

## Week 4: Meter & Rhyme

### Meter

- Other than its message, the meter of a hymn is its most critical feature
    - Texts and tunes need to share the same meter to be sung together
    - Even a small departure from the regular meter becomes obvious when sung
  - Meter in English poetry is derived from classical Greek and Latin poetry
    - The ancient Greek language has no accents, so meter used “long” and “short” syllables
    - Languages like English use “strong” and “weak” syllables based on the stress of the words
    - Typically x represents weak syllables and / strong syllables
    - Syllables are divided into groups of two or three, called “feet”, each with classical names
      - Iambic (x/): “today”
      - Trochaic (/x): “heaven”
      - Dactylic (/xx): “wonderful”
      - Anapestic (xx/): “understand”
  - The meter listed in the hymnal (for example, 8.6.8.6) gives the number of syllables per line
    - Usually hymns with the same meter use the same pattern of feet, but not always
1. Practice identifying the metric pattern for the following hymn titles:

1. Love divine, all loves excelling

/ x / x / x / x  
Love di-vine, all loves ex-cel-ling

2. Great is thy faithfulness, O God my father

/ x x / x x / x x / x  
Great is thy faith-ful-ness, O God my fa-ther

3. A mighty fortress is our God

x / x / x / x /  
A might-y for-tress is our God

4. There's a song in the air, there's a star in the sky

x x / x x / x x / x x /  
There's a song in the air, there's a star in the sky

### Lord, You Were Rich Beyond All Splendor

Text: Frank Houghton (1894–1972), 1937

- Son of an Anglican pastor, the fourth child of eight
- Ineligible for service in World War I due to a heart condition caused by a near-drowning as a teenager
- Entered ministry in the Church of England himself in 1917
- Served as curate for three years in England before heading to China as a missionary
- Four of his siblings would also become international missionaries
- Following the beheading of two fellow missionaries in China, Houghton traveled across China to bring encouragement to each individual missionary outpost
- This text was written during Houghton's journey, meditating on the meaning of Christ's sacrifice
- Was later appointed Bishop in Sichuan province and led the China Inland Mission
- Following the rise to power of Mao Zedong, all missionaries in China were recalled in 1951
- Consequently, the CIM became the Overseas Missionary Fellowship but a younger colleague was tasked as general director
- On returning to England, continued to pastor and write a number of books and hymns

Tune: Traditional French

- Originally a French carol with the name “Quelle est cette odeur agréable”
  - Several English translations exist, titled “Whence is the goodly fragrance flowing”
  - The tune retains some rhythmic syncopation typical of medieval carols and folk tunes
  - Transcribed by Martin Shaw, co-editor of the *Oxford Book of Carols* with Percy Dearmer and Ralph Vaughan Williams
1. In many ways, this is a Christmas hymn without the usual trappings we find in a lot of other traditional Christmas carols - angels, shepherds, starlight, etc. Do you think that this takes anything away from the hymn? Or do you wish other Christmas songs were similarly stripped down?
    - a. There are still a couple overt Christmas references in the text
      - i. Verse 1 talks about the “stable floor”
      - ii. Originally in verse 1, “leaving your throne in glad surrender” was “thrones for a manger didst surrender”
    - b. In some ways, the lack of Christmas-ness gives it a wider scope
      - i. The text puts the incarnation in context as part of God’s “eternal plan”
      - ii. Emmanuel not only “makes us” but “keeps us pure and true” – an ongoing process!
    - c. The emphasis is on “love”, mentioned in every verse, which is in a way larger than just Christmas
  2. Determine the meter for this hymn. Do you notice anything interesting? Does the structure of the hymn reinforce the text in any way?
    - a. The meter here looks like this:

/ x x / x / x / x  
/ x x / x / x /

- While it's not unheard of to mix duple and triple feet, it's definitely less common than having
- Although it makes the text sound a little stilted if read straight, it matches well with the
- The syncopated tune plus the unbalanced text adds enough interest without feeling forced or
- The repetition of the first two lines again at the end of each verse makes the simple text fo
- Plus, the repetition of lines reinforces the common phrase “beyond all” in every verse as we

## Rhyme

- Although many would name rhyme as a key quality of poetry, rhyme is a comparatively recent invention
  - Classical poetry in ancient Greece and Rome relied purely on meter without rhyme
  - Hebrew poetry in the psalms often use acrostics and other organizational schemes
  - Early English poetry too (in Anglo-Saxon and Middle English) focused on alliteration rather than rhyme
  - Only comparatively recently (late middle ages, early renaissance) did rhyme rise to prominence
- Today we recognize many different types of rhyme:
  - true/pure/perfect rhyme: “cat” and “hat”
  - identical rhyme: “leave” and “believe” or “there” and “their”
  - slant/false/imperfect rhyme: “soul” and “all”
  - sight/eye rhyme: “love” and “prove”
  - assonance: “flesh” and “head”
- Many people decry the loss of pure rhymes in modern music:

If [Watts, Wesley, and Crosby] could churn out thousands upon thousands of perfectly rhymed hymns, surely a gifted contemporary writer can get through at least a few original contributions without having to fall back on assonance.

