The Limerick

Almost everybody can identify a limerick when one is recited. It does, however, have a meter and rhyme that can be articulated: five lines of anapestic meter, with a rhyme scheme of aabba. Lines 1, 2, and 5 are usually trimeter, while lines 3 and 4 are usually dimeter. Limericks are almost always humorous in tone.

Try scanning the following limerick by Edward Lear, the man who made the limerick famous:

There was an old man with a beard
Who said, “It is just as I feared!—
Two owls and a hen,
Four larks and a wren
Have all built their nests in my beard.”

Exercise XXII:

1. Read the following limerick and scan it:

A diner while dining at Crewe,
Found a rather large mouse in his stew,
Said the waiter, “Don’t shout
And wave it about,
Or the rest will be wanting one too.”
Writing Activity:

2. Try writing your own limerick. You may use the following template if you choose:

There was an old man (woman) from _______________________________

Who wanted to ________________________________

He (she) ________________________________

But others ________________________________

So he (she) ________________________________.
Parody

When poems become very well-known, they are ripe for parodying. A parody is humorous mimicry. Parody is not, itself, a poetic form; it is simply the copying of a form.

For example, Italian sonnets were in vogue for quite some time. During that period, well-bred young men of promise were expected to try their hand at writing sonnets for their beloveds. Consequently, Italian sonnets abounded and people grew tired of them. William Shakespeare, in particular, found certain conventions in the Italian sonnet tiresome. These conventions, such as overblown descriptions of women, came to be known as Petrarchan conceits (after the Italian poet, Petrarch, who specialized in love sonnets). Shakespeare wrote a parody of this type of poetry.

Sonnet CXXX

My mistress’ eyes are nothing like the sun;
Coral is far more red than her lips’ red.
If snow be white, why then her breasts are dun;
If hairs be wires, black wires grow on her head.
I have seen roses damask’d, red and white,
But no such roses see I in her cheeks;
And in some perfumes is there more delight
Than in the breath that from my mistress reeks.
I love to hear her speak,—yet well I know
That music hath a far more pleasing sound;
I grant I never saw a goddess go,—
My mistress when she walks, treads on the ground;
    And yet, by heaven, I think my love as rare
    As any she belied with false compare.

Even without reading a Petrarchan sonnet beforehand, you can clearly see that it would have described a woman’s eyes as sun-like, breasts as white as snow, damask cheeks, perfumed breath, goddess-like gait. Shakespeare, tired of such trite comparisons, wrote this sonnet to poke gentle fun.
Exercise XXIV:
Read “The Purple Cow” and “Cinq Ans Après,” by Gelett Burgess (GSP, 39). While “The Purple Cow” is a far cry from a great poetic work, it nevertheless worked its way into the cultural lexicon until almost everyone could quote it. Clearly, even the poet grew weary of hearing it because he penned a parody of his own work.

1. What does “Cinq Ans Après” mean? (Hint: the title is French.)

2. Identify the similarities between the two poems that mark the second as a parody.

3. Aside from the similarities, what else makes it clear that one poem is a parody of the other?

Writing Activity:
4. Try your hand at writing a parody. Any of the poems we have studied so far are famous enough to warrant a parody. If you find that you are stuck, read “Trees,” by Joyce Kilmer (GSP, 49). This poem is considered by many to be extremely trite in its use of devices, making it ripe for parody. Alternately, you can reread “This is Just to Say,” by William Carlos Williams (GAP, 61) and parody it. Think of other ridiculous things you could have done to someone and for which you could offer an apology (eating all the groceries in the pantry or all the vegetables in the garden, wrecking a car, burning down a building). Be sure that your readers can identify the original poem.
Free Verse

Beginning in the early 1900s, poets began to experiment with new and fresh ways of writing poetry. They particularly wanted to be able to express themselves in natural phrasing, using common words and speech patterns. They developed free verse, or open form verse. Instead of using rhyme and meter, these poets became very interested in vivid images, variable line lengths, and common subjects. Not all readers find open form verse interesting, nor do all poets. Robert Frost once said, “Writing poetry without rhyme or meter is like playing tennis without a net.”

There are many famous and culturally important works written in free verse. Some of the poets who used this form are: T. S. Eliot, Walt Whitman, William Carlos Williams, Theodore Roethke, Gwendolyn Brooks.

Exercise XXV:

1. Read “The Red Wheelbarrow,” by William Carlos Williams (GSP, 48). This poem has its own peculiar structure. Can you identify it?

2. The first line causes us to anticipate something really important. What is the rest of the poem about? What meaning do you think the poet is trying to communicate?
3. Williams was a practicing pediatrician all his life. He wrote this poem while he was attending at the bedside of a dying child. Knowing this, what type of poem might this be considered? How does this knowledge change your interpretation of this poem?

4. Read “A Noiseless Patient Spider,” by Walt Whitman (GAP, 24). What is the subject of the first stanza? What is the subject of the second?

5. How does the poet link these two drastically different things?

6. What is the poet saying the soul needs?

7. What might be significant about the poet’s description of the spider as “noiseless” and “patient”?
8. Hebrews 6:19 speaks of a hope that provides “an anchor for the soul.” Read this verse and the surrounding context. What is the hope spoken of in this verse?