

## Richard Kenney Transcript

-My name is Richard Kenney and I've been here for the year at the Writers' Workshop and what I want to talk about is meter. I'm going to talk about fundamentals here. Meter means measure, which implies counting and numbers. In fact poetry used to be called numbers. Well, how many? Well, let me think -- one, two, three, four, five, this is my poetic line, so we will measure it as the poets' do. We have five numbers, six, as many as we need I suppose. What gets counted? Well, you could count anything I suppose, anything that you could whistle back for...in a repetitive way, so that you had a symmetrical pattern, a noticeable pattern. You could count unicorns. Five unicorns in a single poetic line would, would...well you see the problem -- it would, its sentimentality would be the least of it. What you really want to count are small things that don't have any meaning like syllables. You know where this is going. Syllables are one of the things that famously get counted in meter. What else? Well, accents or stresses, as we know, get counted. So there are syllabic meters, there are stress meters, and then the third thing, the...which is the confluence of the two, of those two traditions, and is, constitutes the great metrical tradition in English is counting both at once, which means counting feet.

What I'm going to do is illustrate how one would make a line out of, out of those...out of those simple elements and to do that, like I said, I have props. We'll do syllabics first. These represent syllables, if I have enough. Now, the simplest syllabic form -- the one that everybody's familiar with are haiku poems, right? Turnip farmer rose and with a fresh pulled turnip pointed to my road. So we have -- turnip farmer rose / and with a fresh pulled turnip (seven) / pointed to my road. Five, seven, five, easy. Stress tradition, we have, well the Anglo-Saxons, at the very root of English literature -- begin English literature wrote in stress meters. I don't, I can't speak that for you but during the Middle English period, the literary revival there was a poet called the Pearl poet who wrote Sir Gawain and the Green Knight which begins [MIDDLE ENGLISH] That's close, you can hear the bang, bang, bang, bang. There are five of those, five stresses in each line. We're going to use bolts for that. I said I wasn't going to use that word but there it is. It's five for the English tradition. So... [MIDDLE ENGLISH]. Okay -- can you see these better if I turn them? Five! Five stresses. That,

that tradition survives -- comes down to us in the nursery rhyme tradition. So hinks, minks, the old witch winks, the beggars are coming to town, some in rags and some in tags and one in a velvet gown. Hinks, minks, the old witch winks, the beggars are coming to town, the beggars are coming to town, some in rags and some in tags, and one in a velvet gown. And there you see a very famous rhythmic pattern in the literature. It's the song measure. In this case four stresses and then three and then four and then three. It can be done -- and all of them, Hey diddle diddle, the cat and the fiddle, the cow jumped over the moon. Or, one of my favorites -- bow wow wow whose dog art thou? Little Tom Tinker's dog. Bow wow wow. Bow wow wow -- it's not very hard.

It can be done in a more complicated fashion. Gerard Manley Hopkins is famous for it. The King Fisher begins, his poem The Kingfisher begins -

As kingfishers catch fire, dragonflies draw flame;  
As tumbled over rim in roundy wells  
Stones ring; like each tucked string tells, each hung bell's  
Bow swung finds tongue to fling out broad its name;  
And Hopkins is counting stresses and these are accents that fall on particular syllables in the course of a sentence. No syllables, you'll notice I'm not counting any syllables at all, they don't figure at all in this system.

So the line hinks, minks, the old witch winks is the same length as a line which would begin Let me tell you a little story about a boy named Herb, his daddy was a noun and his momma was a verb. That's a ... that follows the pattern a lot of songs do. They don't need to count their syllables, they don't lose track of where they are. They know how many stresses there are because in the AngloSaxon tradition they would alliterate them, in music you strum the banjo and the music carries it.

But that's the alliterative tradition and you're welcome to try it. It's a powerful way of writing and the limitation here is not that you can't hear it but that you sometimes have trouble deciding where the stresses fall in long lines.

