

Here we are again, searching for that ever-elusive definition that will make this whole business seem simple. Let's review what we've learned so far: Poetry can be rhymed or unrhymed. Its lines can stick to a set syllable count (or not, if you want to write free-form). Also it can include a repeating refrain. In addition to this, poetry can have a set rhythm which can be altered to add interest. And you can insert pauses at the end or in the middle of the lines.

We have also established that poetry can adopt no formula at all -- with lines of varying length, no rhyme and no rhythm (except the natural rhythm of the language). And sometimes, by adopting the guise of prose, poetry can skirt the very boundaries of what poetry is.



I looked up “poetry” on the Microsoft dictionary on my computer and it had this to add to our definition: a “literary work written in verse, in particular verse writing of high quality, great beauty, emotional sincerity or intensity, or profound insight.” Whew. I have to admit that, to some extent, this definition is correct. I mean there are a lot of examples of exquisite beauty, emotional intensity and profound insight within the great poems. When Emily Dickinson writes:

The Bustle in a House  
The Morning after Death  
Is solemnest of industries  
Enacted upon Earth--

The Sweeping up the Heart  
And putting Love away  
We shall not want to use again  
Until Eternity.

...quite frankly, she nails it. In this simple poem in which she likens her household chores to coping with loss, she achieves great emotional sincerity, all the more intense because it is so quiet. She provides a new and deeply profound way to view the aftermath of a death. It is beautiful and I am very jealous of her ability to write like that.

Personally, I hadn't twigged till now that I was supposed to be writing with beauty, intensity and profundity.

I'm not sure I'm up to it.

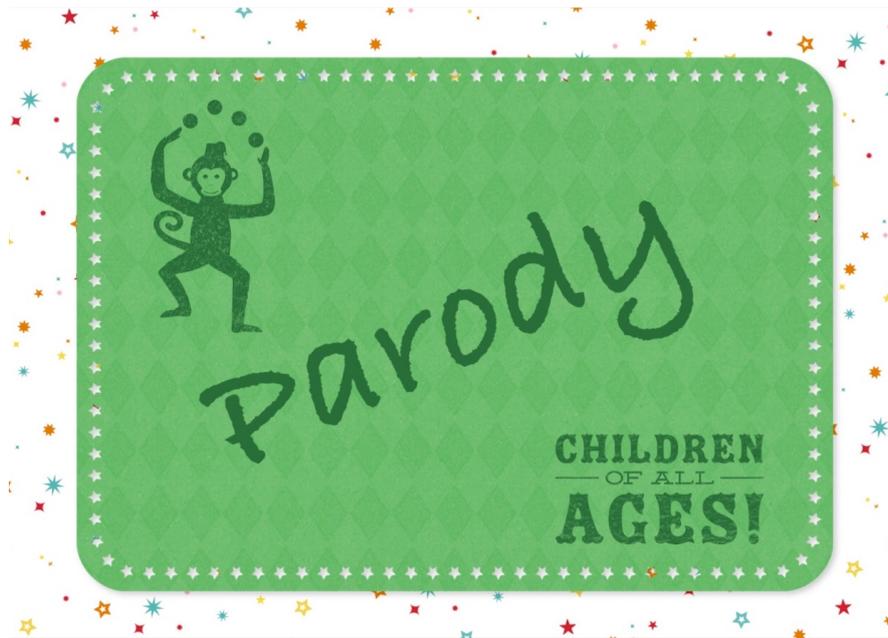
Oh yes, when I was younger and more passionate, I could write with all the intensity that my tortured soul could muster. And I did fancy myself as a deep and profound thinker. But now, I don't know. . . .

Maybe I am getting shallow in my old age....

Maybe I've sold out to the establishment or "the man" (whoever that is) and don't have that fire in my belly anymore....

Or maybe it is because I have realised something: Setting out to write beautifully, to be intense and wise and profound often scuppers the whole thing before you've even begun. I'm not sure why, really. But the harder I try to be deep and meaningful, the more pompous and ridiculous I sound. The more I concentrate on beauty, the more meaningless my strings of beautiful phrases become.

So I have been working on relaxing, on saying what I want to say honestly, with no pretensions to greatness, no pride in my deep understanding of anything. And my poems are better for it. I think this advice may serve you well and may help you end up with that very beauty and intensity we all wish for. But even if that part of it seems out of reach, don't forget: poetry can be downright fun. To remind you of this fact, let's leave the sonnets and the unrequited loves and the tragic deaths behind and concentrate on the wackier side of poetry. To do this, we begin with Weird Al...



The old folk song goes...

Oh, give me a home  
Where the buffalo roam  
And the deer and the antelope play...

But how much more satisfying is this rendition?

Oh, give me a home  
Where the buffalo roam  
And I'll show you a house full of poo...

