

Complex poetic verse by William Teunis et al.

by Jonah Ohayv, March, 2014

I'm amazed that my humbly brilliant Northwood high-school English teacher, Mr. Teunis, could so deftly write humorous examples of complicated poetic verse, to teach us with his examples below. This has, over 40 years later, led to my studying Shakespeare's sonnets and poetry quite closely - just another long-term effect of Mr. Teunis' strong inspiration.

If you think creating poetry like the samples in 2 to 10 is easy, just follow the rules at the end of each section underneath it, and try your hand at it!

1. Short forms of verse

The Coffee House

by William Teunis

Couplet – two lines that rhyme

The people here have lots of hair,
And get along without fresh air.

Triplet or tercet

She thought the coffee very good,
The Scottish songs she understood;
But she didn't like the neighborhood.

Quatrains – various examples

The coffee-house is full of smoke,
It features music of the FOLK;

Guitars and beards are common sights,
Along with certain Northwoodites.

The entertainment still begins at ten;
The place is fairly empty up till then;
But by ten-thirty it will hold no more,
And students listen crouching on the floor.

A Village Voice that I can scarcely see,
Cafe-au-lait, black bread and cheese, and thee
(While the guitarist's doing "Barbara Allen")
Beside me singing "Wreck of the John B."?

The beatniks in the back
Wear beards and dungarees,
They eat black bread and cheese
And talk of Kerouac.

2. Shakespearean sonnet

The Coffee House

by William Teunis

The coffee-house is full of pungent smoke,
Guitars and straggling beards are common sights.
One hears authentic music of the FOLK,
Played by afficionado Northwoodites.
The place is fairly empty up til ten,
But by ten-thirty it will hold no more.
The entertainment's under way by then,

And students listen crouching on the floor.
The beatniks sitting longhaired in the back
Wear turtle-necks and beards and dungarees,
They talk of Burroughs and of Kerouac,
Drinking espresso, eating bread and cheese.
 Excepting just the nicotine-laden air,
 All things will pass: the songs, the talk, the fare.

The rules for making a Shakespearean sonnet -

1. 14 lines - 3 groups of 4 lines (quatrains), ending in an indented couplet.
2. Each quatrain has its own related idea, and the couplet either sums these up or gives a surprise ending.
3. There's a surprise twist (“volta”) of the viewpoint, usually in line 9, but here it's delayed all the way to line 14.
4. Each line has 5 groups or “feet” of 2 beats, the first beat short and the second is long = iambic pentameter (“The cof/fee house/is full/of pun/gent smoke”).
5. The quatrains' lines last words make alternate rhymes: a b a b/ c d c d/ e f e f, and the couplet uses the same rhyme-sound: g g (“air, fare”).

3. Shakespeare's own sonnets

Sonnet XXIX

When, in disgrace with fortune and men's eyes,
I all alone bewep my outcast state,
And trouble deaf heaven with my bootless cries,
And look upon myself, and curse my fate,
Wishing me like to one more rich in hope,
Featur'd like him, like him with friends possess'd,
Desiring this man's art and that man's scope,
With what I most enjoy contented least;
Yet in these thoughts myself almost despising,
Haply I think on thee, and then my state,
Like to the lark at break of day arising
From sullen earth, sings hymns at heaven's gate;
 For thy sweet love remember'd such wealth brings

That then I scorn to change my state with kings.

See if you can find all the above rules applied in this sonnet. (At that time, “possess'd” and “least” were pronounced to rhyme).

S. wrote 154 sonnets, about one a week for three and a half years, for the patron who in return economically sponsored him. Two of those years, due to the plague, all the theatres were closed, with no possibilities for income as a dramatist or actor. Most of S.'s competing peer poets and dramatists died during those years, and S.'s family was totally dependent on the continuing income from this nobly-titled, rich, male, handsome, late teenage patron.

4. Spenserian stanza

The Coffee House

by William Teunis

The coffee-house is full of pungent smoke,
Guitars and straggling beards are common sights.
One hears authentic music of the FOLK,
Played by afficianado Northwoodites
Who come on Wednesday and on Friday nights.
The beatniks sitting longhaired in the back
Engage in ceremonial coffee-drinking rights,
And talk of Burroughs, Corso, Kerouac,
In shirts which once were white but now are mainly black.

