



# Familiarizing Students with Basic Forms of Stanza in English Poetry

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## Abstract

*The textural edifice of English poetry is so flexible that the readers can notice various forms of stanza that entail a number of lines of verse forming a separate unit within a poem. The writer collected a certain number of stanzas as studying variables or data from the corpus of English poems composed by diverse poetic personalities. Stanzas are taken through purposive sampling technique. The writer explored and demonstrated the stanzas from the records of poems that worked as sources of data. The writer assumes that it is necessary for the teachers to be familiar and familiarize their students with some basic forms of stanza in English poetry. The analysis of stanza is linked to the stylistic analysis of a poem. This article is presumed to be useful to teachers and students who crave for teaching and studying English poetry.*

**Key words:** English, forms, poetry, stanza.

## 1. Introduction

One of the elementary features of poetry is its structure and syntax which differentiate it from prose writings. Paragraphs are used in prose writings, whereas stanzas are employed in poetry. A prose line may be different from a verse line even in free verse. Stanza is a unit of the texture of a poem. The stanzas within a poem may be regular, irregular, long, short, rhymed, unrhymed, sentences, clauses, phrases, just words and so on. Such features of stanza make a poem flexible in its texture. Stanza can be defined as a fixed number of lines of verse forming a unit of a poem.

English poetry has been taught at colleges and universities as a compulsory or major subject. Students might know what the stanzas are in a poem, but they have difficulty in naming particular stanzas. This article tries to familiarize the students and readers with different types of stanzaic structure and their names. The writer read several poems composed by diverse poets and noted the different forms of stanza. He selected certain stanzas as a sample of data for considering in this article after studying several stanzas of the different poems. This article is considered to be significant to the learners and teachers of English poetry.

## 1.2 Objective of the Article

The principal objective of this article is to familiarize the students with the basic forms of stanza in English poetry.

## **2. Review of Basic Forms of Stanza in English Poetry**

Review includes definition of stanza, basic forms of stanza and function of stanza.

### **2.1 Stanza**

Stanza is a partition of a poem. It encompasses a number of lines of verse forming a distinctive unit within a poem. In some poems, each stanza has the same number of lines, the same rhythm and the same rhyme scheme, but some poems are based on the irregularity of lines, rhythms and rhymes.

Abraham (1993) defines a stanza as “a grouping of the verse line in a poem, set off by a space in the printed text” (p.198). Of the great diversity of English stanza forms, many have no special names and must be described by specifying the number of lines, the type and number of metrical feet in each line, and the pattern of rhyme.

Cuddon (1999) views a stanza as “a group of verse” (p.863). He further adds that “a stanza pattern is determined by the number of lines, the number of feet in each line and the metrical and rhyming schemes”. The stanza is the unit of structure in a poem.

Harmon (2009) defines a stanza as “a recurrent grouping of two or more verse lines in terms of length, metrical form and, often, rhyme scheme” (p.497). However, the division into stanzas is sometimes made according to thought as well as form in which case the stanza is a unit of a poem. Some poets assign numbers to the stanzas. Lennard (2010) considers “stanza-numbering is a particular issue” (p.86).

### **2.2 Some Basic Forms of Stanza**

Poets exploit various forms of stanza in their poetry. Some poets prefer regular length of lines with a certain rhythm, meter and rhyme scheme in a stanza; while other poets prefer irregular length of lines, irregular rhythm and rhyme scheme even in a single stanza to avoid the monotony of the sameness in meter, rhythm and rhyme. Moreover, the shape of one stanza can be different from the next stanza within a single poem. The irregularity of stanzas in a poem may create a sense of curiosity, puzzle and criticism in the readers resulting in making them critical and creative.

### 2.2.1 Couplet

Couplet is a stanza consisting of two successive lines or a pair of successive lines of verse; usually rhymed. A Couplet consists of two lines that rhyme and have the same meter to form a complete thought. The rhyming couplets are usually used in poetry in order to make a poem interesting and rhythmic. They help create a rhyming effect in a poem.

#### Demonstration: 1

The grave`s a fine and private place,

But none, I think, do there embrace.

Andrew Marvell: To His Coy Mistress.

