

Pantun/Pantoum ...dreamy and enchanting repetitions

Malay is an Austronesian language spoken in Malaysia, Indonesia, Singapore, Brunei and Thailand. The earliest known inscriptions in Malay were found in southern Sumatra and on the island of Bangka and date from 683-6 AD. They were written in an Indian script during the time of the kingdom of Srivijaya.

When Islam arrived in southeast Asia during the 14th century, the Arabic script was adapted to write the Malay language. In the 17th century, under influence from the Dutch and British, the Arabic script was replaced by the Latin alphabet. This is one of many influences of the West on the East.

The most basic form of Malay poetry, the *pantun*, reflects the charm and diplomacy of the Malay persona. Unlike most forms of poetry, the *pantun* was an integral part of Malay life; its birth is believed to have emerged from fishing songs. Its form was embedded in communicating **proverbs** (bits of wisdom), in formal situations such as asking for a maiden's hand in marriage, when a direct approach in prose would have been inappropriate or, if one believed old Malay movies, when two warriors engage in a battle of words before entering into mortal combat. The *pantun* was traditionally improvised.

Pantuns were not only recited, but often exchanged. Hence, they are said to be "sold" and "bought". The exchange can be hilarious or diplomatic, as the situation dictate.

The *pantun* was introduced to the West in the late Renaissance by one of the most important French Romantic writers Victor Hugo (*The Hunchback of Notre Dame* [1831] and *Les Misérables*[1862]). It is at this time its spelling changes to *pantoum*. (Westerners have taken other creative liberties with form such as giving it a rhyme scheme and introducing multiple rather than singular subjects.) Its use can be seen by other French poets, including Charles Baudelaire. Centuries later, New York school poet John Ashberry introduced it into the American mainstream in the mid 1950's, when he began publishing and teaching the form. Other American poets (such as Donald Justice and David Trinidad) have done work in this form. The *pantoum* (note the change in spelling) is still considered a rare form of poetry.

The Structure of the Pantun

The *pantun* is made up of a series or *quantrains* (four lines) and is said to have two parts: the first half is called the *Pembayang* ("shadow" or an image or an allusion ") while the second half is called the *Maksud* ("meaning" or theme). The *Pembayang* merely provides a preamble that may have no relation at all to the *Maksud*. Yet, it is vital in establishing the basis for the rhythm of the whole *pantun*. The essence of the *pantun* is actually contained in the second half of the *pantun*. Ideally, in either form – *pantun* or *pantoum*-, the meaning of lines shifts when they are repeated although the words remain exactly the same. The poem is said to "evolve."

In Western versions, a rhyming scheme of abab is sometimes employed.

The poem form is said to be lyrical/musical. Remnants of its form can be seen in story-type songs such as that found in country music wherein the meaning of the repeated refrain changes as the story evolves.

Here is the grid for the start of the pantoum:

_____ (Line 1)
_____ (Line 2)
_____ (Line 3)
_____ (Line 4)

_____ (Line 2)
_____ (Line 5)
_____ (Line 4)
_____ (Line 6)

_____ (Line 5)
_____ (Line 7)
_____ (Line 6)
_____ (Line 8)

And so on for as many stanzas as you want to write until the last, which has its own special form.

The method of composing a pantoum is simple yet elegant. You first write a stanza of four lines. The pantoum will work best if the lines are fairly intact—each expressing just one basic idea or image.

In the second stanza, it is time to let go of the idea that you can control the pantoum. You cannot control its flow, or even its sense completely—instead, you must allow the wave-like quality of the form to carry you along. This is because of the nature of the pantoum's repetitions—the lines that repeat.

In the pantoum you simply pick up lines 2 and 4 of the first stanza and plunk them down as lines 1 and 3 of the next stanza. You have already written two lines of the quatrain. Now you have to connect the repetitions with new lines. Don't think too much here, spontaneity will help you, and it is probable that your first impulse about what to write is the best.

The pantoum continues in the same fashion—lines 2 and 4 pick up and repeat as lines 1 and 3. Visualize a pantoum as a slinky going down a flight of stairs—it is smooth, fluid, and repetitious.

The last stanza looks like this:

_____ (Repetition from line 2 of *previous stanza*)
_____ (Line 1 of the ***opening*** stanza of the pantoum)
_____ (Repetition from line 4 of *previous stanza*)
_____ (Line 3 of the ***opening*** stanza of the pantoum)

Note how the poem form gives the feeling of a complete circle.

To further complicate matters, it is possible to rhyme the pantoum. The rhyme scheme for the pantoum is abab, bcbc: that is, lines 1 and 3 rhyme, as do lines 2 and 4. However, keep this strictly optional. The pantoum is complex enough not to need rhyme—but do try a bit of partial rhyming or half rhyme if it appeals to you.

It will become obvious to you once you start experimenting with writing the pantoum that there is no way to control it. You have to trust that the form itself will give the poem its sense, and to allow for happy accidents and juxtapositions.

The pantoum seems particularly suited to us writing in America at the end of the twentieth century. Its repetition and circular quality give it a mystical chant like feeling. Its cut-up lines break down linear thought. The form is both ancient and fresh. Once you embark on it, it will be a poetic path you will want to take again and again.