

The Use of Riddles in Poetry Teaching

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WHAT IS A RIDDLE?

A riddle is a question that is difficult to understand, and that has a surprising answer, that one asks somebody as a game: e.g. *Stop talking riddles- say what you mean.*

According to the *Encyclopedia Britannica*, two main kinds of riddles are recognized; the descriptive riddle and the shrewd or witty question. In the first kind usually an animal, person, plant, or object is described in an intentionally enigmatic manner, to suggest something different from the correct answer. There is one general and one specific element in the description. The general element comes first and is to be understood metaphorically. Thus in an English rhyming riddle:

*Little Nancy Etticoat
In a white Petticoat
And a red nose:
The longer she stands
The shorter she grows.*

What is described here seems to be a little girl. The second element, the specific one, which is to be interpreted literally, appears to be in contrast with the first. This little Nancy Etticoat grows shorter and shorter the longer she stands, simply because she is a lighted candle (Benton: 576).

In descriptive riddles, appearance rather than function is dealt with. Thus, an egg is described as “a little white house with no door and window”, not something to eat or something from which a

chicken hatches. Or a water melon is a green city with red walls and black people”, not something to eat or a fruit planted. On the other hand, paradoxical riddles are description in terms of action, for example, “the man who made it did not want it; the man who bought it did not use it; the man who used it did not know it”, and the answer is “a coffin”, or “poor people have it, rich people want it, it is greater than God, but it is worse than Satan”, the answer would definitely be “nothing”.

According to Cuddon, the riddle is an ancient and universal form of literature, in its commonest form it consists of a puzzle question; the equivalent of a conundrum or an enigma (753). For example:

*Brothers and sisters have I none.
This man's father is my father's son.
Who am I?*

Riddles vary in their length; some are brief, while others run to many lines of verse. There are collections of riddles in Sanskrit, Hebrew, Arabic, Persian, Greek, and Latin Literatures.

HISTORY OF RIDDLES

From time to time, a busy world like ours needs a smile, and nothing is better than spending our free time with fun and jokes and some sort of entertainment and joyful activities, such as puzzles, riddles, and trivia solving.

The ancient Egyptians, the ancient Greeks and the American Indians all admired riddles and those who solved them. Riddles have been around since before history was recorded. In the culture of some nations, riddles were considered one of the ways folklore was handed from one generation to the next by word of mouth.

According to Greek mythology, the sphinx sat outside of Thebes and asked passing travellers and caravans a riddle. If they

failed to give the right answer, they would be transformed to stone and die. The riddle says: “what is it which walks on four legs in the morning, on two at noon, and on three legs in the evening?” Many passengers died because they failed to supply the sphinx with the correct answer. But when Oedipus gave the answer, **man**, the sphinx destroyed herself.

The ancient Greeks thought highly of riddles because they believed that riddles were supposed to prove the intelligence of a man, and to get to the right answer was a matter of life or death for them. For instance, Homer, who wrote the story of Oedipus, was believed to have died indirectly and the cause of his death was a riddle which he was unable to solve ([http://EzineArticles.com/?Expert=Wendy Streater](http://EzineArticles.com/?Expert=Wendy+Streater)).

Aranda states that the ancient Greeks were fond of all the challenging games, celebrating banquets where puzzles and riddles were considered both entertainment and competition, they used to crown the winners with laurel. In the middle Ages, some people, who lived by entertaining others in the streets, used riddles to earn their living; they were able to entice the passers-by to pay them if they could come up with interesting riddles.

Riddles in Africa were used as a ritual tradition of passage for young people. The young could not be considered adults if they could not solve riddles. In Fiji Islands, losers held feasts in the honor of winners, in other words, champions. In the Middle East, riddles were used as the consultation of oracles so women could find out if they were meant to marry with the man of their dreams ([http://EzineArticles.com/?Expert=Natalie Aranda](http://EzineArticles.com/?Expert=Natalie+Aranda)).

