



Keeping connected: introducing ThinkLets

Learning Together builds educational communities that bring together people who live, study and work in universities and criminal justice organisations. Together, we want to use the power of education to improve lives, institutions and communities.

Covid-19 is a major challenge to our health and wellbeing. It means that we cannot physically come together as a community to learn with and from each other. But we can still keep learning and supporting each other to stay hopeful, positive and engaged.

Members of the Learning Together Network have created ThinkLets to help us all keep connected. Each ThinkLet contains resources that will help us to think about new ideas and develop new skills together, even from afar.

Each week, for the next eight weeks, two ThinkLets will be shared across our national community. We hope you enjoy them and find them helpful.

**Keep well. Keep hopeful. Keep connected.
And keep Learning Together.**

Please note:

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ThinkLet #6

Literary Analysis: How to Read & Why to Count

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If you're reading this sentence, then it's a safe assumption that you know how to read. And if you've been keeping up with ThinkLets over the last few weeks and realise that this one is #6, you know how to count as well. In this ThinkLet, I want to argue that reading and counting are both important aspects of how we encounter writing in verse.

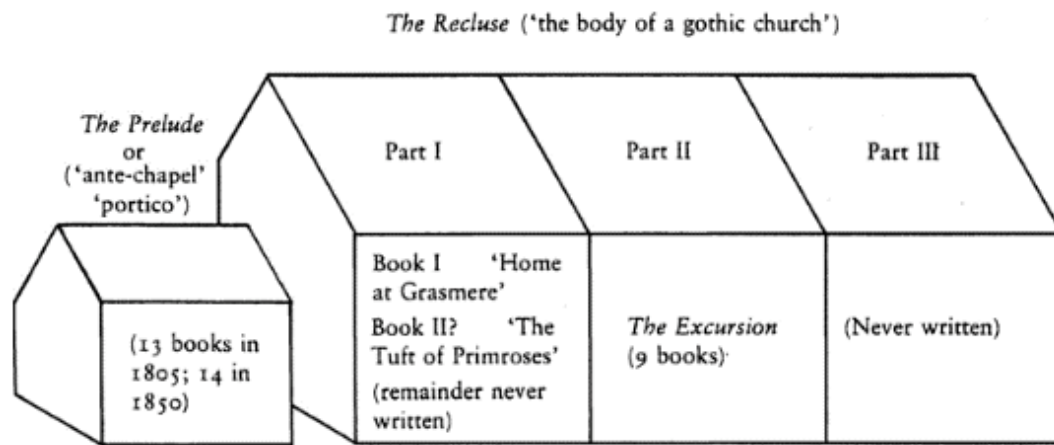
We're going to focus on just two examples, both written in what has come to be called 'blank verse'. Blank verse comes in lines of ten syllables which have a de-dum, de-dum, de-dum, de-dum, de-dum rhythm. Also, blank verse doesn't rhyme.

Some important critics have held a dim view of blank verse. Writing in the eighteenth century, Samuel Johnson concluded his 'Life of Milton' by alleging that, since it doesn't rhyme, blank verse was 'verse to the eye only' (Milton's epic poem, *Paradise Lost*, is in blank verse, but, while he did have a high opinion of Milton, in the end Johnson preferred the rhyming couplets of John Dryden and Alexander Pope). What Johnson meant by saying that blank verse is verse to the eye only is that, although it looks like verse rather than prose on the page – and we'll want to think about what makes it look like verse in a moment – it doesn't sound like verse. To *sound* like verse, Johnson thought, verse has to rhyme.

As I mention above, Johnson is a pretty major critic – perhaps the most important one of the eighteenth century and, in fact, important to discussion of English literature ever since. But poets after him weren't put off by his strictures on blank verse – a poet like William Wordsworth (pictured), for example, looked back to Milton as his model much more than he did to Dryden or Pope.

