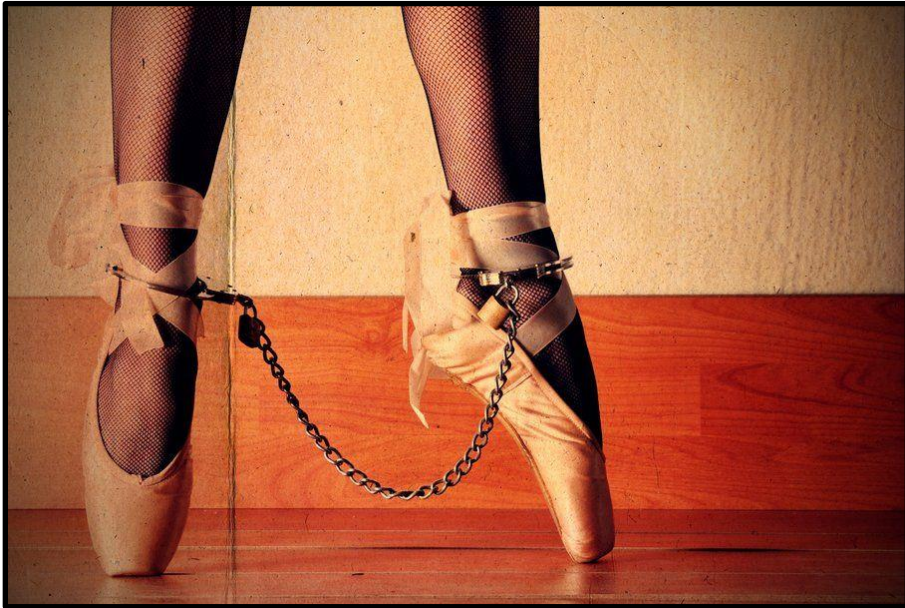


Dancing in Chains:

Fixed Forms in Poetry



Part 1: Limerick, Triolet, Villanelle, Sestina

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“Fixed Form” or “Prescribed Form”

- Type of poem where various elements of the poem – e.g., length/# of lines, rhyme scheme, meter – are predetermined by convention/rule, not by the poet
- Examples of “Fixed Form” poems:

“Fixed Form” or “Prescribed Form”

- **Why should I care about all these rules and types of poems?**

Some Basic Concepts

- **Rhyme Scheme**

- The pattern of sounds that repeat at the end of a line of poetry
- Designated by lower-case letters

- **EXAMPLE:**

Jack and Jill
Went up the hill

Some Basic Concepts

- **Rhyme Scheme**

- The pattern of sounds that repeat at the end of a line of poetry
- Designated by lower-case letters

- **EXAMPLE:**

The people along the sand
All turn and look one way.
They turn their back on the land
They look at the sea all day.

Some Basic Concepts

Rhythm Patterns

- Repetition of strong or weak stress/emphasis on syllables in a line of poetry

EXAMPLE:

Arise fair sun, and kill the envious moon

Some Basic Concepts

Rhythm Patterns

Pattern Names

Iambic - Weak-**Strong** (“before” “arise”)

Trochaic - **Strong**-Weak (“ladder” “highway”)

Anapestic - Weak-Weak-**Strong**

[I must **go**] [on this **jour**] [ney **alone**]

Some Basic Concepts

Meter

- The number of rhythm pattern units (of strong and weak stress/emphasis) in a line of poetry

EXAMPLE:

[**Arise**] [fair **sun**], [and **kill**] [the **en**]

[vious **moon**]

“Fixed Form” or “Prescribed Form”

For each form, we’ll discuss . . .

- History of the form
- “Fixed” elements or rules
- Examples
- Effects of the “fixed” elements or rules on the content of the poem
- How poets work within the “chains” of the fixed elements to make words or ideas “dance”

So why would a poet want to write in a “fixed” form?

Wouldn't it be easier to write free verse and not worry about rhymes or rhythm or meter?

