

TEACHING THE ART OF POETRY

THE REFRAIN

by Paul Batchelor

The refrain is a poetic device that isn't often seen these days – which means it is ripe for rejuvenation. W B Yeats used a refrain in many of his poems, particularly his later work, so let's begin by looking at a well-known example, ['Long Legged Fly'](#).

There are two main types of refrain:

- Those that offer a point of view
- Those that present an image

Refrains can work in any number of ways, but they have two main characteristics:

- Supporting or distilling the poem's argument. This is rarely a straightforward process: in 'Long Legged Fly', Yeats likens Michelangelo's genius to a fly. Ordinarily, this would be ridiculous; but as the refrain is repeated, it casts its spell and we see it follows its own logic – suddenly it seems exactly right for the poem.
- Challenging the poem's argument – either by directly refuting it, or gesturing towards a world outside of the poem and thereby undermining the certainty of the poem's argument.

Either way, the meaning and function of the refrain will change as the poem develops. A refrain that has literal meaning when we first read it may well take on another function when it reappears later in the poem. This subtly changing relationship with the main body of the poem is what makes refrains so interesting: if they simply supported the poem uncritically they wouldn't really be worth having in the first place.

REFRAIN EXERCISE

When doing this exercise, it's best not to read ahead. Complete each paragraph before going on.

Start by collecting six proverbs that appeal to you. Try to find some that are not already familiar to you; you can find lists of them on the internet. For example 'Look to yourself when your neighbour's house is on fire' or 'Heat a stone for a thousand years, it will cool in an hour' or 'A tradesman lives on lack' or 'Sins are not known till they are acted'. Rewrite them as a series of two-line poems (rhymed or unrhymed). You can interpret the proverbs any way you like: put them into the first person, or simply take an image from them.

Next, I want you to write a six or eight line poem about a picture or photograph that made an impression on you when you saw it as a child.

Now write a six or eight line poem about a picture or photograph you have seen within the last week or so. This poem should begin with the same word as the last one.

Now write six or eight lines about a picture of yourself (at any age) that you particularly like or dislike. Again, start with the same word.

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Now assemble your poem! Each of the short 'poems' you have just written are in fact going to be stanzas. One of the proverbs you rewrote will form the refrain, which will come after each stanza. The theme of the stanzas is obviously pictures, but the proverbs won't refer to this directly. Try out different proverbs and hopefully you'll find one with the right mix of being illuminating while also keeping a mysterious distance from the stanzas.

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