Wordsworth's attempt at writing a grand epic poem in the Miltonic style never quite came to fruition, though we do have what he considered to be its first part. Wordsworth described the poem that came to be called 'The Prelude' after his death as being like the antechapel to a great gothic cathedral – the introduction, that is, to the epic he didn't live to complete. The diagram below is an attempt to represent where The Prelude fits along with a number of other poems that Wordsworth did write and which we think he meant, ultimately, to be parts of the great cathedral of his life's poetic work.





Relatively early on in *The Prelude*, Wordsworth reflects in a wonderfully descriptive passage on his formative experiences of nature as a ten-year-old boy ('twice five seasons'). Here it is as it appears in Book I of *The Prelude* – try reading it out loud:

1.
Yes, I remember, when the changeful earth,
And twice five seasons on my mind had stamp'd
The faces of the moving year, even then,
A Child, I held unconscious intercourse
With the eternal Beauty, drinking in
A pure organic pleasure from the lines
Of curling mist, or from the level plain
Of waters colour'd by the steady clouds.

William Wordsworth, *The Prelude* (1805), Book I, lines 586-93

And here is the same passage – not a word changed – but not as it appears in *The Prelude* – again, read it out loud.

2.
Yes, I remember, when the changeful earth, and twice five seasons on my mind had stamp'd the faces of the moving year, even then, a Child, I held unconscious intercourse with the eternal Beauty, drinking in a pure organic pleasure from the lines of curling mist, or from the level plain of waters colour'd by the steady clouds.

Let's think about the differences between these two passages – or, rather, these two ways of presenting the same passage:

1. In what ways do the two passages look different?
2. In what ways, if any, did the passages sound different when you were reading them out loud?
3. We could say that the only difference between the first and second versions of the passage is that the first has *lines* and the second doesn't. What, if any, are the consequences of that difference?
4. Lines have endings in the sense that they are significant in some way – the poet has decided where one line should end and another should begin. In prose, it's just the width of the page that determines where 'lines' of text end. What is significant about the line-endings in the first version of the passage above?
5. We can ask some other questions arising from 4. Are there certain kinds of words or words that are especially significant to description at the ends of lines? Or not? Which lines have punctuation – full-stops, commas, semi-colons, colons, dashes, etc. – and which don't? Do most lines end with punctuation or not?
6. Which version do you prefer? Why? Or doesn't the difference make any, well, difference?!

So, we might say that **line** is pretty fundamental to the writing – and reading – of verse. What we were chiefly doing in looking at Wordsworth was thinking about line endings: how a continuous description is divided up into lines and what effects this might have.

I want now to think about individual lines as (so to speak) units with a certain number of elements – that is, a certain number of syllables – in them. Or perhaps not so certain... You'll remember I said above that, as a rule, blank verse has lines of ten syllables. Well, the thing about rules is that people often break them – and poets are no exception.

The man who succeeded Wordsworth as Poet Laureate was Alfred Tennyson (it was always men in those days – until the recent Poet Laureate, Carol Ann Duffey, in fact – although Tennyson pipped Elizabeth Barrett Browning to the post). Tennyson wrote a poem called 'Tithonus'. Tithonus is a figure from Classical mythology. He asked the gods for immortality, which they granted, but, being rather literal-minded folk with a bit of a sadistic streak, the gods didn't give him eternal youth to go with it. So, Tithonus was condemned to an eternity of getting older and older without the prospect of death to bring relief.



Tennyson's poem reflects on this condition. It is one of his dramatic monologues, a form developed by a number of major poets in the nineteenth century in which a character (here, Tithonus) speaks. These are the opening lines (again, probably a good idea to read it aloud):

The woods decay, the woods decay and fall,
The vapours weep their burthen to the ground,
Man comes and tills the field and lies beneath,
And after many a summer dies the swan.
Me only cruel immortality
Consumes: I wither slowly in thine arms,
Here at the quiet limit of the world,
A white-hair'd shadow roaming like a dream
The ever-silent spaces of the East,
Far-folded mists and gleaming halls of morn.

Alfred Tennyson, 'Tithonus' (written 1833; revised and published 1860), ll.1-10

Count the number of syllables in the first three lines – the lines in which the poet is letting the reader know what to expect and establishing a pattern.

