

LITERARY LIPOGRAMMATIC WINDOWS

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In this article I describe some results of looking for long sections of text in literary works that happen to be lipograms of various sorts. The investigation was carried out by a computer search of the 15000 books (mostly well-known works such as the Bible, the novels of Austen, Dickens, Twain, and so on) that have been put into electronic form by Project Gutenberg.

SINGLE-LETTER LIPOGRAMS

The classic lipogram, exemplified by Ernest Vincent Wright's *Gadsby* and Georges Perec's *La Disparition* (translated to *A Void in English*), is that which avoids the letter E. This letter occurs in English text about every seven or eight letters on average. It is therefore quite remarkable to find the following 133-letter E-less window in Charles Dickens' *Our Mutual Friend*:

"I threatened you," he says, "to chop you over the fingers with my boat's stretcher, or take [a aim at your brains with my boathook. I did so on accounts of your looking too hard at what I had in tow, as if you was suspicious, and on accounts of your holding on to th]e gunwale of my boat."

Although it's not prose, an even longer window of 155 letters occurs in the 1911 edition of *Roget's Thesaurus*, under Entry 312 (Rotation):

N. rotation, re[volution, spinning, gyration, turning about an axis, turning around an axis, circulation, roll; circumrotation, circumvolution, circumgyration; volution, circination, turbination, pirou]ette,

Is it not interesting that synonyms for rotation should eschew the vowel E in favor of one that resembles a circle?

The following 120-letter window from Shakespeare's "King Henry IV, Part I" depends upon the abbreviation of Hostess to Host.

Fal. ...Go, you thing, go!
Host. Say, what thing? what thing?
Fal. What thing? Why a thing to thank God on.
Host. I am no thing to thank God on, I would thou shouldst know it!

In Gilbert and Sullivan's play "Patience", one of Bunthorne's songs contains the following 90-letter window:

Sing "He[y to you--good day to you"--
 Sing "Bah to you--ha! ha! to you"--
 Sing "Booh to you--pooh, pooh, to you"--
 And that's what I shall say!
 I'll t]ell him that unless he will consent to be more jocular...

The first four lines are sung simultaneously by Bunthorne and Jane (who substitutes "you" for "I"), so one can argue that this lipogrammatic window is actually 178 letters in length!

A long lipogram in the letter T (the second-most-common letter in English) is found in the 1913 edition of Webster's Unabridged:

Archway, n. A way or passage under an arch.
 Archwife, n. [Pref. arch- + wife.] A big, masculine wife. [Obs., Chaucer].
 Arch-wise, adv. Arch-shaped.
 Archy, a. Arched; as, archy brows.
 -archy. [fr. Gr. -arches, chief. See Arch-, pref.] A suffix properly meaning a rule, ruling, as in 'monarchy'...

This window is 213 letters long, including the last 14 letters of the previous definition (the German Empire).

MULTIPLE LIPOGRAMS

Going beyond the simple single-letter lipogram, we first tried the half-alphabet constraint, in which no more than half of the alphabet is allowed in the window. The best example we found is from Edward Hale's translation of the letters of Christopher Columbus:

Sunday, October 14. "At daybreak I had the ship's boat and the boats of the caravels made ready, and I sailed along [the island, toward the north-northeast, to see the other port--what there was there--and also to see the towns, and I soon saw two or three, and the people, who all were] coming to the shore, calling us and giving thanks to God...

The 129 letters between the brackets use only ETAOINSHRDLPW.

Threnodials, a form of writing invented by Georges Perec of Oulipo, use only the eleven most common letters in English (namely, those in the word THRENODIALS) and hence are lipograms in the other fifteen. The average threnodial window in English is about four letters. Here is an 81-letter specimen from Isabel Hapgood's translation of *Les Misérables*:

"He is Jean Valjean, Javert's sav[ior! He is a hero! He is a saint!"
 "He's not a saint, and he's not a hero!" said Thenardier. "He's an
 assassin and a ro]bber."

Note the fortuitous similarity between the character's name and the word
 THRENODIALS.

A 68-letter poetic example is found in "Helen of Troy" by Sara Teas-
 dale:

Yet since the Greeks and Trojans would not see
 Aught but my body's f[airness, till the end,
 In all the islands set in all the seas,
 And all the lands that lie] beneath the sun;...

We next looked for lipograms in AIOUY--in other words, univocalic E-
 texts. This is a very difficult constraint, the average window length in
 English text being about three letters. Theodore Graebner's translation
 of Martin Luther's commentary on Galatians contains a nice 44-letter
 example:

Of Peter it is recorded that [he wept whenever he remembered the
 sweet gentleness] of Christ in His daily contact with people.

Even more difficult is the left-handed lipogram in which only the 15
 letters typed by the left hand on a typewriter are permitted. The best
 example we found is the 30-letter window from *Tom Swift And His Aerial
 Warship* by Victor Appleton:

Tom exclaimed, "I[t was a secret." "Few secrets are safe fr]om foreign
 Spies," declared Lieutenant Marbury.