Limerick

- Name is a town in Ireland, but . . .
- General form appears in Shakespeare (1604-05), though not a limerick as we know it today
- Limerick – in form and function – appears in France in early 1700s
- 1st published appearance in English in 1820; popularized by Edward Lear (1846)
- The word “limerick” first used to describe this form in 1892
- No clear connection to Limerick, Ireland, at all

Limerick

- **Fixed Elements**
 - **Length: 5 lines**
 - **Rhyme Scheme: a a b b a**
 - **Meter:**
 - **lines 1 &2 : anapestic trimeter**
 - **lines 3 &4 : anapestic dimeter**
 - **line 5 : anapestic trimeter**

Limerick

- **Modern examples**

There's a speedy young lady from Bright
Who could travel much faster than light.

 So she set out one day
 In a relative way,
And returned on the previous night.

A woodworking guru named Norm
Always dressed in predictable form.

 A bold flannel shirt
 Kept his viewers alert,
And undoubtedly helped Norm stay warm.

Limerick

- **What effect do the “fixed” elements –
number of lines
rhyme scheme
meter
– have on the content of the poem?**

Dancing in the Chains of Limerick

A nice pot of gold that was mari
Belonged to a dan that was harri.
When some cals who were ras
Filled their kets which were bas,
She put up a cade which was barri.

-- Arthur Shaw

Dancing in the Chains of Limerick

There's a wonderful family called Stein;
There's Gert and there's Ep, and there's Ein.
Gert's poems are bunk,
Ep's statues are junk,
And no one can understand Ein.

-- Author Unknown

Dancing in the Chains of Limerick

There was an old man with a beard
Who said: "It is just as I feared!
 Two owls and a hen,
 Four larks and a wren,
Have all built their nests in my beard.

-- Edward Lear

Dear Sir, You're quite wrong about me.
 No wren or small fowl
 Would nest with an owl,
In one beard – they would never agree.
How very absurd can you be!

-- M. Trench

Have you ever seen a sad limerick?

A land of blue skies, and sunlight,
Each day endlessly clear and bright.
 Without rain, the dams dry,
 Crops fail, cattle die,
Farmers waste, walk away, quit the fight.

-- Ruth Silcock

Triolet

- First appears in 13th c. France
- Name means “triplet”
- First English triolet in 1650 by Patrick Cary, English citizen entering Benedictine monastery in France
- Reintroduced into English in 1873 by Robert Bridges

Triolet

Fixed Elements

- Length: 8 lines
- Rhyme Scheme:
 - A B a A a b A B
- Meter: Not prescribed, but frequently iambic tetrameter (four [weak-**strong**] units)

Triolet

Easy is the triolet,
If you really learn to make it!
Once a neat refrain you get,
Easy is the triolet.
As you see, I pay my debt
With another rhyme. Deuce take it,
Easy is the triolet
If you really learn to make it!

-- W. E. Henley

Triolet

Worldly designs, fears, hopes – farewell!
Farewell all earthly joys and cares!
On nobler thoughts my soul shall dwell,
Worldly designs, fears, hopes – farewell!
At quiet, in my peaceful cell
I'll think on God, free from your snares;
Worldly designs, fears, hopes – farewell!
Farewell all earthly joys and cares.

-- Patrick Cary (1650), upon
entering a monastery

What effect do the “fixed” elements of the triolet have on the content?

Triolet

Rose kissed me today.

Will she kiss me tomorrow?

Let it be as it may,

Rose kissed me today,

But the pleasure gives way

To a savour of sorrow:

Rose kissed me today,

Will she kiss me tomorrow?

-- Austin Dobson (1874)

Dancing in the Chains of Triolet

When first we met we did not guess
That Love would prove so hard a master;
Of more than common friendliness
When first we met we did not guess.
Who could foretell this sore distress,
This irretrievable disaster
When first we met? -- We did not guess
That Love would prove so hard a master.

-- Robert Bridges (1873)

Dancing in the Chains of Triolet

Words are candle-flames: with gentle glow,
Yet as painful, as blistering to the soul. As you
Do now, you used these flick'ring weapons long ago:
Words. Are candle flames with gentle glow
As charming as your words which deceived me so?
How could such beauty burn my heart, my soul? True,
Words are candle-flames, with gentle glow
Yet as painful, as blistering to the soul, as you.

