

The Prosody of Cinquains

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In my article, “An Introduction to the American Cinquain” (AMAZE : The Cinquain Journal, Vol. 1, No. 1, Spring & Summer 2002.), I had the temerity to include a section on “Basic Prosody.” At that time, the cinquain form was in a particularly active stage of development by contemporary poets and its prosody was, at best, arguable. Now, from the better perspective of several additional years of experience writing, reading, judging, and commenting upon thousands of cinquains, I will again dare to attempt a definition of their prosody. So that this article may be more useful to entry level cinquain poets, some simple discussion of prosody per se precedes the prosodic considerations of cinquains.

I. General Prosodic Considerations

Prosody is the patterns of spoken lexical stresses, rhythms, and intonations in a particular language and, therefore, is the basis of any system of versification. The study of poetry metrics and the art of versification is “prosodics.” Prosodic features include syllables, words, phrases, and clauses, all of which manifest as syllable length, tone, and stress.

Over the passage of centuries and the rise of English-speaking nations around the globe, classical English prosody and its terms have changed notably. I will not delve into that general development; rather, I want merely to establish sufficient agreement on terms to facilitate the productive discussion of cinquain prosody. Accordingly, although there are competing definitions and understandings, the following indicates the manner in which I use certain terms.

Cinquain — The five-line poetic form of metrical verse created by Adelaide Crapsey, which is generically a “quintain” but is popularly known as “cinquain,” “American Cinquain,” and “Crapseian cinquain.”

Line — The meaning is self-evident. We will use this term rather than “verse,” which is also used for entire poems and for poetry in general. Cinquain poets commonly make shorthand reference to “L1, L2, L3, L4 & L5,” the respective lines of a cinquain; the “short lines” is a common reference to L1 & L5.

Meter (metrical, metrics) — The linguistic sound patterns of verse. The cinquain is a set form of metrical verse rather than five lines of “free verse.” Whether accentual, accentual-syllabic, or purely syllabic, cinquains have a metrical structure. Adelaide Crapsey was an expert in English metrics and her verse form crystallizes her metrical mastery into a transformative template upon which fine poetry may be structured. To ignore metrics when writing cinquains is to discard a great part of the available technique.

Scansion — Analysis of poetic metrical and rhythmic patterns. Scansion is indicated in writing by various competing systems of notation. I use the “ictus and x” or “slash and x” notation in

which an iamb is represented as “x/”. For example, the word “attempt” is naturally iambic, so an x is placed over the unstressed syllable and an ictus over the stressed syllable:

x /
at- tempt

Metrical scansion is infamously individual and necessarily so. The tremendous variation in pronunciation among regional dialects of a particular English speaking nation militates in favor of variable readings, not to mention the variations amongst national English languages, i.e., British, Australian, Kiwi, Indian, American, Canadian, South African, etc. That being said, scansion is not pointless. A poet writes to create a certain effect and readers read in their own dialect. (A light-source has its own form regardless of the many different prisms through which it may be viewed.) With scansion, we have a tool, not a goal, for creating poetry that is beautiful to the ear, audibly and/or mentally.

Quick Reference to the Most Common Metrical Feet: The four most common metrical feet in English are the iamb, trochee, anapest, and dactyl. Pyrrhic and spondaic feet also occur frequently.

[x=unstressed /=stressed. A stress is a beat is an accent.]

Disyllables:

x/ — Iamb, iambic (the gold standard of English poetry).

/x — Trochee, trochaic.

xx — Pyrrhus, pyrrhic.

// — Spondee, spondaic.

Trisyllables:

xx/ — Anapest, anapestic.

/xx — Dactyl, dactylic.

A Note on Iambic Verse: An iamb, for purposes of accentual-syllabic verse in English, is a metrical foot comprising one unstressed syllable followed by one stressed syllable. An iambic foot is sometimes described as a “da DUM” foot. Some poets and scholars consider English to be intrinsically iambic and consider any other metrical foot as a variation on the underlying iambic rhythm. In any case, it is not too much to claim that iambic verse is the most common mode for accentual-syllabic verse in English. That being said, it is important to note that good iambic verse usually is not absolutely regular. Perfectly regular iambic verse can give a monotonous sound called “dogtrot.” A cinquain in such “dogtrot” would scan as follows:

x/
x/x/
x/x/x/
x/x/x/x/
x/

FATE DEFIED

/ x

As it

x / x x / x

Were tissue of silver

x / x / x /

I'll wear, O fate, thy grey,

x / / xx / x x /

And go mistily radiant, clad

x x /

Like the moon.

2-6-6-9-3 syllables.

NOW BARABBAS WAS A ROBBER

x /

No guile?

/ x x / x

Nay, but so strangely

x / x / x / x

He moves among us...Not this

/ x x / x x / x /

Man but Barabbas! Release to us

x / x

Barabbas!

2-5-7-9-3 syllables.

TRAPPED

/ x

Well and

x / x /

If day on day

/ x x / x /

Follows, and weary year

x / x / x / x /

On year...and ever days and years...

/

Well?

2-4-6-8-1 syllables.

THE GUARDED WOUND

/ x

If it

x / x /

Were lighter touch

x / x x / x / x

Than petal of flower resting

x / x / x / x x /

On grass, oh still too heavy it were,

x / x

Too heavy!

2-4-8-9-3 syllables.