(Source: <http://yankeegospelgirl.com/2014/06/03/on-new-hymns-and-perfect-rhymes/>)
- In reality, many of the great hymnwriters (especially Watts!) used their share of slant rhymes and sight rhymes
  - Some hymns, such as “O Come All Ye Faithful”, don’t use any rhyme at all

- The “rhyme scheme” of a hymn tells which lines in a verse rhyme with each other. For a four-line verse:
  - ABAB indicates lines 1 and 3 rhyme and 2 and 4 rhyme
  - AABB indicates lines 1 and 2 rhyme and 3 and 4 rhyme
  - ABCB indicates lines 2 and 4 rhyme and 1 and 3 do not

## Come, Thou Fount of Every Blessing

Text: Robert Robinson (1735–1790), 1757

- Born into a poor English family, father died early in his childhood
- With his widowed mother unable to provide for the family, went to London as a barber’s apprentice
- After hearing George Whitefield’s preaching, found “peace by believing” at age 20
- Served as pastor in a disparate collection of churches: Calvinistic Methodist, Congregationalist, and Baptist
- Finally after retirement in 1790, found himself leaning towards Unitarianism
- Better known for his works of prose (particularly regarding baptism) than for his thirteen hymns
- This text was written for Pentecost Sunday at the Calvinistic Methodist chapel in Mildenhall
- Most hymnals combined the original verses 2 and 3 and omit the final verse

Tune: Traditional American, 1813

- First published anonymously in a set of folk hymn tunes published by John Wyeth in 1813
- Not a musician, Wyeth worked with Methodist preacher Elkanah Kelsay Dare to publish his tunebook for use in Methodist and Baptist camp meetings
- Named NETTLETON after 19th-century evangelist Ahasel Nettleton
- Some hymnals name Nettleton as the tune’s author, since it was included in his *Village Hymns* of 1824
- However, no evidence exists that Nettleton ever wrote any hymn tunes himself

1. Robinson uses a number of biblical images spread throughout the text. Which do you recognize and what do they add to the message of the hymn?
  - a. “Streams of mercy” is reminiscent of Zechariah 13:1
    - i. This is a prophecy regarding the coming of the Messiah, opening a cleansing fountain for Jerusalem
  - b. “Flaming tongues” is appropriate for Pentecost, when the disciples encounter the Holy Spirit as tongues of fire
    - i. “Tongues” here is a double meaning, connecting Pentecost with literal tongues singing
    - ii. The imagery is also similar to the praises sung in Revelation
  - c. “Ebenezer” (“stone of help” in Hebrew) comes from 1 Samuel 7:12, where God helped Israel defeat the Philistines.
    - i. Serves as a reminder of the good things God has done, that he will remain faithful in the future
    - ii. Also a reminder of our own powerlessness, as the Israelites were unable to reach victory on their own
  - d. “Wandering from the fold” pictures God as our shepherd (see Psalm 23)
  - e. “My heart, O take and seal it” lends itself to a number of interpretations
    - i. Song of Solomon 8:6 says “set me as a seal upon your heart”, stressing the permanent ever-present nature of love
    - ii. Seals also preserve the contents they protect, here asking for safe-keeping until the speaker reaches the “courts above”
    - iii. Finally, a seal indicates ownership and authority, as when a king would press his signet ring in a wax seal on official decrees
      - i. This can signify Christ’s authority over our own hearts and lives, claiming them as his own
      - ii. It also “sets us apart” and marks us as his chosen people
2. Look at the use of rhyme in the text, both true rhyme and slant rhymes. Does the inclusion of “false” rhymes hurt the text at all? Also consider the original text compared to its “modern” version - why do you think sections of verses 2, 3, and 5 are routinely omitted?
  - a. The rhyme scheme here is ABAB CDCD

- b. The slant rhymes appear at the beginning rather than end of verses (with the possible exception of “God” / “blood”)
  - i. This maintains the feeling of “closure” given by true rhymes
- c. The omitted lines in verse 2-3 have some borderline questionable theology
  - i. Phrases like “released from flesh and sin”, “death shall loose me” have some Gnostic overtones
  - ii. The implication here is that flesh = bad and spirit = good, and seems to deny a bodily resurrection
- d. The last verse is similar in theme but without the Gnostic tendencies
  - i. Still, the imagery in “blood-washed linen” doesn’t fit as well with the rest of the hymn