

# Rhyme, Metrical Tension, and Formal Function in the Flow of Kendrick Lamar

Benjamin K. Wadsworth  
Kennesaw State University

Music Theory Southeast  
Appalachian State University Boone, NC  
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# Example 1. Three Main Points about Lamar's Flow.

- Adjusts periodicity of rhymes to regulate tension/release
- Adjusts metrical locations of rhymes to regulate tension/release
- Metrical tension and relaxation in chorus or verse create formal blends, suggest formal ambiguity

## Example 2a. Chorus Hierarchy.

Periodicities																
whole									.							
half	.								.							
quarters	.				.				.				.			
8ths	.		.		.		.		.		.		.		.	
16ths	.	.	.	.	.	.	.	.	.	.	.	.	.	.	.	.
Beats	1				2				3				4			
BC	0	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	14	15

# Example 2b. Verse Hierarchy.

Periodicities																
whole													.			
half					.								.			
quarters	.				.				.				.			
8ths	.		.		.		.		.		.		.		.	
16ths	.	.	.	.	.	.	.	.	.	.	.	.	.	.	.	.
Beats	1				2				3				4			
BC	0	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	14	15

# Example 3. Measures 1–9 from “A.D.H.D.”



	0	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	14	15	Metrical State
1		ah	ah				Fuck		that				eight		doo-	bies	8
2	to	the	face				fuck		that				twelv e		bot-	ties	(2) + 8
3	in	the	case		nig-	ga	fuck		that		Two		pills		and	a	(2) + 8
4	half		wait		nig-	ga	fuck		that		got	a	high		tol-	er-	(2) + 8
5	ence		when	your	age		don't	ex-	ist		Man	I	swear	my	nig-	ga	(0) + 8
6	trip-	pin'	off	that	shit	a-	gain		Pick	him	up	then - I	set	him	in		$((0)) + (4) + ((8)) + 12$
7	Cold		wat-	er	then	I	or-	der	some-	one - to	bring	him	Vi-	co-	din		(2) + (6) + 12
8	Hope	to	take	the	pain	a-	way	from - the	feel-	ing	that	he	feel	to-	day	you	(4) + 12
9	know	when - you	part	of	sec-	tion	eigh-	ty	you - feel	like	no	one	can	re-	late	cause	(4) + 12

# Example 4. Primary Section Roles in Hip-Hop Music.

## *Chorus:*

- Repeated lyrics
- First- or second-person address
- Pitched (recalling singing)
- A diss, critique, or boast
- Repetition of short, sub-metrical rhythm or word pattern
- Background vocals
- Rhymes on beats 1 and 3
- Memorable names, acronyms, or the song's "hook"
- Fairly short, around 8 bars long

## *Verse:*

- Lyrics not repeated
- Third-person focus
- Longer, more speech-like phrases
- Longer than a chorus, at least 16 bars long
- Rhymes on beats 2 and 4 (BC 4 and 12)

# Example 5. Parenthetical Chorus and Rhyming Block in “R.O.T.C.”



	0	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	14	15	Analysis
0												Some	times	I	wa-	na	
1	say		fuck		rap-	pin		I	need		mon-	ey	now			Like	(4) + 12
2	should	I	start		trap-	in'		If	what	I	write		down		don't	col-	(4) + 12
3	lect	this	ver-	y	mo-	ment	then	I'm	on	it	no		ques-	tion	(in)	the	4 + 8; 12 + (9)
4	streets			my	nig-	gas	is	well	con	nect-	ted	let's	see		Do	I	(0) + 12
5	cop	a	pound	of	kush	Pro-	meth-	a	zine	or	push	some	E?		Ox-	y-	12
6	con-	tin	have	me	lay-	in'	on	soft	cot-	ton	when	I	sleep ?		This	is	0 + 8; 12
7	deep	as	the	ab-	byss	I'm	not	just	rhym-	in'	on	the	beat	I	be	in	(0) + 12
8	spots		chop-	pin	the	rocks		like	Flint-		stone		feet		This	is	(0 + (2 +5)); 12
9	me			Frus-	tra-	ted		bat-	tl-	in'	my	own	E-	vils	Fin-	na'	(0) + 12; (7) ...
10	sad-	die	up	that	work	a-	cross	O-	hi-	o	in	a	Ge-	o		Or	0; (8) + 12

