



Included in this workshop:
READING 3 Evaluate the changes in sound, form, and graphics in poetry across literary time periods.

Form and Meaning in Poetry

Poets from every era have experimented with poetic form and language to create unique expressions of meaning, and the romantic poets were no exception. For the romantic poets, meaning and poetic form were closely tied together.

Giving Shape to Ideas

Form in poetry refers to the principles of arrangement in a poem—the ways in which words and images are organized, including the length of lines, the placement of lines, and the grouping of lines. Some poems follow a **fixed form**, also known as **traditional**, which uses a conventional stanza pattern or a defined rhyme scheme. Other poems follow an **irregular form**, also known as **organic**, which is not defined by any traditional poetic structure. Samuel Taylor Coleridge wrote extensively about the relationship between content and form in his *Biographia Literaria* (1817).

He believed that a poem's form and content develop simultaneously, not independently. The romantics favored this organic form, which, as Coleridge explains, "is innate; it shapes, as it develops, itself from within." In other words, the poem's shape is tied to the poem's meaning.

The romantic poets experimented with a number of traditional lyric forms—including both Petrarchan and Shakespearean sonnets—and adapted them to suit the contemplative nature of their poetry. Wordsworth, Coleridge, Shelley, and Keats all used the ode form in some of their poems. Originally a choral Greek form that lent itself to dramatic poetry, an **ode** is an exalted, complex lyric that develops a dignified theme and may include an elaborate stanza pattern. In addition, the metrical pattern of an ode quickens and slows to match the emotional intensity of the idea being expressed. The romantic poets favored an irregular form of the ode, which allowed greater freedom of stanza pattern, rhyme scheme, and metrical movement.



Samuel Taylor Coleridge

Building Blocks of Poetry

In their experimentation with poetry, the romantic poets used the basic elements of line and stanza to create elaborate and complex poetic structures. The **line** is the most basic element of a poem. In **end-stopped lines**, the end of the line is the end of a thought, a clause, or a sentence, which is signaled by a period, hyphen, or semicolon. In **run-on lines**, the thought continues into the next line or farther.

Heard melodies are sweet, but those unheard
 Are sweeter; therefore, ye soft pipes, play on;
 Not to the sensual ear, but, more endear'd,

—John Keats, “Ode on a Grecian Urn”

Close Read

Compare the end-stopped and run-on lines in this stanza. What is the effect of each?

A **stanza** is a grouping of lines that conveys a particular idea or set of related ideas. In traditional poetry, stanzas are often characterized by a set pattern of rhythm, rhyme, and number of lines. Some stanzas are named for the number of lines they contain, as shown in the following chart.

TYPES OF STANZAS	
Couplet —two lines	Cinquain —five lines
Tercet —three lines	Sestet —six lines
Quatrain —four lines	Octave —eight lines

The couplet, tercet, and quatrain are the three most commonly used stanzas in English poetry. The romantic poets experimented with various arrangements of these stanzas to group ideas concerning the poem’s subject.

Some highly specialized stanzas have evolved from poets’ experimenting with various combinations of line, rhyme scheme, and meter. For example, the **Spenserian stanza**, invented by Edmund Spenser for his poetic romance *The Faerie Queene*, is a nine-line stanza—eight lines of iambic pentameter and a ninth line of iambic hexameter, called an **alexandrine**. The rhyme scheme is *ababbcbcc*. Lord Byron used this type of stanza in *Childe Harold’s Pilgrimage* (page 854). Other unique stanzas include the following:

- **Ottava rima**—an octave, or eight-line stanza, of iambic pentameter lines, usually rhyming *abababcc*, often used for a fast-paced narrative.
- **Terza rima**—a series of tercets, or three-line stanzas, that are rhyme-linked (e.g., *aba, bcb, cdc*, and so on). Shelley’s “Ode to the West Wind” (page 864) is an example.

O wild West Wind, thou breath of Autumn’s being,
 Thou, from whose unseen presence the leaves dead
 Are driven, like ghosts from an enchanter fleeing,

Yellow, and black, and pale, and hectic red,
 Pestilence-stricken multitudes: O thou,
 Who chariotest to their dark wintry bed

—Percy Bysshe Shelley, “Ode to the West Wind”

Close Read

What is the rhyme scheme of these two tercets? What effect does the linking rhyme create?