

A Line Alone: One-Liners  
in Comedy, Computation, and Poetry

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**Abstract**

One-liners are found in stand-up comedy, creative computing done in high-level programming languages, and Western poetry — the specific form of the poetic one-liner is the monostich. I consider at what distinguishes such one-liners from other utterances, programs, and texts. I seek common aspects of the poetics of these three one-liners to inform my own work and discuss one major similarity: Something simple and apprehended at once opens up to a new and complex universe. In considering my *101 BASIC Poems* project, where I have expanded creative one-line compositions to better allow readers to learn about computing, I find a new wrinkle. Despite my formal constraint, only a subset of my *101 BASIC Poems* are one-liners in the strongest sense. Identifying which ones are, however, helps me strengthen the project.

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## What Makes a One-Liner?

Orthographic symbols all typeset on a single line — this simple idea is straightforward, but not enough to define textual one-liners. The consensus concepts differ within computing and within poetry, where there are slightly different ideas about a line. The comedic one-liner, an oral form, has its own standard.

### The Poetic Line Across Time

A “line” in poetry presupposes that the poem is in verse, that is, is lineated. In a contemporary framework, prose poems and many visual poems do not have lines in the metrical or typographical sense. Thus, Carolyn Forché’s one-paragraph prose poem “The Colonel” is hardly a one-liner, although it has no line breaks.<sup>1</sup> Although Emmett Williams writes that concrete poems have “lines of force,”<sup>2</sup> much visual poetry is not lineated in the usual way: Consider Ana María Urbe’s print typoems and digital anipoems or Dom Sylvester Houédard’s typestracts.

While today’s deviations from the line are worth noting, the poetic line begins in orality. Meter determined the lines of early poems. Even what we literate thinkers understand as the “word” is not as meaningful a unit in orature, as Walter Ong explains:

Goody (1977, p. 115) has pointed out that an entirely oral language which has a term for speech in general, or for a rhythmic unit of a song, or for an utterance, or for a theme, may have no ready term for a “word” ... If you cannot write, is “textbased” one word or two?<sup>3</sup>

A modern example, found in one of the hotbeds of highly literate culture, is a Harvard Square restaurant that has two signs, one announcing its name as “Boathouse” and one as “Boat House.” Ong finds that not only “word” but also “line” is a literate concept —

1 The Poetry Foundation’s site and Poets.org by The American Academy of Poets actually disagree about whether this poem, a canonical example of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century American prose poem, is lineated. At <https://poets.org/poem/colonel>, the poem will reflow as paragraphs typically do and is represented in HTML as a paragraph, in a single paragraph element on line 120 of the file. At <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/49862/the-colonel>, the poem is represented in a paragraph with line breaks that spans lines 746–770. Underneath the poem’s date (May 1978) in this Poetry Foundation presentation there is a copyright notice: “All lines from “The Colonel” from *The Country Between Us* by Carolyn Forché, Copyright (c) 1981 by Carolyn Forché” [emphasis mine].

2 Introduction. *An Anthology of Concrete Poetry*. New York: Something Else Press, 1967. p. vi.

3 Ong, Walter. *Orality and Literacy*. London and New York: Routledge, 2002. pp. 59–60.

true, obviously, if a line is understood as written or printed characters in a row. However, “line” also refers to that “rhythmic unit of a song.” It could also be what rappers call a “bar,” a term derived from an inscription in musical notation. So the line (named with reference to literature culture, understood rhythmically) is not only important; it is more fundamental to poetry than is the word.<sup>4</sup>

A printer working with a letterpress machine and foundry type would speak of a line as a single composed row of this type.<sup>5</sup> Whether in manuscript or when typeset, a metrical line can be inscribed on multiple material lines but still be a rhythmic unit — a poetic line.<sup>6</sup>

As poetry extended into realms that were not metrical, the poetic line came to be involved with syntax, breath, and rhythm in new ways. Non-metrical lines in American verse include the long lines of Whitman and Ginsberg, not in traditional meter. These can, and almost always must, run over more than one typographical line while retaining their integrity as poetic lines.

The poetic line has been often discussed, almost always assuming that poems have many of them. The very idea that the line is a “broken thing”<sup>7</sup> begins with the assumption that there is some preexisting unitary text to be broken into multiple lines.

