Definition: rhyme is the identity in sound, of the accented vowels of words, usually the last one accented, and of all consonantal and vowel sounds following, with a difference in the sound of the consonants immediately preceding the accented vowels.

This seems straightforward enough. But is it? Rhyme deals exclusively with sounds and has nothing to do with spelling. Words that look as though they should rhyme, but do not, such as cow-blow, are called EYE RHYMES. The champions, of course, are the ough words.

The old army song "The engineers / Have hairy ears" seems to rhyme, but does not. The rhyming syllables eers and ears have the same sound, even with different spelling. They are called IDENTITIES.

Rhymes whose final syllables are accented, as in

There was a little girl
Who had a little curl . . .

are called MASCULINE RHYMES. If the next-to-last syllable is accented and rhymed, we have FEMININE RHYMES:

May he be demented
And his pipe fill with dottle,
He who invented
The disposable bottle.

When the third-to-last syllable is accented and rhymed, it is known as a TRIPLE RHYME.

Pornography's saleable
Although it's not mailable.

Theoretically we could have quadruple and quintuple rhymes, but they are hard to come by.

When you try to rhyme an accented syllable with an unaccented one, you wind up with a SMOTHERED RHYME,

She had a ring
But no wedding

a device you often find in old folk-verse.
Some rhymes don’t quite come off:

Rock-a-bye baby in the tree top
When the wind blows, the cradle will rock.

The accented vowel sounds are identical, but the following consonants are somewhat different. Technically, this is called VOWEL RHYME or ASSONANCE, and is frequently used in Spanish poetry. Leon Hale, of the Houston Post, has dubbed such verse RINES, an apt name. Conversely,

The traffic was a ripple
Of undistinguished people

contains vowel sounds that are slightly different, but the following consonants are identical. This is CONSONANCE, sometimes called OFF RHYME, SOUR RHYME, or ANALYZED RHYME.

The use of assonance and consonance is considered sloppy poetry by most English authorities. But both would be perfectly acceptable by classical Greek poets who depended upon rhythm rather than rhyme. Such diverse-sounding words as abstract and deploy could be used to end each line of a Greek couplet since both have the same pattern of accented and unaccented syllables -- iambic.

Both assonance and consonance are logical developments of true rhymes. Other logical modifications are possible. For example, H. Nearing, Jr., in his story "The Poetry Machine" in Fantasy and Science Fiction (Fall, 1960), has a computer compose this verse:

> Befetished nymphophobe and chastitute
> Give pity to my ache -- your hinted wines
> Make desiccated hankering delight
> And in my pectoral sing lubric tunes.

The pseudo-rhyme scheme can be assonance (ute-unes, ines-ite), consonance (tute-lite, wines-tunes) or something in between (ute-ines, ight-unes). For want of a better term, I call this RE-VERSE.

Then there are words which, when pronounced backwards, give other words like scram-Marx. Edmund Wilson in Night Thoughts has produced a poem using this technique. One verse is:

> Below limpid water, those lissome
> Scrolleries scribbled by mussels;
> The floating dropped feathers of gulls;
> A leech like a lengthening slug.

This may seem like a comprehensive survey of rhyme forms. But don’t be fooled. Poets are an ingenious lot. If you don’t believe me, I’ll spin you a quadruple rhyme:

Remove a concavity,
You have a non-cavity.

NEW