Now, now we come to the great tradition, as I said, the accentual syllabic tradition where I said you count both. Well, how do you do two things at once? The obvious way to do it is to combine them

and that's where my, that's where my props come in. So a stress will be coupled with a number of unstressed syllables and you call that grouping a foot. In English there are really just two rhythms that we're trying to approximate. A rhythm would be a repetitive pattern of a stress followed by some number of unstressed syllables which is always the same so that it would sound symmetrical. So, and in English there are really just four of these. There are two rhythms, one is the heartbeat; lub dub lub dub lub dub lub dub, dub lub dub lub. This one, I'm going to couple them together. When I do that what I have is a trochee, from your position. The bolt and the nut. There's two rhythms that, that we try to approximate using these feet. One is the double rhythm and that's the rhythm of the heartbeat, it's an easy way to remember it. The heart goes, let's say the heart goes lub dub lub dub lub dub. It goes unstress, stress, so I just made an iamb here with the unstressed syllable which is the nut followed by the bold lub dub. Now, in a long string if I say lub dub lub dub lub dub lub dub and I ask Chris back there or somebody else, you know, I don't remember where I started, did I start on a lub or a dub? He would shrug and say, why does it matter? And this is the difference, the distinction between a trochee and an iamb, is really minimal. They're both trying to approximate this rhythm which is, propagates all the way through the literature.

Now, the other rhythm that the feet, poetic feet try to approximate is a, is a triple rhythm. It's called a triple because there are three syllables in it. Two of them are unstressed ----- Now, instead of, instead of lub dub I have didi dum didi dum didi dum and these can be strung together in nursery rhymes - hey diddle diddle the cat and the fiddle has a bunch of them, a bunch of these in it. It could be, literature also particularly in former centuries uses these feet. They're called anapests and dactyls. The anapest rises up to the stress and the dactyl falls down from it. The dactyl and the trochee are the falling, the falling feet. Bum bum or bum bum bum and the anapest and the iamb are the double and the triple rising feet and out of these, out of these props you can build a poem. \

There are two measures which are common. One is the pentameter line, the long line, which resembles/sounds like speech and the other is the short line or the song measure and songs are in it and many serious poems too.

Okay, so this goes, shall I compare thee to a summer's day? Thou art more lovely and more temperate. Alright, it works. I'm tired of love, I'm still more tired of rhyme but money gives me pleasure all the time. That works. The opening lines of Keats' famous odes,

Thou still unravish'd bride of quietness,

Thou foster-child of Silence and slow Time,

Excuse me. That sounded really foolish and that's, that's sort of the point of these meters. The meter is purely mechanical and it isn't a feeling creature, it's really a robotic sort of mechanical thing made out of nuts and bolts like this. It only... It only knows stressed syllables and unstressed syllables and for this reason it's really important to understand that when we say stress in the context of accentual syllabic meters what we're talking about is the stress, illicit stress, or allowable stresses within a single word. So if a word accepts a stress, if a syllable in a word accepts a stress, if the dictionary says it accepts a stress, primary or secondary doesn't matter, it just gets a stress as far as the meter's concerned but you, feeling creature that you are will not read it foolishly like that in a singsong fashion. You will read it naturally and so if I read, if I read that Shakespearean line again and say, shall I, I won't, the ... my robot reads it, shall I compare thee to a summer's day? Well, I would say, shall I compare thee to a summer's day? And, how many stresses is that? Well, the number of stresses that I, of actual stresses that I give it is four. So the robot reads it relentlessly and ruthlessly, giving the same amount of stress to each of the stressable syllables. The prepositions, the conjunctions get as much juice as the nouns and the verbs. They get as much stress as anything that one would wish to emphasize, when one read it in a dramatic fashion. An actor can read a line differently one day from another day, differently on Thursday than he does on Tuesday. Meter never changes. The meter is always ticking along underneath the surface, simply striking every allowable syllable, every syllable which can, which the dictionary will, in which the dictionary will permit a stress whereas you will read it normally. So in a, in a line like that, shall I compare thee to a summer's day? Shall I compare thee to a summer's day. We have four, four rhetorical stresses, four voice...voice stresses, or rhythmic stresses we would say, but there are five metrical stress. Don't worry about it.

And this happens in many, many lines. Any line that has a conjunction or a preposition or some grammatical word like that will... will often have fewer stresses than ...than five. Rhythmic stresses - the meter goes along underneath the surface without any problem. And that's just about the whole story really. I could illustrate with ...I could illustrate with four beat lines, I could illustrate with five

beat lines but just to do a couple more. The opening lines of Keats' ... I'll do two of the odes. The Ode on the Grecian urn begins,

Thou still unravish'd bride of quietness,

Thou foster-child of Silence and slow Time,

Sylvan historian, who canst thus express

A flowery tale more sweetly than our rhyme

Now, if you want to hear the robot read that. Metrically it would go like this:

Thou still unravish'd bride of quietness,

Thou foster-child of Silence and slow Time,

It sounds idiotic to put an accent on and. One wants to accent slow and time. Thou foster-child of Silence, slow Time. It's a beautiful line. Well that disjunction, that disharmony, that counterpointing effect is really what makes accentual syllabic poetry so thrilling because the part of your body adjusts itself, your physical nature adjusts itself to the clock of the meter and expects these stresses to come and when they don't come there's a little bit of a...little bit of a ---, little bit of hair goes up on your neck a little bit sometimes. You get a... have a physical response. There's one other version of that.

