

Three Poetry Comics Exercises

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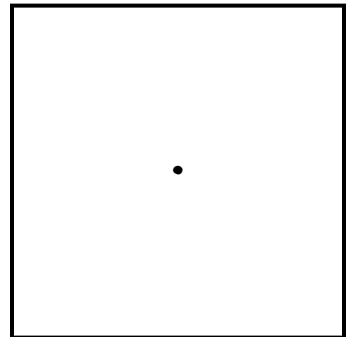
Multiple Cartoons Of A Single Poem

SOME poems, such as Lewis Carroll's nonsense masterpiece, "Jabberwocky," can't be rendered literally, because there is no literal interpretation possible. What's a *tove*, a *borogove*, a *rath*, and a *Jabberwock*? I have drawn eleven different versions of that poem. Some depict people doing things, some show strange surrealistic objects, one is a series of shadow shapes on a chessboard that alternates words and pictures in the squares. In these approaches to cartoon illustrations interpreting the words can become quite complex. It would be possible to do "Jabberwocky" a hundred different ways, a thousand even. How would you make a cartoon of the first stanza? How would a whole class of thirty students do this? The differences would be immense. Here is the stanza waiting for your comic muse to inspire you...

'Twas brillig, and the slithy toves
Did gyre and gimble in the wabe.
All mimsy were the borogoves
And the mome raths outgrabe.

Dot Comics: Minimalist Rhythm Exercise

At the other end of the spectrum, poetry comics can be quite simple: Many poems or parts of poems can be illustrated as minimal art in the exercise that follows. It features a single dot in the middle of a square panel repeated sixteen times to form a 4x4 square. Before adding the words and word balloons, each panel is the same. The student takes the target poem and prints one to four words from the poem in each panel and draws a word balloon around the words.



Imagine the dot character reciting Shakespeare's soliloquy "Tomorrow and tomorrow and tomorrow." I have broken up the words in the first part below. My interpretation starts off with a blank panel having a dot in the exact center, but there are no words or balloons yet. Like an actor, the dot has just come out from behind an imaginary curtain to speak its lines.

