

Metrical Variation: The Example of Iambic Pentameter

The ideal type of the iambic pentameter line may be denoted by the two-layer scheme

F F F F F
WS WS WS WS WS

(F “foot”; W “weak” syllable; S “strong” syllable.) Each pair, WS, makes up a foot, F. In the normal case, W corresponds to an unaccented syllable and S to an accented one. However, many other ways of filling in these abstract positions are still within the bounds of acceptable iambic pentameter. Thus, in Frost’s line (marking stresses with “/,” non-stresses with “x”)

W S W S W S W S W S
/ x x / x / x / x /
One on a side. It comes to little more:

an accented word, “one,” fills the first W position, and an unaccented one, “on,” fills the first S position. All of you correctly scanned this beginning by marking the actual accent on “one.” This example demonstrates, however, that iambic pentameter as a system allows the first foot to be **inverted** (sometimes called “**trochaic substitution**,” after the “**trochee**,” SW). This variation stands out as if in relief from the basic pattern: it is marked. In a poet like Frost these effects can very often be matched up with the themes and content of the poem; here the marked stress on “one” perhaps emphasizes the individualistic tendencies of the two characters in the poem. In other cases the effect of metrical variation is more “musical” or more abstract, or, at times, wholly unimportant.

Another common variation allows a single W position to be filled with two unstressed syllables, as in

W S W S W S W S W S
x / x / x / x / x x /
To each the boulders that have fallen to each.

Again, all of you correctly scanned the 9th and 10th syllables as unaccented. This is sometimes called “**anapestic substitution**,” after the three-syllable foot called an “**anapest**,” WWS; notice that, although it adds a syllable to the line, this variation does not change the essential five-foot (and five-beat) pattern. A final common substitution, called “**spondaic**,” after the “**spondee**,” SS, can be seen in

W S W S W S W S W S
/ / x / x / x / x /
Oh, just another kind of outdoor game

where, for me at least, both “Oh” and “just” are stressed, even though the former occupies a W position. Note, though, that this does not mean the meter has become spondaic (hardly possible in English verse); it simply means that, while remaining within the bounds of iambic meter, the poet has chosen a spondee-like variation on the abstract pattern WS. Such clustering of stresses is often felt as a “slowing-down” of metrical tempo.

One final feature of scansion worth noticing: very commonly syntax divides the line in the middle (with a sentence ending, clause break, or other subsidiary syntactic division). This feature is called “**caesura**” and often marked with a double vertical stroke:

One on a side. || It comes to little more:

It violates the expectation that a line will correspond to a syntactic unit.

An additional note: the trochaic substitution is not the only case of the very common variation in which a relatively unaccented syllable fills an S position; three unaccented syllables often fill a WSW sequence in iambic pentameter. This is permitted in most cases but rarely remarked on in traditional scansion, which tends to confuse the abstract pattern of feet with the actuality of stresses in the line—something which it is in any case difficult not to do, because of the tendency of our awareness of what the meter “should be” to affect the way we stress the words in the line. This accounts for many of the ambiguities of scansion.