The next line is, Sylvan historian, who canst thus express. Now Sylvan can't be pronounced SylVAN but the robot wants to go, Syl-VAN historian canst thus express. Can't do it. So what do you

do? Well, it's really easy. You'll just flip the iamb around into a trochee. Now, you have a trochee.

Sylvan - and now we revert to iambs - historian who canst thus express and this happens all the time. It happens very often in the first position of a, of a poetic line. The opening of The Ode to Autumn is,

Season of mists and mellow fruitfulness

Close bosom-friend of the maturing sun

Well, you know, you could imagine that that was made out of trochees because it starts with season.

Season can't be pronounced seas-ON. Now my robot wants to say seas-ON of mists and mell-OW fruitfulness but I can't so I, again, turn the iamb around, make a trochee of it and I go Sea-son, then I revert to iambs, of mists and mellow fruitfulness and now we're done. It's okay. Everything works out. The ... If I were to take more time, I won't, you should, you read...read poet....the great poems and you'll find these effects happening all the time.

In the context of this little chat I'm saying don't worry about it. It's okay if, if the meter gets violated occasionally it's fine as long as you get, as long as you revert to the pattern. And, again, the pattern doesn't have to be the way that one would actually say the line. The syllables which, where accents are supposed to strike, as in the case of five of them in a pentameter line, they simply have to be able to accept stress. So with these, with these props I've been trying to show how the armature can be laid out for a metrical line. What you have to do, but how does one write one? One simply speaks and moves syllables around so that they can fit the pattern and if you just have to say something and it doesn't quite fit the pattern don't worry about it as long as it- as long as you recover and return to the pattern. Is it possible to write this way and sound anything like a normal human being? Will it necessarily sound like some sort of faux Shakespearean? No, it isn't very difficult at all to do this day and night. The fact is I could speak that way for a long time without you noticing. I guess I'll say one last thing, these meters don't exist in the world. They exist in your nervous system and I'll demonstrate. That I propose that there are two rhythms, the heartbeat and the hoofbeat, I will propose that there are, of all the possible meters, and if you say there are six, there are; dimeters, trimeters, tetrameters, pentameters, and hexameters, and there are anapests, dactyls, iambs, and trochees, that should be twenty four meters that you have to memorize. It's not that way. There are really only a few that actually happen and they are, the lines, the meter which resembles song and that's called the song measure or ballad measure.

And that's, either, that's some combination of four feet and three feet and hinks minks works that way, Betsy from Pike works that way, Clementine works that way, the Yellow Rose from Texas works that way. And Tiger, tiger, burning bright in the forest of the night...many, many poems work that way. All the Christmas Carols you know, all of the ballads you know, work that way. They're some combination of four stresses and three stresses, four stresses and three stresses. Four, four, four, four, something like that. The other famous line is the, is the line which approximates speech and that's the, in English, that's the pentameter line and this is the nature of poetry. It's a ... it's a ...it's DNA is the twining of the strands of song and speech. Speech which resembles song, song which resembles speech.

And those are the two...the two principal measures or line lengths. The short line, the long line and the two rhythms are the heartbeat and the hoof beat. The hoof beat is only really used nowadays for...it's used principally in light verse, in humorous verse. But I started to say the meters exist, they don't. They're often talked about as though they're in the world but they're really just ways of talking about things that happen in the world which are strings of rhythmic patterns which appear in speech. And so the line, shall I compare thee to a summer's day, pentameter line, is it really? Well, in the, if the next line is - thou art more lovely and more temperate and the poem, rough winds do shake the darling buds of May, yes it's a pentameter line but if that poem were to have continued, let's say, shall I compare thee to a summer's day, thou art too prim and arch more like February, say, complaining into March. Okay, now we have, shall I compare thee to a summer's day, no, thou art too prim and arch (four, three) more like February, say, complaining into March.

