

An Introduction to the American Cinquain

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AMAZE: The Cinquain Journal is dedicated to developing, promoting, and publishing cinquains in traditional forms and in innovative forms such as mirror cinquains, crown cinquains, and cinquain cycles and sequences. The "AMAZE Forum for Cinquain Poets" is for poets to discuss these issues and technical problems, places to publish, etc., etc. This article is largely based on postings to that Forum during the last six months. I have indicated below wherever any passage is quoted or lifted from a posting by anyone other than myself. The unattributed poems are my own. - Denis Garrison

I. Basic Prosody

The American Cinquain form itself is a little more complex than some might believe. Also, the cinquain form has been adapted for use in teaching grammar to children, resulting in some forms ("didactic cinquains") which, while they may be fun to write, are not cinquains in the sense of the original form intended to amount to something like "English Haiku." It is not our intention to discuss didactic cinquains.

The classic American Cinquain form developed in two stages. The first, fundamental form is a stanza of five lines of accentual verse, in which the lines comprise, in order, 1, 2, 3, 4, and 1 stresses. Very shortly, Adelaide Crapsey decided to make the criterion a stanza of five lines of accentual-syllabic verse, in which the lines comprise, in order, 1, 2, 3, 4, and 1 stresses and 2, 4, 6, 8, and 2 syllables. Iambic feet were meant to be the standard for the cinquain, which made the dual criteria match perfectly. Some resource materials define classic cinquains as solely iambic, but that is not necessarily so. Below, "On Layers" is an example of a purely iambic accentual-syllabic cinquain which meets the dual criteria:

Behind
her care-worn face—
warm eyes of ardent youth.
A flash of impish smile belies
her age.

It may seem that, if one stays to the syllable-count criterion, the stress pattern will follow. Not so. Below are draft lines 1 & 2 that do not meet the stress pattern but do meet the syllable-count criterion:

Hark! Hark!
A mockingbird.

2 & 4 syllables, yes; but respectively, 2 and 1 stresses, where the criterion is 1 and 2. Both words

in line 1 are stressed and only "mock" in line 2 is stressed. These two lines do not meet the basic criteria for a first stage cinquain. Below is an example of a cinquain, "In Every Good Thing...", that meets the first stage fundamental criterion, 1, 2, 3, 4, 1 stresses, but not the syllabic secondary criterion. The syllable count is 2, 4, 7, 11, 2, so two lines are long on syllables while correct on stresses. It starts and ends with trochees, not iambs.

In your
elation, when
you're full of flowers and song,
you must not fail to watch for the witch at the
wedding.

So, the bottom line, within the context of a strict construction, is that the first stage fundamental requirement is the stress count of 1, 2, 3, 4, 1, which may be met with more or fewer syllables than 22. The second stage criterion, which is more flexible, is the syllable count of 2, 4, 6, 8, 2. Classic first stage cinquains need to meet the first criterion and are best realized when they also meet the second criterion.

While there are a number of patterns discernible in cinquains of the old school, as well as newer poems, besides the line-counts of stresses and syllables, the only original rule was that the poem should build through the 4th line and "fall back" on the 5th line. The "fall back" is similar in meaning to the "turn" between the last part of a sonnet and what comes before, and similar turns in other forms. Think of the kireji (cutting word) in haiku - not the same thing, but conceptually related. It remains to be seen if modern cinquains must have such a turn, but anyone seeking to emulate the original first stage form should surely attempt to include such a feature.

Having looked at the basic prosody of the cinquain from a strict constructionist viewpoint, let us review the main criteria and try to discern what is essential and what is not.

1. Accentual versification (1,2,3,4,1 stresses; the first stage criterion).
2. Syllabic versification (2,4,6,8,2 syllables; the second stage criterion).
3. Metrics: the iambic foot as normative.
4. Turn, twist, reversal, punch line, etc., that occurs at or immediately before the 5th line; the cinquain very rough equivalent of "kireji" in haiku.

The discussion of prosody so far has been in the nature of "strict constructionism," that is, the rules were there to be followed. However, predictably, the rules cannot be followed slavishly without unduly cramping the poetic possibilities of the form. Rules can be chains.

With respect to the first 3 criteria listed above, it is true that a cinquain can be written in the iambic, accentual-syllabic form that was the final form used by Crapsey. In fact, a purely iambic cinquain with the right number of syllables necessarily meets all 3 of these criteria. But what do we learn by examining cinquains? By far, the most common variation is the use of trochaic feet, common to emphatic utterances in English. Anapests and dactyls round out the count, with a few

spondees. In non-iambic cinquains, forcing revision to be purely iambic would ruin the natural diction of the poems. The same is true of the accentual (stress) criterion; one finds lines with long or short stress counts, but, when they are natural, forcing them into a single mold would distort them. Virtually all poems I have examined use the syllabic criterion of 2,4,6,8,2 syllables, which is clearly the modal criterion of cinquain poets.

