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If It's Square, It's a Sonnet

EVERY FEW CLASS PERIODS, I'll begin discussion by asking the class what form the poem under consideration employs. That first time, the correct answer will be "sonnet." The next time it happens, "sonnet." Care to guess about the third? Very astute. Basically, I figure the sonnet is the only poetic form the great majority of readers ever needs to know. First, most readers will go through life without ever doing any intensive study of poetry, while many poetic forms require in-depth analysis to be recognized. Moreover, there just aren't that many villanelles in the world for us to see them very often. The sonnet, on the other hand, is blessedly common, has been written in every era since the English Renaissance, and remains very popular with poets and readers today. Best of all, it has a look. Other forms

require mnemonic assistance. It doesn't take any great sagacity to know that Ezra Pound's "Sestina: Altaforte" (1909) is actually a sestina, but I for one am very grateful that he labels it as to form. We would notice that something funny is going on, that in fact he uses the same six words to end the lines in every stanza, but who has a name for that? We can learn to put the name "villanelle" to Theodore Roethke's "The Waking" (1953), but most readers don't carry that information around with them. Or need to, really. Is the quality of your life harmed by not recognizing on sight something like the *rom-deau*? That's what I thought. And so, unless your ambitions have been spurred by this discussion, I'll stick to the sonnet, for one single reason: no other poem is so versatile, so ubiquitous, so various, so agreeably short as the sonnet.

After I tell the students that first time that it's a sonnet, half of them groan in belated recognition (often they know but think I have a hidden agenda or a trick up my sleeve) and the others ask me how I knew that so fast. I tell them two things. First, that I read the poem before class (useful for someone in my position, or theirs, come to think of it), and second, that I counted the lines when I noticed the geometry of the poem. Which is? they ask. Well, I respond, trying to milk the moment for all its suspense—it's square. The miracle of the sonnet, you see, is that it is fourteen lines long and written almost always in iambic pentameter. I don't want to bog down in the whole matter of meter right now, but suffice it to say that most lines are going to have ten syllables and the others will be very close to ten. And ten syllables of English are about as long as fourteen lines are high: square.

Okay, great, so I can identify one type of poem, you say. Who cares? I agree, to a point. I think people who read poems for enjoyment should always read the poem first, without a formal or stylistic care in the world. They should not begin by counting lines, or looking at line endings to find the rhyme

scheme, if any, just as I think people should read novels without peeking at the ending: just enjoy the experience. After you've had your first pleasure, though, one of the additional pleasures is seeing *how* the poet worked that magic on you. There are many ways a poem can charm the reader: choice of images, music of the language, idea content, cleverness of wordplay. And at least some part of the answer, if that magic came in a sonnet, is *form*.

You might suppose that a poem of a mere fourteen lines is only capable of achieving one effect. And you'd be right. It can't have epic scope, it can't undertake subplots, it can't carry much narrative water. But you'd also be wrong. It can do two things. A sonnet, in fact, we might think of as having two units of meaning, closely related, to be sure, but with a shift of some sort taking place between them. Those two content units correspond closely to the two parts into which the form typically breaks. The sonnet has been a big part of English poetry since the 1500s, and there are a few major types of sonnet and myriad variations. But most of them have two parts, one of eight lines and one of six lines. A Petrarchan sonnet uses a rhyme scheme that ties the first eight lines (the octave) together, followed by a rhyme scheme that unifies the last six (the sestet). A Shakespearean sonnet, on the other hand, tends to divide up by four: the first four lines (or quatrain), the next four, the third four, and the last four, which turn out to be only two (a couplet). But even here, the first two groups of four have some unity of meaning, as do the third four and the last two. Shakespeare himself often works a statement of its own into that last couplet, but it also usually ties in pretty closely with the third quatrain. All these technical terms, and it's not even physics; still, who can say that a poem isn't engineered? Sometimes, especially in the modern and postmodern period, those units slip and slide a little, and the octave doesn't quite contain its meaning, which may, for instance, carry over onto the ninth

line, but still, the basic pattern is 8/6. To see how all this works, let's look at an example.

