

UIL Literary Criticism

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Poetry Explication: Sonnet Forms

The sonnet is a poem almost invariably of fourteen lines and following, perhaps with variance, one of several set rhyme schemes.

Petrarchan (Italian) sonnet	abbaabba cdcddc (or one of several two-rhyme or three-rhyme combinations <i>without</i> couplet)
envelope sonnet	abba cddc . . .
Spenserian sonnet	abab bcbc cdcd ee
Shakespearean (English) sonnet	abab cdcd efef gg
Miltonic sonnet	abbaabba cdcddc (no volta: octave and sestet "combined")
Anglo-Norman sonnet	abab cdcd eeffe abab cdcd efgef ababcdcd efgfe
hybrid sonnet	various combinations of elements characterizing the Italian and the English forms
French sonnet	eleven-syllable lines
caudate sonnet	the Italian (usually) sonnet with an additional (usually six) lines: "tails"
curtal sonnet	a sonnet whose octave is curtailed to six lines and sestet is curtailed to four and a half lines
variants	tributes, no doubt, to the basic form

Petrarchan sonnet (Italian sonnet)

London, 1802

Milton! thou shouldst be living at this hour:
England hath need of thee: she is a fen
Of stagnant waters: altar, sword, and pen,
Fireside, the heroic wealth of hall and bower,
Have forfeited their ancient English dower
Of inward happiness. We are selfish men;
Oh! raise us up, return to us again;
And give us manners, virtue, freedom, power.
Thy soul was like a Star, and dwelt apart;
Thou hadst a voice whose sound was like the sea:
Pure as the naked heavens, majestic, free,
So didst thou travel on life's common way,
In cheerful godliness; and yet thy heart
The lowliest duties on herself did lay.

William Wordsworth

Sonnet 90

She let her gold hair scatter in the breeze
that twined it in a thousand sweet knots,
and wavering light, beyond measure, would burn
in those beautiful eyes, which are now so dim:
and it seemed to me her face wore the colour
of pity, I do not know whether false or true:
I who had the lure of love in my breast,
what wonder if I suddenly caught fire?
Her way of moving was no mortal thing,
but of angelic form: and her speech
rang higher than a mere human voice.
A celestial spirit, a living sun
was what I saw: and if she is not such now,
the wound's not healed, although the bow is slack.

Francesco Petrarch
(trans. A. S. Kline)

Anglo-Norman sonnet

Leda and the Swan

A sudden blow: the great wings beating still
 Above the staggering girl, her thighs caressed
 By the dark webs, her nape caught in his bill,
 He holds her helpless breast upon his breast.
 How can those terrified vague fingers push
 The feathered glory from her loosening thighs?
 And how can body, laid in that white rush,
 But feel the strange heart beating where it lies?
 A shudder in the loins engenders there
 The broken wall, the burning roof and tower
 And Agamemnon dead.

Being so caught up,
 So mastered by the brute blood of the air,
 Did she put on his knowledge with his power
 Before the indifferent beak could let her drop?

William Butler Yeats

Shakespearean sonnet (English sonnet)

Sonnet 18

Shall I compare thee to a summer's day?
 Thou art more lovely and more temperate:
 Rough winds do shake the darling buds of May,
 And summer's lease hath all too short a date:
 Sometime too hot the eye of heaven shines,
 And often is his gold complexion dimm'd;
 And every fair from fair sometime declines,
 By chance or nature's changing course untrimm'd;
 But thy eternal summer shall not fade
 Nor lose possession of that fair thou owest;
 Nor shall Death brag thou wander'st in his shade,
 When in eternal lines to time thou growest:
 So long as men can breathe or eyes can see,
 So long lives this and this gives life to thee.

William Shakespeare

Anniversary

At dinner, in that careful rouge of light
 of five or six martinis, you could pass
 for Ginger Rogers; we could dance all night
 on tiny tabletops as slick as glass
 in flying, shiny shoes. As Fred Astaire,
 my wrinkles grow distinguished as we dine,
 my bald spot festers with the growth of hair,
 I grow intelligent about the wine.
 But such high life is taxing; urgencies
 excuse us from the table. Hand in hand
 we seek the restrooms, trembling at the knees,
 and find our grins grown horrid in that land
 of flare-lit, glaring mirrors. Through the wall
 you flush your toilet like a lonely call.