### The Line of Code

While there is a relationship between the poetic line and the line of code, “line” is not strictly synonymous in these contexts. One piece of evidence: Poetic and programming traditions are similar in France and in the United States, but the classical French term for a line of poetry is “vers” (the same term as for “verse” itself) while “ligne” (“ligne de code”) indicates a line of source code.<sup>8</sup> English-language lexicographers agree that the word “line” has two distinct senses corresponding to these; current editions of *The Oxford English Dictionary* and *Merriam-Webster* both place the poetic and programming senses under the same major sense (along with the typographical line) but distinguish them. While distinct, there are some curious connections between these two “lines.”

A computer program’s lines are now delimited by newlines. This means that whether one views code as hardcopy, printed output or on a video display, the lines can

4 Thus the profound importance of “A Gutenberg Poetry Corpus” by Allison Parrish, used to develop her book *Articulations*. This line-based corpus is likely to be the first one truly native to verse. Parrish, Allison. “A Project Gutenberg Poetry Corpus.” Slides from a presentation at the Electronic Literature Organization conference, 2018. <http://static.decontextualize.com/project-gutenberg-poetry-corpus-export.pdf>

5 A line could also be of quads, which will make no impression. This is called a “white line,” and serves to further highlight the strictly material (rather than conceptual) perspective of a printer. Southward, John. *Practical Printing: A Handbook of the Art of Typography*. p. 251. 1884.

6 Prose as well as poetry is printed in lines; the lines are simply ones determined during typesetting rather than by the writers. The distinction between verse and prose as modes of poetry is not always clear for several reasons. See Dworkin, Craig. *Radium of the Word: A Poetics of Materiality*. Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press. 2021. Particularly pp. 21–26.

7 Rosko, Emily, and Anton Vander Zee. *A Broken Thing: Poets on the Line*. University of Iowa Press, 2011. Some poets in this collection, e.g. Kimiko Hahn, did write about single-line poems. See also Stephanie Strickland’s essay, which relates lines of poetry to lines of code.

8 An older way to refer to line of poetry in English, infrequently used in the US today, is as a “verse.”

exceed the output device's width. The overflow can be unseen, so that one would have to scroll right to see the rest of the line on screen, or the lines can be soft wrapped so that a single line of code or "logical" line appears on several "physical" or material lines.

On the Commodore 64, for instance, a line of BASIC code, when typed in, can occupy 80 characters, although the screen only has a width of 40.<sup>9</sup> An Applesoft BASIC line (on the Apple II family of computers) can be 240 characters long, although that display is by default also 40 characters wide — it can be expanded with hardware to 80 on some Apple II models. One does not have to be a media archaeologist to find logical code lines that exceed the output device's width. Simply selecting "View Page Source" on many Web pages will show lines of HTML that run off the right edge of the browser. When it comes to code, then, a one-liner is not what fits on an output device. It is also not generally a single command, any more than one line of HTML needs to hold a single HTML element. In most dialects of BASIC, multiple commands can be put on a single line by placing colons between them. To take the most formal and strict stance, a one-liner is a program that has zero or one line terminators, and, if it has one, it's at the end.

### **The Comedic One-Liner**

In stand-up comedy, as in theater, performers memorize and deliver *lines* that are originally written. Conventional wisdom holds that a stand-up routine is composed of jokes, with each joke composed of a setup followed by a punchline. (Sometimes the comedian adds a "tag," a sort of extra punchline.) The setup could be a story that takes a little while to relate. The punchline swerves from the assumptions the listener has made about this setup, with the incongruity resulting in laughter.

The comedic one-liner bundles some very concise setup into a single sentence — in oral terms, a single utterance — that also provides the payload of the punchline. For instance, Henny Youngman's "Take my wife, *please*."<sup>10</sup> The comedian appears to be introducing his wife as an example for some more extended setup, but then in a single word pivots to pleading that she be removed.

As in poetry, as in code, a comedy one-liner does not have to be a one-line inscription. It is one line for the performer to memorize. From the standpoint of the audience, the punchline follows so immediately after the setup that they are as one, but the structure often does not differ from that of a longer joke.

### **The Poetics of One-Liners**

Now that we know what a one-liner is, how to compose ones that excel? Guided by chiasmus, we'll consider comedy first, poetry last.

