

Fun with PANTOUM Basics

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Background

- English “pantoum” comes from Malay, “Pantun”
- First appeared in 15th century Malaysian literature
- Existed as folk oral form before
- Introduced to the west by Victor Hugo
- Came to American poetry via English poets
- Modern era practitioners include John Ashbery, Donald Justice, Carolyn Kizer

The Form

A standard pantoum is comprised of quatrains with an interweaving pattern of repetition of lines:

- 1st line of 1st stanza repeats as last line of last stanza. (A variation on this is 1st line repeats in the 2nd line of the last stanza.)
- 3rd line of 1st stanza is the same as the 2nd line of the last stanza. (A variation is 3rd line first stanza repeats as the last line of last stanza.)
- In every stanza except the last, the 2nd line is repeated as the 1st line of the next stanza.
- In every stanza except the last, the 4th line is repeated as the 3rd line of the next stanza.
- The number of stanzas is optional, but must be at least three to fulfill the form. Traditional Malaysian pantuns tend to be short.
- Pantoums lend themselves to end-stopped lines, but enjambment may create interesting variations.
- No end rhymes are required; however, identically repeated lines will create end-rhymes.
- The degree to which lines are identical in their repetition may vary greatly. They may be exactly the same or just repeat key words, or merely begin or end slightly differently. Synonyms can create variation while repeating meaning.
- Some poets will vary the pattern. For example, adding a second repetition of a line.
- Some poets will introduce “rogue” (non-repeating) lines to call attention to them.

“The interweaving of repeated lines in a pantoum suits the poem particularly well to ruminations on the past, circling around a memory or a mystery to tease out implications and meanings. The change in context that arises from the addition of two new lines in each stanza changes the significance of each repeated line on its second appearance.”

—Bob Holman & Margery Snyder

Questions for Analyzing/Writing Pantoums

- How closely does the work adhere to the traditional overall form?
- Number of stanzas? If over eight, does it run out of gas?
- To what degree of exactness are lines repeated?
- Are lines end-stopped or enjambed?
- Are there rogue lines and what is their purpose?
- What is the effect of the repetition on the poem’s meaning and tone?

PANTOUMS BY THE LETTER
Following the Form

Pattern of Line Repetition for Five Stanza*^ Standard Pantoum:

A
B
C
D

repeat B
E
repeat D
F

repeat E
G
repeat F
H

repeat G
I
repeat H
J

repeat I
repeat C
repeat J
repeat A

* Most modern pantoums have at least 10 original lines (A through J), each repeated once to make 20 lines in five quatrains. (The minimum is six original lines in three quatrains.) There is no limit to the number of stanzas a pantoum may have; however, in English, the power of the repetition tends to diminish after eight stanzas.

^ See Felix Jung's poem in the appendix for a rare example of a modern pantoum in fewer than five quatrains.

PANTOUM PRACTICE ONE DRAWING THE FORM

Another Lullaby for Insomniacs

Sleep, she will not linger:
She turns her moon-cold shoulder.
With no ring on her finger,
You cannot hope to hold her.

She turns her moon-cold shoulder
And tosses off the cover.
You cannot hope to hold her:
She has another lover.

She tosses off the cover
And lays the darkness bare.
She has another lover.
Her heart is elsewhere.

She lays the darkness bare.
You slowly realize
Her heart is elsewhere.
There's distance in her eyes.

You slowly realize
That she will never linger,
With distance in her eyes
And no ring on her finger.

A. E. Stallings

- Identify the 10 original lines and identify them as “A” through “J”. Label their repeaters with the corresponding letters.
- Connect the identical letters with a looping line at the margin.
- Circle differences in the repeater lines from the originals.
- Place a star next to any rogue lines.

If there is a word in the lexicon of love,
it will not declare itself.
The nature of words is to fail
men who fall in love with men.

It will not declare itself,
the perfect word. *Boyfriend* seems ridiculous:
men who fall in love with men
deserve something a bit more formal.

The perfect word? *Boyfriend*? Ridiculous.
But *partner* is...businesslike—
we deserve something a bit less formal,
much more in love with love.

But if *partner* is businesslike,
then *lover* suggests only sex,
is too much in love with love.
There is life outside of the bedroom,

and *lover* suggests only sex.
We are left with *roommate*, or *friend*.
There is life, but outside of the bedroom.
My *friend* and I rarely speak of one another.

To my left is my roommate, my friend.
If there is a word in the lexicon of love,
my friend and I rarely speak it of one another.
The nature of words is to fail.