# Example 6. Excursion in “R.O.T.C.”



	0	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	14	15	Analysis
10	sad-	die	up	that	work	a-	cross	O-	hi-	o	in	a	Ge-	o		Or	0; (8) + 12
11	should	I	sell	my	mu-	sic	.zip	to	buy	your	zip	and	hope	one	day	it	6 + 10
12	flour-	ish	to	a	Ki-	lo			Track		re - cord - of - a		hust-	ler	Rath-	er	4...; 8 + 14...
13	rec-	ords	on	the	need-	dle	mak-	in'	Mus-	ic			Clock-	in	fast		4; 0; 8...
14	bank		like	a	shot	from	Pat-	rick	Ew-	ing		My	nig-	ga	what	you	8
15	do-	in'	on	these	cor-	ners	whip-	ping?			I	thought	you	had	a	show	0; 15...



# Example 7. Verse-Crisis in mm. 22–27 of “R.O.T.C.”



	0	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	14	15
22	might	be	in	your	store		boost-	in'			Two	e-	le - vens -with		MAC	e-
23	lev - ens -			like	“Fuck		Hip	Hop”					Don't	wan-	na	be
24	Pun	don't	wan - na - be		Big	don't	wan - na - be		Pac				Just	give - me - your		funds
25	A-	K-	A	ev'	ry	thing	that	you	got		or	ev-	ry	thing	gett-	in'
26	shot		for	noth-	in'	leave	you	in	shock	cough	in'	up	blood		and	mum-
27	blin'			Watch				the	plans		of	a	young - man - spon-			

# Example 8. Overall Form of “R.O.T.C.”

Measures	Lyrics	Rhyme Locations	Rhyme Periodicities	Formal Functions	Narrative
0–3	“Sometimes I wanna say...”	BC 4 + 12 (beats 2 and 4)	half note	<b>Verse-Paranetical Chorus</b>	1 <sup>st</sup> person, disses rapping, weighs drug dealing
4–9	“in the streets...”	BC 12 primary; BC 0 secondary	whole note primary; quarter and half secondary	<b>Verse-Rhyming Block (V<sup>1</sup>)</b>	3 <sup>rd</sup> -person focus, describing drugs
9–10	“This is me...”	BC 12 primary; BC 0 and 8 secondary	mix of whole and half note	<b>Transition</b>	1 <sup>st</sup> -person, describes travel
10–15	“Ohio in a Geo...”	Various BCs: 8, 12, 6, 10, 4, 8, 14, 0, 4, 8, 8, 0: beats 1 and 3 primary by end	mix of whole, half, quarter, eighth, irregular	<b>Verse-Excursion</b>	quick allusions to drugs, music, basketball
14–16	“My [n-word] what you...”	BC 0 at beginning; BCs 15, 14 at end	≈whole note	<b>Verse-Paranetical Chorus-Excursion</b>	2 <sup>nd</sup> -person dialogue weighing rapping and dealing
17–22	“easy money sounds tempting...”	≈BC 8 primary, BC 4 secondary	≈whole note	<b>Verse-Rhyming Block (Chorus secondary) (V<sup>2</sup>)</b>	3 <sup>rd</sup> -person focus on wealth
22–27	“Two elevens...”	Starts BC 0 and 8, then 0, 4, 8, and 12	half notes to quarters	<b>Verse-Crisis</b>	Imagines threatening to rob a store
27–34	“Watch the plans...”	BC 8, 4, 10, 0, 2, 12	wholes, irregular	<b>Verse-Excursion</b>	Imagines rise as drug dealer with fantastic imagery, rejects rapping
31–40	“You’ll know I always...”	BC 12	wholes	<b>Verse-Rhyming Block (V<sup>3</sup>)</b>	Tells listener is in hard spot, decides to not start dealing