<sup>9</sup> The complexities don't end there. Using keyword abbreviations, one can enter a Commodore 64 BASIC line that expands, upon being listed, to more than two physical lines — which then makes it impossible to edit. And directly manipulating the BASIC memory region by POKEing values into it allows for even longer lines.

<sup>10</sup> The comedy one-liners I cite are by particular comics, but belong to oral culture and have been used over many years in many different routines. A bibliographic style of citation doesn't suit them.

## Sucker Punchlines

In comedy, the transgressed assumptions of the one-liner occur so quickly that there is hardly time to make assumptions in the first place. Steven Wright's "What's another word for thesaurus?" provides an example of where it is hard to even identify a setup. Mitch Hedberg presented a perplexing assertion that he would resolve hilariously: "The nice thing about escalators is that they never really break, they just become stairs." While we are still caught off guard by something that doesn't sound right (escalators do break), the punchline arrives.

There are many highly effective one-liners in which comedians who are of particular ethnoracial standing and/or non-male confront the audience with stereotypes, eliciting laughter which should be (and perhaps at some point becomes?) uncomfortable. Without quoting any such one-liners, it would be remiss not to mention the work of comedians such as Chris Rock or Sarah Silverman, whose memorable one-liners can have a very slow burn or long fuse, leading those who recall or repeat them later to think further about the social dimensions of their self-deprecating quips.

Of course, none of these one-liners have their full comic force as written texts. They cause laughter because of the particular personae of the performers, the sometimes deadpan and sometimes extremely anxious delivery, and because of that which is most important in comedy.<sup>11</sup>

## One Infinite Loop

In code, many classic one-liners don't even have initialization. They immediately do one step of what they are going to do and then loop, continuing to do that step, often until the program is interrupted. This is not a hard-and-fast rule. Some one-liners do contain initialization while others only execute a bit of code once. But, for instance, the first one-liner presented in the "Magic" column of *RUN* magazine, a program called "Burrow," causes the cursor to move up, right, down, or left at random, appearing to dig at each step by displaying an inverted space. It does the same thing at each step, as with the maze-drawing program `10 PRINT CHR$(205.5+RND(1)); : GOTO 10`, which collaborators and I discussed (along with other one-liners) in a book of the same name.<sup>12</sup> A capsule poetics for the one-line program might be: "run this tiny bit of code again and again, and you'll see how the work it does becomes surprisingly compelling."

## Monostich Poetics

The one-line poem is an established form in the West, the monostich. Such poems were written in Ancient Greek before the third century BCE, with many being attributed to Menander. A monostich won't tell an extended narrative or set up a framework of expectation, of course, but can do much of what other poems do: present an image, offer musical language, metaphorically describe something, use reference and allusion

<sup>11</sup> Timing.

<sup>12</sup> Montfort, Nick, Patsy Baudoin, John Bell, Ian Bogost, Jeremy Douglass, Mark C. Marino, Michael Mateas, Casey Reas, Mark Sample, and Noah Vawter. *10 PRINT CHR \$(205.5+ RND (1));: GOTO 10*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2012. See particularly "REM One-Liners," pp. 45–49.

to make intertextual connections, and even provide metrical satisfaction.

Consider the often-discussed<sup>13</sup> “Chantre” [Singer] by Apollinaire: “Et l’unique cordeau des trompettes marines.” Resonant with several instances of paronomasia (“puns,” to use a more colloquial term), the line refers explicitly to a one-stringed instrument. When read aloud, the single string of words imitates its sound. The singer is (at least) the marine trumpet, the poem’s text, and the reader. The line is in the most canonical French meter, the 6 + 6 alexandrine, unmistakable even without any surrounding lines.<sup>14</sup>

There are 21<sup>st</sup> Century one-line poems with important metrical aspects. Consider this one, from a book of minimal poems by Craig Dworkin,<sup>15</sup> annotated to indicate stress:

DOCKS

floáting ĩn ă líne ǒn thě wátěr ĩn thě líght

Has Dworkin, like Apollinaire, presented us with a metrically standard and exact line? Because there are twelve syllables, no — an iambic pentameter line with no substitutions has ten, or, with a feminine ending, eleven. But to try scanning this as pentameter *with* substitutions:

floáting | ĩn ă líne | ǒn thě wát- | ěr ín | thě líght

With a trochee to start followed by two anapestic substitutions, the line can be read (or scanned) as pentametrical, but it obviously wasn’t crafted, as Apollinaire’s no doubt was, to be a perfect and central exemplar of English verse. In addition to having only two iambs, the third-to-last syllable (“in”) doesn’t really ask for much stress, although it might be raised to have some. I read this as slapping up against pentameter with regularity and irregularity, like water against docks. Like “Chantre,” it is a line about a line, here with a rhythm evocative of what its title names. While there is more to say about the musicality of the line and its image, this suffices to show that meter remains relevant.