POEM-RIDDLES

Poem riddles are simply riddles in the form of poems. The nature of composing a poem that creates riddles can be considered a difficult task due to the use of certain words for the sake of rhyme and rhythm. And once the solution is known, one can look back again at the riddle and find that the poem makes sense (<http://www.increasebrainpower.com>). For example:

*A hoard of ring am I,
But no fit gift for a bride;
I await a sword's kiss.*

Or:

*My life can be measured in hours,
I serve by being devoured.
Thin, I am quick
Fat, I am slow
Wind is my foe.
What am I?*

Or:

*It cannot be seen, cannot be felt
Cannot be heard, cannot be smelt.
It lies behind the stars and under the hills,
And empty holes it fills.
It comes first and follows after,
Ends life, kills laughter.*

HOW TO CONSTRUCT RIDDLE POEMS:

Rhymed-riddles are a lot of fun. They are considered an amusing game for children as well as adults. These riddles are connected to history, and they are a way to approach poetry. Riddle poems are appreciated by everyone, and almost students can learn to make them. By doing so, they can enjoy themselves, sharpen their

wits, learn a new way to look at the world, and tap resources of creativity they never suspected themselves to have.

To help students appreciate a riddle-poem fully, they have to speak it to themselves out loud because poetry “demands to be heard, not merely read silently, and it is only in the classroom that we can be positive it will be heard” (Deedari: 372). To miss the sound of a poem means missing much of its beauty which is considered a great part of the total experience.

The teacher can help students make a riddle poem by simply working backwards, i.e. picking the answer first, then imagining that the answer is speaking to them describing itself, telling them what it does. If that does not work, they have to try to analogize the subject (answer) to a body or creature and adjust the description of this subject to the level of difficulty they want.

In the Middle Ages, poetry was a spoken art, and poems were composed to be chanted or sung. Here is an example of a riddle poem in modern English in which the style and subject are very traditional:

Riddle: *A hoard of rings am I,
 But no fit gift for a bride;
 I await a sword's kiss*

Answer: a suit of chain-mail.

Rhyme is nice in a riddle-poem, yet this one does not rhyme but it has a strong rhythm. Rhyme was hardly employed for structure in traditional riddle-poems, instead a set of stress rules and alliteration are used.

Students can attract the attention of their listeners or readers by using one- and two-syllable words, avoiding Latin or elaborate words and sticking to concrete objects. Students can make riddles by using modern objects in the traditional style, for instance:

Riddle: *I am the black cloak of the road.*

Answer: *asphalt.*

Or: *I am the iron palm-tree*
Whose fruits darkness devour.
When the light of heaven is lit,
They get down on knee.
What am I?

The iron palm-tree is the lighting post. This phrase is a good example of what Viking poets called kenning, a poetic and indirect description of some simple thing or event – a riddle within the riddle poem. Being used so conventionally, some kennings became poetic clichés; for example, the ocean was called the whale-path, the sun was the candle of heaven, battle was referred to as a feast of eagles, warriors were spear-trees and ring-givers was the name of generous chieftains because in ancient times it was considered a mark of special favor for a warrior (specially a Viking warrior) to receive a ring or a bracelet from the chieftain's own arm, and such a gift was also a confirmation of the status of the chieftain among his people and other chieftains.

Kennings are riddles in themselves. They are ways of suggesting that things can be viewed in two or more ways. In kennings, one element collocates with the main words in the context, while the other, the head word, is intrusive, a man, for instance, is “a tree of battle”, and a lady “a tree of rings” and kennings were elaborated by replacing one of the elements by another kenning. Winter was called “the snake’s sorrow” and the snake was “the thong of the footpath” so that winter became “the sorrow of the thong of the footpath”, linking words from three different sets (Turner: 132). Consider the riddle below:

Riddle: *I drink the blood of earth,*
And the trees fear my roar

Yet a man may hold me in his hands.

Answer: *a chainsaw*

The riddle gets its power by suggesting some fearsome creature which is vast enough to feed on the blood of the earth (petroleum), and then paradoxically stating that the beast is small enough to be held by a man in his two hands.

The very common style of a riddle is personification, i.e. giving the subject of the riddle the qualities of a person, and then having it describe itself poetically. Reading the riddle below one can observe that both alliteration (repetition of the initial consonant sounds) and end rhyme are used:

Screaming, soaring / seeking sky

Flowers of fire / flying high

Eastern art / from ancient time

Name me now / and solve this rhyme.

Answer: *fireworks*

The repetition of the /s/ sound in the first line, the /f/ in the second line, and the /n/ in the fourth are good examples of alliteration. In the third line, all the initial vowels are considered equivalent for alliterative purposes.