All in order? Ten syllables to a line in those lines?... Good.

What about lines four ('And after many a summer dies the swan.') and five ('Me only cruel immortality')? Bit trickier?

Let's take the first of those of those lines and try to count how many syllables it has if we read it in a normal enough way:

And| af| ter| man| y| a| sum| er| dies| the| swan|
1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10 11

Eleven? Surely not? Aren't blank verse lines meant to have ten syllables?

Well, perhaps there's a way to read this line – naturally enough – as having ten syllables, so long as the swan's many summers aren't – unlike Tithonus's – too many:

And| af| ter man| y a| summ| er| dies| the| swan|
1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

We have to be making quite a special effort to give 'many a' three syllables (men-ee-ah) – the kind of effort we might put into reading a poem, for example. But it's quite usual for us to slur our speech, skipping over syllables, squishing two into one: men-yah. And making something that would be otherwise too long – life in Tithonus's case – fit into a reasonable span – life in the swan's case – is exactly what this line is all about.

Try counting the syllables in the next line: 'Me only cruel immortality'. Are there any problems with it? How might we solve them (if any)? And might our solution be pertinent again to the concerns of this poem with living too long, beyond a bearable span?

I've used two examples of blank verse poems to ask you to think about the **line** and the **length** of the line here. Those poems are by much-discussed poets. John Milton's epic poem, *Paradise Lost* (1674) – which I mentioned at the very beginning of this ThinkLet - is yet another example of blank verse. Below is an extract from Book One (lines 27 – 83) of the epic poem. As an **extension task**, look at the text below on your own and see if you can pick out any of the details we found in the previous two examples, as well as new details!

Say first, for Heav'n hides nothing from thy view Nor the deep Tract of Hell, say first what cause Mov'd our Grand Parents in that happy State, Favour'd of Heav'n so highly, to fall off From thir Creator, and transgress his Will For one restraint, Lords of the World besides? Who first seduc'd them to that foul revolt? Th' infernal Serpent; he it was, whose guile Stird up with Envy and Revenge, deceiv'd The Mother of Mankind, what time his Pride Had cast him out from Heav'n, with all his Host Of Rebel Angels, by whose aid aspiring To set himself in Glory above his Peers, He trusted to have equal'd the most High, If he oppos'd; and with ambitious aim Against the Throne and Monarchy of God Rais'd impious War in Heav'n and Battel proud With vain attempt. Him the Almighty Power Hurl'd headlong flaming from th' Ethereal Skie With hideous ruine and combustion down To bottomless perdition, there to dwell In Adamantine Chains and penal Fire, Who durst defie th' Omnipotent to Arms. Nine times the Space that measures Day and Night To mortal men, he with his horrid crew Lay vanquisht, rowling in the fiery Gulfe Confounded though immortal: But his doom Reserv'd him to more wrath; for now the thought Both of lost happiness and lasting pain	30 35 40 45 50 55	Torments him; round he throws his baleful eyes That witness'd huge affliction and dismay Mixt with obdurate pride and stedfast hate: At once as far as Angels kenn he views The dismal Situation waste and wilde, A Dungeon horrible, on all sides round As one great Furnace flam'd, yet from those flames No light, but rather darkness visible Serv'd onely to discover sights of woe, Regions of sorrow, doleful shades, where peace And rest can never dwell, hope never comes That comes to all; but torture without end Still urges, and a fiery Deluge, fed With ever-burning Sulphur unconsum'd: Such place Eternal Justice had prepar'd For those rebellious, here thir prison ordain'd In utter darkness, and thir portion set As far remov'd from God and light of Heav'n As from the Center thrice to th' utmost Pole. O how unlike the place from whence they fell! There the companions of his fall, o'whelm'd With Floods and Whirlwinds of tempestuous fire, He soon discerns, and weltring by his side One next himself in power, and next in crime, Long after known in <i>Palestine</i> , and nam'd <i>Beelzebub</i> . To whom th' Arch-Enemy, And thence in Heav'n call'd Satan, with bold words Breaking the horrid silence thus began.	60 65 70 75 80
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