

by nutmeg
and thyme:
an ode to *pantuns*
and rhyme

written by catdya

foreword: about the author

My name is Catdya. Or at least that's what my pen name is. I graduated with a bachelor's in English language and literature and currently "work" as a fulltime, self-employed multidisciplinary artist. I write, draw, and craft and dabble in many mediums at once.

This zine is a collection of thoughts and opinions on an art form I have participated in for the past 5+ years. A brief period, all things considered. It is text-heavy and that is the point. I could not add any more frills in fear that it will distract from the main thesis of this zine. So sit back, enjoy a beverage of your choice, and bust out your annotation tools, because this one's going to be a doozy.

(0) the troubles of writing about poetry or: scope

As your resident English major, I am keenly aware that there are many misconceptions about poetry both within and outside of the poetry sphere. I could spend an entire book's length giving you a semester's worth of Introduction to English Lit., but that would hinder the brevity of the zine format. Instead, this zine will focus on my love towards the pantun and attitudes towards rhyming in contemporary English poetry, how I navigate that, and finding my voice as a poet.

(1) what is a pantun?

A pantun is an form of Malayic oral poetry with an ABAB rhyming scheme. It's made up of two parts: imagery and message.

The imagery is traditionally implicitly related to the message, using devices such as allusions (references to other things) or assonance (repeating vowel sounds) to achieve this effect. The message is straightforward. it could be a proverb, advice, or anything else!

Modern day Indonesia has no shortage of pantuns! On busses and train cars you might hear a pantun being used to inform passengers, broadcast public service announcements, or reinforce rules.

Because of it's sing-songy nature, it's fun to speak out loud a pantun. It helps that Indonesian, the language, makes it extremely easy to rhyme with its six vowel sounds in contrast to English's twenty or so vowels.

The appeal of the pantun is straightforward; it is short and has an explicit message at the end, making it easy to understand at any skill level. Dig deeper, though, and you'll find an abundance of poetic devices being employed subtly and skillfully.

(2) let's break down a pantun!

Pembangunan

Beton nan tinggi menghias Manggarai
Gerbong kereta membawa harapan
Banding-bandingkan apa yang kau capai
Mutlak hidupmu menjadi bayangan

Construction

*Tall concrete decorates Manggarai
Train cars carry hope
Compare what you achieve
Truly, your life will be a shadow*

This pantun has the explicit message of “comparing your achievements to others will make you unhappy.” Read a bit into the imagery and you’ll discover a few things.

To know the meaning of the imagery, one must know that Manggarai is a transit hub for trains and also a construction site for the upcoming MRT line extension (as of time of writing).

One must also know that the Jakarta-Bogor train line is always packed with workers that work in Jakarta but live in the suburbs, hence “train cars are packed with hope.” Hope for what? Hope for a brighter, better future by working in the big city.

You should also know that (again, as of time of writing) the state is building a new capital on the island of Borneo, away from Java, mainly to escape the poor city planning Jakarta has endured.

Okay, what does that have to do with the message? The theme for this pantun is urbanism and construction (hence, the title). Jakarta is exploding with workers but housing within the city is nigh-impossible to afford.

These facts culminate as a critique of expansion for the sake of expansion. In this pantun, state construction projects are depicted as comparison fodder for other countries instead of focusing on the wellbeing of its inhabitants.

That brings us to the message. This pantun, on the surface, talks about a busy urban life rife with comparisons; read into the context and you'll discover its attitudes towards government projects and how it sees the state.

Just by those two lines and additional context you can analyze a pantun in much greater detail and understanding. That is the beauty of the pantun, it is deceptively simple yet potent with imagery and meaning.

(3) why pantuns?

I love pantuns, they're part of my heritage and such a fun little thing to speak out loud. It is, in essence, an oral tradition passed down for generations, therefore the focus on rhythm and how it sounds when spoken is key to a good pantun.

But *Why* pantuns? Simply put, I think constraints inherent in the pantun serves as a helpful guide when I'm stuck formatting a poem. Its clear guidelines and rhyme scheme makes it, as the adage goes, "easy to pick up, difficult to master."

When writing a poem, there are countless of ways someone might format it, or position the line breaks, or even to add line breaks at all! Pantuns are an easy format to get started, similar to the cliché "roses are red, violets are blue..." Anyone from any skill level can learn how to write a pantun and have fun with poetry!

(4) constraints

Constraints, I think, are what make a poem interesting. One of these constraints are what we call a metered line. Meaning each line of a poem is measured by the stressed and unstressed syllables it contains. It can be in any combination so long as it repeats.

It's difficult to convey metered poetry or even the concept of lexical stress through only text without a solid grasp of the language and a crash course in linguistics. However, I shall try.

The stress in "con-TEST" mean it's a verb meaning to deny, while "CON-test" means it's a noun, like a competition. Now imagine this with all English words. Yeah. It takes a while for your mind to wrap around the concept. And now imagine writing lines where every other syllable is stressed, or every three syllables, or even four- you get it.

(5) my meter and me

Indonesian does not have lexical stress. Therefore, it cannot have metered poetry in the way English does. Personally, this affects my abilities to identify and write in meter. That is *not* to say that it is an impossible task for a second language English speaker to master meter.

Even after four years of formal education in English, I struggle to grasp where meter falls in a written text. I often need to repeat lines and notice stress patterns while making sure prosodic stress isn't affecting my judgement.

So you could see where my affinity for rhyme comes from—it is to make up for which I lack in meter. But what if I were to abandon both rhyme and meter in poetry, would it still be considered poetry? Well...

(6) what is free verse?

