loud makes the rhythm evident. Which syllables are more pronounced? Which are naturally softer?

Count the syllables in each line to determine the meter.

Examination of this poem reveals that it would be considered iambic tetrameter.
The repetition of the initial letter or sound in two or more words in a line.

To the lay-person, these are called “tongue-twisters”.

Example: How much _dew_ would a _dewdrop_ _drop_ if a _dewdrop_ _did_ _drop_ _dew_?
Let’s see what this looks like in a poem we are familiar with.

She Walks in Beauty

I.

She walks in beauty, like the night
   Of cloudless climes and starry skies;
And all that’s best of dark and bright
   Meet in her aspect and her eyes:
Thus mellowed to that tender light
   Which Heaven to gaudy day denies.

These examples use the beginning sounds of words only twice in a line, but by definition, that’s all you need.
Onomatopoeia

Words that spell out sounds; words that sound like what they mean.

Examples: growl, hiss, pop, boom, crack, ptthhhbbb.
Let’s see what this looks like in a poem we are not so familiar with yet.

**Noise Day**  
by Shel Silverstein

Let’s have one day for girls and boysees  
When you can make the grandest noises.  
Screech, scream, holler, and yell –  
Buzz a buzzer, clang a bell,  
Sneeze – hiccup – whistle – shout,  
Laugh until your lungs wear out,  
Toot a whistle, kick a can,  
Bang a spoon against a pan,  
Sing, yodel, bellow, hum,  
Blow a horn, beat a drum,  
Rattle a window, slam a door,  
Scrape a rake across the floor . . . .

**Onomatopoeia**  
Several other words not highlighted could also be considered as onomatopoeia. Can you find any?
Using the same key word or phrase throughout a poem.

This should be fairly self-explanatory, but . . . at risk of sounding like a broken record . . .
Time to spend; Time will eventually show us the truth.  
time to mend.  
Time to hate; Time is a mystery;  
time to wait. time is a measure.  
Time is the essence; Time for us is valued treasure.  
time is the key.  
Time will tell us Time to spend;  
what we will be. time to mend.  
Time is the enemy; Time to cry . . .  
time is the proof. Time to die.
So, which is the repeated key word or phrase?
Valued Treasure
by Chris R. Carey

Time to spend;
time to mend.

Time to hate;
time to wait.

Time is the essence;
time is the key.

Time will tell us
what we will be.

Time is the enemy;
time is the proof.

Time will eventually show us the truth.

Time is a mystery;
time is a measure.

Time for us is valued treasure.

Time to spend;
time to mend.

Time to cry . . .

Time to die.
So, which is the repeated key word or phrase?

Fairly obvious, huh?
The repetition of one or more phrases or lines at the end of a stanza.

It can also be an entire stanza that is repeated periodically throughout a poem, kind of like a chorus of a song.
Phenomenal Woman

by Maya Angelou

Pretty women wonder where my secret lies.

I’m not cute or built to suit a fashion model’s size

But when I start to tell them,

They think I’m telling lies.

I say,

It’s in the reach of my arms,

The span of my hips,

The stride of my step,

The curl of my lips.

I’m a woman

Phenomenally.

Phenomenal woman,

That’s me.
I walk into a room
Just as cool as you please,
And to a man,
The fellows stand or
Fall down on their knees.
Then they swarm around me,
A hive of honey bees.
I say,
It’s the fire in my eyes,
And the flash of my teeth,
The swing of my waist,
And the joy in my feet.
I’m a woman
Phenomenally.
Phenomenal woman,
That’s me.

Men themselves have wondered
What they see in me.
They try so much
But they can’t touch
My inner mystery.
When I try to show them,
They say they still can’t see.
I say,
It’s in the arch of my back,
The sun of my smile,
... The grace of my style.
I’m a woman
Phenomenally.
Phenomenal woman,
That’s me.

Look familiar?

That is refrain.
Simile

A comparison between two usually unrelated things using the word “like” or “as”.

Examples:
   Joe is as hungry as a bear.
   In the morning, Rae is like an angry lion.
Let’s see what this looks like in a poem we have never seen before in our lives.
An implied comparison between two usually unrelated things.

Examples:
- Lenny is a snake.
- Ginny is a mouse when it comes to standing up for herself.

The difference between a simile and a metaphor is that a simile requires either “like” or “as” to be included in the comparison, and a metaphor requires that neither be used.
When it comes to using a metaphor device in poetry, a poet can either make the entire poem a metaphor for something, or put little metaphors throughout the poem.
Hyperbole

An exaggeration for the sake of emphasis.

Examples:
I may sweat to death.
The blood bank needs a river of blood.
Personification

Giving human characteristics to inanimate objects, ideas, or animals.

Example:
The sun stretched its lazy fingers over the valley.
A word or image that signifies something other than what is literally represented.

Examples:
- Dark or black images in poems are often used to symbolize death.
- Light or white images are often used to symbolize life.
Using words to create a picture in the reader’s mind.
Poetry that follows no rules. Just about anything goes.

This does not mean that it uses no devices, it just means that this type of poetry does not follow traditional conventions such as punctuation, capitalization, rhyme scheme, rhythm and meter, etc.

Fog

The fog comes
on little cat feet.

It sits looking
over harbor and city
on silent haunches
and then, moves on.

No Rhyme
No Rhythm
No Meter

This is free verse.
Allusion

A reference to another piece of literature or to history.

Example: “She hath Dian’s wit” (from *Romeo and Juliet*).

This is an allusion to Roman mythology and the goddess Diana.

The three most common types of allusion refer to mythology, the Bible, and Shakespeare’s writings.
Poetry should be read aloud!

- Poetry Outloud National Champion 2009
  http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6SJeGjAzvs8

- An Evening of Poetry, Music and the Written Word at the White House, President and First Lady Obama
  http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cUfekqAJHeI

- James Earl Jones reciting from *Othello* by Shakespeare
  http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DJybA1emr_g&feature=SeriesPlayList&p=1ECEA36D759093A1

- Billy Collins, “The Dead” with animation
  http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=iuTNdHadwbk