

The Dos and Don'ts when using Heroic Couplets

Heroic couplets have been a useful and successful vehicle in formal poetry. They have a uniqueness to them that is pleasing in both a visual and audible sense. The heroic couplet became popular from the influence of the likes of Dryden and Pope.

The **Heroic Couplet** defined:

- Paired lines with the **same rime**.
- Both lines written in **iambic pentameter**.
- Common themes of a **lofty nature** such as heroes, gods, kings, queens, (religious) quests and the like.

The last point is almost forgotten today, and is no longer a fixed need. From this point on, where proper, I will refer to the **heroic couplet** as **couplet**.

Why use Heroic Couplets?

Couplets are one of the main forms used in lengthy poems such as narratives and epics. Their simplicity of construction allows the poet relative ease in composition. Couplets can do away with the complex stanzaic patterns of other story-telling forms.

As a Unit of Verse

Couplets are self-contained units, each being end-stopped in an appropriate manner. These units come together to form your verse in the same way that sentences do to form a novel. There is great flexibility in how the couplets combine. More than one or two couplets may be used to produce a correct grammatical sentence in verse.

Variations

Variations can occur when writing in couplets. These variations all appear to be at odds with the definition of a heroic couplet.

Introducing variations into your work needs extreme care. You must avoid them unless for poetic effect, emotion or action. If variations occur too often, the reader may think that you are not using couplets at all.

Even though poets, famous or otherwise, have used variations in their work, you need not do the same. Oscar Wilde wrote:

“Imitation is the sincerest form of flattery that mediocrity can pay to greatness.”

Imitation may at times be entertaining. But you may risk destroying, or at the least distorting your natural poetic voice. The effect becomes that of pretending to be someone or something you are not. A little goes a long way, so let the mediocre try to imitate you.

Using an iambic hexameter line for the second line of a couplet.

This is quite an obnoxious thing to do, especially in a sequence of couplets. Some poets refer to them

as **Alexandrines**, but the term itself is misleading. The way we write them in English is quite different to that of the **French** Alexandrine after which we name it.

The French Alexandrine is neither iambic, nor does it have six major stresses. Producing the Alexandrine in English results in two iambic trimeters separated by punctuation. The problem is that the line lumbers along until it has finally finished. This results in an uncomfortable end to the couplet. Often there is too much conflict with its iambic pentameter companion. If these occur, they should be at the very end of a chapter or canto so as not to disturb the reader's sense of rhythm. In such a way, the reader will learn when to expect them.

Adding an extra iambic pentameter line to form a triplet.

This variation is not as disturbing. In this variation, the reader's natural sense of rhythm and rime is not disrupted. An added third line has the same rime as the other two lines. A fence or bracket indicates the triplet in an unobtrusive manner.

Adding an extra iambic hexameter line to form a triplet.

This is by far the most obnoxious thing to do with couplets. Not only does it add an extra line with the same rime, but it lengthens the last line. The extra foot of the hexameter will always cause problems. Another problem lies in the difficulty to write a well-formed iambic hexameter line. An experienced reader may overcome their sudden appearance. Others may not, and find the line disruptive.

More about Triplets.

Triplets are a rarity. They exist to give the poet an extra line for expression or dramatic effect. They may also help to round off something of importance. They must never occur as a mere third riming line. When this is the case, you will always find that you can omit one of the lines. The purpose of this line does not add to the verse, and neither will its removal detract from the verse.

Triplets are very scarce in dialog and must never appear mid-stream in conversation. The only exception is if the main character has something relevant to say that will affect the verse. Lesser characters should never use triplets in conversation.

Your work should have no more than approximately five percent written in triplets. You do not want your work littered with triplets. The reader may start to question your ability to use couplets.

Signaling the triplet.

You must show all triplets in a suitable manner. The signaling of a triplet uses the right-curved fence at the right-hand side of the page. If necessary, you may use italics provided they do not occur elsewhere in your work. There are two reasons why:

1. It gives the reader a visual reminder that there is a three-line rime occurring. (You have not messed up a couplet.)
2. There is something of importance here.