-- Shaunna Stanton (1999)

Villanelle

- Form originated in 15th c. France with the use of a refrain (*i.e.*, a repeated line)
- Form standardized in 17th c.
- Appears throughout literature; recent users include
 - Dylan Thomas
 - Elizabeth Bishop
 - Theodore Roethke
 - Peter Davison
 - L. E. Sissman

Villanelle

Fixed Elements

- Length: 19 lines
- Five 3-line stanzas
- One quatrain (4 line stanza)
- Rhyme Scheme:
 - [A₁ b A₂] [a b A₁] [a b A₂] [a b A₁] [a b A₂]
 - [A b A₁ A₂]
- Meter: Not fixed; no rule

Villanelle

Villanelle of Ye Young Poet's First Villanelle to His Ladye and Ye Difficulties Thereof

by Eugene O'Neill

To sing the charms of Rosabelle,
To pour my soul out at her feet,
I try to write this villanelle.

Now I am caught within her spell,
It seems to me most wondrous sweet
To sing the charms of Rosabelle.

I seek in vain for words to tell
My love – Alas, my muse is weak!
I try to write this villanelle.

Would that I had the power to compel
The English language incomplete
To sing the charms of Rosabelle.

The ardent thoughts that in me dwell
On paper I would fair repeat
I try to write this villanelle.

My effort fruitless is. Oh, hell!
I'll tell her all when next we meet.
To sing the charms of Rosabelle,
I tried to write this villanelle.

Villanelle

Do Not Go Gentle Into That Good Night

by Dylan Thomas

Do not go gentle into that good night,
Old age should burn and rave at close of day;
Rage, rage against the dying of the light.

Though wise men at their end know dark is right,
Because their words had forked no lightning they
Do not go gentle into that good night.

Good men, the last wave by, crying how bright
Their frail deeds might have danced in a green bay,
Rage, rage against the dying of the light.

Wild men who caught and sang the sun in flight,
And learn, too late, they grieved it on its way,
Do not go gentle into that good night.

Grave men, near death, who see with blinding sight
Blind eyes could blaze like meteors and be gay,
Rage, rage against the dying of the light.

And you, my father, there on the sad height
Curse, bless, me now with your fierce tears, I pray.
Do not go gentle into that good night
Rage, rage against the dying of the light.

What effect do the “fixed” elements of the villanelle have on the content?

Dancing in the Chains of Villanelle

One Art

by Elizabeth Bishop

The art of losing isn't hard to master;
so many things seem filled with the intent
to be lost that their loss is no disaster.

Lose something every day. Accept the fluster
Of lost door keys, the hour badly spent.
The art of losing isn't hard to master.

Then practice losing farther, faster:
places, and names, and where it was you meant
to travel. None of these will bring disaster.

I lost my mother's watch. And look! My last, or
next-to-last, of three loved houses went.
The art of losing isn't hard to master.

I lost two cities, lovely ones. And, vaster,
some realms I owned, two rivers, a continent.
I miss them, but it wasn't a disaster.

-- Even losing you (the joking voice, a gesture
I love) I shan't have lied. It's evident
the art of losing's not too hard to master
Though it may look like (*Write it!*) like disaster.

Sestina

- Earliest attributed to Arnaut Daniel, circa 1190, in Occitan (the language of medieval southern France)
- Taken up in Italy by Petrarch, Dante, and others in 1300s
- To England (Sir Philip Sydney) 1590
- Revived in 19th c. by Swinburne
- Recent users include Ezra Pound, W.H. Auden, Peter Davison, Elizabeth Bishop

Sestina

Sestina

by Elizabeth Bishop

September rain falls on the house.
In the failing light, the old grandmother
sits in the kitchen with the child
beside the Little Marvel Stove,
reading the jokes from the almanac,
laughing and talking to hide her tears.

She thinks that her equinoctial tears
And the rain that beats on the roof of the house
Were both foretold by the almanac,
But only known to a grandmother.
The iron kettle sings on the stove.
She cuts some bread and says to the child,

It's time for tea now, but the child
is watching the teakettle's small hard tears
dance like mad on the hot black stove,
the way the rain must dance on the house.
Tidying up, the old grandmother
hangs up the clever almanac

on its string. Birdlike, the almanac
hovers half open above the child,
hovers above the old grandmother
and her teacup full of dark brown tears.
She shivers and says she thinks the house
feels chilly, and puts more wood in the stove.

It was to be, says the Marvel Stove.
I know what I know, says the almanac.
With crayons the child draws a rigid house
and a winding pathway. Then the child
puts in a man with buttons like tears
and shows it proudly to the grandmother.