THE SOURCE

/ x

Thou hast

x / x /

Drawn laughter from

x / x / x /

A well of secret tears

x / x / x x // x

And thence so elvish it rings,—mocking

x /

And sweet:

2-4-6-9-2 syllables. Note that this is clearly modulated iambic verse.

SNOW

x /

Look up...

x / x x /

From bleakening hills

x / x / x /

Blows down the light, first breath

x / x / x / x /

Of wintry wind...look up, and scent

x /

The snow!

2-5-6-8-2 syllables. Note that this is clearly modulated iambic verse.

Fate Defied; Now Barabbas was a Robber; Trapped; The Guarded Wound; The Source; Snow —
Adelaide Crapsey

2. ACCENTUAL-SYLLABIC — All three of these cinquains by Adelaide Crapsey are perfectly iambic, yielding 1-2-3-4-1 stresses and 2-4-6-8-2 syllables, every metrical foot being iambic. Note how, in the hands of a master, pure iambic lines do not read as “dogtrot.”

TRIAD

These be
Three silent things:
The falling snow...the hour
Before the dawn...the mouth of one
Just dead.

NIAGARA

Seen on a Night in November

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

AMAZE

I know
Not these my hands
And yet I think there was
A woman like me once had hands
Like these.

Triad; Niagra Seen on a Night in November; Amaze — Adelaide Crapsey

Below are two cinquains of mine which demonstrate modulated iambic meter within a standard syllable count of 2-4-6-8-2.

Untimely

She was
not shocked by death.
Turns out, she knew for months.
Could we have known, when lilacs were
in bloom?

Friendly Fire

Her eyes
tell me to stop,
but what fool takes a cue?
Too late, I see the anguish in
her eyes.

Untimely and Friendly Fire by Denis M. Garrison, were published in *Ku Nouveau* - Summer 2001; later in *AMAZE: The Cinquain Journal* - Spring & Summer 2002; and again in *The Brink at Logan Pond*. (Lulu Press. 2005.)

3. POST-CRAPSEIAN MODERN SYLLABIC — There are, of course, no examples of this type in Crapsey's cinquains. The standard here is simple: 2-4-6-8-2 syllables without respect to meter. This is the standard subscribed to by, perhaps, a majority of contemporary cinquain poets. It is problematical to furnish high quality example cinquains of this type, for two reasons. First, in high quality contemporary cinquains there is usually to be found a modulated iambic meter, even if the poet did not conscientiously write to an iambic meter. This is because English itself is overwhelmingly iambic and any English-speaker with a good ear tends to write in iambic verse with occasional trochaic, anapestic, and dactylic variations that modulate the iambic melody. Second, that being said, it would be impolitic, at best, to cite other poets' cinquains as examples of this type.

Put bluntly, I do not believe that there are many good cinquains that are genuinely unmetrical. Even though many poets claim only to follow the syllabic criterion, the best of them actually write accentual-syllabic verse. I propose that genuinely unmetrical syllabic cinquains are crippled cinquains, excluding the genius of the form itself which capitalizes upon the iambic baseline of English to facilitate a delicate and intense poetic, a lyrical poem of remarkable brevity. Master of metrics that she was, Crapsey "captured lightning in a bottle" with her simple but meticulously designed set form. She succeeded where many have failed—in distilling the

element of brevity from the Japanese waka/tanka/haiku traditions into a form perfect for English.

III. Cinquain As Tanka

While a body of work is coming into existence this century that is distinguishably cinquain and remarkably fine, it is also true that modern English tanka poets are successfully writing tanka in the cinquain set form, omitting titles. Ironically, modern English tanka are also more successful when approaching free verse style unmetricality than are cinquains, which are expressly formal poems in English.

It is a matter of current interest, and speculation, the direction in which cinquain and tanka might converge, synergistically, into a complex of English short poetry forms and techniques that can inseminate and reinvigorate that field.

Tanka poets diverge amongst themselves on the question of formality. Some write tanka to the syllabic set form of 5-7-5-7-7 (31 syllables); others to a looser formula of short-long-short-long-long; and still others (perhaps the majority) to even looser formulae, such as “five phrases on five lines” and “five lines of free verse.” Among tanka formalists, interest appears to be increasing in the cinquain and cinqku set forms as vessels for tanka. Additionally, many tanka poets vary their practice and are neither formalists nor free verse tankaists, but choose the form (or lack thereof) for each poem. Those advantages which formalism can offer, for tanka, can be found, I suggest, in cinquain and cinqku forms as well as in 5-7-5-7-7.

Cinquain poets have a broader agreement on form, most of them adhering, at a minimum, to the syllabic formula of 2-4-6-8-2 and some to the nearly identical accentual formula 1-2-3-4-1. Differences among them include titling (cinquains normally have an integrally essential title, virtually, a sixth line; some poets prefer not to title their cinquains) and diction. Cinquains are written in both the modern English idiom and in various “poetic styles” including, e.g., archaic vocabulary and syntax. Some use normative grammar and others use the telegraphic diction common to haiku in English as popularly practiced. Cinquain poets may find it useful to study modern English tanka for its widespread and highly successful use of a modern, everyday idiom. Likewise, tanka poets may find it useful to study the concept of “resonant connections” as practiced in cinquain composition, especially with respect to the short lines. Both cinquain and tanka are developing rapidly and productively in this new century; I suggest they may both benefit from cross-fertilization in the person of poets who can handle both with artful expertise.

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