#### Analysis

These two lines are an example of a couplet in which the poetic persona as a lover is trying to persuade his beloved to make a love affair while they are alive now. No one can love in the grave after death. The rhyme scheme of this couplet aa.

### 2.2.2 Heroic Couplet

**Heroic couplet** is a couplet of rhyming iambic pentameters often forming a distinct rhetorical as well as metrical unit. A heroic couplet is a traditional form for English poetry, normally used in epic and narrative poetry. It refers to the couplet constructed from a sequence of rhyming pairs of lines in iambic pentameter.

#### Demonstration: 2

Though deep yet clear, though gentle yet not dull;

Strong without rage, without overflowing full.

John Denham: Cooper`s Hill

#### Analysis

This is a part of the poet's description of Thames. The River Thames is a river that flows through Southern England including London. It is the longest river entirely in England and the second longest in the United Kingdom, after the River Severn. The rhyme scheme of this couplet aa.

### 2.2.3 Closed Couplet

If a couplet has the ability to stand apart from the rest of the poem, it is independent and hence it is called a closed couplet. It means a rhymed couplet in which the sense is complete.

#### Demonstration: 3

One tender Sigh of hers to see me languish,  
Will more than pay the price of my past anguish:

John Dryden: One Happy Moment

#### Analysis

This extract is also an example of closed heroic couplets. The lines follow iamb pentameter pattern. The couplet forms complete separate thoughts and ideas, and the rhyme scheme is perfect. The rhyme scheme of this couplet aa.

### 2.2.4 Open Couplet

A couplet which cannot give a proper meaning alone is called an open couplet. It is a couplet that concludes with a run-on line.

#### Demonstration: 4

At Sestos Hero dwelt; Hero the fair,  
Whom young Apollo courted for her hair,  
And offered as a dower his burning throne,  
Where she should sit for men to gaze upon.  
The outside of her garments were of lawn,  
The lining purple silk, with gilt stars drawn;

Christopher Marlowe: Hero and Leander

#### Analysis

This is a very good example of open heroic couplets where the end of each couplet is enjambed – its phrasal and syntactic sense is carried to the next lines. The rhyme scheme of such couplet runs on the way of aabbcc.....

### 2.2.5 Tercet

A tercet is a stanza composed of three lines rhymed or unrhymed in verse or a complete poem composed of three lines. A tercet is a three-lined verse, or a group, or unit of three lines. English-language haiku is an example of an unrhymed tercet poem.

#### Demonstration: 5

An old silent pond,  
A frog jumps into the pond,  
splash! Silence again.

Matsuo Bashu: The Old Pond translated by William J. Higginso

#### Analysis

This haiku poem contains three lines with no rhyming pattern. The focus of the poem is on a natural scene. There are five-syllables in the first line, seven in the second, and five in the third line. It is not necessary to have rhyme for a tercet stanza, poem or haiku.

### 2.2.6 Triplet

A Triplet is basically a form of tercet where three lines end with the same rhyme. Poetic triplet is a tercet in which all three lines follow the same rhyme *a a a*.

#### Demonstration: 6

He clasps the crag with crooked hands;  
Close to the sun in lonely lands,  
Ring'd with the azure world, he stands.

The wrinkled sea beneath him crawls;  
He watches from his mountain walls,

And like a thunderbolt he falls.

Alfred Lord Tennyson: The Eagle

### Analysis

This brief poem contains two stanzas that talk about the eagle. The rhyme scheme of the two stanzas is aaa bbb.

#### 2.2.7 Terza rima

A terza rima is an Italian form of poetry first used by Dante Alighieri. A terza rima consists of stanzas of three lines (or tercets) usually in iambic pentameter. It follows an interlocking rhyming scheme, or chain rhyme. This is where the middle of each stanza rhymes with the first and last line of the following stanza. A set of such stanzas can close with some variation- a couplet or quatrain.

#### Demonstration: 7

O wild West Wind, thou breath of Autumn's being,  
Thou, from whose unseen presence the leaves dead  
Are driven, like ghosts from an enchanter fleeing,

Yellow, and black, and pale, and hectic red,  
Pestilence-stricken multitudes: O thou,  
Who chariotest to their dark wintry bed

The winged seeds, where they lie cold and low,  
Each like a corpse within its grave, until  
Thine azure sister of the Spring shall blow

Her clarion o'er the dreaming earth, and fill

(Driving sweet buds like flocks to feed in air)

With living hues and odours plain and hill:

Wild Spirit, which art moving everywhere;

Destroyer and preserver; hear, oh hear!