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- Reveal line pattern by using letters.
 - Number of stanzas?
 - Rogue lines?
 - Does it follow standard pattern?
 - How many lines are enjambed?
 - Examples of where variations in the lines suggest new meanings?

HALF-RANDOM PANTOUM PRACTICE

Practice Following the Standard Form

Possible Subjects: Time; A Heart Attack; Chamisas in Autumn

Write: 20 brief free-standing lines on the subject, don't consciously link them

Pick: 10 best lines

Label them: A through J

Fill in the standard pattern:

A
B
C
D

repeat B
E
repeat D
F

repeat E
G
repeat F
H

repeat G
I
repeat H
J

repeat I
repeat C
repeat J
repeat A

Stillbirth

Laure-Anne Bosselaar

On a platform, I heard someone call out your name:

No, Laetitia, no.

It wasn't my train—the doors were closing,
but I rushed in, searching for your face.

But no Laetitia. No.

No one in that car could have been you,
but I rushed in, searching for your face:
no longer an infant. A woman now, blond, thirty-two.

No one in that car could have been you.
Laetitia-Marie was the name I had chosen.
No longer an infant. A woman now, blond, thirty-two:
I sometimes go months without remembering you.

Laetitia-Marie was the name I had chosen:
I was told not to look. Not to get attached—
I sometimes go months without remembering you.
Some griefs bless us that way, not asking much space.

I was told not to look. Not to get attached.
It wasn't my train—the doors were closing.
Some griefs bless us that way, not asking much space.
On a platform, I heard someone calling your name.

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- Laure-Anne Bosselaar's poem:
 - Reveal line pattern by using letters.
 - Number of stanzas?
 - Rogue lines?
 - Does it follow standard pattern?
 - How many lines are enjambed?
 - What/where are variations in the repeated lines?
 - How does repetition reinforce meaning/tone?

Pantoum of the Great Depression

Donald Justice

Our lives avoided tragedy
Simply by going on and on,
Without end and with little apparent meaning.
Oh, there were storms and small catastrophes.

Simply by going on and on
We managed. No need for the heroic.
Oh, there were storms and small catastrophes.
I don't remember all the particulars.

We managed. No need for the heroic.
There were the usual celebrations, the usual sorrows.
I don't remember all the particulars.
Across the fence, the neighbors were our chorus.

There were the usual celebrations, the usual sorrows
Thank god no one said anything in verse.
The neighbors were our only chorus,
And if we suffered we kept quiet about it.

At no time did anyone say anything in verse.
It was the ordinary pities and fears consumed us,
And if we suffered we kept quiet about it.
No audience would ever know our story.

It was the ordinary pities and fears consumed us.
We gathered on porches; the moon rose; we were poor.
What audience would ever know our story?
Beyond our windows shone the actual world.

We gathered on porches; the moon rose; we were poor.
And time went by, drawn by slow horses.
Somewhere beyond our windows shone the world.
The Great Depression had entered our souls like fog.

And time went by, drawn by slow horses.
We did not ourselves know what the end was.
The Great Depression had entered our souls like fog.
We had our flaws, perhaps a few private virtues.

But we did not ourselves know what the end was.
People like us simply go on.
We have our flaws, perhaps a few private virtues,
But it is by blind chance only that we escape tragedy.

And there is no plot in that; it is devoid of poetry.

Donald Justice's poem:

- Reveal line pattern by using letters.
- Number of stanzas?
- Rogue lines?
What is their effect?
- Does it follow standard pattern?
- Identify the two sets of enjambed lines.
- What/where are variations in the repeated lines?
- How does repetition reinforce meaning/tone?

GROUP PANTOUM

- 1) Choose a subject: Mushrooms; Possibilities; Trying to Make It Work
- 2) Each student come up with one line on same subject until we have 20 lines:
- 3) Pick 10 lines from the 20
- 4) Label Lines A through J
- 5) Fill in the form:

Fill in the standard pattern:

A
B
C
D

repeat B
E
repeat D
F

repeat E
G
repeat F
H

repeat G
I
repeat H
J

repeat I
repeat C
repeat J
repeat A

Where did these enormous children come from,
More ladylike than we have ever been?
Some of ours look older than we feel.
How did they appear in their long dresses

More ladylike than we have ever been?
But they moan about their aging more than we do,
In their fragile heels and long black dresses.
They say they admire our youthful spontaneity.

They moan about their aging more than we do,
A somber group--why don't they brighten up?
Though they say they admire our youthful spontaneity
They beg us to be dignified like them

As they ignore our pleas to brighten up.
Someday perhaps we'll capture their attention
Then we won't try to be dignified like them
Nor they to be so gently patronizing.

