

English Literature

Lesson objectives:

- Students will be able to recognise the metre in rap verses as well as poems.
- Students will understand why metre is important and how it is used in hip hop and poetry.
- Students will attempt to write their own short verse in iambic or anapaestic metre.

The lesson will look at a selection of rap verses that exhibit the use of various poetic metres and then compare these lyrics with poems in the same metre.

In Marc Lamont Hill's 'Beats, Rhymes and Classroom Life', Hill states that 'Mr. Columbo and I agreed that we wanted the course to focus on hip-hop texts as literature and not merely printed versions of music'¹. As this lesson is concerned with the aural rhythm that the language in the rap verses convey I feel that it is necessary for the students to hear the songs as the delivery highlights how the metre is vital to giving the rap rhythm and can inform the reading of the poetry.

To introduce students to iambic metre, play the first verse of Run DMC's 'It's Tricky' and explain the iambic foot; the first syllable being soft and the second being stressed and draw attention to the pyrrhic foot inserted in the first and third line: '...this **LIT**tle **GIR**ly **her** **HAIR** was **KIN**Da **CUR**ly'². The pyrrhic foot separates the line into two smaller sections which creates smaller blocks of lyrics and adds to the fun, punchy rhythm of the song. The lines also end on an unstressed beat, continuing the bouncy flow and contributes to the dancefloor feel to the song.

Compare this to lines from Shakespeare's *Hamlet*: 'To **BE** or **NOT** to **BE** That **IS** the **QUE**STion, **Whe**THEr 'tis **NO**bler **IN** the **MIND** to **SUF**fer'³. The lines are iambic and gives the speech a flow and a regular pace. It also contains a final unstressed syllable, just as the DMC track does; this continues the rhythmic swing of 'It's Tricky', its appearance in the *Hamlet* speech could be more practical, interrupting the disciplined iambs could reflect the anxiety and hesitation in Hamlet's voice in this contemplative speech.

Next, give the students a double spaced first verse of Eminem's 'The Way I Am'; get the students, in pairs, to attempt to annotate the stressed syllables in this different metre. After this, play the song and give the students a second opportunity to make any amendments after hearing Eminem's delivery. Explain the anapaest metre and highlight it with Edgar Allan Poe's 'Annabel Lee'.

Eminem's use of anapaests draws out the internal rhyme in each line which compliments the metre: 'Of this **WEED** it gives **ME** the shit **NEE**ded to **BE**'⁴. The metre emphasises the multiple rhymes on the stressed syllables of each line and he foregrounds this with his delivery.

Poe's 'Annabel Lee' is predominantly made up of anapaests with the occasional iambs to end a line: 'It was **MAN**y and **MAN**y a **YEA**R a**GO**, In a **KING**dom **BY** the **SEA**'⁵. Poe uses this metre to reimagine the classic ballad form in a more dynamic and complex way.

¹. Marc Lamont Hill, 'Beats, Rhymes and Classroom Life', *Hip-Hop Pedagogy and the Politics of Identity*, (New York: Teachers College Press, 2009), p. 21.

². Run DMC, 'It's Tricky', *Raising Hell*, Profile Records, 1986.

³. William Shakespeare, 'Act III, Scene I', *Hamlet*.

⁴. Eminem, 'The Way I Am', *The Marshall Mathers LP*, Aftermath, 2000.

⁵. Edgar Allan Poe, 'Annabel Lee', The Poetry Foundation, <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems-and-poets/poems/detail/44885>, 1849.

Final task: students must attempt their own verse in iambic, anapaestic or a combination of the two about anything they like, thinking about the words and syntax they use.

'It's Tricky' – Run DMC, from: www.ohhla.com

I met this little girlie, her hair was kinda curly
Went to her house and bust her out, I had to leave real early
These girls are really sleazy, all they just say is please me
Or spend some time and rock a rhyme, I said "It's not that easy"

'The Way I Am' – Eminem, from: www.ohhla.com

I sit back with this pack of Zig Zags and this bag
of this weed it gives me the shit needed to be
the most meanest MC on this -- on this Earth
And since birth I've been cursed with this curse to just curse
And just blurt this berserk and bizarre shit that works
And it sells and it helps in itself to relieve
all this tension dispensin these sentences
Gettin this stress that's been eatin me recently off of this chest
and I rest again peacefully (peacefully)..
but at least have the decency in you
to leave me alone, when you freaks see me out
in the streets when I'm eatin or feedin my daughter
to not come and speak to me (speak to me)..
I don't know you and no,
I don't owe you a mo-therfuck-in thing
I'm not Mr. N'Sync, I'm not what your friends think
I'm not Mr. Friendly, I can be a prick
if you tempt me my tank is on empty (is on empty)..
No patience is in me and if you offend me
I'm liftin you 10 feet (liftin you 10 feet).. in the air
I don't care who is there and who saw me destroy you
Go call you a lawyer, file you a lawsuit
I'll smile in the courtroom and buy you a wardrobe
I'm tired of all you (of all you)..
I don't mean to be mean but that's all I can be is just me

'Annabel Lee' – Edgar Allan Poe, from www.poetryfoundation.org

It was many and many a year ago,
In a kingdom by the sea,
That a maiden there lived whom you may know
By the name of Annabel Lee;
And this maiden she lived with no other thought
Than to love and be loved by me.

'Hamlet' – William Shakespeare

To be, or not to be: that is the question:

Whether 'tis nobler in the mind to suffer

The slings and arrows of outrageous fortune,

Or to take arms against a sea of troubles