Percy Bysshe Shelley: Ode to the West Wind

### **Analysis**

This is an extract of the poem “Ode to the West Wind” retains four tercets and one couplet with the rhyme aba bcb cdc ded ff. The poet refers to the wind as “Wind” using the capital letter, suggesting that he sees it as his god. He praises the wind, referring to its strength and might in tones similar to the Biblical Psalms which adore God.

### **2.2.8 Quatrain**

Quatrain is a stanza or poem consisting of four lines rhymed or unrhymed. Quatrains may have various rhyme patterns. A quatrain is a verse with four lines, or even a full poem containing four lines, having an independent and separate theme. Some of them are given below.

#### **i. The abab pattern is called interlaced quatrain.**

#### **Demonstration: 8**

The curfew tolls the knell of parting day,

The lowing herd wind slowly o'er the lea,

The plowman homeward plods his weary way,

And leaves the world to darkness and to me.

Thomas Gray: Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard

### **Analysis**

This stanza has four verse lines. Each line has ten syllables, known as decasyllabic line. Each verse line is in iambic pentameter, an unstressed syllable followed by a stressed syllable in each foot.

**ii. The aaaa pattern is called Monorhyme quatrain.**

**Demonstration: 9**

Twenty odd years have turned to air;

Now she's the girl I didn't dare

Approach, ask out, much less declare

My love to, mired in young despair.

Dick Davis: A Monorhyme for the Shower

**Analysis**

Four verse lines are rhymed the same. They indicate the unity of thought or feeling. Each verse line has 8 syllables. It is called octasyllabic line.

**iii. The aabb pattern is called double couplet quatrain.**

**Demonstration: 10**

Trapped within a haze of fear,

The Lord of Lies does appear.

Clouded by so much that's wrong,

Truth gets twisted by his song.

Theresa King: Lord of Deceit

**Analysis**

In this stanza, each verse line has 7 syllables. It means the stanza retains heptasyllabic line. It has two couplets.

**iv. The abba pattern is called envelope/ enclosed quatrain.**

**Demonstration: 11**

Strong Son of God , immortal love,



Whom we ,that have not seen thy face,

By faith , and faith alone, embrace,

Believing where we cannot prove.

Tennyson: In Memoriam

### Analysis

Each verse line has 8 syllables. Middle two rhymed lines are surrounded with two peripheral rhymed lines.

v. **The abcb or abab pattern is called ballad quatrain, in which lines of iambic tetrameter alternate with iambic trimeter.**

### Demonstration: 12

All in a hot and copper sky!  
The bloody Sun, at noon,  
Right up above the mast did stand,  
No bigger than the Moon.

Samuel\_Taylor\_Coleridge: The Rime of the Ancient Mariner

### Analysis

The first and third verse lines have 8 syllables, whereas the second and fourth verse lines have 6 syllables. There are several forms of quatrains in English poetry. Other quatrains as stanzas in English poetry are:

**Goethe Stanza:** Its rhyme scheme is abab but no meter.

### Demonstration: 13

As we grow older and look back,  
This album which is in my heart  
Will have love and never will lack  
Pages for new stories to start .

Lorraine Dafney: We Will See

### Analysis

This stanza involves the first line rhymed with the third line; and the second line rhymed with the fourth line. But the lines do not have regular occurrence of stressed and unstressed patterns.

**Italian Quatrain:** Its rhyme scheme is abba with iambic pentameter.

### Demonstration: 14

The worried efforts of the busy heap,  
The dirt, the imprecision, and the beer  
Produce a few smart wisecracks every year;  
Laugh if you can, but you will have to leap.

Auden: Look Before You Leap

### Analysis

This stanza consists of four verse lines written in iambic pentameter with slight variation at the beginning of the third and fourth lines.

**Elegiac Stanza:** This uses abab rhyme scheme with iambic pentameter.

### Demonstration: 15

The breezy call of incense-breathing Morn,  
The swallow twitt'ring from the straw-built shed,  
The cock's shrill clarion, or the echoing horn,  
No more shall rouse them from their lowly bed.

