

Analysis of Rhythm in "Mad Girl's Love Song"

"Mad Girl's Love Song" is pretty easy to deal with as far as iambic pentameter is concerned. This is really important for the impact of the poem, because the stanza that seems to have the most variations on iambic pentameter is also the one that seems to have the most thematic conflicts. This poem is all about imagination and the power it gives the speaker over her world, and so when, in the third stanza, a new person is introduced who challenges this power, it is fitting that the fourth stanza should contain some metrical irregularities. Line 11 begins with catalexis, which emphasizes the pause after "God topples from the sky, hell's fires fade:" and before "Exit seraphim and Satan's men." It actually creates a feeling of absence after God and Hell disappear, and then are echoed by the disappearance of "seraphim and Satan's men". (It is also interesting that "seraphim" and "Satan's men" are accorded the same number of syllables, and thus equalized). Even the last line, the stable, repetitious "I shut my eyes and all the world drops dead," really doesn't restore order or normalcy to the stanza.

A second way the poem's meter corroborates with the message of the poem is in the colon structure of the lines. The poem makes good use of the subtle change in stability caused by varying the mid-line pauses. The first line, "I shut my eyes and all the world drops dead," can easily be seen to have a slight pause between the second and third feet, giving a stabilizing 2:3 structure. The second line also seems to have this structure, while the third line, "(I think I made you up inside my head)," seems to have a 3:2 structure, giving it a feeling of instability. Because the poem is a villanelle, these lines are repeated throughout, giving a feeling of a tug of war between the speaker's control and powerlessness. The last line of the poem, the same as line 3, ends the poem on a note of metrical and thematic instability, thus suggesting the speaker's final inability to control the boundaries of her world.

Continuing on analysis of the colon structure, there are a few lines which are difficult to assign either a 2:3 or a 3:2 structure. These also tend to be important lines in the poem's message. Line 5 is particularly nice, because "And arbitrary blackness gallops in," seems to have a rather arbitrary pause between "blackness" and "gallops," in the middle of the fourth foot. This is especially interesting because, in contrast, the line before it appears to have a 3:2 division, less stable than 2:3, but not arbitrary.

The next unusual division is in line 8. This is at a point in the poem just after the second person has been introduced. Line 7, "I dreamed that you bewitched me into bed," has the stable 2:3 division, as

opposed to line 8, "And sung me moon-struck, kissed me quite insane," with its forced pause in mid-third foot. This odd rhythm emphasizes the conflict involved with this new person and his threat to the speaker's power over her own world. It also quite neatly divides the line into two equal segments, reflecting the inner conflict and division the speaker may well feel at this point. The following line repeats the less stable, but not irregular, third line refrain.

The all-important fourth stanza is conspicuously without major deviations in colon structure. Line 10, "God topples from the sky, hell's fires fade," has a forced pause which coincides with the break between the third and fourth feet, giving it a 3:2 break, line 11 has a 3:2 break, which and line 12 returns to the stable first line refrain. Stanza five is also without any major colon structure irregularities. Lines 13 and 15 have the less stable 3:2 division, with line 14 in the middle with a 2:3 division. Most of the oddities of the pauses are gone from this verse, but it is still governed by the instability of 3:2 divisions, which reflects the way in which the action of the poem is finished, while still leaving the speaker with doubts about her ability to control her world.

The final stanza of the poem is mostly methodical, starting with a 2:3 rhythm, repeating 2:3 once more, and ending on a 3:2 pattern. The exception is found in line 17, where "At least when spring comes they roar back again," contains a deliberate pause in mid-third foot, dividing the line neatly in two and giving the two pieces an equal number of syllables. This division greatly emphasizes the comparison the speaker is making between the person who is missing and the regularity of the thunderbird. The poem then ends after repeating the first, more stable, refrain, and then the second, and less stable refrain. These last two lines suggest a return to the more predictable beginning of the poem.

The slight variation from traditional villanelle rhyme scheme also adds some nice contrasts to the poem. The traditional aba aba aba aba abaa undergoes a slight mutation in the second and fourth verses (line 5 "in" and line 11 "men" rhyme with each other, but less so with line 2 "again," line 8 "insane," etc.), giving a slight emphasis to those stanzas, and again the tenth line is emphasized by not quite following the rhyme scheme ("fade" is not an exact rhyme with line 1 "dead," line 3 "head," etc.) The fourth stanza is thus given more emphasis via its two off-rhymes, while the off rhyme in stanza 2 almost predicts and makes a path for the fourth stanza.

As its relatively strong adherence to the conventions of iambic pentameter would suggest, "Mad Girl's Love Song" is one of Plath's earlier poems. Her earliest poems could almost be seen as exercises in iambic pentameter and metrical form done in preparation for future poetic endeavors, while her later poems tend to break free of these structural constraints. It is rather difficult to find any later poems of Plath's which are written in iambic pentameter or similar forms. "Moonrise," a rare example of Plath's later use of iambic pentameter, is full of catalexis and extra metrical syllables, and contains lines that

plainly do not conform to iambic pentameter.

The crucial line 9, "White petals, white fan-tails, ten white fingers," either contains a fifth foot with reversed stress or suggests catalexis in a strong position in the second foot (which is not generally accepted as a valid alteration in iambic pentameter). Transitional line 29, "White-bearded, weary. The berries purple," is also virtually impossible to scan in iambic pentameter. It suggests either an extra metrical syllable in the third foot, accompanied by catalexis in a strong position at the end of the line, or catalexis in a strong position in the third foot, accompanied by an extra metrical syllable at the end of the line. This line does, however, scan quite nicely in iambic tetrameter, with extra metrical syllables after the second and fourth foot. In any case, it gives this dramatic line, with its message of possibility and hope, an off-set and equalizing tone. These are just a few examples of the intricacies of the poet's use of meter in this poem. In comparison with "Mad Girl's Love Song," "Moonrise" does much to suggest a more difficult and laborious usage and knowledge of iambic pentameter on the poet's part. By the time of writing her later poems, Plath had obviously done a great deal of experimenting with this particular form of meter, and this becomes particularly visible when poems of different periods of her development as a poet are contrasted.

Lynley Lys
English 100
Rhythm in Verse