AN ANAGRAM COMPOSING CONTEST

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With the exception of palindromes, anagrams are the most difficult kind of word puzzle to compose. The base phrase and the anagram must contain exactly the same letters, and (in the National Puzzlers' League, at least) the anagram must be apposite. The criteria for a "perfect" anagram are much stricter still: the anagram must agree in tense and number, precisely describe the base, and contain no filler such as exclamations, unrelated proper names, or irrelevant adjectives.

Given these strictures, it is not surprising that so few perfect anagrams have been created, and I was not expecting greatness when I ran an anagram-composition contest at the National Puzzlers' League 1982 Indianapolis convention. The resulting anagrams were far better than I had thought they would be, and may be of interest to Word Ways readers.

I prepared for the contest by selecting four bases which were conducive to anagramming. I chose the bases to have varying lengths, different ratios of easy to hard letters, and a reasonable vowel-consonant mix. Most importantly, the bases expressed thoughts that I felt were easy to paraphrase or give concrete examples for. The bases were:

April is the cruellest month
The wages of sin is death
The sexual revolution
How do I love thee? Let me count the ways

Seventeen people composed anagrams on at least one of these bases. I will discuss the results for each base separately.

April is the cruellest month

There were several distinct approaches to this base. One that I had not anticipated is exemplified by

Special IRS toll hurt me then.

Four others in a similar vein (the last one somewhat flawed) were

An IRS leech'll hurt me -- stop it!
IRS -- it'll plaster me then -- ouch!
IRS hits! all lucre to them pen
IRS lucre: lo then, Mal, the pits.

Some composers referred to the fact that the base is the first line of a poem by T. S. Eliot.

    T. S. Eliot: March is, then pure 'll
    Poet: lean'r time chills, hurts
    Poet, hurt, tells lies in March
    Curt poet-snarl: hellish time.

The final approach taken was to describe the time of the year, with no reference to poetry. These anagrams included

    Let March rule, then it spoils
    No erect tulips mar this hell
    Chillest role thru time span
    Stop March until Hell I steer.

There were also two antigrams along this line.

    March piles it on: truest Hell
    Lo, picture then! Hills, stream.

The wages of sin is death

Everyone followed the same idea here. I gave higher ratings to the ones that were truest to the base, that is, those which mentioned sin of some kind and death.

    He "swings", dies; a hot fate
    He hates God -- wastes; fini
    Sows hate, fate's nigh: die
    He who, "fasting", eats -- dies
    If he tastes gin: ow! Hades!
    I fight, was seen to Hades
    Swig -- headstone his fate
    As heist fee: had to swing.

More vague, and thus somewhat inferior, were

    Ha! Fiendish asset we got!
    Wish age? Dishonest? Fate!
    This wag said "honest fee"
    Atheist, we sing of Hades
    Wee sadist fan, he got his.

There was also a tri-anagram (three lines, each of which is a rearrangement of the base) submitted.

    T' gin he owes his sad fate. High sense? Was deaf to it. So the gin was his defeat.

And, finally, a voice from the past (1931):

    High fees owed satanist

The sexual revolution

This base, with its two Us and X, was the most difficult, but for some unknown reason also the most popular. I won't distinguish between anagrams and antigrams in this section since the determination rests on whether one thinks the sexual revolution is a Good Thing or a Bad Thing. First-rate anagrams were

Love's exultant hour, i.e.
Ah, exult in love so true
Oh, value lust exertion
Ah, love out ere " X" lust in.

On a completely different, Martin Buberish track was the lovely

Nous: I-thou extra level.

Anagrams related to the base but not totally apposite (or not as coherent) included

Arouse the love until " X"
Unlit house -- rate love " X"
Hue: lovers' exultation
Use hint: Relax! Love out!
True love -- exhaust loin
Our naive hotels exult
Usual love -- exert it, hon
Nix value, the rules too
O, enlist her! X out value
Ho, oust neuter; live lax
Exit lust, no love, U hear.

Last, but probably not least, there was the obscure

Eve's hotel, uxorial nut!

and the brilliant, if completely irrelevant

Volunteer oxtail hues

which the composer commented was an alternate spelling of "I give up".

How do I love thee? Let me count the ways

This base, with the greatest number of letters and a basically open-ended set of answers, drew the most disparate set of anagrams. The best ones were

We hie, touch, lay: methods one to twelve
Method one: Oh, we heave lustily. Two: etc.
One: we heed lust, move hotly. Two: I cheat
Twelve thousandth hotel -- I come -- Yowee!

Less apposite, but still acceptable, were

We could total seventy-two (he-hee; O, him?)
Once? Oh, twelve hot times would heat ye
Eye chum? One. Two. With those, devote all
Why Maude will choose to vote thee ten.

In the obscure and/or incoherent category we have

Ode to towel me with heavenly touches
Oh, many devices whet woo outlet, Ethel
Why? One, the live hut; two, loose dame; etc.
No. Themes I covet you? Wet, lewd -- heh, a lot!

Because of the gratifying results of my last contest, I am pleased to announce another one, this time for Word Ways readers. Send in one or more anagrams on any or all of the following four bases:

How I spent my summer vacation
Corporals and sergeants
He who hesitates is lost
Computer scientists

Results will be presented in a future issue of Word Ways.

QUERY

Randolph W. Hobler (47 Darwin Avenue, Hastings-on-Hudson, NY 10706) is interested in gathering examples of shibboleths from various languages. By shibboleth, he means a systematically-used word, phrase, or sentence which contains one or more phonemes which will trip up a non-native speaker of the language in question.

"The quick brown fox jumps over the lazy dog" contains all the letters of the alphabet, some more than once. Randolph Hobler is seeking a coherent, relatively pithy sentence which contains all the phonemes of the language (41? 42?), some more than once if necessary.