TEACHING RIDDLE POEMS:

A good teacher always knows during the first lesson where she/he wants the majority of their students to be during the last lesson. Only geniuses will find their way alone. Teaching is a tool to empower students and teachers as to form and strengthen their consciousness to be able to break the chains of the oppressed and the marginalized. To be a great teacher is like to be a great coach-to provide structure and discipline for learning, to set high standards and define them clearly, to model the intellectual curiosity and openness to new ideas that one expects his/her students to have, and

to help them find their own voices and unique talents, even though they may differ from the teacher's own voice and talent (www.slideshare.net/).

The teaching of poetry offers teachers of literature some of the most fundamental, active and even physical ways to engage students in learning (Showalter: 62). Teachers often complain that most of the students find poetry difficult, even the good ones can arrive at university afraid of it. Some students think of poetry as a mystery into which they are not initiated, and some consider poems to be vague messages. They confess that they do not know how to read it and therefore are unable to understand or appreciate it, they even do not like it very much and "resist poetry that is difficult" (Ibid: 63).

Poetry helps to stir students' imagination and to move their feelings. In studying English poetry, students encounter a new dimension of language that is not found in other literary types which is reflected through peculiar syntax, poetic diction, and ambiguity. If poetry is taught properly, it can be an effective tool in urging students to learn the language. Many teachers maintain that trying to write poetry is one of the most useful ways to learn to read poetry and, thus, to appreciate it. Parody is one of the excellent methods of teaching. Students should be encouraged to imitate the forms of other poets, starting from the brief epigrams to other types and so on. Involving students by actually writing a poetic text prove stimulating for some students though difficult and upsetting for others. To have them write poetry is of great significance because it enhances language development in a way that is fun and a way that enhances creativity.

Riddles are an excellent vehicle for introducing students to poetry and poetry writing. The teachers can encourage their students to begin their exploration of riddle poems by reading sample riddle

poems and guessing the answers. They can then analyze the riddle poems to find the techniques used in the poems and to define what elements help in making good riddle poems. The teacher can make some preparations to introduce his/her students to riddle-poem activity by simply photocopying the sample riddle-poems handout for each student. The goal behind this is to help them explore, analyze, and discuss how metaphor, simile, and metonymy are used in riddle- poems, and use these figures of speech to write original riddle poems which might be carried out through different sessions; firstly, the teacher gets her/his students read the first sample riddle poem themselves along from their handouts, or read it her/himself. He/she then can ask the students guess the answer to the riddle. It may take them some time to write down the possible answers.

Secondly, the teacher can ask them to look back at the first sample riddle poem and say what they notice about it, what it does, how it works, what techniques it uses, and how it gives hints and, at the same time, obscures the answer. He/she has to encourage them to comment upon anything they notice, meanwhile, she/he needs to work through each poem in turn and have the students take notes. The teacher can ask them to discuss the poem as a whole taking into consideration what makes a good riddle poem. At least, she/he finds it necessary to discuss the use of metaphor, simile, and metonymy (<http://www.readwritethink.org>).

Thirdly, the teacher may ask them to parody the sample riddle-poems of their handouts describing different objects inside or outside their classrooms. The language of poetry is concrete, it evokes emotion, and “it is thinking and seeing with our hearts” (Johnson: x), so students will, no doubt, produce some good poetry if they are given the opportunity. But it is very important for the teacher when she/he starts off to provide the students with riddles that are easy to understand and interesting.

Teaching Similes and Metaphors via Riddle Poems:

Students should be able to use their knowledge of similes and metaphors to promote their appreciation and understanding of poetry. Reading riddle-poems and later learning to compose their own riddle poems will help them be able to interpret similes and metaphors, write similes and metaphors, and write similes and metaphors that describe a person from their own city, TV, or an era in history. (volweb.utk.edu/Schools/bedford/harrisms/2poe.htm). The materials needed for introducing students to such types of poetry are poetic examples of similes and metaphors. The teacher might ask them some introductory questions to stimulate discussion; for instance, what are the ways authors follow in writing to make their details more vivid? What are some good describing words to describe something? Or, how can one write things to show comparisons? Students then should be given definitions of both the simile and metaphor and those definitions should be discussed in the class.

