

ENGLISH HONOURS

SEMESTER-V (DSE-2)

CAESURA

A caesura is a pause that occurs within a line of poetry, usually marked by some form of punctuation such as a period, comma, ellipsis, or dash. A caesura doesn't have to be placed in the exact middle of a line of poetry. It can be placed anywhere after the first word and before the last word of a line. In the following line from the prologue of *Romeo and Juliet*, the comma after "Verona" marks a caesura: "In fair Verona, where we lay our scene."

Some additional key details about caesuras:

Either "caesurae" or "caesuras" can be used as the plural form of caesura.

A line of poetry can contain multiple caesurae.

How to Pronounce Caesura

Here's how to pronounce caesura: sez-yoo-ra

### Caesura in Depth

Caesurae have been used in poetry since the time of the ancient Greeks and Romans—though, back then, the term was even more specific and referred to pauses that actually threw off the meter of a line of poetry. The Romans and Greeks, however, wrote their poetry

using much more rigid conventions of meter than are used in English verse, and the word caesura has long since come to mean simply a pause in the middle of a line, such as:

**To be, or not to be — that is the question...**

In this famous line from Shakespeare's Hamlet, the dash in the middle of the line represents a pronounced pause. Read the line aloud yourself and you will hear the pause. The comma after "To be" is another example of caesura in this line, though the pause is arguably a briefer one.

When analyzing poetry, poets and scholars sometimes mark instances of caesura by using a symbol called a "double pipe," which looks like this: ||. Here's an example of how the double pipe is used to mark caesura in context:

**To be, || or not to be — || that is the question...**

As you can see, from this example, it is possible to have multiple caesurae in a single line of poetry.

### **Feminine vs. Masculine Caesurae:**

In poetry that uses meter, each caesura is defined as “masculine” or “feminine” depending on whether the pause comes after a stressed or unstressed syllable. A feminine caesura follows an unstressed syllable, as in:

The woods are lovely, || dark and deep

A masculine caesura, on the other hand, is one that follows a stressed syllable, as in:

My words fly up, || my thoughts remain below

Generally speaking, feminine caesura often are a bit shorter and feel “softer.” Masculine caesura often feel harder and more abrupt.

### **Initial, Medial, and Terminal Caesura**

Instances of caesura are also sometimes referred to based on where they occur in the line.

Initial caesura occurs toward the beginning of a line, such as the comma “To be, or not to be — that is the question...”

Medial caesura occurs in the middle of a line, such as the dash in “To be, or not to be — that is the question...”

Terminal caesura occurs near the end of a line, such as the dash in the line “Then there’s a pair of us — don’t tell!”

### Caesura Examples:

#### Caesurae in Beowulf

Beowulf is one of the oldest surviving poems written in Old English. Poems written in Old English often used lots of caesura, and Seamus Heaney’s modern English translation of Beowulf does an excellent job of preserving the original text’s prolific use of caesurae. This example shows that, although the use of caesurae can create an unusual or jarring rhythm that might be perceived by some as more “modern,” it has actually been in use for many centuries.

A ring-whorled prow rode in the harbour,  
Ice-clad, || outbound, || a craft for a prince.  
They stretched their beloved lord in his boat,  
Laid out by the mast, || amidships,  
The great ring-giver. || Far-fetched treasures  
Were piled upon him, || and precious gear.  
I never heard before of a ship so well furbished  
With battle tackle, || bladed weapons  
And coats of mail. || The massed treasure  
Was loaded on top of him: || it would travel far  
On out into the ocean’s sway.

Both of the caesurae in the second line are feminine, because each pause follows an unstressed syllable: Ice-clad, || outbound, || a craft for a prince.

### Caesura in Shakespeare's "Sonnet 42"

This excerpt from Sonnet 42 by Shakespeare contains an example of caesura in each line except the fourth.

If I lose thee, || my loss is my love's gain,  
And losing her, || my friend hath found that loss,  
Both find each other, || and I lose both twain,  
And both for my sake lay on me this cross,  
  
But here's the joy, || my friend and I are one,  
Sweet flattery, || then she loves but me alone.

### Caesura in Ashbery's "Our Youth"

This stanza from John Ashbery's poem "Our Youth" gives a more modern example of caesura using three different types of punctuation: ellipsis in the first two lines, a period in the third, and finally a comma in the fourth.

Blue hampers . . . || Explosions,

Ice . . . || The ridiculous  
Vases of porphyry. || All that our youth  
Can't use, || that it was created for.

### Function of Caesura

A caesural break creates various effects, depending upon the way it is used. Sometimes it breaks the monotonous rhythm of a line and forces readers to focus on the meaning of the phrase preceding the caesura. In some other cases, it might create a dramatic or ominous effect. Normally, it happens in the middle of a sentence, or phrase in poetry. It also adds an emotional and theatrical touch to a line, and helps convey depth of the sentiments.

### Significance of Caesura in Literature

Originally, the double pipes were used for the purpose of scansion, which is to say determining the metrical character of a line of verse. A reader could easily see that an audible pause was called for in a line of poetry with the double pipes. Caesura examples were very common in Ancient Greek and Ancient Latin poetry, which both emphasized the importance of meter. Caesurae help to highlight the meter in a line of verse. Old English poetry also included examples of caesura in almost every line, as this type of poetry did not generally involve rhyme or meter; the preferred methods of creating euphony and poetic unity were through consonance and medial caesurae.

While caesurae was particularly important in the poetic works of ancient cultures, there are many caesura examples in contemporary

poetry as well. There may not be quite as many rules regarding its usage now. However, most people add natural and frequent breaks in the middle of lines when speaking normally. Thus, when contemporary poets make their verse resemble natural speech it is common to use caesurae.

**Moumita Das**

**English Department**