The rules for making a Spenserian stanza -

1. 9 lines - 2 quatrains, each with their idea (in this example, the ideas take 5 lines and 3 lines instead). Lines 2-7 indented.
2. Each line is in iambic pentameter, except the last which is in iambic hexameter (has 6 feet).
3. Rhyme scheme: a b a b / b c b c / b.
4. Last line takes the ideas a step further or surprises.

5. Spenserian sonnet

This is the earliest form of English sonnet. It simplifies the yet earlier Italian style. Shakespeare mentions reading Spenser in one of his own later sonnets.

Sonnet 54

by Edmund Spenser

Of this worlds theatre in which we stay,
My love like the spectator ydly sits
Beholding me that all the pageants play,
Disguysing diversly my troubled wits.
Sometimes I joy when glad occasion fits,
And mask in myrth lyke to a comedy:
Soone after when my joy to sorrow flits,
I waile and make my woes a tragedy.
Yet she, beholding me with constant eye,
Delights not in my merth nor rues my smart:
But when I laugh she mocks, and when I cry
She laughs and hardens evermore her heart.
What then can move her? if nor merth nor mone,
She is no woman, but a senceless stone.

Rules for making a Spenserian sonnet -

1. 14 lines - 3 groups of 4 lines (quatrains), ending in a couplet.
2. Each quatrain has its own related idea, and the couplet either sums these up or gives a surprise ending. The overlapping rhymes of the three quatrains (12 lines) makes their ideas combine into one major theme, whereas the couplet moves onto another path.
3. Volta at start of line 9 (“yet”).
4. Lines in iambic pentameter, wuth each foot's first beat short and the second long.
5. The quatrains' lines last words have this stricter overlapping rhyme-scheme: a b a b/ b c b c/ c d c d/, and the couplet uses the same rhyme-sound: e e.

6. Italian sonnet

The yet more demanding rhyme scheme of the first sonnet form, the Plutarchan (“Italian”) sonnet, better fits the Italian language, which has more rhyming words than English has.

Vain Gratuities

by Edwin Arlington Robinson

Never was there a man much uglier
In eyes of other women, or more grim:
"The Lord has filled her chalice to the brim,
So let us pray she's a philosopher,"
They said; and there was more they said of her--
Deeming it, after twenty years with him,
No wonder that she kept her figure slim
And always made you think of lavender.

But she, demure as ever, and as fair,
Almost, as they remembered her before
She found him, would have laughed had she been there,
And all they said would have been heard no more
Than foam that washes on an island shore
Where there are none to listen or to care.

What lips my lips have kissed, and where, and why (Sonnet XLIII)

by Edna St. Vincent Millay

What lips my lips have kissed, and where, and why,
I have forgotten, and what arms have lain
Under my head till morning; but the rain
Is full of ghosts tonight, that tap and sigh
Upon the glass and listen for reply,
And in my heart there stirs a quiet pain
For unremembered lads that not again
Will turn to me at midnight with a cry.

Thus in winter stands the lonely tree,
Nor knows what birds have vanished one by one,
Yet knows its boughs more silent than before:
I cannot say what loves have come and gone,

I only know that summer sang in me
A little while, that in me sings no more.

The rules for making an Italian sonnet -

1. The 14 lines have two sections: the first 8 lines (“octet”), and the last 6 lines (“sestet”). There are also two overall, contrasting ideas or feelings, with the first expressed in the octet, and the next in the sestet.
2. The volta in line 9 introduces the second main idea, and the final couplet resolves or clarifies the tension.
3. The octet's lines last words have this stricter rhyme-scheme: a b b a/ a b b a/. The following sestet has two or three rhyming sounds, which can be arranged in numerous ways (here, in E.A. Robinson, c d c d d c, in E.S.V. Millay, c d e d c e).

7. Here's my own best effort at a sonnet -

contemplating in Madeira, winter, 2013

Sonnet 2

by Jonah Ohayv

Were I to view which ways worn paths now turn
To nicer walks, my opened eye need wake
Anew, discard old guilts and fear of pains,
But lead the body healthful to its smile:
In kind, calm, brave joint with all the world that
Flows or tumbles through a well-travelled life,
Clear radiant dreams to guide my step aright,
Amongst a grand circle of inspiring
Friends, spending freely what i rightly earn,
The sporty body's dance of yin-yang sway,
Smooth mutual joyful nether coupling,
A generous heart, wise food with clean drink,
Where wondrous thankfulness shall lead my cheer,
For love in practice, peace and growth each year.