Scansion is less likely to help crack the nut of Charles Bernstein’s recent monostich:

*People Are the Same the World Over*

I am not the same as myself.<sup>16</sup>

The humor is advanced by its one-line text being shorter than its title, whether one

13 See for instance Cordonier, Noël. “La poésie et l’éclectisme critique en situation scolaire : l’exemple de « Chantre » d’Apollinaire,” *Pratiques : linguistique, littérature, didactique* 67, 1990, pp. 87–103, <https://doi.org/10.3406/prati.1990.1617>, which includes a bibliography of eleven critical articles discussing the poem in depth.

14 Bories, Anne-Sophie. “Sex, Wine and Statelessness: Apollinaire’s Verse without Borders in ‘Vendémiaire.’” *Modern Languages Open* 1. November 1, 2019. <http://doi.org/10.3828/mlo.v0i0.221>

15 In *Motes*. New York: Roof Books. 2011. p. 59.

16 In *The Minute Review* 2:3, December 2021, p. 2.

counts syllables or letters. The title is a truism to which Bernstein's line, in its simple complexity, replies. There are a multitude of possible allusions, but the line certainly calls to the most famous "myself" in American poetry — in the title of Whitman's book — and to that poet's well-known assertion that he "contain[s] multitudes." Since the title is a cliché, it may lead the reader to associate the text of the poem with idiomatic phrase "beside myself," as in, very angry. That's an alternative to people all over getting along peacefully. Or, maybe the poem doesn't actually refute the title. Maybe people are all the same in that they each contain multitudes. If this monostich is a joke, it's a joke that keeps on giving.

### Reading across the Lines

We might guess that these three sorts of one-liners have little to say to each other, because one-liners speak succinctly and conclude — or do they? Most code one-liners don't, in the sense that they perform their processing again and again. The monostich often replies to its title and opens up opportunities for reflection, encouraging a reader to read again and think further. Even the comedy one-liner delivers an incongruity that can stay with audience members *longer* than that of a lengthy joke, because these short jokes not only are easy for the performer to memorize — they are memorable for listeners.

Some poetic principles definitely underlie all three. For instance: be parsimonious. But this principle isn't special to the one-liner. Whatever the poem, program, or joke is being composed, there is no reason to add anything unnecessary.

The special thing about all three sorts of one-liners is that while they seem boiled down to almost nothing, and are to be grasped at once, they also open up to offer a reconfigured understanding that is broad, if not universal — making the line what Antoine Fongaro, writing about "Chantre," called "Un vers univers."<sup>17</sup> Although we may be most inclined to see this in the monostich, this quality can be found in comedic one-liners and one-line programs, too, which, in the former case, reconfigure our thinking through incongruity and, in the latter, reveal unexpected and powerful effects of computation.

### Expanding Universes and a Complication

I am undertaking a lengthy project, *101 BASIC Poems*, to write programs that are creative works and respond to poems, artworks, and creative computing productions. These are for the Apple II series of computers and for the Commodore 64. The main constraint I place on myself is that when I initially compose these programs/poems, they must formally fit on a single line.<sup>18</sup>

Part of my overall project is to help those new to programming empower themselves and understand computation. Writing short programs can help here, as it limits the overall complexity of computation. But my constraint has resulted in many

17 "Un vers univers," *Revue des lettres modernes* 450, *Guillaume Apollinaire* 13, pp. 109–118.

18 Montfort, Nick. "A Platform Poetics: Computational Art, Material and Formal Specificities, and *101 BASIC Poems* (2013–)." *the digital review* 01, September 12, 2021. <https://doi.org/10.7273/ba27-s438>

programs/poems that are difficult to understand.