But secretly, while the grandmother
busies herself about the stove,
the little moons fall down like tears
from between the pages of the almanac
into the flower bed the child
has carefully placed in the front of the house.

Time to plant tears, says the almanac.
The grandmother sings to the marvellous stove
and the child draws another inscrutable house.

Sestina

Fixed Elements:

- Length: 39 lines, in 6 stanzas of 6 lines each, plus a final 3-line stanza
- Last word of each line in the first stanza must be used as the last word of another line in each of the other 6-line stanzas, and in the final 3-line stanza as follows:

Sestina

Fixed Elements:

The word at the end of line 1 of the first stanza is designated as “1”, and the words at the ends of the other lines in the first stanza are designated 2, 3, 4, 5, and 6. Then the pattern of repetition is

Stanza 1: 1 2 3 4 5 6

Stanza 2: 6 1 5 2 4 3

Stanza 3: 3 6 4 1 2 5

Stanza 4: 5 3 2 6 1 4

Stanza 5: 4 5 1 3 6 2

Stanza 6: 2 4 6 5 3 1

Stanza 7 uses three of the ending words, one each at the ends of its 3 lines, and the other three words are included elsewhere, one in each line of the stanza (no required pattern here)

What effect do the “fixed” elements of the sestina have on the content?

Dancing in the Chains of Sestina

The Shrinking Lonesome Sestina

by Miller Williams

Somewhere in everyone's head something points toward home, a dashboard's floating compass, turning all the time to keep from turning. It doesn't matter how we come to be wherever we are, someplace where nothing goes the way it went once, where nothing holds fast to where it belongs, or what you've risen or fallen to.

What the bubble always points to whether we notice it or not, is home. It may be true that if you move fast everything fades away, that given time and noise enough, every memory goes into the blackness, and if new ones come

small, mole-like memories that come to live in the furry dark – they, too, curl up and die. But Carol goes to high school now. John works at home what days he can to spend some time with Sue and the kids. He drives too fast.

Dancing in the Chains of Sestina

Ellen won't eat her breakfast.
Your sister was going to come
but didn't have the time.
Some mornings at one or two
or three I want you home
a lot, but then it goes.

It all goes.
Hold on fast
to thoughts of home
when they come.
They're going to
less with time.

Time
goes
too
fast.
Come
home.

Forgive me that. One time it wasn't fast.
A myth goes that when the quick years come
Then you will, too. Me, I'll still be home.

Dancing in the Chains of Sestina

All-American Sestina

by Florence Cassen Mayers

One nation, indivisible
two-car garage
three strikes and you're out
four-minute mile
five-cent cigar
six-string guitar

Six-pack Bud
one-day sale
five-year warranty
two-way street
fourscore and seven years ago
three cheers

three-star restaurant
sixty-
four dollar question
one-night stand
two-pound lobster
five-star general

five-course meal
three sheets to the wind
two bits
six-shooter
one-armed bandit
four-poster

four-wheel drive
five-and-dime
hole in one
three-alarm fire
sweet sixteen
two-wheeler

two-tone Chevy
four rms, hi flr, w/vu
six-footer
high five
three-ring circus
one-room schoolhouse

two thumbs up, five karat diamond
Fourth of July, three-piece suit
six feet under, one-horse town

Bonus Form

Fibonacci Poems (“Fibs”)

- Invented by Greg Pincus in 2005; first appeared on April Fools’ Day, 2006.



- <http://gottabook.blogspot.com/2006/04/fib.html>
- 6 lines (or more)
- # of syllables per line follows the Fibonacci sequence: 1, 1, 2, 3, 5, 8 . . .
- Other informal rules: see <http://gottabook.blogspot.com/2006/04/more-fibbery.html>

Bonus Form

Fibonacci Poems (“Fibs”)

of syllables

One
Small,
Precise,
Poetic,
Spiraling mixture:
Math plus poetry yields the Fib.

of syllables

I
Love
him but
he loves her
and since she is not
me, so then he is a fool, right?

Bonus Form

Fibonacci Poems (“Fibs”)

Fibs Are Easy as Pi

Pi Day came;
i
took a deep breath
and
a circle i squared
then put a few remaining digits
aside
for my evening repast