8. Blank verse

The Coffee House

by William Teunis

Fifteen feet wide, one hundred twenty long,
The coffee-house mists pungently with tears
From scores of cigarettes. The long-haired chick
Beside the door must strain her eyes to see
Her crowd at the far end. The table cloths
Are red and white, and wrinkled sloppily
Across the four-chair tables. In the center
The floor is raised and a four-legged stool
Supports a red guitar. The waiter strides . . .

Rules for making blank verse like this example -

1. Iambic pentameter without rhymes.
2. A sentence ends in its third line after 3 feet, and the last 2 feet are the start of the next sentence.
3. Present tense Hemingwayske descriptive sentences.

9. “Di-di-dah 4-3 meter” - or “Iambic hexameter-tetrameter” ?

(Don't know the name for this one, which is quite musical when read aloud.)

The Coffee House

by William Teunis

In the dark of the night when guitarists delight
In singing of sleeves that are green,
There's a whir and a hum that strikes everyone dumb,
It's the damned espresso machine!
The guitarist is drowned by the maniac sound,
By the howl quite incredibly keen,
And what is it that's wrong so you can't hear the sound?

It's the damned espresso machine!

Rules for making “Di-di-dah 4-3 meter” like this -

1. All lines written in di-di-dah meter. (In the dark / of the night / when guitar/ ists delight) (It's the damn / ned espress / o machine) (éd often being used in Shakespeare's time at the end of verbs, to create an extra beat).

The exception in line 2 here follows the music, instead of the usual number of syllables. (In siiiinging/ of sleeves/ that are green.)

2. First line has 4 groups of feet, next line has 3, etc. in alternation.

3. The last word of each couplet line rhymes. Also, the word completing the second foot in the longer (tetrameter) lines, rhymes with the last word of that line.

4. Each couplet has a new idea.

5. 2 quatrains, with the last line in each being both the turning-point idea (“volta”) and a repeating refrain.

OR

Rules for making “Iambic hexameter-tetrameter” like this -

1. All lines in iambic (one short and one long) meter. (In the/ dark of/ the night/ when guit/ ar ists/ de light) and (In sing/ ing of/ sleeves that/ are green). Also (There's a/ whir and/ a hum/ that strikes/ ev' ry/ one dumb) and (It's the/ damned es/ pres so/ mach ine.)

2. First line has 6 groups of feet=iambic hexameter, next line has 4=iambic tetrameter, etc. in alternation.

3. The last word of each couplet line rhymes. Also, the word completing the third foot in the longer (hexameter) lines, rhymes with the last word of that line.

4. As above.

5. As above.

10. Eulogy

Now let's look at Mr. Teunis' only known-surviving, serious poem, published in my underground literary booklet, Hemlock, in 1963.

Dorothy Ellis

1

In the honeysuckled fence
Lurks the nest of excellence
Secret twigs that cannot fly
Cancer's green bureaucracy.
Schizophrenic flesh rebels
And the pale promiscuous cells,
Not content to stand and wait,
Lawlessly proliferate.

2

Dorothy at last is gone,
Fitful bright phenomenon,
Firefly of neurotic bent
In the marsh of government.

Civil servants sucking spoons
Through the office afternoons
Turn perplexed when clattering keys
Hinted bright disharmonies.

Now her match has flared its flare,
Ashes scattered God knows where,
Everybody walks once more

Fearless through each office door.

3

One there was who liked to pose,
Go where intimacy goes,
Pull on love to self-defense
Shrank it to indifference.

Sonnets typed in pain outlive
Faults we guiltily forgive,
Wishing our familiars dead
Across the sword she took to bed.

Rules for making a poem like this -

1. Balance of sections: 1st section has 2 quatrains, 2nd has 3 quatrains, 3rd has 2 quatrains.
2. Each line has three and a half iambic feet, poem's last line has 4.
3. Quatrain rhyme: a a b b.
4. Theme rules: only Mr. Teunis knew them.