# Example 9. Hypothetical Subsection Roles within Verses.

## Role #1, Verse-Rhyming Block:

- Lyrics are not repeated
- Stable rhymes on beats 2 and 4 (beat-classes 4 and 12)
- Third-person focus
- Focus on a background story
- Multi-syllable length

## Role #2, Verse-Parentetical Chorus:

### *Verse aspects:*

- Lyrics not repeated
- Stable rhymes on beats 2 and 4
- Third-person focus
- 2- to 4-bar length

### *Chorus aspects:*

- Stable rhymes on beats 1 and 3
- Second- or third-person focus
- Pitched
- Diss, critique, or boast
- Short, sub-metrical patterns
- Memorable names or acronyms

## Role #3, Verse-Excursion:

- Lyrics not repeated
- Irregular, often offbeat rhymes continually changing
- Fewer rhymed syllables
- Couplets and shorter rhyme spans (e.g., freestyle rap)
- A variety of pauses
- Third-person focus
- Quick jumps in thought

## Role #4, Verse-Crisis:

### *Verse aspects:*

- Placement of rhymes on beats 2 and/or 4

### *Intensification aspects:*

- Increasing number of syllables per bar
- Lyrics suggest impending conflict
- Inter-rhyme intervals shortening
- Inter-rhyme intervals suggest meter at odds with beat track

### *Chorus aspects:*

- Hook-like, **memorable words**
- Rhymes on beats **1** and/or **3**

# Example 10. Manipulations of Chorus and Verse in “Rigamortis.”



Time	0	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	14	15
:35 (0)															Got	me
(1)	Breat h-	ing	with	Drag-	ons	I'll	crack	the	egg	in	your	bas-	-ket	you	bas-	tard
:41 (2)	I'm	Mar-	-liyn	Man-	son	with	Mad-	ness,	Now	just	I-	mag-	-ine	the	Mag-	-ic
:43 (3)	I	light	To	Ass-	-es,	Don't	ask	for	your	Fav-	or-	-ite	Rap-	-per		
:45 (4)																
:48 (5)		I	killed	him								Bitch				And
:51 (6)	this	Is	Ri-	ga-	mor-	tis	and	It's	Gor-	geous	when	you	die	Al-	i	Re-
:53 (7)	cor-	ded	and	I'm	Mor-	phe-	us,	the	Mat-	rix	of	my	mind	I'm	out	the
:56 (8)	Or-	bit,	you	an	Or-	phan	and	a	Hair-	Dress-	er	Com-	combined	I'm	on	the
:59 (9)	Toi-	let	when	I	rhyme	if	you	[the]	shit	then	I	Dec-	line			I
1:02 (10)	Cli-	max	where	you	Be-	gin	and	then	I	end	on	Cloud	9	and	That's	Im-

# Example 11. Form Chart for “Rigamortis.”

Measures	Lyrics	Common Locations of Rhymes	Common Periodicities of Rhymes	Formal Functions	Narrative
0–3	“Got me breathing with dragons”	BC 3, 11, 14, 6, 11 (irregular)	Irregular 3, 5 16ths; regular half note	<b>Chorus-excursion</b>	Lamar is “out of this world” as a rapper
6–17	“And this is Rigamortis...”	BC 12 (primary); 0, 4, 8 (secondary)	whole (primary); half and quarter (secondary)	<b>Verse-rhyming block-excursion-chorus</b>	He “kills” other rappers; quick references to sci-fi, toilet, sex
18–27	“That’s what they tellin’ me...”	BC 12, 4→15, 3, 8, 11 (irregular)	half note→ 3, 5 16ths (irregular)	<b>Verse-rhyming block→verse-excursion</b>	Quick references to basketball, food, sex
30–31	“Got me breathing...”	BC 3, 11, 14, 1, 3, 8, 11 (irregular)	half notes, 3, 5 16ths (irregular)	<b>Chorus-excursion</b>	“out of this world” rapper
34–43	“Got me breathing...”	BC 3, 11, 14, 1, etc. (irregular)→3, 6, 11 (irregular), ≈beat 2, 4	half notes, 3, 5 16ths (irregular)→half notes	<b>Chorus-excursion→verse-rhyming block-excursion</b>	explains how he will casually kill other rappers; jumps in thought between space, religion, money
43–51	“And I go...”	BC 4, 12	half notes	<b>Verse-crisis</b>	He’s a vicious monster; a threat against all competitors
52–54	“Got me breathing...”	BC 3, 11, 14, 1, 3, 8, 11 (irregular)	half notes, 3, 5 16ths (irregular)	<b>Chorus-excursion</b>	“out of this world” rapper

