

Stressing Off the Beats

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In senior year of high school, our English teacher copied a line of verse from a Shakespearean sonnet and scanned it, marking the unstressed syllables with a midget “u” and the stressed syllables with a forward slash (/). She counted five feet (or metrical units), each foot containing two beats (or syllables). Each two-beat foot was an iamb, an unstressed syllable followed by a stressed syllable, making the line of verse *iambic pentameter*, which is characteristic of all sonnets.

My friend sitting next to me raised his hand and said, “Why is this important?”

The English teacher replied, “Because poets give a lot of thought when they write poems.”

“I don’t get it, though,” my friend complained. “Rhyming doesn’t really mean anything. Poets just do it to make their poems sound nice. So shouldn’t it be the same way for meter?”

Our teacher failed to provide an answer to placate my friend.

Professor Janie Miller (MFA), an instructor at the University of Washington, Tacoma, teaches creative writing, including poetry. “If we create a rhythm that we can remember in our minds,” Professor Miller says, “it’s like spoken-word poetry today. And they [spoken-word poets] create a certain rhythm and they just keep going, going, and going. It helps them to remember everything.”

Poetry has its roots in oral tradition. Metrical con-

sistency serves as a mnemonic device; however, an interruption in the change of the normal metrical flow acts as an attention-grabber. Miller explains, “our brains are so in tune with the iambic rhythm,” and a change in the regular rhythm “almost serves as transition, like an emotional transition.”

Years later, as a junior at California State University, Long Beach, I enrolled in a poetry writing class. The professor listed Robert Pinsky’s *The Sounds of Poetry* on her syllabus as required reading. Pinsky uses the mundane word *permit* to illustrate the impact of stresses when applied to their proper syllables:

Permit me to give you a permit.

Permit consists of two syllables. When the first syllable is unstressed and the second is stressed, *permit* is a verb. When the accent falls on the first syllable and the other remain afloat above the second, *permit* is a noun. Using proper scansion, the sentence sounds:

per-MIT me to give you a PER-mit.

Pinsky writes that a “syllable is stressed or unstressed only in relation to the syllables around it.” Professor Miller phrases it another way: “It’s just manipulation.”

Considering Pinsky’s viewpoint on stress and Miller’s concept of manipulation, does an iamb *imply* anything about love? Iamb here is used as an example since poems about romantic love traditionally assume the form of sonnets composed of fourteen lines in iambic pentameter.

However, where is the love in an iamb? The phrase “I love you” is a foot consisting of three beats.

We may say “I love *you*” as an anapest, two unstressed syllables followed by a stressed one, meaning “You are the only one I love.”

We may say “*I* love you” as a dactyl, one stressed

syllable by two unstressed ones, meaning “I love you more than he loves you.” Or we may say “I *love* you” as an amphibrach, only the middle syllable stressed, meaning “I do not like you. I love you.”

But why pentameter? Is there an analogous romantic life-lesson embedded within the mechanics of iambic pentameter? Perhaps the absence of a stress in the first syllable is an expression of hesitancy, an absence of uttering those three monosyllabics: “I love you”—

“There is always tomorrow morning to profess my love to the cheerleading captain,” the *Star Wars* geek says to himself after having seen her hop into her friend’s convertible.

And on the next day—the next syllable—confidence turns on his heart, like the press of a button turning on a lightsaber. The *Star Wars* geek scampers to her locker and leans on it with a slant, like the stress mark on the second syllable, waiting for her.

She arrives. He holds up his palm and wiggles his digits in playful salutation.

She smiles. She says, “If you don’t get away from me, I swear to God, I will file a restraining order against you, you nerf herder.” Her sarcasm causes his fingers to curl, amorousness seeping out of his fingers—like a lightsaber beam becoming flaccid—like the dip from the mania of a stressed syllable down into the suicidal despair of an unstressed syllable.

And the next morning, he perks up out of bed like a jolted stress slash. The Jedi returns to the cheerleader’s locker in the morning.

She arrives.

He says, “I love you.”

She says, “I know—too bad I don’t feel the same

for you.”

From the high of feeling stressed to the low of feeling unstressed, the platform descends into the chamber. His face cringes during the freezing process of carbonite.

The following morning, the heat of unrequited passion frees the *Star Wars* geek from his slab of carbonite perdition with the melting aura of a stress mark—and pretty much the same thing happens again and again during the remainder of the week.

Five days in a school week = five iambic feet in a pentameter verse.

Maybe iambic pentameter is a prosodic metaphor for bipolar adolescence.