



## Prose and poetry techniques: Riddle

### Form

Riddles have no set form.

### Characteristics

A riddle is, of course, a verbal puzzle: an enigmatic statement, description or question posed by one person to another, or to a group, who have to guess the answer. We use the term loosely for more than one kind of puzzle. However, the riddle proper relies on imagery for its effects; often quite poetic imagery.

Here is a selection of traditional riddles in English:

I am within as white as snow,  
without as green as herbs that grow;  
I am higher than a house,  
and yet am lesser than a mouse.

Answer: Walnute on a tree

Old Mother Twitchett had but one eye,  
And a long tail which she let fly;  
And every time she went over a gap,  
She left a bit of her tail in a trap.

Answer: Needle and thread

Though of great age,  
I'm kept in a cage,  
Having a long tail and one ear,  
My mouth it is round,  
And when joys do abound,  
O, then I sing wonderful clear.

Answer: Bell in a steeple

I have a cock on yonder hill,  
I keep him for a wonder,  
And every time the cock do crow,  
It lightens, hails and thunders.

Answer: Shotgun

The last three riddles here all rely on misdirection by means of elaborate metaphors. As you will have noticed, all of these riddles are in verse form.

## History

The riddle is one of the most ancient of poetic forms. In England its known history begins with the Anglo-Saxons, who enjoyed composing complex riddles in verse. Here is one of the Anglo-Saxon riddles in translation:

Often I must war with the waves, fight with the wind -  
strive with both at the same time - when I depart to seek  
the earth beneath the waters; to me my home is an alien place.  
I am strong in the struggle if I hold still -  
if I slip, even slightly, they are stronger than I  
and, wrenching me loose, soon force me to flee;  
will carry away the thing I must keep safe.  
I can avoid this so long as my tail endures,  
and the stones against my strength have power  
to keep firm. Guess what I'm called.

Answer: Anchor

'The Exeter Book Riddles, No. 16', translated by Gillian Spraggs

This translation attempts to give some of the flavour of the elaborate patterns of alliteration found in the original (and in Anglo-Saxon verse in general).

In the 20<sup>th</sup> century Sylvia Plath wrote some poems with pronounced riddling qualities: see especially 'You're' and 'Metaphors'. Take away the title, and her poem 'Mushrooms' would make an excellent riddle.

## Advice

Many riddles have the names of objects for their answers. So why not see if a museum object inspires you to write a riddle?

The art of writing riddles is to tease the reader with clues that are both accurate and misleading. Think carefully about the nature of your chosen object. What are its characteristics? What metaphors come to mind when you try to describe these?

Extended metaphors are particularly useful. These are metaphors developed through more than one point of comparison. The last of the four traditional riddles on this page contains a particularly neat example of an extended metaphor: 'And every time the cock do crow, / It lightens, hails and thunders.'

Many riddles incorporate paradoxes (apparent contradictions). The last two lines of the first traditional example are paradoxical: 'I am higher than a house, / and yet am lesser than a mouse.' The fourth line of the Anglo-Saxon riddle is a bit of a paradox too.

A riddle about an object very often describes it as though it were some kind of strange creature, or even a person. Riddles in which the subject is made to address the reader directly are quite common, as you will have noticed from the examples. Cultivate a riddling habit of mind and the everyday world will be revealed as full of unexpected wonders.