Introduction

Riddle-poems are a lot of fun. They're an amusing game for children and adults, a connection to history, and a way to approach poetry that avoids the conceit and self-indulgence that lays waste to so much of it.

Anyone can appreciate riddle-poems, and almost anyone can learn to make them. By doing so, you can enjoy yourself, sharpen your wits, learn a new way to look at the world, and perhaps tap resources of creativity you never suspected yourself to have.

With the riddle-poem comes the riddle-game. To play the riddle-game, two or more people take turns making up riddles on the spot. You win points, or jellybeans, or whatever, by answering riddles correctly (we'll present some rules for a modern version of the riddle-game later). If you're feeling uninspired, you can use a riddle you've heard somewhere else, but doing that a lot is considered poor form. The riddle-game should be about creativity, not rote memory.

At this point, a lot of you are probably thinking Improvise poetry? I couldn't possibly! This isn't for me! But you can do it. One of the charms of the riddle-game is that it proves that poetry need not be an elite art. I'll show you how to make beautiful riddle-poems with simple methods that are play to use, not hard specialized work.

We know of many cultures that have riddle-poem traditions. The best-documented, and the one we'll be taking our model from, is the riddle-poem tradition of the Anglo-Saxons, the Vikings, and the Teutons. These peoples of the Dark Ages played the riddle-game around their hearth-fires for more than five hundred years. Some of their riddles have come down to us.

Here is a modern English translation of a simple riddle poem, over a thousand years old. It's from a very old manuscript called the Red Book of Exeter, which contains a treasury of Anglo-Saxon riddles. It's one of my favorites.

The Red Book of Exeter

A wonder on the wave / water became bone.

Riddle: A wonder on the wave / water became bone.

Answer: Ice on a lake or seashore.

Riddle: A hoard of rings am I, but no fit gift for a bride; I await a sword's kiss.

This simple one-line poem is an excellent example of the riddle-poem style. Good riddle-poems are terse, pithy, visual, rhythmic. Like haiku, they take their power from a compelling image.

To appreciate this poem fully, speak it to yourself out loud (the slash represents a caesura or pause). In the Dark Ages, poetry was a spoken art. Poems were written to be chanted or sung. Anglo-Saxon (the parent language of English) was a rolling, sonorous, thunderous language well-suited to poetry and oration. Some of this quality comes through even in translation.

Basic Riddle-Poem Construction

Here's an example of a riddle-poem in modern English in very traditional style and subject:

Riddle: A hoard of rings am I, but no fit gift for a bride; I await a sword's kiss.
Note that it doesn't rhyme. Rhyme is nice in a riddle-poem, but strong rhythm (what poets call good scansion) is better. Actually, traditional riddle-poems hardly employed rhyme for structure at all; they used an elaborate set of stress rules and a technique called alliteration which we'll describe later on.

Rhythm — speech rhythm — is all-important. In composing riddle-poems that sound good, a bit of role-playing helps. When you're working on one, try to imagine yourself chanting it to a hall-full of drunken Vikings. Do they pound the tables and roar? Do they laugh? Or do they just plain not get it?

Often you can get the right effect by sticking to muscular one-and two-syllable words in your poem — avoid anything Latin-sounding or elaborate. Sticking to concrete objects that anyone in a medieval setting might have seen is also a good idea.

That said, it's certainly possible to make riddles in the traditional style about modern subjects. Consider these two examples:

Supposing your Viking had ever seen an asphalt road, he'd like this one. Though he'd probably think it rather simple, a children's riddle. Here's another good children's riddle, contributed by Isobel Hooper:

Riddle: I am the black cloak of the road.

Answer: Asphalt

Riddle: Hard iron on horse / cow's hide on man.

Answer: Shoe

Riddle: I drink the blood of the Earth and the trees fear my roar yet a man may hold me in his hands.

Answer: Chainsaw.

The blood of the Earth, of course, is petroleum. This phrase is a good example of what Viking poets called a kenning, a poetic and indirect description of some simple thing or event — a riddle within the riddle-poem.

Some Viking kennings were used so conventionally that they became poetic cliches; for example, the ocean was called the whale-road, the sun as world-candle, battle referred to as a feast of eagles, warriors as spear-trees and generous chieftains as ring-givers (it was considered a mark of special favor for a Viking warrior to receive a ring or bracelet from the chieftain's own arm, and such a gift also confirmed and raised the status of the chieftain).

Other kennings were riddles in themselves, or ways of suggesting that a thing could be viewed in two or more ways. The riddle-poem above gets its power by suggesting some fearsome creature vast enough to feed on the Earth itself, and then paradoxically stating that the beast is small enough to be held in two hands.

Here is another, simpler riddle-poem with a similar
Anglo-Saxon Riddles

Riddle: Three red eyes have I, all in a row; 
When the red one opens, all freeze.

Giving the subject of the riddle the qualities of a person, and then having it describe itself poetically, is a very common style of riddle. The stoplight riddle isn't a particularly inspired one, though the first line makes neat use of the internal rhyme between eyes and I.

Here are a few more of this kind to think about:

Riddle: I am the hall-upholder, 
       once crowned in green.
Answer: Pillar carved from a tree-trunk.

Riddle: I am the yellow hem 
       of the sea's blue skirt.
Answer: Sand on a beach.

Riddle: I am the red tongue of the Earth, 
       that buries cities.
Answer: Lava from a volcano.

Riddle: The Moon is my father, 
       the Sea is my mother; 
I have a million brothers, 
I die when I reach land.
Answer: A wave on the ocean.

Another common form is to make poetic assertions about the subject that lead to an obvious image, which you then flatly deny, creating an air of paradox. (We saw this above in the chain-mail poem; but no fit gift...)