Enjambment

We may describe enjambment as a variation to the couplet form. The enjambment of couplets has become popular in present day works. This can add a new dimension to how we read the verse. It allows for greater impact of thought and effect. Such enjambment must be whole couplets. This means that the thought, passage, or effect cannot stop at the end of the first line in a couplet.

Other considerations follow:

1. A couplet and triplet must never undergo enjambment in any order.

2. Understand that it is impossible to have two triplets with enjambment. The reason is they should not be so common to appear one after another. If this were to happen, take the last line of the first triplet and first line of the second. Use a rhyme different to either of the current ones to form a couplet, resulting in three couplets.
3. Enjambment of couplets is possible. Avoid lengthy enjambment since you could exceed the grammatical sense of the line.
4. Mid-line stops (as in periods) are an unusual result of enjambment inside the couplet. This is not recommended because it will need another couplet to complete the passage. The greater pause may be of concern to the rhythm of the line.

Line Construction

The line construction for the couplet is the same as that needed for any iambic pentameter line. There may still be a necessity to elaborate on these technicalities.

- Most lines will average ten syllables if your rhythm is in form.
- The occasional line will have nine syllables, and this will be worth your while to check. It may be headless, it may not. Never use a headless line as the first line of a couplet, there is a sense of audible symmetry that will go awry. This may happen on rare occasions and may come from necessity rather than desire.
- Some lines will have eleven syllables. These will be of the feminine variety and both lines of the couplet must show the same quality. The male variety will be less common if at all. It will be difficult to recover your rhythm after the stress on the eleventh syllable.
- Yet other lines may have twelve syllables. These will not always be hexameter or that obnoxious Alexandrine. The same may apply for an eleven-syllable line. You may have introduced one or more of the happy trio; dactyl, anapest, or amphibrach. This type of line can be a very pleasant diversion to the ear and will not disrupt the rhythm. Most times you will find it is the introduction of an anapest, also known as a loose iamb (for the reason I hope is obvious).

Other Notes of Interest

which apply to most works

Reading Your Work Out Loud

This is of prime importance!

- Listen to your work and be honest with your appraisal. Do not try to deceive yourself.
- Do not read one line at a time. Chances are that a line may sound fine itself. When read in conjunction with its companion line, comes as utter nonsense.
- Do not rush your reading, it may take reading after reading to perfect a line and then one more. Never be impatient. This is the only way you will find those errors in your rhythm, and then you will be aware of the areas to rework. Impatience will make your work inferior, and there is never any prize for hurried work.

Sections Breaks, Chapters, Cantos, and the Like

There comes a point in any lengthier work, where it will become necessary to create a break or pause. You do not want to drive the reader to utter boredom with hundreds of lines one after another.

A simple break does not mean that there is a change of subject material, although it is possible. It could be a pause in dialog to make who is speaking more obvious or a minor change in position of the characters. Here, there is no major change in the circumstance of the verse.

Chapters and cantos go together because they can stand for the same thing. Some poems will only have cantos and appear like chapters in a novel. Yet other poems have cantos and chapters within. The arrangement is up to you. You need to consider the degree of complexity your work requires.

Chapters and especially cantos must never start with that popular filler-word *and*. There is always the implication that something has come before, and that the reader should be aware of it. Think how ridiculous it would be to start a sonnet with *and*. Now you get the point. In other ways too, *and* is a sorry word to start with.

In formal poetry, the tendency is to place an emphasis on the word *and* at the start of a line. Enjambment may determine otherwise. This will at once create a trochee or the less common dactyl beginning. This could ruin the rhythm of the line from its outset. It appears that *and* could be more powerful and disruptive than we imagined.