Someday perhaps we'll capture their attention.
Don't they know that we're supposed to be the stars?
Instead they are so gently patronizing.
It makes us feel like children--second-childish?

Perhaps we're too accustomed to be stars.
The famous flowers glowing in the garden,
So now we pout like children. Second-childish?
Quaint fragments of forgotten history?

Our daughters stroll together in the garden,
Chatting of news we've chosen to ignore,
Pausing to toss us morsels of their history,
Not questions to which only we know answers.

Eyes closed to news we've chosen to ignore,
We'd rather excavate old memories,
Disdaining age, ignoring pain, avoiding mirrors.
Why do they never listen to our stories?

Because they hate to excavate old memories
They don't believe our stories have an end.
They don't ask questions because they dread the answers.
They don't see that we've become their mirrors,

We offspring of our enormous children.

Kizer's "Parents Pantoum":

- Reveal line pattern by using letters .
- Number of stanzas?
- Rogue lines?
- Some lines achieve repetition by only repeating one of two words. How well does this work?

APPENDIX

PANTOUMS FOR FURTHER FUN!

Bareback Pantoum

Cecilia Woloch

One night, bareback and young, we rode through the woods
and the woods were on fire —
two borrowed horses, two local boys
whose waists we clung to, my sister and I

and the woods were on fire —
the pounding of hooves and the smell of smoke and the sharp sweat of boys
whose waists we clung to, my sister and I,
as we rode toward flame with the sky in our mouths —

the pounding of hooves and the smell of smoke and the sharp sweat of boys
and the heart saying: mine
as we rode toward flame with the sky in our mouths —
the trees turning gold, then crimson, white

and the heart saying: mine
of the wild, bright world;
the trees turning gold, then crimson, white
as they burned in the darkness, and we were girls

of the wild, bright world
of the woods near our house — we could turn, see the lights
as they burned in the darkness, and we were girls
so we rode just to ride

through the woods near our house — we could turn, see the lights
and the horses would carry us, carry us home
so we rode just to ride,
my sister and I, just to be close to that danger, desire

and the horses would carry us, carry us home
— two borrowed horses, two local boys,
my sister and I — just to be close to that danger, desire —

one night, bareback and young, we rode through the woods.

Can you identify the line with the slight variation in wording?

What do you think of the variation in stanza form at the end?

Miss Charlotte Brown, Librarian, Goes Mad

Today, I have decided
to read every poem ever written
in the short history of our civilization.
I know it is a selfish thing

to read. Every poem ever written
has its good intentions. I know,
I know, it is a selfish thing.
I want to believe that. Poetry

has its good intentions. I know
reading poems can't help much.
I want to believe that poetry
books have the answer. I'll start

reading. Poems can't help much
in the short history of our civilization.
Books have the answer. I'll start
today. I have decided.

Felix Jung

How does he make lines that are identical in wording different?

Do you like the effect that this has?

There are only four quatrains in this pantoum. How does this length work for this poem?

Pantoum

Marilyn Hacker

for Fadwa Soleiman

Said the old woman who barely spoke the language:
Freedom is a dream, and we don't know whose.
Said the insurgent who was now an exile:
When I began to write the story I started bleeding.

Freedom is a dream, and we don't know whose—
that man I last saw speaking in front of the clock tower
when I began to write the story? I started bleeding
five years after I knew I'd have no more children.

That man I last saw speaking in front of the clock tower
turned an anonymous corner and disappeared.
Five years after I knew I'd have no more children
my oldest son was called up for the army,

turned an anonymous corner and disappeared.
My nephew, my best friend, my second sister
whose oldest son was called up for the army,
are looking for work now in other countries.

Her nephew, his best friend, his younger sister,
a doctor, an actress, an engineer,
are looking for work now in other countries
stumbling, disillusioned, in a new language.

A doctor, an actress, an engineer
wrestle with the rudiments of grammar
disillusioned, stumbling in a new language,
hating their luck, and knowing they are lucky.

Wrestling with the rudiments of grammar,
the old woman, who barely speaks the language,
hated her luck. I know that I am lucky
said the insurgent who is now an exile.

How does the repetition advance the poem's themes?

Something About the Trees

Linda Pastan

I remember what my father told me:
There is an age when you are most yourself.
He was just past fifty then,
Was it something about the trees that make him speak?

There is an age when you are most yourself.
I know more than I did once.
Was it something about the trees that make him speak?
Only a single leaf had turned so far.