To address this, I have been expanding these one-liners. Consider my work in “Pulse,” a program that makes the border region change endlessly from white to black and back again through the Commodore 64’s few shades of gray. I wrote this poem/program in a compact form:

```
00#0,11,12,15,1,15,12,11:FPI=0T07:R-A:PF  
53280,A:FPP=0T080:N-:N-:RE#:GF
```

Recall that, although this visually spans two lines, it fits in 80 characters and has a single line number (0) and a single line terminator. Any BASIC programmer would identify the program as having a single line. I then expanded this (formal) one-liner to:

```
10 DATA 0, 11, 12, 15, 1, 15, 12, 11  
20 FOR I = 0 TO 7  
30 READ HUE  
40 POKE 53280, HUE  
50 FOR P = 0 TO 80  
60 NEXT P  
70 NEXT I  
80 RESTORE  
90 GOTO 20
```

To anyone not familiar with BASIC and the Commodore 64, this second form may seem equally opaque. It lacks comments. The meaning of the numbers on line 10 is hardly self-evident. The effect of line 40 (changing the border color) will only be known to initiates. It is the case that the variable name “HUE” provides a bit of a clue that “A” does not. But this form has a few other advantages, too: While it’s not even clear how to type in the previous, compact “one-liner,” this latter form can be read and input by anyone familiar with a keyboard, and it can be done using an emulator and a modern computer. If the person typing the program in makes a mistake, an error message will helpfully indicate the specific part of the program with the typo. And it becomes possible to explore what happens if the program is modified. For instance, what if different values are substituted for those eight at the beginning, or the “80” in line 50 is changed to some value much larger or smaller?

The problem, of course, is that the elaborated program is no longer a line alone. It may be short, but it is neither formally a one-liner nor something that (most) readers could immediately grasp. Perhaps even the original version of “Pulse” never really was, despite my constraint: It met a technical, but not a poetic, criterion. This is not true of all my *101 BASIC Poems*. Some of them, if they have a meaning to readers at all as computational artifacts, will be understood immediately. But among many poems *limited* to a single formal line, only some are “one-liners” in a poetic sense.

Although I have tried to construct truly minimal universes that unfold in the way great one-liners do, some of these are not big bangs that start as a tiny dot. This insight should give pause<sup>19</sup> to anyone who imagines a brief run of creative code, even one with a fine effect, to have the same inherent unity as an excellent comedic one-liner or a

<sup>19</sup> FOR P = 0 TO 80 : NEXT P



monostich. For me, it means that I will arrange my poems/poems to invite progressive understanding (not just according to cultural themes) and apply appropriate poetic principles to those that are simpler and those that are more complex.

There is one thing I am reassured about, however, because a poetic line of a true monostich does not become multiple lines when typeset as such, for instance on a poster.

Let's look at a program of mine that I consider a true one-liner. With awareness of the text it refers to, this one can (at least potentially) unfold its universe with sudden understanding. The program is an homage to Ron Padgett's sonnet, "Nothing in That Drawer," a poem that simply consists of fourteen repetitions of "Nothing in that drawer." Each line in Padgett's poem is *lexically* the same, and yet each line in my reading refers to a different drawer, pulled open by the expectant speaker at a different moment. The poem, as I read it, suggests that the sonnet is a line a cabinet in which poets can place wondrous things, even if Padgett himself, as a joke, has left his empty.

To put my own twist on the joke, I have developed an extremely simple program that prints the same line an unbounded number of times; it will keep going until the user presses the RUN STOP key or cuts off the power. My program is called "File Not Found." The computer can, after all, keep opening drawers — even the same drawer — inanelly and indefinitely:<sup>20</sup>

```
0?"Nothing in that drawer.":GOTO 10
```

This one can be expanded, too, so that each line presents only one statement, for the sake of clarity.

```
10 PRINT "Nothing in that drawer."  
20 GOTO 10
```

Having carried out this process of elaboration, however, I find that the snappiness of the original program is only enhanced. Whether I tag ": GOTO 10" formally onto the end of the single line or place it on a new line 20 doesn't seem to change how straightforward the program's underlying process is. So while some of my programs that formally fit into a single line may not match the poetics of the one-liner, I also feel empowered to present clearer, multi-line versions of some of my programs that are one-liners, based on my understanding of code, comedy, and poetry.

<sup>20</sup> This program is presented here in lowercase mode, but an alternate version has the message in all-caps, using the standard mode with uppercase letters and graphical symbols.