Free verse poetry, simply put, does not follow regular or formal meter and rhyme schemes. That does not, however, mean it is truly free from rules and guidelines.

Think of metaphors, similes, personification, symbolism, imagery, hyperbole, and many other types of poetic devices that can be employed regardless of meter.

Contemporary poets and literary magazines tend to favor this style, as free verse is seen as more accommodating towards different styles and perspectives compared to the constricting meter. This form (or lack thereof) allows poets to freely choose the poetic devices that best suits their given subject matter and tone.

(7) the response to the response of a response

Contemporary free verse was born out of a response to traditional forms of poetry with strict rhyme and meter. To put it short, free verse was seen as liberating ideas from the strict rules of meter and rhyme and allowed for greater creative expression. This response initiates another round of responses—people who yearn to go back to metered and rhymed poetry.

These voices come from a variety of people, from poetry purists who believe meter and rhyme are the foundations of poetry, to casual readers who were introduced to poetry through Shakespeare or Dickinson with their rhymes, to strongly opinionated people who enjoy a challenge in their poetry.

As I have mentioned many a pages ago, this is not supposed to be an all-encompassing book on poetry debates, it's about my attitudes towards rhyme in particular. To tie this back to the main argument, I cannot but help to sympathize with people that are fond of rhyme and meter in poetry.

(8) finding my voice

It is a shame that end-rhymes in contemporary English poetry are seen as trite and outdated, or even predictable and cliché. As I see it, rhyme is one of the many poetic devices in a poet's repertoire that they can employ when the subject matter calls for it.

When is rhyme called for? As we've seen in the pantun, it can be used to portray a wide range of attitudes, from love, to happiness, to scorn, to sagely advice. Of course I cannot deny its sing-songy intonation makes it more humorous and lighthearted than, say, what a eulogy poem calls for.

As I see it, Indonesian has a rich history of rhyme in its oral poetry. I love incorporating my heritage into my art. I love the fact that rhyming is effortless in Indonesian and want that to reflect in the way I write. I too, want to have a unique voice, and I already have it. Rhyme is part of that unique voice of mine. I'm proud to be able to write about various subject matters using rhyme and not letting contemporary attitudes towards rhyme bog me down.

Even though rhyme has fallen out of fashion in contemporary works, that doesn't mean rhyme is forbidden to be used at all. Instead, I love leaning into the old-timey-ness of it all and embracing that voice using archaic terms and syntax (you might find one or two examples of that in this zine right here!).

I don't blame anyone for wanting fewer end-rhymes. However, each individual poet can be the change they want to see in the world. So I implore anyone reading this to write the type of poetry you'd want to read, regardless if it's in line with contemporary standards or not!

(9) let's write a pantun!

Now that you're caught up on what a pantun is and what it means, time to focus on the meat of the issue; writing one yourself. For the first step you should have an imagery you want to incorporate into your pantun. Take scenes from nature, everyday life, describe a trip or a purchase, lament or ponder on a subject matter, show an activity taking place, the possibilities for imagery are endless!

Popular imagery opens as such:

- Berakit-rakit ke hulu / Berenang-renang ke tepian
(*Rafting upstream / Swim to the shore*)
- Ke pasar beli mangga muda / Mangga dimakan manis
terasa. (*to the market to buy young mangos / mangos
sweet when eaten*)
- Air dalam bertambah dalam / Hujan di hulu belum lagi
teduh (*Deep waters get deeper / The rain upstream has
yet to subside*)

The second step is using that imagery and writing a related moral or message to your pantun! Remember, it can be about anything. The form is just a format! The content could be whatever your heart's desire. From public service announcements, to pick-up lines, a joke, a warning, an omen, do what you wish!

- Bersakit-sakit dahulu / bersenang-senang kemudian
(*Toil now / have fun later*)
- Rajin belajar sepanjang masa / Agar kelak hidup bahagia. (*Study diligently forever / For a happier future*)
- Hati dendam bertambah dendam / Dendam dahulu belum lagi sembuh (A vengeful heart grows more vengeful / old grudges not yet healed)

Make sure you're keeping the rhyme scheme ABAB, meaning the first and third lines rhyme, as well as the second and fourth lines!

You could even turn a 4-line pantun into 2 lines, compress the imagery into one line and follow it up with the message in another!

Now go forth, write a pantun!

(10) okay, where's the actual ode?

Four-lines and a message,
Two parts and a heart—
So rarely contested
A heritage-art.

Ah! the pantun lives!
Springing out of the paper!
A message to believe!
Inside lies something greater!

Lips move to the beat,
Forget any stress!
Pantuns crowd the big street,
No time for rest!

Through speakers blasting
Truly, the heart yearns for a song!
A legacy long-lasting—
The pantun lives on!

(11) references + suggested readings

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poetry book recommendations

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Bishop, Elizabeth. *Poems*. Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2015.

Dickinson, Emily. *Selected Poems*. Gramedia Pustaka Utama, 2020.

Emre, Yunus. *Yunus Emre: Selected Poems*. Ministry of Culture, Turkish Republic. 1993.

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(12) exercises

1. Apply what you know now to the title of this zine, what could “by nutmeg and thyme” represent?

2. Try writing a pantun of your own!

3. Do you prefer free verse over rhyme or meter? Why do you think you feel that way?

This semi-educational, semi-academic work of a zine contains a glimpse into pantuns, a traditional form of oral poetry popular in modern day Malaysia and Indonesia.

Catdya attempts to wrangle her Indonesian identity and love for pantuns with the contemporary English poetry scene, how she finds her voice, and her opinions on the matter.

Learn a bit about how to dissect a pantun, how to write one, and the current predicament surrounding rhyme.

Made with love by Catdya
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