

Free Verse

The Poetry of Spoken Language

What Is Free Verse?

Free verse is poetry that does not conform to a regular meter or rhyme scheme.

- Poets who write in free verse try to reproduce the natural rhythms of spoken language.
- Free-verse poets use many of the traditional poetic elements, including rhyme—but they do so without any strictly set pattern.

Common Elements of Free Verse

Free-verse poets often use the following poetic elements:

- alliteration—the repetition of similar consonant sounds
- assonance—the repetition of similar vowel sounds
- imagery—the use of language to evoke visual pictures, as well as sensations of smell, hearing, taste, and touch

Common Elements of Free Verse

- onomatopoeia—the use of words whose sounds echo their meaning (such as *buzz*)
- parallel structure—the repetition of the same or similar words, phrases, clauses, or sentences

What Shapes Free Verse?

Free verse is not entirely “free” or without rules. Free-verse poets organize their poems using

- the natural, unstructured rhythms of spoken language
- important images and patterns of images

Free Verse and Cadence

Cadence is the natural, rhythmic rise and fall of language as it is normally spoken.

- Cadence is different from meter, in which the stressed and unstressed syllables of a poetic line are carefully counted to conform to a regular pattern.
- Free-verse poets depend on their own sense of balance, proportion, and timing when deciding when to end a line in their poetry—not a predetermined traditional pattern.

Some Important Free-Verse Poets

Although modern free verse was first written in France, important American writers have used it as well:

- Walt Whitman
- T. S. Eliot
- Carl Sandburg
- Marianne Moore
- William Carlos Williams

Walt Whitman (1819–1892)

- Pioneered free verse in America
- Was a public spokesperson for the masses and a prophet of progress
- Changed the course of American literature with his collection *Leaves of Grass* (1855)



Courtesy of Ohio Wesleyan University, Bayley-Whitman Collection, Delaware, Ohio.

Whitman's Free Verse

Whitman discusses free-verse poetry in the prefaces to *Leaves of Grass*—

“I have been more anxious, anyhow, to suggest songs of vital endeavor . . . than to make perfect rhymes, or reign in the parlors.”

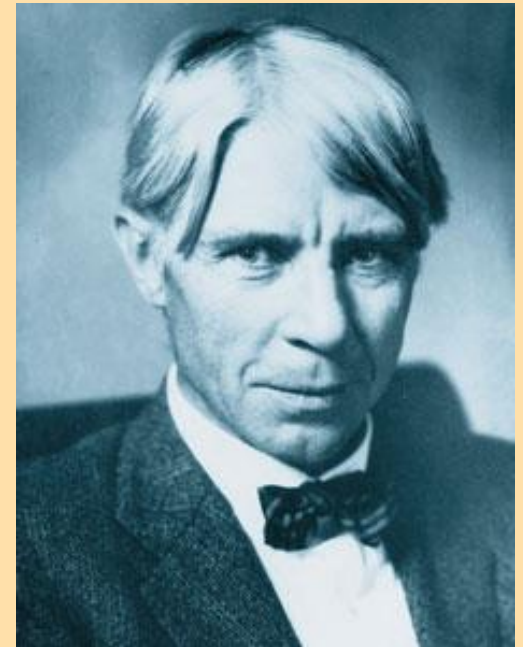
Whitman's Free Verse

from "I Hear America Singing"

I hear America singing, the varied carols I hear,
Those of mechanics, each one singing his as it should be blithe
and strong,
The carpenter singing his as he measures his plank or beam,
The mason singing his as he makes ready for work, or leaves off
work,
The boatman singing what belongs to him in his boat, the
deckhand singing on the steamboat deck,
The shoemaker singing as he sits on his bench, the hatter singing
as he stands . . .

Carl Sandburg (1878–1967)

- Was a poetic champion of American Democracy and of the inherent nobility of labor and the working person
- Wrote two of the most popular poems of the first half of the twentieth century: “Chicago” (1914) and “Fog” (1916)
- Drew inspiration from American folklore
- Said that poetry “is for each of us what we make of it.”



Brown Brothers

Sandburg's Free Verse

Grass

Pile the bodies high at Austerlitz and Waterloo.
Shovel them under and let me work—
I am the grass; I cover all.

And pile them high at Gettysburg
And pile them high at Ypres and Verdun.
Shovel them under and let me work.
Two years, ten years, and passengers ask the conductor:
What place is this?
Where are we now?

I am the grass.
Let me work.



Criticism of Free Verse

Not all poets appreciate free verse. Robert Frost, the well-known American poet who wrote both rhymed and blank verse, commented:

“I, myself, as I said before, don’t like it for myself. I do not write free verse; I write blank verse. I must have the pulse beat of rhythm, I like to hear it beating under the things I write.”

“When a man sets out consciously to tear up forms and rhythms and measures, then he is not interested in giving you poetry. He just wants to perform; he wants to show you his tricks.”

Quotes by Robert Frost from “Robert Frost Relieves His Mind,” interview by Rose C. Feld, from *The New York Times Book Review*, October 21, 1923. Copyright 1923 by Robert Frost. Reproduced by permission of **The Estate of Robert Frost**.

What Have You Learned?

Are the following statements true or false?

True —Free verse does not follow a regular meter.

True —Walt Whitman was one of the first important American poets to use free verse.

False —Free-verse poetry does not rhyme.

True —Free verse echoes the patterns of spoken language.

The End