Scanning and Creating Formulas

- Do not concern yourself with scansion of a line. To do so is a waste of time. There may be an interest later to decide what is creating a particular creative effect in the line. In some cases, why it skips along with such sweet abound. Then too, why it may sound poor. If the line does not disturb the iambic pentameter rhythm, there is nothing to worry about. Let it be and continue dancing.
- Do not try to invent formulas or construct lines according to a pattern you have invented. Who thinks I need a trochee, iamb, iamb ... oh why not, I need an anapest too. Total nonsense! Do you think the masters composed their works like this? There is no reward for this otherwise futile exercise. Write to rhythm organized by meter.

Prattle and Punctuation

- Do not prattle with lengthy descriptions of people and irrelevant objects. Each line and every word must have a purpose. You have no reason to bore or comatose your reader.
- Do not use excessive punctuation. Too much punctuation is as bad as too little. The first has the reader stopping and starting, the second has the reader gasping for breath.
- Punctuation in poetry is not the same as punctuation in prose. To a point, it is the skill of the reader needed in interpreting your lines. So, if I see a comma I pause, an em-dash, a more significant pause, and the period even more. If you start sprinkling punctuation everywhere, the reader will not have a clue what you want. Not only this, but they will not be able to read and make sense of it. You need to control the flow, but let the rhythm be the major player.

Elision

Elision is one of those things that formal poets like to use. Is it the fear of too many syllables? No, but it can be useful to keep meter and thus rhythm. As purposeful as it may be, you should not over-elide because it will become distracting. *'Ey wha's wiv all th' apostrophes?*

Sometimes you will need to decide whether you should or should not elide certain words. Depending on your text, elided words may look very out of place. They may be undesirable if visual appeal is important. Now should we ever sacrifice metrics over sound? In certain situations, yes.

Not all syllables take the same amount of time to speak. This is due to the length of vowels sounds or regional pronunciation. e.g., Consider the word *memories*. How many times do poets use the word in their compositions? Anyhow *memories* will serve its purpose for demonstration.

Dividing *memories* into its three syllables we have *mem-o-ries*. Now it is unlikely that anyone would pronounce it as such. The point is that the middle syllable is short sounding compared to the first and last. You may have considered the elision *mem'ries*, but there no reason, and to a point the elision has no visual appeal to it.

So, for the bean-counter we have overruled the metrics in favor of the sound. They would feel more at home with the elided form. There would be no problem with the ensuing rhythm by choosing not to elide.

Common Iamb Substitutions

The most accepted iamb substitutions also apply to couplets.

1. **Trochee for Iamb:** Sometimes called reversal, occurs at the start of a line but may appear in the middle.
2. **Anapest for Iamb:** Most times seen toward the end or at the end of a line.
3. **Amphibrach for Iamb:** Found in the middle of a line.
4. **Dactyl for Iamb:** Not common, but proper at the beginning of a line.

(If you are a bean-counter, you would discard the last three to please your ignorance of rhythm.)

Line Numbering

Any work of great length needs to be line numbered. It is preferable to be in fives for critical purposes or for the location of notable lines. The numbers themselves are smaller than the text, and appear on the left. Why? The fence will appear on the right to signal a triplet. If the fence is not used, the numbers may appear on the right.

Rime: Full or Slant?

- You should always strive for full rime because this is what the reader's ear will be expecting.
- You must avoid predictable rimes as this will divert the reader's attention to other things. This will create a game of sorts with your verse.
- If not full rime, then as near as possible with your slant rime.
- Avoid sight rimes. These are disturbing because they will conflict with the reader expecting a rime.
- The rime should not be jarring to the ear unless it is for dramatic effect.

Line Endings

Couplets will end with the stress or implied stress on the last syllable. The only variation to this is that of the feminine ending which gives a pleasant change. As a rule of thumb, you should not finish a line with a trochee. This type of ending creates metrical confusion for the reader. If this happens, scan both lines of the couplet. Check that you have five metrical feet and not a hypermetric syllable or a tetrameter line.

Finally

It may appear that these are rules of sorts. This is not the case. My discussion consists of recommendations. There are times when what you have written, or how you have written comes from necessity.

These suggestions may help you when writing in heroic couplets. Trying to adhere to a specific guideline may result in an unfavorable impact on your verse. If so, you should not follow it.

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