Ted Kooser

Spenserian sonnet

Sonnet LIV

Of this World's theatre in which we stay,
 My love like the Spectator idly sits,
 Beholding me, that all the pageants play,
 Disguising diversely my troubled wits.
 Sometimes I joy when glad occasion fits,
 And mask in mirth like to a Comedy;
 Soon after when my joy to sorrow flits,
 I wail and make my woes a Tragedy.
 Yet she, beholding me with constant eye,
 Delights not in my mirth nor rues my smart;
 But when I laugh, she mocks: and when I cry
 She laughs and hardens evermore her heart.
What then can move her? if nor mirth nor moan,
 She is no woman, but a senseless stone.

Edmund Spenser

Miltonic sonnet

[When I consider how my light is spent]

When I consider how my light is spent
 Ere half my days in this dark world and wide,
 And that one Talent which is death to hide
 Lodged with me useless, though my soul more bent
 To serve therewith my Maker, and present
 My true account, lest He returning chide,
 "Doth God exact day-labour, light denied?"
 I fondly ask. But Patience, to prevent
 That murmur, soon replies, "God doth not need
 Either man's work or his own gifts. Who best
 Bear his mild yoke, they serve him best. His state
 Is kingly: thousands at his bidding speed,
 And post o'er land and ocean without rest;
 They also serve who only stand and wait."

John Milton

curtal sonnet

Pied Beauty

Glory be to God for dappled things—
 For skies of couple-colour as a brinded cow;
 For rose-moles all in stipple upon trout that swim;
 Fresh-firecoal chestnut-falls; finches' wings;
 Landscape plotted and pieced—fold, fallow, and plough;
 And áll trádes, their gear and tackle and trim.

All things counter, original, spare, strange;
 Whatever is fickle, freckled (who knows how?)
 With swift, slow; sweet, sour; adazzle, dim;
 He fathers-forth whose beauty is past change:
 Praise him.

Gerard Manley Hopkins

To His Book

Wafer; thin and hard and bitter pill I
 Take from time to time; pillow I have lain
 Too long on; holding the brief dreams, the styled
 Dreams, the nightmares, shadows, red flames high
 High up on mountains; wilted zinnias, rain
 On dust, and great weight, the dead dog, and wild

Onions; mastodonic woman who knows how,—
 I'm tired of you, tired of your insane
 Acid eating in the brain. Sharp stones, piled
 Particularly, I let you go. Sink, or float, or fly now,
 Bad child.

Leon Stokesbury

envelope sonnet (Italian sonnet variant)

The Rural Carrier Stops to Kill a Nine-Foot Cottonmouth

Lord God, I saw the son-of-a-bitch uncoil
 In the road ahead of me, uncoil and squirm
 For the ditch, squirm a hell of a long time.
 Missed him with the car. When I got back to him, he was all
 But gone, nothing left on the road but the tip-end
 Of his tail, and that disappearing into Johnson grass.
 I leaned over the ditch and saw him, balled up now, hiss.
 I aimed for the mouth and shot him. And shot him again.

Then I got a good strong stick and dragged him out.
 He was long and evil, thick as the top of my arm.
 There are things in this world a man can't look at without
 Wanting to kill. Don't ask me why. I was calm
 Enough, I thought. But I felt my spine
 Squirm, suddenly. I admit it. It was mine.

T. R. Hummer

hybrid sonnet

Visionary Oklahoma Sunday Beer

The small window opened. I asked for the six-pack
 I paid for, then I saw the women playing pool
 In the loud and common light where ball and stick
 Have always met.

The oldest on a high stool

Was as big as a mound but wasn't simply fat.
 She glistened and shouted—she was having great fun
 With all the other Indians—each one great
 With child in a way to make that bulb a sun.

All fancy with no men around they played.
 Hey, let me in is what I think I said.
 I meant of course to ask where are your men
 And what of pageantry and life and death?