Deborah P. Kolodji (Magazine Editor of *AMAZE*) wrote: "Personally, I'd say the 'stress' criteria is more flexible than the syllable criteria. Adelaide may have invented the form but cinquains have come to be known as a syllable form with 2,4,6,8,2, usually iambic in meter." - D. P. Kolodji

I agree completely. Crapsey, herself, moved to the syllabic criterion as primary. I think that the definition of an American Cinquain as a five-line stanza with 2,4,6,8,2 syllables per line, respectively, in any meter, is determinative for the form. While the accentual and iambic criteria are perhaps useful guides, compliance with them is not essential; whereas, compliance with the syllabic criterion apparently is essential in the true sense of the word.

With respect to the fourth criterion listed above, "turns" that occur at or immediately before the 5th line, while this was an important criterion to Crapsey, it appears to be less important to a significant coterie of poets. However, some poets do find this technique very useful and some consider it to be an essential feature of the cinquain. Given the extraordinary circumstances in Crapsey's invention of the form, specifically, her imminent demise and her concentration on the idea of a life suddenly cut short, we may not need to feel overly constrained by this criterion, which may have undergone further development or even omission had Crapsey not died so untimely. Conclusion: The turn is a useful technique, characteristic of the American Cinquain, but not an essential component of the form.

Where does that leave us? What is the basic prosody of the cinquain? I think that simple dictionary definitions are most useful: A five-line stanza; a five-line verse form, analogous to the Japanese verse forms haiku and tanka, it has two syllables in its first and last lines and four, six, and eight in the intervening three lines and is generally iambic in meter. As for other techniques, they should be just that: available techniques by which a poet can add meaning, depth, resonance, etc., to a stanza which meets the 5-line, syllabic-count criterion. Even meter can vary without disqualifying a stanza as a cinquain.

The original Crapsey cinquains had initial capitalization for every line. That is just fine, but not necessary, I believe. Capping every line is somewhat antiquated in my personal estimation. I do think a cinquain's first word should be capitalized. The original Crapsey cinquains also are mainly comprised of short sentences; in which case, initial capitalization for the beginning of the sentence and terminal punctuation should be normative. Again, not a solid rule, just a guideline. My personal take on it is that, since natural diction is wanted, normative capitalization and punctuation should also be wanted, as supporting the naturalness of the language. Leaving a single word orphaned on the last line works better in haiku than in cinquains. Telegraphic language likewise is not so effective in cinquains.

The cinquain poet needs to understand various criteria and techniques, but must not be enslaved by them. Every poem is an opportunity to rewrite poetic rules.

II. Dunadh & Resonant Connections

Dunadh is the repetition of a syllable, word, or line at the beginning and end of a stanza and/or poem, an ancient Irish bardic device also called the circle-back. The dunadh was originally a feature of the Irish syllabic stanza form "ae freislighe" (pronounced ay-freshly) which was a quatrain with 7-syllable lines. A dunadh could be a syllable, word, or line repeated. The pure dunadh (actual repetition) is not used by Adelaide Crapsey in any of her cinquains, so, it is not a necessary feature of the original design. But use of the dunadh is certainly an option for cinquains.

The classic example of dunadh is this anonymous work, "Evil," which when translated from its Gaelic into modern English works perfectly as a cinquain and has "evil" in both lines 1 & 5.

Evil
It is to shun
The King of Righteousness
And to make a compact with the
Devil.

I think this device adds resonance to cinquains (not that it should be made a rule to use it). Below is "When I Saw," an example of my own.

"Keep her"
My heart tells me.
With her married sisters,
So like them, yet she's all her own.
Keeper!

In this case, lines 1 & 5 are homophones, not the same word. In "Friendly Fire," I actually repeat a phrase, "Her eyes" -- that is true dunadh. In my mirror cinquain (viz., 2-4-6-8-2 2-8-6-4-2) "Unbidden," lines 1, 5, 6, 10 taken by themselves read: "Woman, ... Don't go! ... I'm glad ... you came." -- that is a resonant connection, but not dunadh. In such a short form as the cinquain, such devices may be used to deepen the resonance of (or perhaps introduce ambiguity into) the poem.

