

Oxford Research Encyclopedias (2021) - Laura Marcus - RHYTHM

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L. Marcus, « [Rhythm](#) » - *Oxford Research Encyclopedias* - published online : 23 February 2021.

Summary : The topic of rhythm in literary theory draws both on discussions of poetry and prose and on much broader currents of thought in the natural sciences and philosophy. In Western thought, rhythm was a central focus of attention in ancient Greece, in the 19th and early 20th centuries, when theorists and practitioners of literature and the other arts often referred back to classical models. This is also the case in more recent theorizing of rhythm in the context of everyday life in advanced modern or, as some would say, postmodern societies. Nietzsche, who constantly circled around the term and with frequent direct and metaphorical references to dance, is in many ways the central figure in these discussions. He was massively influential after his death in 1900, both in Germany and more widely, for example, in Britain and North America, and he was taken up again, along with Heidegger, in much French thought after World War 2. Contemporary debates around rhythm and its relation to meter continue to refer to classical Greece, and in Chinese and Indian thought there is a similar continuity of attention to issues of rhythm.

Keywords : rhythm, meter, prosody, eurhythmy, Nietzsche, dance

Subjects : Middle Ages and Renaissance (500-1600), Enlightenment and Early Modern (1600-1800), 19th Century (1800-1900), 20th and 21st Century (1900-present), Literary Theory, Ancient Literatures (before 500)

What Is Rhythm ?



Rhythm is conventionally defined as pertaining to a sequence of events that can be perceived as a pattern, with an interplay between repetition and variation or grouping. It appears in philosophy, aesthetics, and literary theory in two overlapping forms. The more precise sense covers issues of musical and poetic and prose rhythm and, by extension, natural rhythms such as those of water, the planets, human and other animal bodies, and the rhythms of architecture, work, and so on. These are brought together in a broader sense in which rhythm is seen as a pervasive and dominant feature of the universe and its contents, expressed in, for example, Friedrich Hölderlin's assertion that "all is rhythm" or the musician Hans von Bülow's much-quoted "In the beginning was rhythm."

More tentatively, Jacques Derrida suggested that “rhythm has always haunted our tradition, without ever reaching the centre of its concerns.”

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