Poetic Meter and Rhyme

Most poetry gets much of its effect from what is called meter—a regular and predictable rhythm in the lines. The basic unit of meter is the poetic foot. A foot consists, most usually, of one accented (or stressed) syllable and one or more unaccented syllables.

The most common feet in poetry are:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Ascending or “rising” feet</th>
<th>Descending or “falling” feet</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>/u/ iambus</td>
<td>/u trochee</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>uu/ anapest</td>
<td>/uu dactyl</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

and for variation the poet may mix in:

| uu amphibrach             | / monosyllabic foot         |
| spondee                   | uu pyrrhic                 |

For example, the following line is made up of trochees (is trochaic):

I / u / I / u / I / u / I / u / I / u / I / u / I / u / I / u
Once up/on a/ midnight/ dreary/, while I/ pondered/ weak and/ weary.

In addition to the foot, when we give the meter of the line, we also say how many feet there are. English poetry may have lines that are any of these:

- Monometer (one foot)
- Pentameter (five meter)
- Dimeter (two feet)
- Hexameter (six meter)
- Trimeter (three feet)
- Heptameter (seven feet)
- Tetrameter (four feet)
- Octameter (eight feet)

The line above from Poe’s “The Raven”, therefore, is trochaic octameter [eight trochees in each line]. As for rhyme, there are

- Perfect rhyme (same vowel and final consonant): mill-sill; right-night
- Consonance (same final consonant but different vowel): bill-ball; born-burn; begun-afternoon
- Assonance (same vowel but different consonant): lake-fate; beauty-receive
- Feminine rhyme (two or more syllables rhyming): flaming-shaming; transportation-information

Feminine ending: Most rising meters end on an accent as can be seen from above. Occasionally, there is an unaccented beat left over. This makes the line softer or “feminine”. Here is an example:

u u / u / u / I / u / I / u

And I would/ that my tongue/ could ut/ter---- extra unaccented syllable
Exercise on Poetic Meter and Rhyme

Read the following portion of a poem and answer the questions:

Break, break, break
On thy cold gray stones, O sea!
And I would that my tongue could utter
The thoughts that arise in me.

O well for the fisherman’s boy,
That he shouts with his sister at play!
O well for the sailor lad,
That he sings in his boat in the bay!

How many feet in the lines?________________________________________

Which metric feet or foot is predominant?_____________________________

Are the line endings masculine or feminine?___________________________

What is the rhyme scheme?__________________________________________

As well as you can, mark off the feet and meter of all eight lines above.
Answer Key

[u] /   [u] /   [u] /  
Break, break, break  
  u  u  /   /   /  u /  
On thy cold/ gray stones,/ O seal  
  u  u  /   u  u  /   u  /  u  
And I would/ that my tongue/ could ut/ter  
  U  /   u  u  u  /  
The thoughts/ that arise/ in me.

   u  /   u  u  /   u  u  /  
O well/ for the fish/erman’s boy,  
   u  u  /   u  u  /   u  u  /  
That he shouts/ with his sis/ter at play!  
   u  /   u  u  /   u  /  
O well/ for the sai/lor lad,  
   u  u  /   u  u  /   u  u  /  
That he sings/ in his boat/ in the bay!

Feet per line? _______ three

Predominant foot? ___ anapestic-iambic

Masculine or feminine endings? _______ All masculine except three

Rhyme scheme? _______ ABCB DEFE