The Phonetics of Poetry

I will examine the phonetics of English rhyming poetry because I have always had a passion for poetry. When I was young, I only wrote poems that rhymed because I felt that they were more enjoyable to read aloud. After rereading these poems, I noticed that phonetics was an integral part of my poetry writing as a child. I did not focus on using words that looked the same, but rather words that sounded the same. I found this to be a fascinating discovery; therefore, I will examine the role of phonetics in rhyming poetry through examples from my own poetry as well as published poetry. I will also look at the ways in which poets create near rhymes or manipulate the pronunciation of words in order to make rhymes.

Because this paper will examine near rhymes, I must first define a rhyme. According to the dictionary, the definition of a rhyme is the "agreement in final sounds of two or more words, especially at the ends of related lines of verse." The dictionary does not specify how many sounds, but according to a dictionary of literary terms, when words have one identical syllable such as *man* and *pan*, they are called a masculine rhyme. When words have more than one identical syllable at the end such as *condition* and *rendition*, they are called a feminine rhyme. Feminine rhymes usually have the same stress pattern; *condition* and *rendition* both have the stressed nucleus [dɪ]. These words both have three syllables, and if they did not have the same amount of syllables, the rhyme would not sound as pleasing. For example, *condition* and *rendition* sounds better then *condition* and *superstition* because these two words are not a true feminine rhyme. As a child, I wrote mostly true masculine rhymes.

I wrote the following poem when I was about seven years old: “The castle / was made of / pure gold but / the prince / was made of / mold.” In looking back at this poem, it seems that I thought in order for something to rhyme, it had to end in the same few letters. However, after looking at another poem I had written at approximately the same time, I see that as a child I knew that letters did not matter and sounds did. This is evident in the following poem: “I found a shell in / the sea take / it home to / mommy as / guick (sic) as can / bee (sic).” Clearly, I knew that s*ea, mommy,* and *bee* rhymed because they all have the [ij] sound at the end. Although many famed poets are already aware that words do not have to end with the same letters in order to rhyme, I think it is interesting to see that I figured this out at such a young age. I know that I figured this out on my own because my parents do not write poetry, and they said that they did not help me write it.

This next poem I wrote, which is about my mother’s life, is a little different because I wrote it when I was about twelve years old. This is the time when I began to manipulate sounds for the sake of rhyme: “She graduated high-school / and got her diploma / but she’s still in school / to become a court reporta.” As you can see, I desperately needed something to rhyme with the word *diploma*, so I changed the spelling of the word *reporter* so that it would end with an [ə] rather than an [r]. This way, my two words end in the same vowel sound. Words that end in the same vowel sound are a type of near rhyme called assonance. Luckily, these words already had a similar stressed nucleus; *diploma* has an [ow] while *reporta* has an [ɔ]. Because I already grasped the rules of rhyming, I now knew how to break them. I literally changed the spelling of the word rather than leaving it up to the reader to figure out, which is what the following poets did.

Robert Herrick's (1591-1674) "The Vine," contains a rhyme in which the reader is expected to change the phonetic pronunciation of Lucia from [luwsijə] to [luwsijej]: "I dreamed this mortal part of mine / Was metamorphosed to a vine, / Which, crawling one and every way, / Enthralled my dainty Lucia" (667). Unlike myself, who changed the spelling of *reporter* to accommodate my rhyme, Herrick expects the reader to figure out that they must mispronounce Lucia. Clearly, Herrick manipulated the sound of this woman's name for the sake of his rhymes.

Andrew Marvell's "The Definition of love" rhymes two unlike words: "My love is of a birth as rare / As 'tis, for objects, strange and high; / It was begotten by Despair / Upon Impossibility" (681). In this case, it seems that one is expected to pronounce impossibility [ɪmpa:səbɪlɪtij] as [ɪmpa:səbɪlɪtaj] in order for this word to rhyme with the word *high* [haj]. John Donne's (1572-1631) "The Flea" also rhymes two unlike words; however, his near rhyme is more deceiving because the two words that do not rhyme phonetically do rhyme alphabetically: "Oh stay, three lives in one flea spare, / Where we almost, nay more than marred are" (602). The last three letters of the word *spare* and the word *are* are the same; therefore, at first glance, it appears to be a normal rhyme. This is called an eye rhyme. I must point out that every other rhyme in these poems had phonetically correct rhymes except for one rhyme in each poem, which suggests that the poets intentionally manipulated those rhymes.

Now, I will look at a different type of rhyme manipulation, which is the rhyming of a different sound of the word. For example, Walt Whitman's "Leaves of Grass [Songs of Myself]" rhymes one word with the middle sound of another word: "I celebrate myself / And what I assume you shall assume, / For every atom belonging to me as good

belongs to you." Although Whitman did not write conventional rhyming poetry, it seems that the first lines of this poem sound like a rhyme. The word *assume* and the word *you* rhyme because they both have the [yuw] sound. Although *you* ends with this [yuw] sound, *assume* does not. *Assume* has a coda, which is the [m] sound, but this is overshadowed by the [yuw] sound because this is where the word is accented. I must say that I am also guilty of this as seen in the following poem that I wrote at about age seven: "The castle was / made of pure / gold and the man / was cold in / the north / pole." Apparently, the words *gold* and *cold* rhyme phonetically and alphabetically, but I also rhymed these two words with the word *pole* because all three words have the [owl] sound in the middle of the word. Looking back, I see that this is a near rhyme, but it is possible that as a child it seemed to be a true rhyme considering that I might not have pronounciated the letter *d* very much, especially in cases where it came after the letter l.

Another way that poets make near rhymes is by rhyming words that end in the same class of sounds as seen in Anne Bradstreet's "In Memory of My Dear Grandchild…": "Experience might 'fore this have made me wise, / To value things according to their price" (268). The words *wise* and *price* are a near rhyme for two reasons. First, they each have the [ay] sound before the last sound of the word. Second, they each end with an alveolar fricative. Shelly Novo's "After Reading Too Much Sylvia Plath" also contains a near rhyme because the last two sounds of the words are in the same class: "What do they mean, these blue dress days, / That keep me here within myself? / And what of these precarious ways / That separate me from my health?" The words *myself* and *health* rhyme because they both have the [ɛl] sound followed by a

voiceless non-sibilant fricative. When considering these two examples, it seems that the last sounds and the second to the last vowel sound must be in the same class.

I will conclude with my own poem that consists only of near rhymes:

Poetry isn't as hard as it might seem
Just think of a word and add an ending.
And if you think it is still really hard
Just make up a word like *gard*.
Now if you have trouble thinking of a word
Get as close as you can, whatever you can afford.
It doesn't matter if it doesn't make sense
Just think of some sounds and do your best.

As you can see, sometimes the right words do not rhyme. However, there are many conventions to overcome this obstacle, and these conventions have worked so well in deceiving the human ear that the most famous poets have resorted to near rhymes. Not only this, their poems, peppered with near rhymes, have gone on to become published as well as canonized. This is because, after examining the phonetics of poetry, it seems that creating a near rhyme is just as complicated as creating a true rhyme because one still has to consider phonetics.

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