

Writeous — by Ray

“CUT...!”

(NOTE: This poem actually evolved as the column was being written. It is not previous work.)

This is only my opinion, but I see a lot of over-written poems. There is a belief that “Poetry is just prose, broken into short lines.” I disagree. I have said it before: “Breaking prose into short lines and calling it poetry is like putting a saddle on a giraffe and calling it a race horse.”

If novels are landscapes, then short stories are busts, and poems are jewels. It’s all a matter of scale. Even long poems are like strings of matched pearls — each section its own precious gem — if it’s a good poem.

Here’s some prose I just made up:

It is a cold winter’s night in the middle of January. Ribbons of ice hang from the eaves of the house. The mood is somber, as if the house is in mourning — waiting for spring.

It’s nice prose. Descriptive. Evocative. Even ‘poetic.’ I like it. Let’s make it into a poem:

*It is a cold winter’s night in
the middle of January.
Ribbons of ice hang
from the eaves of the house.
The mood is somber,
as if the house is in mourning
— waiting for spring.*

Believe it or not, I see a lot of this. Is it a poem? Well, many people think so. I don’t!

Why?

It wastes far too many words. It’s not brief, terse. It’s flabby. It has too much useless verbiage. It’s still *prose*. If it’s a jewel, it’s certainly not polished. But it can be a good start.

Ask yourself, “What is the writer trying to say?”

Well, *most* important, is the mood: somberness.

Then: It’s winter, cold. There’s a house. Ice hangs from it.

Now, the above is brief and terse. But it’s not poetry either. It’s not evocative. It doesn’t *affect* us the way the original did. We’ve lost something: the ‘humanity.’ Let’s go back.

Look at the first sentence. Do we really need to tell the reader that January is in the middle of winter? Maybe not. And phrases like “It is” are usually unnecessary, too. So that leaves us with: “Cold January night.”

Now the second sentence. “Hang” is kind of a tepid word (unless your grandfather was a horse thief). Surely, we can find a word that carries more emotional impact. How about “Ribbons of ice *dangle* from the eaves...?” Well, it’s really not somber, is it? “Droop?” Lets leave it and come back, later.

“The mood is somber.” This is definitely unnecessary — and bad writing. We’re *telling* the reader instead of making him *feel* it. If we do our job well, we don’t want, or need, it.

The last part is kind of nice. It does evoke the mood. But

we can certainly tighten it without losing the effect. How about simply, “The house mourns for spring?” Doesn’t seem to lose anything. Let’s see where we are:

Cold January night.

*Ribbons of ice dangle from the eaves
of the house.*

The house mourns for spring.

I like this better, but I still see three things.

Two are problems: We repeat “the house” twice. (Do we really need to? Should we?) And “dangle” definitely conflicts with the mood we want to evoke.

The third is an opportunity: My rusty English Lit. education tells me this is close to an established form. It looks a lot like a *Haiku*! Let’s see.

Both a *Haiku* and our fledgling poem have three lines. Check!

A *Haiku*’s first line has five syllables; ours has six. Close!

A *Haiku*’s third line has five syllables. So does ours! Great!

The middle line has twelve syllables. *Haikus* have seven. This would need a *lot* of changing. Let’s see if it’s worth it by playing with the first line.

Now, surely, there’s nothing sacred about the month of January. (Yes, it’s closer to the “middle of winter,” but is that so important? I mean, any cold month will do, really.) How about “December?” “Cold December night.” Five syllables! Voila! Houston, we have lift-off!

Now, that damned middle line: “Ribbons of ice dangle from the eaves of the house.”

Well, we’ve already said that the part about the house should go. And ‘dangle’ is not right either. We need something sad, mournful. How about “weep?”

“Ribbons of ice weep from the eaves?” Well, this is nice. Very nice! But, really, what are these “ribbons of ice?” They’re icicles, of course! So now, we *do* have a *Haiku*:

Cold December night.

Icicles weep from the eaves.

The house mourns for spring.

Nobody would argue that this is not a poem. (Is it a good one? You, the reader, must decide.)

We’ve watched the evolution of a poem. As with ‘real’ evolution, there are many paths we *could* have gone down. This is only one; yours will be different. That’s what makes us individual artists. It’s ‘style.’

In particular, the branch we took when we decided to adopt a *form* will not always be available — or attractive. (We will discuss this next month.)

But this is a path you *must* travel. Cut useless words! Replace tepid verbs and adjectives with powerful ones! Always *evoke* an emotional response (never *dictate* one)! It’s painful, hard work. But it’s the essence of being a writer. □