# Example 12. Verse-Crisis in “Rigamortis.”



Time	0	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	14	15
2:31 (43)	you	Rath-	er	Leap,	my	Sta-	tis-	tic	go	up	in	weeks	And I	go	Vis-	it
2:34 (44)	the	Near-	est	creek	And I	get	Bu-	sy	on	Many	M-	c	Really	Ball-	ist-	ic
2:36 (45)	Any-	body	done	See	Some	Per-	sist-	ence	Recog-	nize	I	be	really	too	Vic-	ious,
2:40 (46)	the	Perma-	nent	beast	And the	De-	mo-	li-	tion	breaking	up	the	Streets,	better	Part-	i-
2:43 (47)	tion,	Better	dot	your	I	And I	Gon'	Men-	tion,	How the	far	you	See,	putting	my	dick
2:46 (48)	In the	Rap	In-	dus-	try	Every-	body	Bitch-	in',	getting	mad	at	Me,	Recog-	nize	Ken-
2:49 (49)	drick	In the	Bat-	te-	ry	And I'm	charged	up	And the	Ca-	tas-	tro-	phe	is	charged	up
2:51 (50)	And the	Au-	dac-	i-	ty	And	Y'all	Fucks,	never	could	Has-	sle	me	and	Y'all	Luck,
2:54 (51)	just	ran	out	You'll	see											

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# Example 13. Measures 0–12 from Verse 1 of “D.N.A.”



	0	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	14	15	Rhymes
<b>Verse 1: Lamar</b>																	
:46 (0)									I	got	I	got	I	got	I	got	8 + 10 + 12 + 14
:48 (1)	Loy-	-al-	-ty,	got	Roy-	-al-	-ty	In-	side	my	D	N	A		Co-	-caine	0 + (4); (8) + 12
:51 (2)	Quar-	-ter	Piece,	got	war	and	piece	In-	-side	my	D	N	A		I	got	Same
:54 (3)	Pow-	-er,	Poi-	-son,	pain	and	joy	In-	-side	my	D	N	A		I	got	0 + 2 + 4; (8) + 12
:58 (4)	Hus-	-tle	Though,	Am-	-bit-	-ion,	Flow,	In-	-side	my	D	N	A		I	was	2 + 6; (8) + 12
1:01 (5)	born	like	This,	since	one	like	this	Im-	-ma-	-cu-	-late	Con-	-cep-	-tion	I	Trans-	2 + 6; 12
1:05 (6)	-form	like	This,	Per-	-form	like	this	Was	Yes-	-hu-	-a's	new	Wea-	-pon	I	Don't	Same
1:08 (7)	Con-	-tem-	-plate,	I	Med-	-l-	-tate,	then	off	your	Fuck-	-ing	head		This	that	Same
1:12 (8)	Put-	-the-	-kids-	-to-	-bed		This	that	I	Got,	I	Got,	I	Got,	I	Got,	14 + 6; 12 + 4; 8 + 10 + 12 + 14
1:15 (9)	Real-	-ness,	I	just	kill	shit	'cause	It's	in	my	D	N	A		I	got	0 + 4 + 8; 12; (14)
1:18 (10)	Mil-	-lions,	I	got	Rich-	-es	Build-	-in'	in	my	D	N	A		I	got	(8) + 12; (14)
1:22 (11)	Dark,	I	got	Ev-	-il,	that	rot	In-	-side	my	D	N	A		I	got	3; (8) + 12; (14)
1:25 (12)	Off,	I	got	Trou-	-ble-	-some,	heart	In-	side	my	D	N	A		I	just	3; 6; (8) + 12; (14)



# Example 14. Transition in mm. 33–37 of “D.N.A.”



2:54 (33)																																																																																																																																																																																																																																																																																																																																																																																																																																																																																																																																																																																																																																																																																																																																																																																																																																																																																																																																																																																																																																																																																																																																																																																																																																																																																																																																																																																																																				
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# Example 15. Verse-Rhyming Block in mm. 38–40 (Verse 2) of “D.N.A.”