The teacher, after that, tends to read or display the introductory poem, have the students identify the similes and metaphors and what is being compared, and change the similes to metaphors and the metaphors to similes, he/she needs to use a given list of sample similes and metaphors and have the students identify each. As a class, they might choose a person from TV or an era in history and write several similes and metaphors to describe the person. The teacher can have each student choose a different person and write similes and metaphors to describe that person and tell them to base their comparisons on facts. Concerning assessment, the teacher might assess students' similes and metaphors on whether they used the words 'like' or 'as' in similes, whether they used comparisons, or if the information about the person they chose was accurate.

The researcher has a practical experience in this regard. Due to great love of poetry and spending enjoyable hours reading poetry and attempting to paraphrase and interpret poems, the researcher shared this enthusiasm with students by applying this method of teaching poetry through riddles, and it worked. The researcher helped them compose their own riddles and, later, asked them to rhyme these riddles to come out finally with riddle poems. They were very enthusiastic about the idea and they loved the experience which came out with tens of examples of riddle- poems. And below is an example written by one of the students:

*I am faster than a bird.
I am a wingless bird.
I am a well-eater of stone
But with one touch of silk I drown.*

The answer is *the eyeball* which moves faster than a bird but unlike birds this eyeball is wingless. It can absorb the small grains of black crushed stone (*kohl or eyeliner*). With one slight touch of any tissue (even as soft as silk), teardrops run down this eyeball.

Exploring Riddle Poem Techniques

Let's read this sample riddle poem carefully more than once:

*Still, I am like a mirror,
Fast, I am stronger than stone.
Wet, I can burn you,
Cold, I can keep you warm.
Life, I can be in the desert,
Death, I can be on the riverbank.
What am I?
What is the answer?*

There are certain techniques the teacher should follow to stimulate his/her students guess the right answer. The teacher may ask them whether the answer is a concrete object such as desk or car, or it is an abstract concept such as happiness or peace. He/she might ask them how specific the answer is; for instance: Is it very specific such as Lana's white cat? Is it specific such as red wine? Or is it general such as car?

The teacher may ask the students certain questions to stir their imagination, for instance: Why do you think the author chooses to write a riddle about water? How much harder would it be to write (and guess the answer to) a poem with a more specific answer like river? And how about an even more specific answer like a special pond in a special area?

In this poem, each line acts as a clue except for the last one which asks the question. Let's look at the first line: *Still, I am like a mirror*. The mystery object is like a mirror, but only when it's still. That includes lots of objects which look like mirrors such as windows and metal. And *still* is a good trick word because it covers both water that isn't moving, such as a pool, and calm moving water. Calm streams and rivers can reflect images just as pools of water can.

Fast, I am stronger than stone.

This line is another good clue. The poet could have written "Fast, I cut through stone" but one often uses the word cutting when they talk about rivers making canyons. Cutting is almost too obvious so the poet uses the phrase "*stronger than stone*" instead. The other lines work on these same principles, telling things that water can do, but presenting the clue in a way that isn't completely obvious. For instance, one doesn't think of wet things burning them (*scalding*). And the last line can be really tricky because one doesn't

think of water being on the riverbank, but that's exactly what it does during a flood.

The class has to think about the perspective of the riddle-poem; it may adopt the persona of the object or it presents the information from a third person perspective. This choice in perspective may affect the types of clues used and it may work to trick the audience. The class have to notice the figurative language used in the riddle poem and its different types such as imagery, metaphor, metonymy, onomatopoeia, personification, simile, synecdoche, etc. They have to take into consideration the clues provided through the use of figurative language, rhetorical devices, or poetic devices such as antithesis, parallelism, or zeugma. They have to see whether these rhetorical devices (if used at all) are used to emphasize the clues or not. They have to underline the poetic sound techniques such as alliteration, assonance, and consonance, and see if these sound techniques are used to emphasize the clues. As a class, they have to notice also the poet's use of visual clues such as its shape, capitalization, or formatting or typing techniques such as bold, italic, or larger font size to emphasize the clues.

Conclusion

Riddles can be used as an amazing tool for introducing students to poetry, poetry reading, and poetry writing. Being short poems with a challenge to the students' intelligence they provide the students with material for comprehension and analysis to explore the metaphors, the similes and the mystery of the hidden meaning. Helping students read, and later write their own riddle poems opens new horizons before them to appreciate poetry in general, and explore the language of poetry in particular. The second step in teaching riddle-poems, therefore is to encourage and help students

write their own riddle-poems. Using riddles in teaching makes learning interesting and enjoyable.

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