

Poetics

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Poetry Night

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(Abstract: a sampling of poetic forms, with notes)

Introduction

This is the stuff of one who is drawn to the more formal or traditional forms of poetry and still enjoys trying to work within the structures of those poetic constraints.

So this paper will present poems in several of these forms.

The first is a villanelle.

The villanelle has its roots in rustic Italian harvest work songs from the 16th century. The term is thought to derive from “villano,” an Italian word for peasant, or from “villa,” the Latin word for “country house” or “farm.”

The form as we know it now became popular in France in the 17th century and persists to this day. Elizabeth Bishop’s *One Art* is a good example of a modern take on the form, as is Dylan Thomas’ *Do Not Go Gentle into That Good Night*. Modern versions tend to have less of the sing-song style you will see here.

The form consists of nineteen lines presented in five 3-line stanzas and one 4-line stanza. The structure is complex.

The first line of the first stanza is repeated as the last line of the second and fourth stanzas. And, the third line of the first stanza is repeated as the last line in the third and fifth stanzas.

These two lines then become the last two lines of the last stanza.

The rhyme scheme for each of the 3-line stanzas is a-b-a. The first and third lines of each of the 3-line stanzas rhyme throughout. The second line of each stanza also rhymes throughout.

The second copy of the poem in this handout demonstrates how this works.

When We Are Young
(a villanelle)

When we are young and filled with joy and life seems at its height
The urgency of busy lives will press upon the day
And all that matters at the point is seeking out delight

A bedroom door breaks out upon the dreams that seem so bright
And represents an outlet for a precious getaway
When we are young and filled with joy and life seems at its height

As urgent pastimes mount and throb with overbearing might
The sun ensures an open source for avenues of play
And all that matters at the point is seeking out delight

Our hallowed missions press against the fast approaching night
As desperate calls to home are met with desperate calls to stay
When we are young and filled with joy and life seems at its height

We run and jump and cross our ways but never feel the slight
Our talk a rush of shouts and calls that time cannot allay
And all that matters at the point is seeking out delight

Alas it ends as years subside and visions don't ignite
And wiser years look back on times when passions held the day
When we were young and filled with joy and life seemed at its height
And all that mattered at the point was seeking out delight

When We Are Young
(a villanelle)

1	When we are young and filled with joy and life seems at its height	a	1
2	The urgency of busy lives will press upon the day	b	
3	And all that matters at the point is seeking out delight	a	2
4	A bedroom door breaks out upon the dreams that seem so bright	a	
5	And represents an outlet for a precious getaway	b	
6	When we are young and filled with joy and life seems at its height	a	1
7	As urgent pastimes mount and throb with overbearing might	a	
8	The sun ensures an open source for avenues of play	b	
9	And all that matters at the point is seeking out delight	a	2
10	Our hallowed missions press against the fast approaching night	a	
11	As desperate calls to home are met with desperate calls to stay	b	
12	When we are young and filled with joy and life seems at its height	a	1
13	We run and jump and cross our ways but never feel the slight	a	
14	Our talk a rush of shouts and calls that time cannot allay	b	
15	And all that matters at the point is seeking out delight	a	2
16	Alas it ends as years subside and visions don't ignite	a	
17	And wiser years look back on times when passions held the day	b	
18	When we were young and filled with joy and life seemed at its height	a	1
19	And all that mattered at the point was seeking out delight	a	2

The Sonnet:

The sonnet is a 14 line poem, usually in iambic, which means the stress is on the second syllable of a word or phrase.

There are two main types of sonnet, the Petrarchan and the Shakespearean. There is a third more minor type known as the Spenserian sonnet, but the main form is one of these two – the Petrarchan and the Shakespearean.

The Petrarchan sonnet is structured along the lines of an 8-line section and a 6-line section representing a “proposal and response” format which tends to be more intellectual or argumentative.