Christina Rossetti was a significant minor British poet of the late nineteenth century, although not so well known as her older brother Dante Gabriel Rossetti, a poet, painter, and leader in the artistic Pre-Raphaelite movement. This is her poem "An Echo from Willow-Wood" (ca. 1870). I suggest you read it out loud to get the full effect:

Two gazed into a pool, he gazed and she,

Not hand in hand, yet heart in heart, I think,

Pale and reluctant on the water's brink,

As on the brink of parting which must be,

Each eyed the other's aspect, she and he,

Each felt one hungering heart leap up and sink,

Each tasted bitterness which both must drink,

There on the brink of life's dividing sea.

Lilies upon the surface, deep below

Two wistful faces craving each for each,

Resolute and reluctant without speech:—

A sudden ripple made the faces flow,

One moment joined, to vanish out of reach:

So those hearts joined, and ah were parted so.

It's a terrific little poem in its own right, and a good poem for our purposes. For one thing, it has neither a *thee* nor a *thou* in sight, not an *e'er* nor an *o'er*, so we eliminate some of that ball of confusion that older poetry slings at hapless modern readers. Moreover, I like Christina Rossetti, and I think more people should be able to fall in love with her.

At first glance, the poem doesn't really look square. True, but it's close, and that's how the eye will initially perceive it. So the first question: how many sentences? Note that I'm not asking for lines, of which there are of course fourteen, but for sentences. The answer is two. What we're interested in here is the

most basic unit of meaning in a poem. Lines and stanzas are necessities in poetry, but if the poem is any good, its basic unit of meaning is the sentence, just as in all other writing. That's why if you stop at the end of every line, a poem makes no sense: it's arranged in lines, but written in sentences. Second question: without counting, can you guess where the first period falls?

Right. End of line eight. The octave is a single unit of meaning.

What Rossetti does here is construct her sentences, which have to carry her meaning, so that they work within the form she has chosen. Her rhyme scheme proves to be a little idiosyncratic, since she elects to repeat the same rhymes in both quatrains of the octave: abbaaba. Then she picks an equally uncommon rhyme scheme for the sestet: cddcdc. Still, in each case the particular pattern reinforces the basic concept—these eight lines carry one idea, those six another, related idea. In the octave, she creates a static picture of two lovers on the verge of an event. Everything in it points to the imminence of their parting, three times using the word “brink,” which suggests how close to the edge of something these two lovers are. And yet with all their trepidation—full of “hungering” and “biterness”—their surface, like that of the water, is placid. Inside, their hearts may leap up and sink, yet they show nothing, since they look not at each other but “at each other’s aspect,” at the reflection of the beloved in the water rather than the beloved’s person. This not being able to look directly at one’s lover suggests the panic of their situation. The watery images may further portend disaster in recalling the myth of Narcissus, who, falling in love with his reflection in the water, attempted to join it and so drowned. Still, no outward sign gives anything of their inner feeling away. In the sestet, though, a puff of breeze

underneath. The water, “the dividing sea,” which had united them in image, now effects their separation. What is possible in the octave becomes actual in the sestet.

Without making any extravagant claims—no, this is not the greatest sonnet ever written, nor the most important statement of anything—we can say that “An Echo from Willow-Wood” is an excellent specimen of its chosen form. Rossetti manages her content so that it tells a story of complex human longing and regret within the confines of a very demanding form. The beauty of this poem lies, in part, in the tension between the small package and the large emotional and narrative scene it contains. We feel that the story is in danger of breaking out of the boundaries of its vessel, but of course it never does. The vessel, the sonnet form, actually becomes part of the meaning of the poem.

And this is why form matters, and why professors pay attention to form: it just might mean something. Will every sonnet consist of only two sentences? No, that would be boring. Will they all employ this rhyme scheme? No, and they may not even have rhyme schemes. There is something called a blank sonnet, “blank” meaning it employs unrhymed lines. But when a poet chooses to write a sonnet rather than, say, John Milton’s epic *Paradise Lost*, it’s not because he’s lazy. One of the old French philosophers and wits, Blaise Pascal, apologized for writing a long letter, saying, “I had not time to write a short one.” Sonnets are like that, short poems that take far more time, because everything has to be perfect, than long ones.

We owe it to poets, I think, to notice that they’ve gone to this trouble, as well as to ourselves, to understand the nature of the thing we’re reading. When you start to read a poem, then, look at the shape.