

## Mastering Literary Analysis

### Class 5 - Close Reading: The Sonnet

#### Readings:

- "Meter & Scansion" *Please go ahead and take a stab at scanning the lines in the worksheet portion of this handout. We will also go over this in class and answer questions.*
  - If you are struggling to understand this, the following YouTube videos may help you:
    - Introduction to scansion and meter:  
[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1vFOHySkrC4&ab\\_channel=Shmoop](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1vFOHySkrC4&ab_channel=Shmoop)
    - Watch this if you just cannot figure out how to find a stressed syllable:  
[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OR2vTDyoQRk&ab\\_channel=LyricalLanguageLab](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OR2vTDyoQRk&ab_channel=LyricalLanguageLab)
- "Sonnets"
- "Writing Strong Body Paragraphs"

#### Pre-Class Assignment (be sure to do this after you read through the lesson):

- As usual, bring to class three questions: a first level question, a second level question, and a third level question.
- Read the sonnets in the handout carefully, paying close attention to the first three. You will spend the bulk of class on these sonnets.

#### Lesson/Discussion:

- The Sonnet
  - In this brief unit on poetry, we will be focusing on **formal poetry**. Poetry comes in two basic types: formal and informal. "Formal" means it has a set form or pattern it must follow; "informal" means that it does not. There are many different poetic forms, but the one we will study in this class is the **sonnet**. The sonnet has been the queen of poetic forms in English for well-nigh five hundred years. It is one of the most restrictive forms, but the restriction is ground for the beauty and the fun: Like in football, or basketball, or dance, or ice skating, virtuosity is all about excellence within the forms and rules of the game. Poetry is also a game with beauty at stake.
  - So what is a sonnet?
    - A sonnet is a poem in iambic pentameter with fourteen lines which has a **volta** or a "turn."
    - Sonnets typically come in one of two kinds, and the kind is determined by the rhyme scheme:
      - Petrarchan/Italian (octave: *abbaabba*; sestet: *cdecde* or *cdcdcd*)
        - **octet** - first eight lines; **sestet** - last six lines (adds up to fourteen total)
      - Shakespearean/English: (*abab cdcd efef gg*)

- A group of four lines is called a **quatrain**. There are three quatrains in a Shakespearean sonnet adding up to twelve lines. The final two lines, to make fourteen, are the **couplet**.
  - The two most common sonnet forms (and the ones we will discuss) are the **Petrarchan** and **Shakespearean**
- **Meaning follows form—or is it the other way?** This formal structure (again, formal means "form" and the meter, rhyme scheme, and length are what gives the sonnet its form) reflects the structure of a sonnet's meaning: the Petrarchan sonnet has a question/answer or problem/solution structure. The **octet** proposes some kind of a question or problem which the **sestet** answers. This "turn" of subject (from problem to solution) is called the **volta** and it is one of the most essential features of a traditional sonnet. The poem you will study closely in the next class (Milton's "On His Blindness") sticks closely to this Italian form. In the Shakespearean or English sonnet, the **volta** or "turn" of the poem from "problem" to "solution" occurs in the rhyming couplet (though occasionally they can also have a subtle shift between the octet and the sestet as well).
- The sonnet begins as an Italian poetic form and the Italian form of the sonnet is named after its most famous practitioner, **Petrarch** (1304-1374). Petrarch is a fascinating character in his own right, but a biography of his life would be a digression in the context of this lesson. I do encourage you to look him up, however.
- How does this Italian form make it to England? Imitation. After William the Conqueror brought French to England in 1066, English high culture has generally followed continental forms. The English have always had a superiority/inferiority complex with regard to the Continentals, particularly the French and Italians. The English are proud of their "stiff upper lip"—a reserve and quiet strength of character—but those Continentals have culture and pizzazz—if an English gentleman wants a chef, he wants a Frenchman. If he wants the latest *haute couture*, he goes to Paris or Milan. If he wants a sensible wool walking suite or some cabbages, well, he stays in England.
- How does this relate to literature? Originally English poetry came in a form that seems totally foreign to us today: alliterative verse. I don't have time to explain what this is, but the most famous example is *Beowulf* which you should read if you have not already. Instead of rhyming, lines repeat the same sounds (bench/bat/battle/beach); it's a heavy, hypnotic beat that can almost sound like rap. But in 1066, England was invaded by France (William the Conqueror) and what became modern English was created by the hybridization of Old English (Anglo-Saxon) and French (with its Latin roots). The old patterns of poetry continue, but in circles of high fashion, everyone speaks French and writes in Continental European forms: rhyming, not alliterative, poetry. (Note: Like all histories, there's a lot of hand-waving there; actually there is an alliterative verse revival

around Chaucer's time, and the best examples are from the author of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*. But that is a subject for another day.)

