

**The Nature of Poetry: Structure and Sound**  
a Writing the World™ seminar for poets, prepared especially for the SLWG  
5 April 2008 10 a.m. – 2 p.m.  
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Note: This course is for those who are serious about learning and applying the craft of poetry. As Howard Nemerov wrote in *Journal of the Fictive Life*, "A poet, upon seeing a rock lying in the road, will write, 'A rock lay in the road.' A false poet will hoke it up in the translation." If you write poetry so you may be counted among the *avante-garde*, this is not the course for you. A duck, having been named an eagle by an aspiring poet, is still only a duck.

To write is to draw the universe into your heart and dispense it through your pen.  
You draw on the spirit of which you're a part and give to the spirit a mirror of itself.

You are not alone in your endeavors. Always remember—  
the words you put on the page with your hand, from your mind,  
first were written in the wood from which the paper was made,  
and in the tree from which the wood was cut,  
and in the seed from which the tree grew,  
and in the ancestral memories of the seed itself....

**Hour 1: Definitions, History and Rationale**

English is an accentual-syllabic language

The Modes of Language: Prose and Verse.

the genres

What distinguishes the poem from the other genres?

is that a "prose poem" or just a beautifully worded (maybe) vignette?

A brief history of the transition of American poetry

Clarification of the terms *blank verse* and *free verse*

The importance of Craft

**Hour 2—The Source and Application of Meter and Sound**

Meter is an inherent part of the language

the iamb    – '    (two syllables, soft, hard)

the trochee    ' –    (two syllables, hard, soft)

the anapest    - - '    (three syllables, soft, soft, hard)

the dactyl    ' - -    (three syllables, hard, soft, soft)

## The mood conveyed by the sounds of individual words

### harsher words

#### Third Canto, "Courage, Defined in Four Acts"

##### "The Fighters"

Circling, zeroing in on insanity,  
fly ever lower; don't let them escape!  
Knowing no boundaries eases your misery;  
murder the bastards; your job is their rape.  
Into the battle you fly with the best of them,  
screaming past courage to bludgeon your foes;  
raining your rocketed blessings down onto them,  
mauling them, maiming them, onward you go.  
Laser-aimed armament stops all the suffering  
screams in the hot conflagration below.  
Silence the guns and the streets with your cannoning;  
victims are faceless, and sanity holds.

### softer words

#### Fourth Canto, "Courage, Defined in Four Acts"

##### "The Soul"

Circling, zeroing in on infinity,  
soar ever higher on gossamer wings  
over the boundaries into eternity;  
leave all the nightmares and live in your dreams.  
Into forever you soar while the rest of them  
reach beyond courage to bludgeon their foes;  
easing your wisdom deep into the hearts of them,  
blessing them, teaching them, softly you go.  
Gently and silently, seek out the reasoning  
ones in the manifest mis'ry below;  
whisper true courage deep into the hearts of them:  
he is courageous who *withholds* the blow.

### Sounds within words

**alliteration**—repetition of sounds at the beginning of words

**assonance**—repetition of vowel sounds

**consonance**—repetition of consonant sounds

**internal rhyme**—repetition of sound within a line at regular intervals

(usually every  $\frac{1}{4}$  or  $\frac{1}{2}$ )

end rhyme—don't force it  
perfect rhyme vs. slant rhyme

the sounds of letters and letter combinations can affect the mood of the poem and the mood of the reader

### Hour 3: The Necessity of Structure

Is "free verse" free of structure? (No)

The structure of the poem—what was it again that distinguishes the poem from the other genres?)

the canto

the stanza

the line

the word

The importance of the sentence in the poem

caesura  
often creates substitute syllable

The importance of the line break

enjambment (or not) affects connotation of lines  
note meter flowing from one line to the next as well  
feminine and masculine line endings

"All Things May Come"

The narrow street at six p.m. is heavy  
burdened so with loiterers and bums  
it seems to tilt. The shadows of the high

rise buildings slice the curb, and passers-by  
cough exhaust along the fume-choked sidewalks,  
soot the one ingredient that's missing

from this Dickensian inner city.  
Churchbells chime and dowdy ladies trundle  
children toward the sound. Mustn't keep Jesus

waiting. Waiting seems a nobler cause  
to some, just risen from a huddled doorway;  
they've learned that rushing does no good. In time

all things may come to those who wait. A cop  
wanders past the empty stores and faces  
himself in a window, turns and nods

*You're no trouble are you?* half to me,  
half to the air, rises on his toes  
and moves away with just one backward glance.

The shadows lengthen quickly in an hour  
and usher in a chill that settles deeply,  
offering no solace for these streets:

not a prelude to a new dawning;  
not a harbinger of peaceful sleep;  
not so much a blanket as a shroud.

## Notes

**advice against omitting words necessary to everyday communication**

**the sounds and connotations of words**

## Hour 4: Notes, Q&A, Individual Readings

Among the more harmful of the myths is that reading others' poetry will somehow dilute your writing style. In fact, nothing could be farther from the truth. Reading others' works will inform your style, but always by improving it, not detracting from it. If you wish to undertake the serious study of the craft of poetry, you must read others' works, and question why the poet used a particular word or phrase or structure or rhyme scheme. How would you have written the poem? How would you revise the existing poem? Can you write a parody of the poem? A take-off?

Every word and line in a poem should have an impact on the denotation, connotation, and/or sense or feel of the words and lines surrounding it.

Everything the poet (or writer, for that matter) does on paper should be done to create a particular effect in the reader, even punctuation or the lack thereof.

Read your poetry aloud. Notice the music in the lines and listen for awkward places or places where the poem stumbles.

Don't think the reader should be required to "interpret" your work to understand it.

**"A Prayer" (If time allows)**