Her break and a brown arm closed down
 A show I would have stayed a season with.

James Whitehead

caudate sonnet (tailed sonnet)

The Only Comfort Always There

No one to hold brings tears to downcast eyes;
 I know there is no one to see them through
 the lonely nights when I am one, not two.
 No mental tricks or voiced words could disguise
 the pain brought to light by all past goodbyes.
 I need a way to sleep and not feel blue,
 when I can't find true peace by holding you.
 As a child would, I turn to face the skies.

Sad thoughts make it so hard to sleep at night,
 as so much turmoil lives in my worn mind.
 I can't sleep with the pain of each heartbeat.
 Now I go out and look to see night's light,
 the stars and moon; a friend to always find
 when I need a friend who's free of deceit.

One Bliss that does repeat.

The only comfort that is always there,
 to brightly shine down and make me aware;
 they'll free me of despair.

At night it's worst but I can bare my scars,
 with shining light from the eternal stars.

Stephen J. Napolitano

further variations**Double Mock Sonnet**

(excerpted second half)

A moment ago this stage was perfect, bare,
 Inspiring like Hardy heath, despair
 The catchword of the landscape's monologue
 (Soliloquy, I mean). Now there's a dog.
 Though almost thin and low and nondescript
 Enough to fit my fine pet of a script,
 He's making too much noise. His barks assail
 The silence, lake trees, seagulls, his own tail,
 Whatever. Single-voiced, he's nearly raised
 An echo from the mist that hangs amazed.
 However, he affronts my counterfeit
 Drama, he gets my thanks for making it
 (Amid this wind-swept, sullen antonym)
 Unnecessary to imagine him.

Charles O. Hartman

Air-Raid Warning

Though
 Night
 Fright
 Grow
 No
 Bright
 Light
 Show!

This
 Law
 Is
 For
 YOU
 TOO!

Noel Petty

This is my play's last scene; here heavens appoint

This is my play's last scene; here heavens appoint
 My pilgrimage's last mile; and my race,
 Idly, yet quickly run, hath this last pace,
 My span's last inch, my minute's latest point;
 And gluttonous death will instantly unjoint
 My body and my soul, and I shall sleep a space;
 But my'ever-waking part shall see that face
 Whose fear already shakes my every joint.
 Then, as my soul to'heaven, her first seat, takes flight,
 And earth-born body in the earth shall dwell,
 So fall my sins, that all may have their right,
 To where they're bred, and would press me, to hell.
 Impute me righteous, thus purg'd of evil,
 For thus I leave the world, the flesh, the devil.

John Donne

Why are we by all creatures waited on?

Why are we by all creatures waited on?
 Why do the prodigal elements supply
 Life and food to me, being more pure than I,
 Simple, and further from corruption?
 Why brook'st thou, ignorant horse, subjection?
 Why dost thou, bull, and bore so seelily,
 Dissemble weakness, and by one man's stroke die,
 Whose whole kind you might swallow and feed upon?
 Weaker I am, woe is me, and worse than you,
 You have not sinned, nor need be timorous.
 But wonder at a greater wonder, for to us
 Created nature doth these things subdue,
 But their Creator, whom sin nor nature tied,
 For us, His creatures, and His foes, hath died.

John Donne

Some of the Literary Terms with Which We've Worked

alliteration	elision	metaphor	scansion	foot
allusion	enjambment	meter	sestet	iambic
ambiguity	heroic couplet	metonymy	sigmatism	spondaic
anastrophe	hyperbole	octave	simile	trochaic
hyperbaton	imagery	oxymoron	sprung rhythm	pyrrhic
inversion	visual	paradox	synæsthesia	anapestic
apostrophe	auditory	personification	synecdoche	dactylic
assonance	tactile	quatrain	tenor and vehicle	metrics
consonance	olfactory	reification	tone	pentameter
couplet	gustatory	rhyme scheme	volta	tetrameter
diction	melopoeia	run-on line	zeugma	trimeter

A Far-from-Exhaustive Bibliography

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