- Rhyming, then, is not quite native to English, and it is more challenging than in Romance (Latin-based) languages. No less a master than Shakespeare himself spoofs this fact in his comedy *Much Ado About Nothing* when his hero, Benedick, is stumped by the paucity of English rhymes when writing a love poem to Beatrice. English doesn't have a lot of rhyming words. If you want a rhyme for "love" you have such tired pairings as "dove" and "above" or absurd ones like "shove" and "glove." Whereas the iambic pentameter meter naturally reflects English cadences (**blank verse**, or non-rhyming iambic pentameter sound like natural English speech), rhymes in English generally sound a bit deliberate. That isn't a bad thing, but it is something to know about English poetry.
- **The Sonnet Cycle:** Petrarch did not invent the sonnet, but he did make it wildly popular in his 317 sonnets written to his lady love, Laura. A series of sonnets which follow the same topic (and sometimes tell a kind of story in "snapshots") is a **sonnet cycle**. You will read one of Petrarch's sonnets to Laura today. The kind of love here is that of "courtly love" or *fin amour*—the beloved is remote and unattainable. She is a lofty ideal which the man can only aspire towards. If he is a knight, he does great deeds in her honor and dies with her name on his lips; if he is a poet, he writes fevered and meditative poems on her grandeur and its effect on him. Keep this in mind as you read the paired sonnet by Shakespeare; if Shakespeare is not directly responding to Petrarch's fever for Laura (and he certainly knew Petrarch's poems by heart), he is certainly responding to the courtly love ideal. Shakespeare's **sonnet cycle** contains 154 sonnets which tell of his deep love for a younger friend (the "Golden Boy", as he is usually called), and then his tortured but passionate affair with a volatile woman (the "Dark Lady", as she is generally dubbed). In a highly painful love triangle, the Golden Boy and the Dark Lady themselves fall in love and the narrator is left alone (always remember that it is a mistake to assume that an author's "I" is always the author). In the final section, the narrator turns from the fickleness of the world to thoughts of eternity—a turn which Petrarch also takes at the end of his sonnet cycle.
- In closing, here is a quote from Madeleine L'Engle's novel *A Wrinkle in Time* which puts words to why I personally love the sonnet as a form and why—perhaps—it remains the queen of poetic forms even today:

*"In your language you have a form of poetry called the sonnet... There are fourteen lines, I believe, all in iambic pentameter. That's a very strict rhythm or meter... And each line has to end with a rigid pattern. And if the poet does not do it exactly this way, it is not a sonnet... But within this strict form the poet has complete freedom to say whatever he wants..."*

*"You mean you're comparing our lives to a sonnet? A strict form, but freedom within it?"*

*"Yes. You're given the form, but you have to write the sonnet yourself. What you say is completely up to you."*

**NOTE: If you are interested in learning more about formal poetry, I highly recommend the following books:**

- *The Making of a Poem: A Norton Anthology of Poetic Forms* by Mark Strand and Eavan Bolan.
  - *Rules for the Dance: A Handbook for Writing and Reading Metrical Verse* by Mary Oliver
    - Mary Oliver's *A Poetry Handbook* can also be a helpful resource
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**Post-Class Assignment:**

- This week you will write a paragraph essay. A paragraph essay is a well-developed but limited argument made in a single paragraph (usually about a page in length). This is an excellent opportunity to practice structuring body paragraphs because this essay is, essentially, one body paragraph.
  - Select one poem from this week's handout and answer the following question: "What is the sonnet's problem? What is its solution?" OR "What is the sonnet's question? What is its answer?"