

English 442 Exercise Three Shakespeare in Code: Sonnet Conversion

Part 3: Encode/Decode

The Aim Encode your sonnet using a schema that you design. This exercise has three parts: encoding, composition, and decoding. Once your sonnet has been encoded, you'll create a physical object out of it, give the object to someone else, and ask them to interpret it using a decoder.

The Text Sonnet #14 from Shakespeare:

01 Not from the stars do I my judgement pluck,
02 And yet methinks I have astronomy,
03 But not to tell of good, or evil luck,
04 Of plagues, of dearths, or seasons' quality,
05 Nor can I fortune to brief minutes tell;
06 Pointing to each his thunder, rain and wind,
07 Or say with princes if it shall go well
08 By oft predict that I in heaven find.
09 But from thine eyes my knowledge I derive,
10 And constant stars in them I read such art
11 As truth and beauty shall together thrive
12 If from thy self, to store thou wouldst convert:
13 Or else of thee this I prognosticate,
14 Thy end is truth's and beauty's doom and date.

Task Step 1: The "input" setup. All together:
In Class

- Reread the poem and look at how it's structured.
- Think of all the encoding systems we currently have around us. Visual: words, pictographs, icons, symbols, type. Aural: music, telephony. Tactile: Braille, coin design (edge milling and image relief).
- Make a list of possible encoding systems. There are two kinds: lossless, and lossy. Lossless encoding loses no information, for example if you have the "decoder" you should be able to completely reconstitute the poem word for word. Lossy encoding in the context of this assignment is more abstract: for example, you might want to encode just the nouns and adjectives, or just the rhyme scheme, or just the figurative language. When the reader "decodes" the poem, they will not see the original; they will see only what you've chosen to encode.

Task Step 2: Come up with the "output" solution yourselves, in pairs.
Lab Session

- Decide on the encoding system you're going to use.
 - What are you going to choose to encode? Grammatical features? Scansion? Poetic devices (metaphor, imagery, motif)? Sounds?
 - What kind of system are you going to use? Letters? Binary? Color? Space? Rebus (pictures that you sound out)?
- Develop your schema. This is where you lay out the "rules" for the system you will use and define what each part means. For example,
 - All nouns will be encoded as "red"; or
 - For each noun, go to the dictionary, count 9 nouns ahead, and replace the noun (this is called the "n+9" formula in Oulipo); or

- More figurative: for each poetic device, use emblems and tokens (remember English 324? Emblem=an object representing a “thing”, token=an object representing a “counter” or other abstract). For example, you could have emblems representing “weather,” and tokens representing “good” and “bad”, and combine them.
- Write down the rules for your encoding system. This will also become your decoder.
- Decide what you’re going to do with the sonnet once it’s encoded, i.e. what format the object should take. (Think: how can you use objects to convey simple bits of information, e.g. colored buttons, string, knots, cube faces.)
- You’ll have the next three weeks to build a schema, encode the sonnet and then build an object with that code. The object should come with a “decoder.”

Next Week & Following Bring in all your materials and start encoding and assembling your object and decoder.