Thomas Gray: Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard

### Analysis

The stanza holds the elegiac tone and embodies a meditation on death and remembrance after death. The poetic persona finds comfort in pondering the lives of the obscure rustics buried in the churchyard. The verse lines are written in iambic pentameter.

Memoriam Stanza: This uses abba rhyme scheme with iambic tetrameter.

**Demonstration: 16**

O thou, new-year, delaying long,  
Delayest the sorrow in my blood,  
That longs to burst a frozen bud  
And flood a fresher throat with song.

Tennyson: Memoriam

**Analysis**

Each verse line has 8 syllables in which the unstressed first syllable is followed by the stressed second syllable in each foot.

**2.2.9 Quintain**

A Quintain is any poetic form containing five lines. It may refer to a stanza or a poem containing five lines rhymed or unrhymed.

**Demonstration: 17**

Sunny scorching show of summer season  
now to drop curtain with storms and rainfall.  
Cerulean sky to exult meeting clear horizon.  
Yellow leaves from deciduous trees ready to fall  
Dry dying leaves leaving tree on appear of Fall.

Fresh flush on abloom flower and foliage  
Flocks of egrets on firmament looking nicest  
Hesitant lovers at last decided to get engaged.  
Full Moon reminds season to harvest.  
Choice of mellow pumpkins is the best.

Anisha Dutta: Welcome Autumn

## Analysis

This poem retains two stanzas. Each stanza has five verse lines with the rhyme scheme ababb in the first stanza and cdcd in the second stanza.

### 2.2.10 Sextain / Sestet

Sextain is a group of six lines of stanza or poetry. The last stanza of six lines of a Petrarchan sonnet is called sestet.

#### Demonstration: 18

That murmur, soon replies, "God doth not need  
Either man's work or his own gifts; who best  
Bear his mild yoke, they serve him best. His state  
Is Kingly. Thousands at his bidding speed  
And post o'er land and ocean without rest;  
They also serve who only stand and wait."

John Milton: On His Blindness

## Analysis

This is a stanza from his popular sonnet on his blindness. The poet is grieved by thinking that he would not be able to continue his poetic creation because of his blindness. The rhyme scheme of this stanza is abcabc.

### 2.2.11 Septet

A stanza or a poem comprising of seven lines is termed as septet. . A septet can be defined as a poem or stanza consisting of seven lines, having any form or meter:

#### Demonstration: 19

There is a garden in her face  
Where roses and white lilies grow;  
A heav'nly paradise is that place  
Wherein all pleasant fruits do flow.

There cherries grow which none may buy,

Till "Cherry ripe" themselves do cry.

Thomas Campion: There is a Garden in Her Face

### **Analysis**

This stanza has seven verse lines which contain ababcc rhyme scheme.

#### **2.2.12 Rhyme Royal**

Rhyme royal is a stanza of seven lines in iambic pentameter with a rhyme scheme of ababbcc.

Rhyme royal is a stanza made up of seven iambic Pentametric lines.

#### **Demonstration: 20**

There was a roaring in the wind all night;

The rain came heavily and fell in floods;

But now the sun is rising calm and bright;

The birds are singing in the distant woods;

Over his own sweet voice the Stock-dove broods;

The Jay makes answer as the Magpie chatters;

And all the air is filled with pleasant noise of waters.

William Wordsworth: Resolution and Independence

### **Analysis**

The stanza consist of seven verse lines with ten syllables in each line in which the first syllable is unstressed and second syllable is stressed and so on. Each line has five iambic feet. The rhyme scheme of this stanza is ababbcc.

#### **2.2.13 Octave**

An octave is a verse form consisting of eight lines of iambic pentameter (in English) or of hendecasyllables (in Italian). The most common rhyme scheme for an octave is *abba abba*. An octave is the first part of a Petrarchan sonnet which ends with a contrasting sestet. In traditional Italian sonnets the octave always ends with a conclusion of one idea, giving way to another idea in the

sestet. Some English sonnets break that rule, often to striking effect. Octave also refers to a poem or a stanza containing eight lines. Let's have a look at a normal octave.