The Shakespearean sonnet has three 4-line stanzas and one 2-line stanza and tends to be more metaphorical and playful. Given the times, the form often employed several layers of meaning that could be metaphorically suggestive if not downright risque.

The following sonnet tries to capture some of that tongue-in-cheek, double-meaning aspect.

Loves Labours
(a sonnet)

To build a bed requires a set of tools.
A hammer first for what it will evoke –
So long and hard and basic to the rules
Its heft belies the pleasure of its stroke.

We'll sand the piece to smooth the anxious brace
And keep the focus where the softness warms
So that the deeper hues will soothe our place
And set the frame for soon recumbent forms.

As pliers pull resistant links to rest
To soften all the sorrows that may come
Our tensions turn to oils to balm the test
Of that which now achieves our settled sum.

So then let's turn to what we hope to find
If springs resound can love be far behind?

The Sestina:

A sestina has six 6-line stanzas and one 3-line stanza.

Its structural character and challenge is to repeat and systematically rotate the words that end each of the six lines of the first stanza.

So, the end word in the first line of the next stanza is the same end word in the last line of the preceding stanza.

The end word in the second line of that stanza is the same end word in the first line of the preceding stanza.

And so on and so on.

The final 3 line stanza employs all six words in sequence but within three lines.

The second copy of this poem tries to demonstrate how this works.

There tends to be a preference for a standard line, such as a line of 10 syllables. It also usually tells a story.

A hard form to pull off.

Thanksgiving, 1998

(a sestina)

The thought was to go there for Turkey Day,
Arrange with the home for an overnight,
And get a room with a kitchen down the way
For a "home cooked" dinner -- a special delight
That would bring back what he kept of our love.
We knew we'd feel better once this was done.

So we all headed out after jobs were done
Determined to make the most of the day.
A taciturn group, never talked much of love
Now starting to bond on this special night
With stories galore for our father's delight,
Memories and comforts from back a long way.

Landlords must have thought it strange in a way --
Summer rents in winter were not often done --
But one man's folly is another's delight.
After all, to them, a day is a day
A night is a night --
Third party windfalls of filial love.

We brought what there was to bring of our love,
Each trying hard in each our own way
To relive memories long into the night,
Going back over what shouldn't have been done,
Bringing up good times from back in the day --
Warming in all a long dormant delight.

Such is the measure of a soul's delight
That much can be taken from voices of love
Coming in synch at the end of the day
Hoping at last to have found a true way
To seek absolution for what wasn't done
While facing the prospect of a starless night.

Now he's gone gently into that good night
A few misfortunes and a few delights
Happy and proud of all he had done
And perhaps in his way knowing the love
We strained to show in a beholden way
Gathered at last on that Thanksgiving Day.

So on that frosted day and large-eyed night
We found a way to source a faint delight
With grateful love for all that he had done

Thanksgiving, 1998
(a sestina)

The thought was to go there for Turkey Day,	1	day
Arrange with the home for an overnight,	2	night
And get a room with a kitchen down the way	3	way
For a "home cooked" dinner -- a special delight	4	delight
That would bring back what he kept of our love.	5	love
We knew we'd feel better once this was done.	6	done
So all headed out after jobs were done	6	done
Determined to make the most of the day.	1	day
A taciturn group, never talked much of love	5	love
Now starting to bond on this special night	2	night
With stories galore for our father's delight,	4	delight
Memories and comforts from back a long way.	3	way
Landlords must have thought it strange in a way --	6	way
Summer rents in winter were not often done --	1	done
But one man's folly is another's delight.	5	delight
After all, to them, a day is a day	2	day
A night is a night --	4	night
Third party windfalls of filial love.	3	love
We brought what there was to bring of our love,	6	love
Each trying hard in each our own way	1	way
To relive memories long into the night,	5	night
Going back over what shouldn't have been done	2	done
Bringing up good times from back in the day	4	day
Warming in all a long dormant delight.	3	delight
Such is the measure of a soul's delight	6	delight
That much can be taken from voices of love	1	love
Coming in synch at the end of the day	5	day
Hoping at last to have found a true way	2	way
To seek absolution for what wasn't done	4	done
While facing the prospect of a starless night.	3	night
Now he's gone gently into that good night	6	night
A few misfortunes and a few delights	1	delight
Happy and proud of all he had done	5	done
And perhaps in his way knowing the love	2	love
We strained to show in a beholden way	4	way
Coming to give him that Thanksgiving Day.	3	day
So on that frosted day and large-eyed night	day / night	
We found a way to source a faint delight	way delight	
With grateful love for all that he had done.	love / done	