I know more than I did once.
I used to think he'd always be the surgeon.
Only a single leaf had turned so far,
Even his body kept its secrets.

I used to think he'd always be the surgeon,
My mother was the perfect surgeon's wife.
Even his body kept its secrets.
I thought they both would live forever.

My mother was the perfect surgeon's wife,
I can still see her face at thirty.
I thought they both would live forever.
I thought I'd always be their child.

I can still see her face at thirty.
When will I be most myself?
I thought I'd always be their child.
In my sleep it's never winter.

When will I be most myself?
I remember what my father told me.
In my sleep it's never winter.
He was just past fifty then.

This pantoum uses exact repetition of lines throughout; however, there are a pair of lines so similar in their endings as to be echoes of another pair of lines. Where are the echo lines and what are their effect in terms of the poem's meaning?

September Elegies

Randall Mann

in memory of Seth Walsh, Justin Aaberg, Billy Lucas, and Tyler Clementi

There are those who suffer in plain sight,
there are those who suffer in private.
Nothing but secondhand details:
a last shower, a request for a pen, a tall red oak.

There are those who suffer in private.
The one in Tehachapi, aged 13.
A last shower, a request for a pen, a tall red oak:
he had had enough torment, so he hanged himself.

The one in Tehachapi, aged 13;
the one in Cooks Head, aged 15:
he had had enough torment, so he hanged himself.
He was found by his mother.

The one in Cooks Head, aged 15.
The one in Greensburg, aged 15:
he was found by his mother.
"I love my horses, my club lambs. They are the world to me,"

the one in Greensburg, aged 15,
posted on his profile.
"I love my horses, my club lambs. They are the world to me."
The words turn and turn on themselves.

Posted on his profile,
"Jumping off the gw bridge sorry":
the words turn, and turn on themselves,
like the one in New Brunswick, aged 18.

Jumping off the gw bridge sorry.
There are those who suffer in plain sight
like the one in New Brunswick, aged 18.
Nothing but secondhand details.

Mann's poem:

1. How do repetitions underscore the tone of the poem's tone?
2. What effects do the short, end-stopped lines have?
3. What do you think of the choices involved regarding which lines from the first stanza are repeated where in the last stanza?

IMPLACABLE FORCE

There's no AA for stealing buses and trains.—Darius McCollum,
convicted 30 times for impersonating transit system operators

I get caught, I do my time. I am released.
It's not so hard to steal a subway train.
I memorized the routes, befriended transit workers.
My first success—age 15—the Lex express to Wall Street.

To steal a bus or train is not so hard.
Stabbed in the back in second grade, I retreated into trains.
At age 15, my first success—a Lex express to Wall Street.
I watch for bus drivers heading to the restroom.

Stabbed in the back when I was eight, I retreated into trains.
I know the drill for changing shifts, I've got uniforms and keys.
I watch for motormen taking smoke breaks.
To steal, one must mingle with routine.

I know the shift-change drill, I own uniforms and keys.
I do not speed or deviate from scheduled stops.
Successful stealing is to mingle with routine.
Passengers don't know it's me who's in control.

I never speed or deviate from scheduled stops.
To brake a racing train is to master implacable force.
It's me who's in control—the passengers don't know.
Harper's told my story, photographed my stabbing scar.

To master implacable force is to brake a racing train.
My friends were transit workers; I memorized the routes.
Harper's did an article, showed my stabbing scar.
I do my time, I am released. I get caught.

How does the form reinforce the speaker's mental condition?
Find pairs of lines that are both repeated and varied.

More Pantoums for You to Find

John Ashbery, "Hotel Lautréamont," "Pantoum" (beginning with, "Eyes Shining Without Mystery") (Both of these grow on you when you study them.)

Beverly Birch, "Pantoum That Can't Sleep" (Insomnia, like obsession, lends itself to the form.)

Dove Cochrane, "Paradise Came With a Price" (Hmm, a 24 line pantoum with one rogue line?)

Austin Dobsin, "In Town" (a very early pantoum)

Denise Duhamel, "Lawless Pantoum" (sexy)

Donald Levering, "My Only Son," "Walking Mangrove Suicide Rag" (both in forthcoming book, *Breaking Down Familiar*, from Main Street Rag press)

Paul Muldoon, "The Mountain Is Holding Out" (masterful)

Peter Schaeffer, "Juggler, Magician, Fool" (This is a cleverly disguised pantoum.)

Anne Waldman, "Baby's Pantoum" (This one stretches the limits of the form perhaps into tedium.)