**Demonstration: 21**

May she be granted beauty and yet not  
Beauty to make a stranger's eye distraught,  
Or hers before a looking-glass, for such,  
Being made beautiful overmuch,  
Consider beauty a sufficient end,  
Lose natural kindness and maybe  
The heart-revealing intimacy  
That chooses right, and never finds a friend.

William Butler Yeats: A Prayer or My Daughter

**Analysis**

This stanza has aabbccddc rhyme. Though some lines rhyme, but the verse lines seem irregular in the number of syllables.

**2.2.14 Ottava Rima**

Ottava rima is a stanza made up of eight lines in iambic pentameter with the rhyming pattern of ababbcbcc.

**Demonstration: 22**

Tis sweet to hear the watch dog's honest bark  
  
Bay deep- mouthed welcome as we draw near home;  
  
Tis sweet to know there is an eye will work  
  
Our coming and look brighter when we come.  
  
Tis sweet to be awakened the lark  
  
Or lulled by falling waters; sweet the hum

Of bees, the voice of the girls, the songs of birds,

The lisp of children, and their earliest words.

Byron: Don Juan

### **Analysis**

This stanza is extracted from Byron’s famous poem “Don Juan”. He mentions what is sweet to hear and know.

#### **2.2. 15 Nonette**

A Nonette is a nine –line stanza. The rhyme scheme can be of various arrangements.

#### **Demonstration: 23**

“Forward, the Light Brigade!”

Was there a man dismayed?

Not though the soldier knew

Someone had blundered.

Theirs not to make reply,

Theirs not to reason why,

Theirs but to do and die.

Into the valley of Death

Rode the six hundred.”

Alfred Lord Tennyson: The Charge of Light Brigade

### **Analysis**

This stanza consists of nine verse lines with the rhyme scheme of aabccdddec. Most of the verse lines have 6 syllables.

#### **2.2.16 Spenserian Stanza**

The Spenserian stanza is a fixed verse form invented by Edmund Spenser for his epic poem “The Faerie Queene”. Each stanza contains nine lines in total: eight lines in iambic pentameter followed by a single ' alexandrine' line in iambic hexameter.

**Demonstration: 24**

Lo I the man, whose Muse whilome did maske,  
As time her taught, in lowly Shepheards weeds,  
Am now enforst a far unfitter taske,  
For trumpets sterne to chaunge mine Oaten reeds,  
And sing of Knights and Ladies gentle deeds;  
Whose prayes having slept in silence long,  
Me, all too meane, the sacred Muse areeds  
To blazon broad emongst her learned throng:  
Fierce warres and faithfull loues shall moralize my song.

Edmund Spenser: The Faerie Queene

**Analysis**

This stanza is taken from Spenser’s famous epic. It retains the certain arrangement of rhyme. The rhyme scheme of this stanza is ababbcbcc.

**2.2.17 Dizain**

A stanza or a poem of ten poetic lines.

**Demonstration: 25**

Heard melodies are sweet, but those unheard  
Are sweeter; therefore, ye soft pipes, play on;  
Not to the sensual ear, but, more endear'd,  
Pipe to the spirit ditties of no tone:



Fair youth, beneath the trees, thou canst not leave  
Thy song, nor ever can those trees be bare;  
Bold Lover, never, never canst thou kiss,  
Though winning near the goal yet, do not grieve;  
She cannot fade, though thou hast not thy bliss,  
For ever wilt thou love and she be fair!

John Keats: Ode on a Grecian Urn

### Analysis

This stanza has ten verse lines with ababbcdede rhyme scheme. Each verse line is deca-syllabic.

### 3. Method of Analysis

The article is based on the qualitative research, especially the content analysis in which stanzas of different poems by different poets are considered for the study. The stanzas are selected through the purposive sampling design. The stanzas are taken as data for the research study. The selected stanzas are analyzed by focusing on the number of verse lines and rhyme scheme in each stanza. Different types of stanza are demonstrated and analyzed in brief.

### 4. Conclusion

Poetry is flexible in its forms of stanza. Stanzas are primarily named on the basis of the number of verse lines, metrical feet and rhyme schemes. Some verse lines in a stanza may be of the same length, but verse lines may be irregular in the stanzas of free verse. Teachers and students or any persons interested in studying poetry should have an understanding of forms of stanza for better analysis of poetry. This article will be significant to the persons interested in English poetry.

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