

SESSION 4

CONVENTION AND GENRE: THE SONNET

Preparation - Units 9 and 10 in *Ways of Reading*

Sonnets have continued to be popular for more than six hundred years. Though they originally dealt solely with the theme of love, poets have come to employ them for many other purposes, and have enjoyed the challenge of experimenting with both the formal and the thematic conventions of the genre.

The sonnets that you will be looking at this week were all written in the twentieth century.

A. Read "The Lynching", by the African American poet Claude McKay (1890-1948).

The Lynching

His Spirit in smoke ascended to high heaven,
His father, by the cruelest way of pain,
Had bidden him to his bosom once again;
The awful sin remained still unforgiven.
All night a bright and solitary star
(Perchance the very one that guided him,
Yet gave him up at last to Fate's wild whim)
Hung pitifully o'er the swinging char.
Day dawned, and soon the mixed crowds came to view
The ghastly body swaying in the sun.
The women thronged to look, but never a one
Showed sorrow in her eyes of steely blue.

And little lads, lynchers that were to be,
Danced round the dreadful thing in fiendish glee.

1920

1. To what extent is this a conventional sonnet in terms of its handling of formal means and subject matter?

2. One strong tradition in the early sonnet was the mixture of discourses on sensual and spiritual love and enlightenment. How is this paralleled in McKay's treatment of his subject matter?

B. The American poet Edna St. Vincent Millay (1892-1950) was particularly fond of the sonnet. Read the following example of hers in this form.

I, Being Born a Woman and Distressed

I, being born a woman and distressed
By all the needs and notions of my kind,
Am urged by your propinquity to find
Your person fair, and feel a certain zest
To bear your body's weight upon my breast:
So subtly is the fume of life designed,
To clarify the pulse and cloud the mind,
And leave me once again undone, possessed.
Think not for this, however - the poor treason
Of my stout blood against my staggering brain -
- I shall remember you with love, or season
My scorn with pity, - let me make it plain:
I find this frenzy insufficient reason
For conversation when we meet again.

1923

1. How does Millay both stay close to and challenge the earlier conventions of the sonnet, particularly in the treatment of her theme?
2. Consider how her use of language and form contribute to the effectiveness of the poem.

C. To understand fully the following sonnet by W.H. Auden (1907-1973), you should consider it in the context of the time and place at which it was written.

Sonnets from China: XII

Here war is harmless like a monument:
A telephone is talking to a man;
Flags on a map declare that troops were sent;
A boy brings milk in bowls. There is a plan

5
For living men in terror of their lives,
Who thirst at nine who were to thirst at noon,
Who can be lost and are, who miss their wives
And, unlike an idea, can die too soon.

10
Yet ideas can be true, although men die:
For we have seen a myriad faces
Ecstatic from one lie,

1938
And maps can really point to places
Where life is evil now.
Nanking. Dachau.

1. In its use of form and language, this poem is radically different from the conventional sonnet. In what ways? In what ways does it remain in contact with those conventions?

2. What is the argument or story of the poem?

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Session 36 (Summer) - Lyric Verse (Secular and Religious)

In April

When the nightgale sings, the woodes waxen⁸ greene,
Leaf and grass and blossom springes in Averil, I wene⁹;
And love is to mine hearte gone with one spear so keene,¹⁰
Night and day my blood it drinks, mine hearte deeth to tene.

- 1 Joust, fight in a tournament.
- 2 Also.
- 3 Sketch.
- 4 Holy.
- 5 At night.
- 6 Humble.
- 7 It was a squire's duty to carve his lord's meat.
- 8 Grow.
- 9 Suppose.
- 10 Compel to tears.

5
I have loved all this year, that I may love no more;
I have siked¹ many a sik, lemman,² for thine ore,³
Me nis⁴ love never the near,⁵ and that me reweth sore,⁶
Sweete lemman, think on me, I have loved thee yore.⁷

10
Sweet lemman, I pray thee of love one speeche;
While I live in world so wide other nulle⁸ I seek.
With thy love,⁹ my sweet leof,⁹ my bliss thou mightes eche;¹⁰
A sweet cos¹¹ of thy mouth mighte be my leche.¹²

15
Sweet lemman, I pray thee of a love-bene;¹³
If thou me lovest, as men says, lemman, as I wene,
And if it thy will be, thou look that it be seene;¹⁴
So much I think upon thee that all I waxe greene.¹⁴

I Sing of a Maiden

I sing of a maiden
That is makeles;¹⁵
King of all kinges
To her son she ches.¹⁶
He cam also stille¹⁷
Ther¹⁸ His moder¹⁹ was,
As dew in Aprille

- 1 Sighed.
- 2 Sweetheart.
- 3 Mercy.
- 4 Is not.
- 5 No nearer.
- 6 Makes me sorely unhappy.
- 7 Long.
- 8 Will not.
- 9 Sweetheart.
- 10 Increase.
- 11 Kiss.
- 12 Healer.
- 13 Boon (i.e. blessing).
- 14 Pale.
- 15 Matchless.
- 16 Chose.
- 17 As silently.
- 18 Where.
- 19 Mother.

Session 4 (Summer)

B. The sonnet below is from a sequence by Sir Philip Sidney (1554-1586). Read it and consider the questions that follow.

10 That falleth on the gras.
 He cam also stille
 To his moderer bowr,¹
 As dew in Aprille
 That falleth on the flowr.
 15 He cam also stille
 Ther his moder lay,
 As dew in Aprille
 That falleth on the spray.²
 Moder and maiden
 Was never none but she;
 Wel may swich³ a lady
 20 Godès moder be.

1. Compare these two poems in terms of:
 i) the relationship between earthly and heavenly love in the Middle Ages;
 ii) their use of rhyme, rhythm, repetition and parallelism (compare them, for example, to the more "Renaissance" form of the sonnet, which we looked at in the first semester).

(P. 111)

Who will in fairest book of Nature know
 How Virtue may best lodged in beauty be,
 Let him but learn of Love to read in thee,
 Stella, those fair lines, which true goodness show.
 There shall he find all vices' overthrow,
 Not by rude force, but sweetest sovereignty
 Of reason, from whose light those night-birds⁴ fly;
 That inward sun in thine eyes shineth so.
 And not content to be Perfection's heir
 Thyself, dost⁵ strive all minds that way to move,
 Who mark⁶ in thee what is in thee most fair.
 So while thy beauty draws⁷ the heart to love,
 As fast thy Virtue bends⁸ that love to good;
 "But, ah," Desire still cries, "give me some food."
 1582

1. How do the mood and argument of this poem differ from those of the first poem?

- 1 Naturally (with an ironic hint of the modern meaning of "unkindly").
- 2 I would like to (*archaic*)
- 3 Contained.
- 4 The owl, for example, was an emblem of various vices.
- 5 Do.
- 6 Notice, observe.
- 7 Attracts, directs.
- 8 Shifts the direction of.