

# One Relation of Rhyme to Ritual<sup>1</sup>

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Rhyme is not a popular subject in criticism, and it shares this fate with other formal devices in poetry. This is surprising considering the frequency of rhyme in poetry. There is the rather lonely but magnificent attempt to revive interest in the topic in J. Paul Hunter's article "Seven Reasons for Rhyme." Yet we seem to know enough about it and have lost interest. We do not see that rhyme may challenge the very notion of literature with which we, both conservatives and radicals, have worked for a long time.

Handbooks tend to give a descriptive definition and possibly some examples of different types of rhyme. The entry in *The New Princeton Encyclopedica of Poetry and Poetics*, first edition, still has a section on "function" (Brogan), by the fourth, 2012, this has been dropped. Brogan mentions six functions: semantic, architectonic, mnemonic, closural, heuristic, and aesthetic (Brogan 1060). Discussions of rhyme, where they go beyond description, tend to turn to meaning. This seems to be the accomplishment of a single essay, W.K. Wimsatt's "One Relation of Rhyme to Reason" in *The Verbal Icon*, one of the monuments of formal criticism.<sup>2</sup>

Wimsatt argues "that verse in general, and more particularly rhyme, make their special contribution to poetic structure in virtue of a studiously and accurately semantic character" (153), and that "the greater the difference in meaning between rhyme words the more marked and the more appropriate will be the binding effect" (164). Not surprisingly, it is Pope who best illustrates his principles, because of the "closure and completeness" (157) of his couplets. Chaucer, on the other hand, is an imperfect rhymer. This may be related to the difference Wimsatt

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<sup>1</sup> Not published before Paper offered at the SAUTE Conference "Repetition in Language and Literature." Zurich University, .1993. Revised 2025.

<sup>2</sup> His semantic view of rhyme is also accepted by critics, who rejected Formalism, when they discuss rhyme (which is rare), in the shape of the problematic relationship between the signifier and the signified. I am thinking in particular of Easthope, one of the few books that addresses the role of poetic devices from this perspective.

makes between “more primitive and forthrightly emotions” and the “more sophisticated and intellectualized” poetry (155); I shall return to this point at the end of my essay when I try to suggest a historical dimension to the use of rhyme.

Wimsatt's account, like the others, should be placed in the framework of a more general one. Wimsatt's account then proves to be characteristic of one particular view of literature, a special case rather than a generally applicable one.

Critics have often tried to define literature in terms of repetition as creating structural cohesion, for example in Jakobson's famous definition: “The poetic function projects the principle of equivalence from the axis of selection into the axis of combination.” (Jakobson 358). This attempt to define literature structurally, however, cannot be successful because it includes texts that we should not want to be included (e.g., certain forms of advertising).

Pragmatic definitions can help us to deal with this problem. According to John M. Ellis, in *The Theory of Literary Criticism: A Logical Analysis*, a book that continues to be important, the “category of literary texts is not distinguished by defining characteristics but by the characteristic use to which those texts are put by the community” (Ellis 50). He defines this characteristic use as one

that lifts them out of the context of their origin and no longer assumes that they are part of the practical give and take of any particular context. [...] Whenever the ordinary use of language to communicate to someone in a specific context is no longer evident, and the piece of language is no longer regarded as one having interest only for its original utterer, those addressed by him, and those (present or future) who have interest in that whole situation, it is being treated as literature. (Ellis 44)

Ellis's definition is useful, but we should note that the literary use of texts is not characterized by the *absence* of context, but rather by a different context, precisely the one of literature. This context is created by repetition, re-readings, re-interpretations, by the kind of repetition characteristic of ritual.

*The Dictionary of Anthropology* (to choose one of many formulations) defines ritual, as the term is commonly used among anthropologists, as follows: “any activity with a high degree of formality and a nonutilitarian purpose” (Barfield 410).

The formality is based on (assumed) repetition; and it is the kind of repetition that raises the action from “the practical give and take” mentioned by Ellis. Repetition of this kind suggests significance to those practicing it, without determining precise meanings. It rather creates symbols and invites interpretation. As symbols they help to define communities (Sperber).

I should like to call these ritual events *occasions*. They are characterized by at least three features: (1) they are marked off by specific kinds of preparation, and ways of returning to every-day-life; (2) they are repeated in what is (or is at least supposed to be) the same form; (3) certain objects are regularly part of it, in particular a book or a manuscript; (4) they assign specific roles to all the participants; and (5) they are themselves patterned by the repetition of significant elements, like movements, gestures, linguistic expressions, etc.

Stylistic elements, like a special poetic language, may serve the purpose of reminding the audience of being part of such an occasion. In *A Preface to “Paradise Lost,”* for example, C. S. Lewis distinguishes between the Primary and the Secondary, the oral and the literary epic. Homer's epics and *Beowulf* are of the first, Virgil's and Milton's epics of the second type. The Primary epic is the “loftiest and gravest among the kinds of court poetry in the oral period”; it is connected with “stately and ceremonial festivity.” (Lewis 16–17) The Secondary epic “

aims at even higher solemnity than the Primary; but it has lost all those external aids to solemnity which the Primary enjoyed. There is no robed and garlanded aoidos [singer], no altar, not even a feast in a hall - only a private person reading a book in an armchair.

The private person must be made to feel, with the help of an elevated style, “that he is assisting at an august ritual, for if he does not, he will not be receptive of the true epic exhilaration.” (Lewis 40)

Repetition is crucial for the occurrence of such occasions but also for their structuring. Repetition—like rhyme and rhythm in the case of poetry—will confirm those who take part in the occasion of its ritual nature.

In the case of poetry three types with which we are all familiar today can easily be distinguished: public performance, the silent reading by an individual, and the literature course.<sup>3</sup> Repetition, or at least the awareness of

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<sup>3</sup> Stanley Fish has memorably raised the issue in “How to Recognize a Poem When You See One” Fish. In a university classroom he wrote a list of names on the blackboard, told students this was a poem, asked them to interpret it—and they

repetition, may occur in different forms, in performance the situation set up for it, in silent reading the capital letters at the beginning of the lines and their jagged endings but also the awareness that the text exists in multiple published copies. These occasions have not been extensively studied, but they certainly deserve it.

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duly did. This led him to conclude that the reader actually writes the poem. A pragmatic definition of literature would rather suggest that it is the occasion that tells us whether we should be dealing with a text as a poem.