



Private prescription:

A thought-provoking tonic on the lighter side

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Davy. However Davy did discover sodium in 1807. It is thought that this was the very first cleriheiw ever written and, to some, it has never been bettered. However, I prefer the one referring to James Dewar (1842–1923), the Scottish chemist [3]:

Professor Dewar
Is a better man than you are.
None of you asses
Can condense gasses.

It is interesting to note that this cleriheiw celebrates Dewar's work on the liquefaction of hydrogen in 1898 and was written when he was 63 and still experimenting at the Royal Institution in London; hence the use of the present tense.

The cleriheiw was immediately popular and was soon widely imitated. One of the most prolific of imitators was the American writer, Paul George Vincent O'Shaughnessy Horgan (1903–1995). Horgan was fascinated with the effects of history and landscapes on people and it is not surprising that he published several compilations of cleriheiw during his lifetime. A favourite of mine is the one Horgan wrote on Sigmund Freud (1856–1939), the psychoanalyst [4]:

Dr Sigmund Freud
Was self-employed.
As for what he did,
He invented the id.

Freud supported himself and his family as a private medical practitioner while working on his concept of the three agencies of the human personality – the ego, super-ego and id. The id specifically controls the psychic centre relative to sex and aggression.

Mathematical and chemical cleriheiw

Unlike limericks, cleriheiw on scientists especially those written by scientists in

Brief biographies

I cannot remember how many times I have been asked by organisers of conferences for a brief biography of myself, generally in not more than two sentences, to append to the programme of a conference they are planning sometime in the future. Of course, I always comply with something containing the important points such as position, place of work, experience and interests. However, the final submission always appears stilted and dull.

'A humorous pseudo-biographical quatrain'

One person who single-handedly turned the brief biography into an art form was Edmund Clerihew Bentley (1875–1956), the inventor of the cleriheiw, which is defined as 'a humorous pseudo-biographical quatrain, rhymed as two couplets, with lines of uneven length more or less in the rhythm of prose' [1]. Add to this the fact that the name of the individual who is the subject of the quatrain usually supplies the first line and that the cleriheiw is short and pithy, whimsical rather than satirical and often contains or implies a moral reflection of some kind then one can see the attraction of this kind of verse.

Early cleriheiw

Bentley, the son of a civil servant, was born and educated in London before graduating with a BA from the University of Oxford. He initially studied law, being called to the bar in 1901, but soon abandoned this for journalism writing for the *London Daily News* (1901–1912) and the *London Daily Telegraph* (1912–1934).

He first introduced the cleriheiw in his book *Biography for Beginners* published in 1905 under the pseudonym Edmund Clerihew. Although the majority of his original cleriheiw referred to politicians, authors, royalty and philosophers, Bentley did include a couple on scientists; for example the one on Humphry Davy (1778–1829), the famous chemist [2]:

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

In the original version, written several years earlier, Bentley used the word detested rather than abominated and in subsequent collections this is the word that is used. Of course, whether or not Davy did detest gravy is, and forever will be, unknown but this is not the point of the cleriheiw. It has only been included to rhyme with

science-based journals, are few and far between. Nevertheless, it is possible to find some if one searches hard enough, even if the majority are in the field of mathematics. In 1988, the *Mathematics Magazine* published four mathematical clerihews [5]. The clerihew on Pythagoras, the ancient Greek mathematician, rather than referring to his well-known theorem, concentrates on his philosophy that all existing things can be ultimately reduced to numbers:

Pythagoras
Did stagger us
And our reason encumber
With irrational number.

The clerihew on Pierre de Fermat (1601–1665), the French mathematician, concentrates on his most famous theorem and the fact that he did not published his proof.

Wily Fermat propounded,
'Many will be confounded
At the thought that my theorem
Is really quite near 'em.'

An interesting clerihew on a modern American mathematician Norbert Wiener (1894–1964) published in 1995 contrasts his enjoyment of his subject and dancing [6]:

Norbert Wiener
Was very much keener
On Fourier transforms
Than on acrobatic dance forms.

In 2000, the journal *Chemistry in Action* published several clerihews on chemists [7]. The one on Pierre Curie (1859–1906), the pioneer of radioactivity, is particularly poignant referring to his tragic accident:

Pierre Curie
Perhaps in a hurry
Maybe lost in thought
Under a tram was caught.

The one on Michael Faraday (1791–1867) alludes to the generally held belief that he was the supreme experimentalist:

Michael Faraday
In his heyday
Was the best in the lab...
Too bad his subject was so drab.

Drug discovery

As can be seen, many clerihews tend to be written in the past tense because those to whom they refer have often departed this world. However, this does not always have to be the case and, indeed, should not be the sole reason to write such a verse. Clerihews are about people, recognising achievements in a humorous rather than satirical way and this applies equally to both the living and dead. In fact, having a clerihew written about one, especially if one is a scientist, should be an honour. It is with this in mind, coupled with the fact that I have not found any clerihews on scientists working in drug discovery, that I dedicate the following to Sir James Black, the Nobel laureate for medicine in 1988 and father of modern pharmacology:

Sir James Black
Was taken aback.
He looked through the keyhole
And discovered pronethalol.

This relates to Black's initial invitation to join ICI Pharmaceuticals in 1958, his subsequent work on applying Ahlquist's theory of two types of adrenotropic receptors (the keyhole) and the discovery of the first beta-blocker pronethalol. In fact the last line could have also ended in propranolol, the successor to pronethalol and the first commercial beta-blocker [8].

Can you write a clerihew using the name of a scientist working in any aspect of drug discovery and development? If so, I would be grateful for a copy for my collection.

References

- 1 Stillman, F. (1966) *The Poet's Manual and Rhyming Dictionary*, Thames and Hudson, London
- 2 Clerihew, E. (1905) *Biography for Beginners*, T. Werner Laurie, London
- 3 Bentley, E.C. (2001) *The Complete Clerihews*, House of Stratus, London
- 4 Horgan, P. (1985) *The Clerihews of Paul Horgan*, Olympic Marketing Corporation, New York
- 5 Cushing, S. (1988) *Four Mathematical Clerihews*, *Mathematics Magazine*, 61, 23
- 6 Boas, R.P. (1995) *Lion Hunting and Other Mathematical Pursuits*, Mathematical Association of America
- 7 Malito, J. (2000) *Some Chemical Clerihews*, *Chemistry in Action*, 62, 30
- 8 Kennedy, C. (1993) *ICI The Company that Changed our Lives* (2nd edn), Paul Chapman Publishing, London

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