Verse 2	0	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	14	15	16	17	18	19	20	21	22	23	Rhymes
3:1 0 (38)				Tell	me	Som	thin			You	mot h-	a	Fuc k-	-ers	Can 't	tell	me	Not it	-in'			I'd	Rat h-	-er	5 + 17
3:1 3 (39)	die	than	To	List-	-en	to	you			My	D	N	A	not	for	Im-	-i-	tat-	-ion			Your	D	N	3; 10 + 17 + 22
3:1 7 (40)	A	an	a-	-bo-	-min-	-a-	tion			This	ho w	it	is	whe n	you' re	in	the	Mat	-rix	Dod-	-gin	Bul	lets	Rea p-	5 + 17

# Example 16. Verse-Rhyming Block and Verse-Crisis in Verse 2 of “D.N.A.”



	0	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	14	15	16	17	18	19	20	21	22	23	Rhyme s
3:5 2 (50 )	way		you	Ain't	shit	With	-out	a	Bo-	-d y	on	your	bel t		you	Ain't	shit	With	-out	a	Tick	-et	on	you	0; 12
3:5 5 (51 )	plat e		You	Ain't	sick	en-	-ough	to	pull	it	on	Your	- self		You	Ain't	rich	E-	- nough	to	hit	th e	lot	and	0; 12
3:5 9 (52 )	skat e		Tell	me	when	De-	- struc-	- tio n	Gon	- a	be	my	fat e		Gon	-na	be	your	Fate,		Gon	- na	be	our	0 + 12 + 18
4:0 2 (53 )	faith		Peac e		to	the	Worl d,		Let	it	Ro		- tat e		Sex,		Mon	-ev	Mur-	- der	our		D	N	0 + 12; 16 + 18
4:0 6 (54 )	A																								0

# Example 17. Form Chart for “D.N.A.”

Measures	Lyrics	Common Locations of Rhymes	Common Periodicities of Rhymes	Formal Functions	Narrative
<b>Verse 1</b>					
0–32	“I got, I got...”	BC (8) 12 (primary), 0 and 4 secondary	whole, quarter	<b>verse-rhyming block</b>	Explains positive, negative sides of heritage
<b>Bridge</b>					
33–37	“I I got loyalty...”	BC (8) 12 (hook, 16 <sup>th</sup> notes); BC 12, 21, 3, 16 (16 <sup>th</sup> triplets)	quarter (16 <sup>ths</sup> ); dotted quarter, irregular (16 <sup>th</sup> triplets)→ dotted eighths	<b>Transition</b>	Fights back against Rivera’s criticism against Hip-Hop: he has royal blood
<b>Verse 2</b>					
38–40	“Tell me somethin’...”	BC 5, 17 (≈bts. 2, 4)	dotted half, dotted whole (triplet sixteenth flow)	<b>Verse-Rhyming Block</b>	Critiques hypocrisy of Fox News in criticizing Afro-American community
40–47	“in the Matrix dodgin’ bullets...”	BC 3, 5, 9, 11, etc. (irregular)	2, 4, 6 16 <sup>ths</sup> (irregular)	<b>Verse-Excursion</b>	Quick comparison of his life as a celebrity to life in the Matrix
47–54	“Sex, money, murder...”	BC 5, 11, 17, 23→ BC 0, 12	dotted quarter→dotted half, dotted whole (triplet 16 <sup>th</sup> flow)	<b>Verse-Rhyming Block-Crisis</b>	Apocalyptic vision of violence in the Afro-American community

# Hypothetical Normative Successions of Roles Within a Verse.

<b>Scenario #1</b>	Rhyming Block→	Excursion→	Rhyming Block
<b>Scenario #2</b>	Rhyming Block→	Excursion→	Verse—Crisis