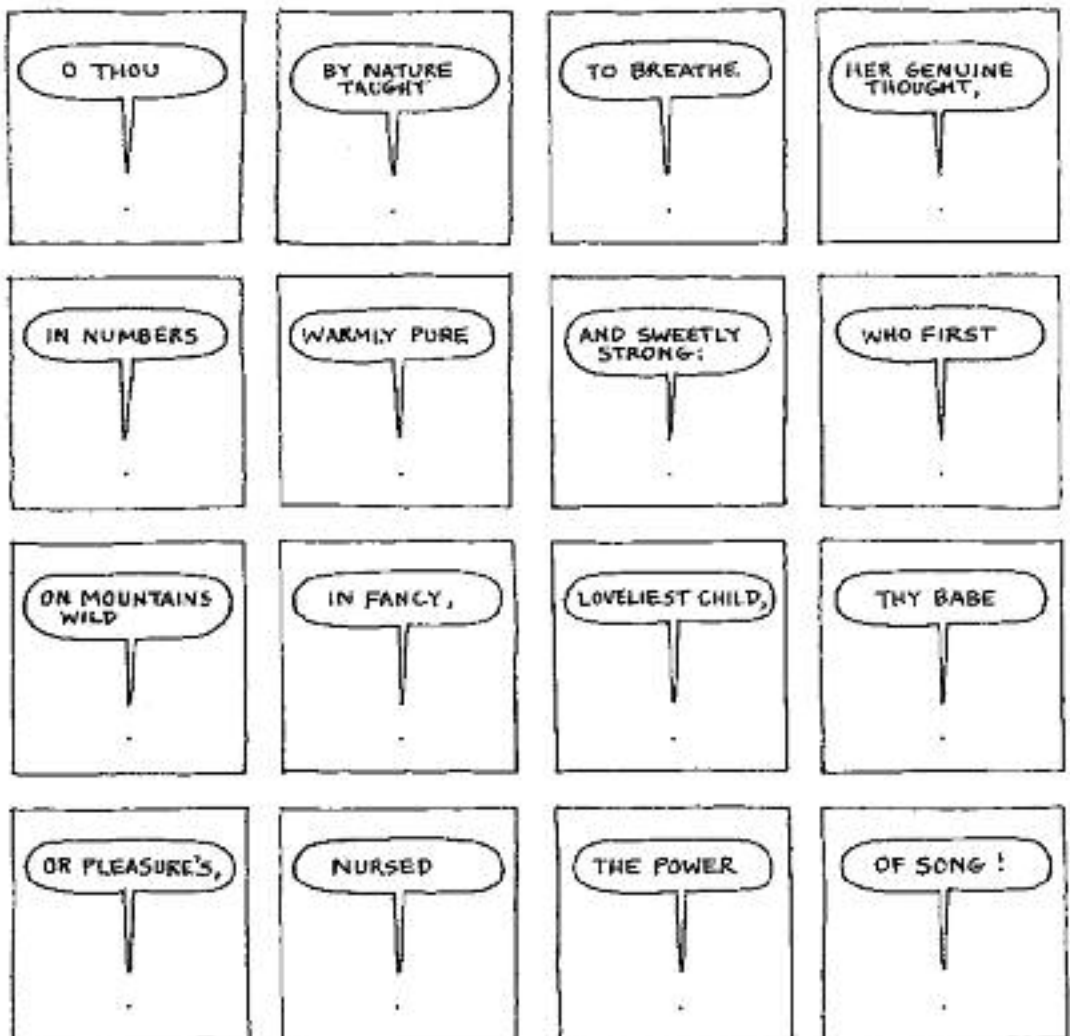
[blank panel] / "Tomorrow / and tomorrow / and tomorrow /
creeps / in / this petty / pace /
from day / to day / and all / our yesterdays /
have lighted / fools / the way / to dusty death /

Now it's your turn. Here are the next few words. Draw sixteen squares with a dot in the middle of each, and your dot is ready to speak. Note that the words don't have to stay on the same lines that they appear on below.

Out out brief candle

Life's but a walking shadow, a poor player,
That struts and frets his hour upon the stage
And then is heard no more.

More than any other exercise, this approach focuses on the rhythm of the words. Rhythm isn't usually the focus of a poetry comics activity, but this is a simple, clear, quick, and ideal approach. And it can be used with almost any poem or part of a poem. The number of panels and the way they appear on the page can be changed for smaller or larger texts.



An example of a minimalist rhythm exercise: the first page of Dave Morice's adaptation of William Collins' "Ode to Simplicity."

“I Wandered Lonely as a Cloud” Exercise

In the spring of 1980 I taught several poets-in-the-schools programs in Iowa elementary schools. In some of the classes, I brought copies of *Poetry Comics* to use as a textbook.

For one activity, I handed out copies of my cartoon version of “I Wandered Lonely as a Cloud” by William Wordsworth. The students read it aloud (each student reading one cartoon frame apiece), and we discussed both the poem and my cartoon interpretation. I suggested that everyone write a poem about wandering like some animal or object and also illustrate it. They talked about their ideas, and then they wrote and drew.

The poems below are by fifth- and seventh-graders who participated in the writing.

Untitled

DAWN (FIFTH GRADE)

I wandered lonely as a giraffe
 Always up in the air how in the
 World can I tie my shoe when I
 Can't even put on my socks
 But of course it's not all
 Bad I get to see a long ways
 Away And of course I don't have to
 Worry about picking things up off
 The ground and I always have the
 The chance to reach the highest

Wandering

DOUG (SEVENTH GRADE)

Wandering down the highway
 There is not a car in sight.
 It is midnight and I'm all alone.
 The moon is clear and very bright

Absence is near I have no one to talk to
 For I have no friends.
 The highway is never ending,
 For all it has is bends.