Syllabics:

Syllabics is a compositional form that is built upon the number of syllables in a line, without any consideration for rhyme or meter.

A modernist, 20th century development most notably associated with Marianne Moore, whom you may recall as a little old lady dressed in black and wearing a tri-corned hat. She also loved baseball – the Brooklyn Dodgers as I recall. Dylan Thomas also wrote poems in this convention.

So this poem consists of two lines with 6 syllables, two lines with 5 syllables, two lines with 4 syllables and so on down to 1 syllable.

Savages
("syllabics")

They say they're all gone now

The tribal chiefs of old

Who carried with them

The wisdom of wars

Passed on to boys

Who became braves

Warriors

Tent keepers

Wanton

Homeless

Lost

Proud

Free Verse:

Most contemporary poetry is written in free verse, which typically has neither rhyme nor meter.

Its significance comes by way of the poetic line and the development of creative images.

The length of the lines and the line breaks affect the pacing or rhythm of the poem and ultimately affect the way it is received. Sometimes the effect isn't obvious until the end of the poem.

An interesting aspect of this form is something called enjambment, in which the last word of a line changes in its meaning or understanding by the line that comes next. When done well, it's an impressive dimension of this form.

Free verse strikes me as very sophisticated and the hardest to write.

The poem that follows is a pretty modest effort in this regard.

I looked for you

(free verse)

I looked for you in songs of innocence
on graveled paths worn smooth
by those who thought the same before

I looked for you at times that closed the day
in shadows on a harbored path foregone
when feinting gestures failed to embed

I looked for you on spotless nights
when it seemed the empty stars
were waiting to celebrate our touch

But that was long ago
and what seemed so right was hard to hold
when songs refract instead what seemed their burning truth

The songs are empty now
and I look to them as to desolate desires
for one who was there once if only in shadows
and in songs of innocence

The Limerick

Finally, I'll end on a lighter note with what most would consider the lowest form of poetry and one best served in its most vulgar element – the limerick.

Limericks don't have to be vulgar, however, and the form lends itself to jovial, semi-mocking opportunities to poke good-hearted fun.

This one tries to play with that vulgar side in a lighter, more “civilized” fashion.

Limericks on the Poets

One's limericks don't have to be dirty
 When mixing with those over thirty
 To upgrade the sway
 Here's what the Brits say
 Use "arse" and what's dirty is nerdy

 So limericks for each introduction
 Polite but still true to deduction
 Off-color enough
 To answer the bluff
 By keeping the word in production

 Now Jim we thought might be above it
 A golf channel gig he may covet
 But he's here for sure
 And if we demur
 Says Jim up the "arse" we can shove it

 The Judge is as good as Augustus
 A poet for sure -- we can trust this
 But here's what gives pause
 It's probably because
 Hard benches didn't do his "arse" justice

 Chicago can hardly believe it
 John Barr is the one to conceive it
 In Pegasus* land
 His dream now at hand
 Though he worked his "arse" off to achieve it

 So now we are done with the limerick
 Surprises can make one choleric
 And if that's the case
 They no doubt will race
 To render my "arse" asymmetric

*The Pegasus is the trademark of The Poetry Foundation and Poetry Magazine