Riddle: Thousands lay up gold within this house, 
       but no man made it. 
Spears past counting guard this house, 
       but no man wards it.

Answer: A beehive. The spears are bee stings.
**Anglo-Saxon Riddles**

**J.R.R. Tolkien's Riddle-Poems**

In *The Hobbit*, there is an important scene in which Bilbo Baggins plays the riddle-game with Gollum in the orc passages of the Misty Mountains. Tolkien was an expert on the language and poetry of Anglo-Saxon; his riddles were clearly modeled on the riddle-poems in the *Red Book of Exeter*. Here they are:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Riddle</th>
<th>诗文</th>
<th>Answer</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>What has roots as nobody sees, Is taller than trees, Up, up it goes And yet never grows?</td>
<td>什么根不被人看见， 高于树木， 上升，但永不生长。</td>
<td>A mountain.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Thirty white horses on a red hill, First they champ, Then they stamp, Then they stand still.</td>
<td>三十匹白马在红山上， 首先咀嚼， 然后踩踏， 最后站立。</td>
<td>Teeth in your mouth.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Voiceless it cries, Wingless flutters, Toothless bites, Mouthless mutters.</td>
<td>无声地哭泣， 无翼地翻飞， 无牙地咬， 无嘴地低语。</td>
<td>The wind.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Moon is my father, the Sea is my mother; I have a million brothers, I die when I reach land.</td>
<td>月亮是我的父亲，海洋是我的母亲；我有无数的兄弟，我一到陆地就死亡。</td>
<td>A wave on the ocean.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>An eye in a blue face Saw an eye in a green face, &quot;That eye is like to this eye&quot; Said the first eye, &quot;But in low place, Not in high place.&quot;</td>
<td>蓝色脸上的眼睛 看到绿色脸上的眼睛，“那只眼睛像这只眼睛” 第一眼说，“但在低处，不在高处。”</td>
<td>Sun on a field of daisies.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>It cannot be seen, cannot be felt Cannot be heard, cannot be smelt. It lies behind stars and under hills, And empty holes it fills. It comes first and follows after, Ends life, kills laughter.</td>
<td>不可看见，不可感觉。 不可听见，不可闻。 它位于星星和山下， 填补空洞。 它先来后跟，终结生命，杀死笑声。</td>
<td>Darkness.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Anglo-Saxon Riddles

Riddle: A box without hinges, key, or lid,
Yet golden treasure inside is hid.
Answer: An egg.

Riddle: No-legs lay on one-leg,
Two-legs sat near on three-legs,
four legs got some.
Answer: Fish on a little table, man at table
sitting on a stool,
the cat ate the bones.

Riddle: This thing all things devours:
Birds, trees, beasts, flowers;
 Gnaws iron, bites steel;
 Grinds hard stones to meal;
 Slays king, ruins town,
 And beats high mountain down.
Answer: Time.

Notice an interesting thing about these. Tolkien, the poet and expert on Anglo-Saxon poetry, did not try to cast them in the Anglo-Saxon meter! Instead, he uses the simple end-rhymed verse of modern English folk poetry.

How to Make a Riddle-Poem

Work backwards. First, pick your answer. Then, imagine it speaking to you; describing itself, telling you what it does. Then make that into a little poem.

As I was thinking about the last paragraph, my eyes lit on the telephone beside my keyboard. I decided to make a riddle-poem for which telephone is the answer.

So I imagine the phone speaking to me. It says I carry the voices of people over many miles. That's a good start, but it's not specific enough; it could apply to a radio as well.

What distinguishes a phone from a radio? Wires. But if I mention wires directly, the riddle will be too obvious. So I think instead about what a phone looks like, analogizing it to a body. And I have it:

Riddle: One ear, one mouth, no legs,
But I will carry your voice a thousand miles.

This is pretty nice. But the scansion in the second line is not quite right.

_ / _ / _ _ / _ / _ / _ /
Anglo-Saxon Riddles

This is close to iambic pentameter. It could be improved by a one-syllable verb replacement for carry. There are lots of possibilities; take, waft, send, bear. I like bear for its archaic sound. And so we have it:

/   /       /    /        /   /
One ear, || one mouth, || no legs,
_ / _ / _ / _ / _ /
But I || will bear || your voice || a thou- || sand miles.

This is an easy riddle, but the construction worked well. In general, these are the steps you'll usually go through:

1. Pick a subject.
2. Imagine the subject speaking to you.
3. If that doesn't work, analogize the subject to a body or creature.
4. Adjust the description to the level of difficulty you want.
5. For best poetic effect, fix the scansion in the result.

Rules for the Riddle-Game

The riddle-game, played between two or more people, is a simple contest of poetry and wit. In the two-person version, players take turns posing each other riddles; each time, the answerer guesses and the riddler either agrees that the answer is correct or reveals the correct answer.

Each time a player fails to guess a riddle correctly, the riddler scores a point. In multi-player games, permit each player other than the riddler to guess; riddler gets one point for each wrong answer, but no points if no-one guesses correctly.

To prevent the tactic of simply posing vague or nonsensical riddles (especially in the two-player game), it is helpful to have a vocal audience. The audience gets to disallow a score, and dock the riddler a point, if they judge his/her riddle is badly made.

Also, players may award "style points" to each other, or the audience to either. A style point is due if the answerer thinks of an answer which is not what the riddler intended, but works just as well or better; or, from the audience, for any unusually poetic, tricky, or beautiful riddle.

The riddle-game works best if the players think of it not as cut-throat competition but as a performance art, like a jam session with words.

Adapted gratefully from http://catb.org/~esr/riddle-poems.html