In my ancient copy of the Oxford Illustrated Dictionary, parody is defined as a “feeble imitation or travesty; to make ridiculous by imitation.” This definition makes the art of parody sound very harsh, as if its sole purpose is to make fun of people. And don't get me wrong, it can and has been used that way. However, there is also a good-natured side to parody -- an impulse to joke around -- that can be fun and harmless. The master of this art form is Weird Al Yankovic.

From the very beginning, poetry and music have been interlinked. The earliest poems were often set to music and, in my opinion, a song is simply a poem that is sung. Bearing this in mind, I believe that Weird Al's parody of popular music is a useful place for us to begin. Who, after all, can forget this? ....

### “Eat It”

(A parody of Michael Jackson's “Beat It”)

How come you're always such a fussy young man  
Don't want no Captain Crunch, don't want no Raisin Bran  
Well, don't you know that other kids are starving in Japan  
So eat it, just eat it.

Don't want to argue, I don't want to debate  
Don't want to hear about what kind of food you hate  
You won't get no dessert 'till you clean off your plate  
So eat it

Don't you tell me you're full  
Just eat it, eat it, eat it, eat it  
Get yourself an egg and beat it  
Have some more chicken, have some more pie  
It doesn't matter if it's boiled or fried  
Just eat it ...

As you can see, parody can just be a matter of rewriting a popular poem or song with a funny twist to it. No, it's not profound, emotionally intense or particularly beautiful, but, gosh, it is fun. And it is a good way to practice sticking to a set rhythm or rhyme scheme.

Rewriting songs has been a life-long amusement of mine. Hence, the "Hal-le-lu-jah" of The Hallelujah Chorus has become "Get-a-Hair-Cut." That song from American Werewolf in London, "There's a Bad Moon on the Rise," has been changed to "There's a Bathroom on the Right" -- useful information you must admit. And the ever-famous song from Grease now goes something like this:

I've got chills -- they're multiplying  
And I'm blowing my nose  
Got a fever, conjunctivitis,  
I feel like I'm dying!

I started rewriting poems and songs back in Mrs. Schwimmer's class. I'd read a poem and get some of the words and phrases stuck in my head and start to play with them a bit. Here's an early example of a parody I wrote based on Clement C. Moore's "Twas the Night Before Christmas." We all know how it's supposed to go...

‘Twas the night before Christmas,  
When all through the house,  
Not a creature was stirring,  
Not even a mouse.  
The stockings were hung  
By the chimney with care,  
In hopes that St. Nicholas  
Soon would be there...

And so on and so on. To this timeless classic I applied my eleven-year-old sense of humour:

‘Twas the day before Christmas  
When all through the place  
Every creature was stirring  
At incredible pace.  
While mother was busy  
Decorating the house,  
She stopped for a moment  
To check on her spouse.  
And what to my wondering eyes did appear?  
But mom’s face fill with rage  
(and dad’s expression of fear).  
The moment mom shouted  
Dad sprang from the couch,  
Tripped over the coffee table  
And let out a loud “Ouch!”  
He turned off his football game  
And went straight to his work  
And hung up the stockings  
Then turned with a jerk....

...and so on. Ok, so the humor isn't very sophisticated, but I enjoyed writing it and at the time thought it was clever. I'm not, by the way, the only one who rewrote this poem. Yogi Yorgesson added this interlude to his song "I Yust Go Nuts at Christmas":

On the night before Christmas  
It's still in the house.  
My family is sleeping so I'm quiet like a mouse.  
I look at my watch and midnight is near --  
I think I'll sneak out for a cold glass of beer...

It's fun, isn't it? And once you get started, rewriting songs can easily become a habit. Even now I do it. While my children bickered in the back seat of the car the other day, Britney Spears came on the radio singing "Hit Me Baby One More Time." By the time I pulled into my driveway, I had twisted it to this: "An Ode to Size Zero Models".

My boniness is killing me (and I),  
I must confess I have to eat (Mac and Cheese!)  
I'm so skinny, I've no behind  
Give me some fries!  
Or maybe a big slice of pie.

Just be careful. You may find yourself doing this in public -- like I did at the doctor's surgery one day when I was in getting a flu jab. Quite unconsciously, I started singing this to myself:

(To the tune of The Bangles' song, "Walk Like an Egyptian")

First there is tetanus, then TB,  
And then, of course, there is polio,

Measles and mumps (oh-ay-oh)  
Rubella is bad, don't you know.  
Going abroad? Think about malaria  
Yellow fever too.  
How do we stop (oh-ay-oh)  
Diseases like these afflicting you?  
All the germs in the tsetse fly say  
Way-oh-way-oh-way-oh-way-oh.  
Get your injections.

No wonder people kept giving me strange looks and no one took the empty seat next to me. Oh well. I enjoyed myself and now it is your turn to do the same. Just pick a song or poem and rewrite it. And laugh. A lot.