The resonant connection between the first and last lines, as described above, which is not actually dunadh, is used by Adelaide Crapsey; I would argue she used it quite a lot. Here is an obvious example in which "How frail ... The moon" plaintively summarizes Crapsey's "NIAGARA Seen on a Night in November."

How frail
 Above the bulk
 Of crashing water hangs,
 Autumnal, evanescent, wan,
 The moon.

Dunadh is a fine technique if well done. Likewise, a skillfully wrought resonant connection between lines 1 & 5 can also enhance and enrich a cinquain.

III. Titles

Poets coming from the western tradition almost always use titles for all their poems. Haikuists and other poets specializing in eastern forms are unused to titling their poems. In Adelaide Crapsey's conception of the cinquain, the title is an integral part of the poem, the sixth line, so to speak. All her cinquains are titled, and the titles are never just the first line of the stanza; they convey significant information, necessary to fully understand the poem. In my opinion, the essential nature of Crapsey's titles is "context-setting." They fulfill an expository role without limits on their length. A classic cinquain ought to be carefully titled, so as to give greater depth and resonance to the poem. While the ultimate decision on titling is the poet's, I believe titling cinquains is desirable for the following three reasons.

1. Since Crapsey invented the cinquain form that is the subject of discussion, her own usage is useful guidance. She titled all of her cinquains.
2. Crapsey's titles are integral to the poems. They carry a sixth of the meaning of the poem. It is true of all her cinquains, but two which exemplify the necessity of the title (and the concomitant loss of meaning which would occur if the poems were presented without titles) are "NIAGARA Seen on a Night in November", shown above, and "SUSANNA AND THE ELDERS" shown below.

"Why do
 You thus devise
 Evil against her?" "For that
 She is beautiful, delicate;
 Therefore."

3. Cinquains may hold a place in Western poetry which is similar to haiku, but cinquains are not just a Western form of haiku. Crapsey did in fact translate a number of haiku and learned a great deal from them. On the other hand, she was actively involved with the poetic movement which became "Imagism" and is respected as an important Imagist poet. She invented cinquains on the basis of her profound studies in English metrics [Crapsey, Adelaide. *A Study of English Metrics*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1918.]. Her very conscientious design included titles with substantive additions to the content of the poem (not one of her titles repeats the first line).

I conclude that titling cinquains is the normative practice for this form.

Deborah P. Kolodji, whose cinquains are widely published, wrote, in this respect, "I agree with your position on titles for cinquains but only up to the point to which a title adds additional meaning. I have written a few cinquains that simply baffled me when I tried to come up with a decent title and ultimately decided that they stood on their own without a title. I have two untitled cinquains in the next issue of *'World Haiku Review'*..."

"In general, I believe that there is little point in titling a cinquain that has a first line of 'winter', 'Winter'.

"Some poets are discovering cinquains coming from a background of haiku, and I believe that some of the cinquains that are most 'haiku-like' probably do best to remain untitled.

"That said, I do believe that when a cinquain is titled carefully, a title can add a totally new dimension to the poem. A good example of this is, of course, Adelaide Crapsey's 'NIAGARA Seen on a Night in November' ...

"Probably 90% of my own cinquains have titles, but ever so often I have one that just seems complete as it is without one!" - D. P. Kolodji

IV. Polystanzaic Cinquains

Cinquains, in their earliest form, are single stanza poems of five lines. As the cinquain form develops, we need to consider polystanzaic cinquain forms in which each stanza is a cinquain. Because each stanza is, itself, a cinquain, it may be useful to name the polystanzaic forms which are built on cinquains.

There is one type of polystanzaic form in which there is a stanza that is not a cinquain, that is, the mirror cinquain. In English poetry, mirroring is a standard technique, applied to many different poetic forms. In mirror cinquains, the line-count is reversed in the second, or mirror, stanza (there are two stanzas in a mirror, or an even number - 4, 6, 8, etc., since each cinquain needs its mirror stanza). So, using the usual syllable counting convention, a mirror cinquain = 2,4,6,8,2 blank line 2,8,6,4,2 syllables. This pattern repeats for longer mirror sequences. Theoretically, one might create a macro-mirror poem in which, for example, three cinquains are followed by three mirrored stanzas, but the mirrors, ideally, would be in order, e.g., cinquains 1, 2, 3 are mirrored by stanzas 4 (mirroring 3), 5 (mirroring 2), 6 (mirroring 1). In mirroring, symmetry is the fundamental standard. The special effects of the rhopalic form (wedge verse) needs to be taken into account as the mirror stanza will flow the opposite direction (each line is shorter than its predecessor, except line 2); this has implications for the content of the whole poem. I have written some 2 stanza mirror cinquains and seen some fine examples of 2 stanza mirror cinquains by other poets, and one macro-mirror cinquain.