Now we've, I've made a little ballad out of that. Does that mean that this ballad measure has one pentameter line? No, it just has, it has a stressed tetrameter line that just has a few extra syllables in it. What I'm trying to propose is that , is that I began with counting and numbers, just like professors always do and it's not about numbers and counting at all. That's just the mind trying to understand it at a level of detail which is, in practice, all but irrelevant. The truth is, these things are biological effects. They're happening in the body and music is the proof of that. If you find yourself moving to music then, then you know that this happens in a very immediate kind of way.

I left the question of, the journalist's questions of who, what, when, where, why, how, I tried to concentrate a little bit on what and how but the who, where, when? Everybody, always, that's who and when. There's no, it's a cultural universal. The anthropologists haven't found a culture where this doesn't exist. One presumes, there are bone flutes that go back to the caves, one presumes that this kind of thing was going on from the beginning. It's everywhere. Where? It's not only in poetry it's, in fact, over the last century metrical verse, having dominated the tradition and probably all, all the Western poetic traditions in England, the only ones I know anything for, since the beginning. In the last century meter took a backseat to some other poetic effects but the advertisers and the --- shamans didn't leave it behind.

We often, we hear metrical constructions probably more often in advertising than, than, at least average people out there on the street probably hear them in that context and the context of music more often than they do in the context of poetry. Why? Well, the advertisers know that counting gets peoples' attention. The music people know that we're all drinking wine, aren't we, why wouldn't we want to be here? We like it. You sometimes hear the meter's used because it, it enhances, meter was a technology or a method which enhanced memory, okay. It's not untrue, it's true. It strikes me, it's true in the sense that groceries enhance digestion. One presumes, there are bone flutes that go back to the caves, one presumes that this kind of thing was going on from the beginning. It's everywhere. Where? It's not only in poetry it's, in fact, over the last century metrical verse, having dominated the tradition and probably all, all the Western poetic traditions in England, the only ones I know anything for, since the beginning. In the last century meter took a backseat to some other poetic effects but the advertisers and the --- shamans didn't leave it behind. We often, we hear metrical constructions probably more often in advertising than, than, at least average people out there on the street probably hear them in that context and the context of music more often than they do in the context of poetry. Why? Well, the advertisers know that it kind of gets peoples' attention. The music people know that we're all drinking wine, aren't we, why wouldn't we want to be here? We like it. You sometimes hear the meter's used because it, it enhances, meter was a technology or a method which enhanced memory, okay. It's not untrue, it's true. It strikes me, it's true in the sense that groceries enhance digestion. We, because we're inclined to. The answer is the same as for music. Why? Because we like it. It's pleasing to us both in the hearing and the composition. I guess that's...that's it.

-I love thinking about form. I think that form, you know, it can be a little daunting. It can feel like maybe it's constraining, but I think it can also be very freeing. And I think that's one of the things that I think these poets kind of have shown us. As we'll go back to Marvin Bell again, "Rhyme and meter, too, can be experimental," he says in his 32 statements. And I think that is very true. I think that one of the fun things about form is that you know within that structure you can find ways of playing around, of making it your own, and also of exploring the topic that you have chosen to write

about in a new way that maybe wouldn't have occurred to you before. I think that can be very experimental, very freeing.

-And I'm just thinking that Rick Kenney once taught a workshop to my students, and he gave them the most diabolical exercise imaginable, which was to write a poem of ten words in which each word had one letter more than the previous word. And I thought, oh that's impossible. And then I started driving home that night, and I thought, "I am the mare night forgot." And I realized I was on my way to a poem, and what a formal constraint can do is to channel the imagination in ways that you had not expected. And I love the fact that you were bringing up the pantoums and made me think of, we can write pantoums, we can write... our former faculty member here at Iowa Donald Justice had "Pantoum of the Great Depression," which in the wake of the Great Recession feels strangely contemporary. And there are sestinas. We were speaking earlier about John Ashbery's "Farm Implements and Rutabagas," you can go almost anywhere writing in different forms.

-Yeah, I think it's true. And I think that it can push you to, as you were saying, you know, that exercise that seemed impossible can push you into places that you would never have got to go before and can open you up in a way that maybe you didn't know you could be opened up to I think is one of the really great things about it.

-That's why we like to write poems.

-Exactly. Onward!