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Tool 14

The Lyric

WHAT IS POETRY MADE OF?

SOUND

Rhyme

Slant Rhyme

Internal Rhyme

PURPOSE

To work and play with Sound in your poems through using rhyme, slant rhyme, and/or internal rhyme.

BACKGROUND

We're so adept at identifying the pattern of repeating sounds that have traditionally ended lines of poetry that, even if we'd never heard this old nursery rhyme, we would be able to fill in the blanks:

Humpty Dumpty sat on a wall,
Humpty Dumpty had a great _____.
All the king's horses and all the king's men
Couldn't put Humpty together _____.

When rhymes fall like this at the end of lines of a poem, they're called, logically, *end rhymes*. *Internal rhyme*, just as logically, is rhyme that occurs anywhere within the body of a poem, as opposed to at the end of lines. There's no hard and fast rule about how close they should be to each other in a poem. They just need

to be near enough to create a nice sound effect, albeit often a subtle one. Here's an example from my poem "Desire":

Am I coming to **feed** you?

They warned me **you'd** be trouble,
you and your endless cravings,
yes, and your **needs—food**, water,

While *you'd* and *food* aren't spelled the same way, they are an exact sound rhyme. *Feed* and *needs*, on the other hand, are oh-so-close, but not quite an exact rhyme. This makes them, technically a *slant rhyme*, also known as *approximate rhyme*. By nature, a slant rhyme is inexact. The words used in this way have one or more similar sounds, such as a final consonant sound or the same vowel sound or blend.

Think back to Tool 12, "The Sound Effect," where you learned about consonance (repetition of consonant sounds in the endings, middles, and beginnings of words) and assonance (repetition of vowel sounds in the endings, middles, and beginnings of words). Consonance and assonance are what create slant rhyme. Can you identify them in these examples? gull/girl, shine/thin, gleam/home, work/earth

Slant rhyme comes in very handy for poets writing in English, which doesn't have nearly as many rhyming possibilities as the romance languages, such as Italian, French, and Spanish. Slant rhyme allows those of us writing in English to take advantage of what's best about rhyme—its stateliness and formality, or, conversely, its humor and childlike playfulness; its musicality—while avoiding being pat, predictable, clichéd, forced, or worst of all, unwittingly comical.

I don't write rhyming poetry very often, but when I do, I'm very grateful for the gift of slant rhyme. It opens up so many more word choices.

WHAT TO DO

Write a poem using rhyme, internal rhyme, and/or slant rhyme. If you like, you can write a poem in any form you're familiar with, such as a sonnet or limerick, but you don't have to, as long as you use some kind of rhyme or rhyme scheme. Don't make this hard on yourself if you're new at this—even a single rhyming couplet, like the first two lines of "Humpty Dumpty," counts.

EXAMPLE

Both poems here are written in *terza rima*, three-line stanzas (*tercets*) linked by end rhymes patterned ABA, BCB, CDC, DED, EFE, etc. There's no set number of

stanzas, but a terza rima usually ends with a single line or a couplet that rhymes with the middle line of the last tercet. You can read more about terza rima [here](#). I marked the rhyme scheme so you can check out the slant rhymes I used.

I wrote this first poem after one of my cousins committed suicide. It was my way of coming to terms with how our beautiful Bonnie could make such a choice. Poems are a safe place to put, or even contain, difficult emotions, and sometimes the structure of rhyme and form offers a kind of support to both writer and reader.

It Wears Like Leather, Bruises

How strong my skin is, holding all (A)
of me the way it does. Like fine (B)
leather, generous to a fault, (A)

it etches my history, tautens (B)
to fit my penchant for excess— (C)
a suitcase bulged with wants. (B)

Exposed to scrapes, rubs, wrenches, (C)
skin knows tenderness and anger, (D)
pelt of rain, the way wind dances (C)

over surfaces. Skin hungers (D)
for a lover's skin, the close (E)
pulse of a child's heart, suckle (D)

of small mouth. I won't loosen (E)
the weight of keeping what this sack (F)
of body has taken in, places it knows (E)

by touch – gritty inlets, moss-rocked (F)
creeks, crannied walls of distant (G)
canyons, this room where I tuck (F)

my own, flannelled, into bed. Skin (G)
flinches from fear or pain, darkens (H)
when bruised, chills. Constricts (G)

when I see pictures of smiling children (H)
missing or dead. If they were mine, (I)
how to bear that chasm, the solid ground? (H)

This must be why wrists weep red, to unbind (I)
what refuses to be contained. (I)

I wrote this second poem right after my daughter graduated from fifth grade and was headed for middle school, thinking of all that lay ahead for her in this new territory. Note that, in this poem, I chose to ignore the form in several places (those lines are marked with an X), as the intention and meaning of my poem were more important to me than following the rhyme scheme exactly.

Deep End

Even her hair floats. (A)
She's learned the exact (X)
angle of chin, elbow, (A)

to keep her eyes open. (B)
She knows the trick's to think (X)
as long as you're on (B)

top, it doesn't matter (C)
where the bottom is. (X)
I watch my daughter, (C)

limbs spread on the water, (C)
trusting it will hold her. (C)

REFLECTION

So, what was it like to write within the constraints of rhyme? In what ways did it challenge you? Expand your thinking about what poetry is? Nurture your creativity?

HONE YOUR CRAFT

Take note of how poets you admire use rhyme, slant rhyme, and internal rhyme in their poems.

Try inserting slant rhyme and internal rhyme into your own poems.

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