Poems may be constructed simply of any number of cinquains serving as stanzas; this is a "cinquain sequence." When done collaboratively, by two or more poets, such a "linked sequence" forms a single polystanzaic poem which may be titled. When a collaborative linked sequence contains individually-titled cinquains, this is better referred to as "linked cinquains."

Polystanzaic cinquains can be tied together with a refrain, whether a phrase or a line. It is problematical using *dunadh* (repetition in the first and last lines) in conjunction with the refrain technique, as it would likely be overpowering. Repetition of just one line of each stanza or thematically linked phrases or lines (not actual repetition) may be more successfully used as refrains.

A crown cinquain is a 5-stanza poem in which the stanzas are woven together / connected somehow with a refrain or any other repetition technique (technical or thematic) which clearly makes the stanzas parts of a whole. In other words, the full meaning of each cinquain can be discovered only in the context of the entire poem (the crown cinquain). Crown cinquains are 25 lines in length (5x5); a double crown has 10 stanzas (50 lines); and a triple crown has 15 stanzas (75 lines), etc.. These crown cinquains are currently being written by several poets. I have written one triple crown cinquain.

V. New Directions for Cinquain Innovation

About innovative directions for development of the cinquain form: I am grinding two axes at the same time. On the one hand (and most of the time), I am trying to clarify what the original cinquain form is and can be, largely in contrast to eastern forms to which it is related (haiku/tanka, particularly), and in contrast to "didactic cinquains" which are very different from both original cinquains and haiku/tanka.

The other axe I grind is the development of the cinquain form beyond its original boundaries to a new place in modern poetry. I have written some mirror cinquains and longer cinquain sequences; as have some other poets. But surely that is not the extent of possibilities. While original cinquains are clearly in the school of Imagism, need all cinquains now be such? I don't think so. I am developing a real appreciation of light verse in the cinquain form. And the question has been posed as to whether cinquains might not be expository poems (Laurene Post coined the word "thinkuain"). Well, it is really far too early to come to judgment on that question. It is just that we are not used to such cinquains. Look at sonnets: they have developed from their original limits on subject matter to the widest variety. Why could not cinquains do the same?

Cinquain poet Stephen Clay Dearborn wrote: "I agree that poets must continue to push the boundaries of the cinquain. Otherwise, the form will become stiff, stale, the province of the stodgy and unimaginative. That's the main reason I wrote 'Adelaide by Turns.' Certainly, it's a note of affection to A.C. and the cinquain, as well as an exercise in curiosity, but it's also reflective of my belief that the form is strong enough to withstand a little tossing and turning

from time to time—and that such a 'troubling of the waters' is actually necessary to prevent stagnation.

"That's why I stress (pardon the pun) the syllabic criterion over the stress criterion in my own writing, and in how I read others' work. Some of the best cinquains I've read fail the stress test—they're gems of written jazz, offbeat at times but perfectly capturing the essence of the poet's vision.

"And THAT, I think, is the most important thing to remember. We're not just writing cinquains, or haiku, or sonnets—we're writing poetry. If there's no passion in it, no desire to see how far we can push ourselves and our writing, we might as well hang it up and go to work for Hallmark.

"That's why it's important to debate such things as syllables vs. stresses, or what is appropriate subject matter for the form. Debate is critical to keeping the form viable, and keeping its place in poetry—as poetry.

"I would say this to poets who write cinquains: Keep the foundation, whether 2-4-6-8-2 or 1-2-3-4-1. But build on that whatever you think the foundation will bear—and if it falls down, recalculate and build again." - S. C. Dearborn

Of course, it is problematical to suggest that any poem that meets the stress/syllable/line count criteria of the original cinquain is a cinquain. Crapsey designed the cinquain originally as accentual verse and later moved to accentual-syllabic verse. In my personal opinion, a cinquain must have the intrinsic musicality of the original accentual verse pattern laid down by Crapsey; this is why I do not personally consider word-counts, themed-lines, and other forms of "didactic cinquains" to be genuine cinquains. Crapsey's only other rule for the form that I believe compels consideration in modern cinquains is that the poem should build to the 4th line and "fall back" on the 5th - much like the kireji in haiku. All of this is by way of proposing that the content of cinquains may, I believe, cover the whole spectrum, not just exercises in objective correlative imagism, and may well include expository verse.

This article is not intended to be authoritative with respect to the American Cinquain form. Rather, it is meant to suggest a baseline for further discussion of the form, to stimulate its future development.

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