

Shakespeare uses figurative language as he speaks with metaphors, similes, and personification. Recognizing when his characters are speaking figuratively helps in understanding the play.

A **metaphor** is the application of a word or phrase to somebody or something that is not meant literally but to make a comparison. For example: The Duke of Illyria compares music to food for lovers.

Duke Orsino If music be the food of love, play on;
Give me excess of it, that, surfeiting,
The appetite may sicken, and so die (1.1.1-3).

A **simile** is a figure of speech that draws comparison between two different things using the word “like or as”. For example: Valentine compares being able to see one's love to a nun being kept from the outside world.

Valentine The element itself, till seven years' heat,
Shall not behold her face at ample view;
But like a cloistress she will veiled walk,
And water once a day her chamber round
With eye-offending brine; all this to season
A brother's dead love, (1.1.25-30).

Personification occurs when human attributes or qualities are applied to objects or abstract notions. For example: The Captain responds that the waves are Sebastian's acquaintances.

Captain Where like [Arion] on the dolphin's back,
I saw him hold acquaintance with the waves
So long as I could see. (1.2.15-17)

Shakespeare's Words: Language in Twelfth Night

Shakespeare's plays are written in two forms: prose and verse. In Twelfth Night prose and verse are both used extensively.

Prose

Prose is the form of speech used by common people in Shakespearean drama.

There is no rhythm or meter in the line. It is everyday language. Shakespeare's audience would recognize the speech as their language. These are characters such as murderers, servants, and porters.

However, many important characters can speak in prose. The majority of The Merry Wives of Windsor is written in prose because it deals with middle-class. The servants from Twelfth Night speak in prose.

For example, When Sir Toby introduces Sir Andrew to Maria:

Toby Accost, Sir Andrew, accost

Sir Andrew Good Mistress Accost, I desire better acquaintance.

Maria My name is Mary, sir.

Sir Andrew Good Mistress Mary Accost—

Sir Toby You mistake, knight, ‘Accost’ is to front her, board her, woo her, assail her.

Sir Andrew By my troth, I would not undertake her in this company. Is that the meaning of “accost”? (1.3.43-52)

Sir Andrew mistakenly believes that Maria’s name is Accost. There is no rhyme or rhythm, and the text flows without concern of where the line ends on the page, we recognize the passage as prose. Consequently, better understand that Sir Andrew, Sir Toby, and Maria are all comical characters who speak the language of an Elizabethan audience member.

Verse

The majority of Shakespeare’s plays are written in verse. A character who speaks in verse is a noble or a member of the upper class. Most of Shakespeare’s plays focused on these characters. The verse form he uses is **blank verse**. It contains **no rhyme, but each line has an internal rhythm with a regular rhythmic pattern**. The pattern most favored by Shakespeare is **iambic pentameter**. Iambic pentameter is defined as **a ten-syllable line with the accent on every other syllable, beginning with the second one**.

For example:

Viola He nam’d Sebastian. I my brother know
Yet living in my glass; even such and so
In favor was my brother, and he went
Still in this fashion, color, ornament,
For him I imitate. O, if it prove,
Tempests are kind and salt waves fresh in love! (3.4.379-384).

The accent occurs on every other syllable, and the natural accent of each word is placed in that position on the line.

Shakespeare sometimes used this style of writing as a form of stage direction. Actors today can tell by “scanning” a line (scansion) what words are most important and how fast to say a line. When two characters are speaking they will finish the ten syllables needed for a line showing that one line must quickly come on top of another. This is called a **shared line or a split line**.

For example, in this scene Olivia interrupts Viola’s reply to Orsino:

Duke Orsino Farewell and take her; but direct thy feet
Where thou and I henceforth may never meet.

Viola My lord, I do protest,—

Olivia O, do not swear;
Hold little faith, though thou hast too much fear. (5.1.165-169)

Trochaic Verse

On some special occasions Shakespeare uses another form of verse. He **reverses the accent and shortens the line**. The reversed accent, with the **accent on the first** syllable is called trochaic. He uses this verse frequently in *A Midsummer Night's Dream* and in *Macbeth* where magic or ritual is involved.

For example:

Oberon "Flower of this purple dye,
Hit with Cupid's archery,
Sink in apple of his eye." (3.2.102-104).

When reading or acting a Shakespearean play, count the syllables in the lines. You will be surprised at Shakespeare's consistency. Then circle the syllables where the accent appears. You will notice that he places the most important words on the accent. Words like "the", "is" and "and" that do not carry the meaning are on the unaccented portion of the lines. In the Globe Theatre where there were no microphones, the more important words would carry and an audience member would still know what was going on because the important words were heard. **Iambic pentameter** has been called a "**heart beat**", and each of Shakespeare's lines contains that human beat.