

## CLERICHEWS: A PERSONAL HISTORY

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It was many years ago that I first became acquainted with a form of light verse called a clerihew. At the time I was reading some poetry by W. H. Auden. Most of Auden's poetry was serious, but some of it was light, and I especially liked the following:

James Watt  
Was the hard-boiled kind of Scot.  
He thought any dream  
Sheer waste of steam.

a good poet. At the time, though, I didn't know that this was a clerihew.

Later, however, I noticed other poems in the same form. What characterizes the form is that it is pseudo-biographical, with the first line always including the name of the person (and usually consisting of the name only). It has 4 lines, with a rhyme pattern of AABB. Although this rhyme pattern is invariable, the lines are of irregular length, possessing the rhythm of speech. This irregularity is sometimes employed for comic effect, just as the rhymes are often humorously contrived. The overall effect is a witty or whimsical comment about the person in question, sometimes shrewdly accurate (as in the case of James Watt) and sometimes merely expressing the attitude of the poet. But the comment should not run contrary to what is known about the person.

Like the limerick, the clerihew is indigenous to the English language. In fact, it is a purely invented form, its inventor being an English schoolboy in the late Victorian period named Edmund Clerihew Bentley. Being bored with his studies in St. Paul's School in London, Bentley began at age 15 or 16 to write this kind of verse as a diversion, and was soon joined in this by one of his classmates, G. K. Chesterton. Some years later, in 1905, the first collection of these "clerihews" was published under the title "Biography for Beginners."

The very first clerihew that Bentley wrote was:

Sir Humphrey Davy  
Abominated gravy.  
He lived in the odium  
Of having discovered sodium.

This isn't first-class, of course, but Bentley was onto something, so he continued.

Sir Christopher Wren  
Said, "I am going to dine with some men.  
"If anybody calls,  
"Say I am designing St. Paul's."

Getting better, Bentley went on to

Daniel Defoe  
Lived a long time ago  
He had nothing to do, so  
He wrote Robinson Crusoe.

And

It was a weakness of Voltaire's  
To forget to say his prayers,  
And one which to his shame  
He never overcame.

In addition to Bentley, Chesterton, and Auden, many other people have written clerihews over the years, some of them poets, some not. Those that I've liked best have been ones that require the reader to participate, to supply something, as a puzzle does. The following three clerihews are examples.

Labor leader Jimmy Hoffa  
Apparently refused an unrefusable offer.  
It is widely feared  
That he just

James Joyce  
Had an unusually loud voice.  
Knightly knock eternally wood he make  
Finnegan's Wake.

Did Descartes  
Depart  
With the thought  
"Therefore I'm not"?

Despite learning to recognize and enjoy clerihews, it never occurred to me to write one until this past year. I was prompted to do so by reading one by a fine contemporary American poet, Daniel Mark Epstein. For some reason, many modern poets are known either by all three of their names or by their first two initials and last name. Perhaps it's an unconscious stratagem to be taken seriously in a culture that has increasingly relegated

poetry and poets to the realm of the inconsequential. Epstein's clerihew, like Auden's, has the polish of the professional poet, and runs as follows:

Paul Gauguin  
Was a ladies' man.  
He loved them from Tahiti to Provence.  
*Honi soi qui mal y pense.*

For some days, as I pattered round the house, I would derive a sense of satisfaction in reciting this little verse to myself. Once, some years ago, I had a print of one of Gauguin's paintings on my bedroom wall. And Gauguin had always symbolized for me (as for Epstein) the artist's liberation from the restrictions of conventional morality. He was a kind of culture hero.

But gradually I became dissatisfied with the attitude expressed by the poem. I felt its romanticism was a little too easy. Having learned something over the years, about Gauguin and about life, I began to feel that a balancing view was needed. So I constructed what might be called a counter-clerihew. My effort did not result in a verse as smooth as Mr. Epstein's. Its rhythm is a little "sprung" (allowable in a clerihew), but at least it said what I wanted to say.

Paul Gauguin  
Was once a family man,  
But abandoned his wife and children and consorted with whores  
And died blind, covered by syphilitic sores.

From this I went on to try my hand at another clerihew. I wasn't especially interested in constructing one about a famous figure, past or present. Rather, I was interested in constructing one that would be a kind of puzzle, one that would require the reader to figure out what was going on. The result was not a very difficult puzzle, but I was fairly satisfied with it. It goes as follows:

Clara Hughes  
Was the name on which Miss Bow would muse  
When in her private heaven of heavens,  
She dreamed of marriage to Mrs. Charles Evans.

Feeling that this improbably pairing perhaps needed further explanation, I constructed a complementary clerihew.

Clara Hughes?  
Why on earth would Miss Bow choose  
That fate? Why, to be the little leave that leavens  
The big lump that was Mr. Charles Evans.

My only other foray into the form was to devise a tribute to the inventor of the clerihew. He (and others) had celebrated (or skewered) so many famous figures that I thought he deserved a clerihew of his own. I soon discovered that this was not an original thought. There were several already written, the best known of them being:

E. C. Bentley  
Mused while he ought to have studied intently.  
It was this muse  
That inspired clerihews.

I thought this was a little pedestrian, though it was definitely better than one written by the gentleman (who shall remain nameless) who called the clerihew “the lowest verse form in existence.” His goes as follows:

This form was evidently  
Invented by E. Clerihew Bentley.  
He did nothing else well,  
But what the hell.

This lacks wit because (among other things) it lacks truth. It is as unfair as it is ungenerous. The fact is that E. C. Bentley became a well-regarded and influential writer of detective fiction. His most famous novel, “Trent’s Last Case,” published shortly before World War I, is still read. It was the first work of detective fiction to make character and plot as important as the puzzle and it inaugurated the gold age of British detective fiction, as practiced by such writers as Agatha Christie and Dorothy Sayers. Bentley served as president of the prestigious Detection Club in London during much of this time. So he deserves better than the ill-informed put-down shown above.

My own effort to pay tribute to the inventor of the clerihew may be my last such effort, so I’ll close with it here:

E. C. Bentley  
Was a truly prodigious scholar, evidently.  
He authored dozens of biographies, so I’m told,  
Before he was even 17 years old.