

THE SONNET

The sonnet is one of the most well known poem forms. It is distinct because of its **14 line** length. *If it's not 14 lines, it's not a sonnet.* Its theme is often **love**. Its rhythm is **iambic pentameter** (5 feet of 2 beats = 10 beats per line). There are two common types of sonnets – the **English** sonnet and the **Italian** sonnet. In recognizing each type, the reader must be able to:

1. Decipher the rhyme scheme.
2. Recognize the stanza forms.
3. Recognize imagery and/or mood shift.

ENGLISH/SHAKESPEAREAN/ELIZABETHAN

Rhyme scheme: ababdcdefefgg

Stanza form – 3 quatrains and a rhyming couplet

Imagery – usually a distinct image in each quatrain and the theme in the couplet

Mood – adheres to one general mood.

My mistress' eyes are nothing like the sun (Sonnet 130)

My mistress' eyes are nothing like the sun;
 Coral is far more red than her lips' red;
 If snow be white, why then her breasts are dun;
 If hairs be wires, black wires grow on her head.
 I have seen roses damasked, red and white,
 But no such roses see I in her cheeks;
 And in some perfumes is there more delight
 Than in the breath that from my mistress reeks.
 I love to hear her speak, yet well I know
 That music hath a far more pleasing sound;
 I grant I never saw a goddess go;
 My mistress when she walks treads on the ground.
 And yet, by heaven, I think my love as rare
 As any she belied with false compare.
 William Shakespeare

ITALIAN/PETRARCHAN SONNET

Rhyme scheme: abbaabbacddcd (There are a few variations in the sestet).

Stanza forms: Although the poem is usually written in one stanza, within this stanza there is a distinct octet and sestet.

Mood: between the octet and sestet there is a discernable shift of mood and focus.

“What Lips My Lips Have Kissed”

What lips my lips have kissed, and where, and why,
I have forgotten, and what arms have lain
Under my head till morning; but the rain
Is full of ghosts tonight, that tap and sigh
Upon the glass and listen for reply,
And in my heart there stirs a quiet pain
For unremembered lads that not again
Will turn to me at midnight with a cry.
Thus in winter stands the lonely tree,
Nor knows what birds have vanished one by one,
Yet knows its boughs more silent than before:
I cannot say what loves have come and gone,
I only know that summer sang in me
A little while, that in me sings no more.

- *Edna St. Vincent Millay*

WHICH ONE IS IT?

Look at the following sonnet and determine which type it is by:

1. Labelling the rhyme scheme.
2. Dividing into stanza form.
3. Identifying imagery and mood.

"Ozymandias"

I met a traveller from an antique land
Who said: "Two vast and trunkless legs of stone
Stand in the desert. Near them on the sand,
Half sunk, a shattered visage lies, whose frown
And wrinkled lip and sneer of cold command
Tell that its sculptor well those passions read
Which yet survive, stamped on these lifeless things,
The hand that mocked them and the heart that fed.
And on the pedestal these words appear:
`My name is Ozymandias, King of Kings:
Look on my works, ye mighty, and despair!
Nothing beside remains. Round the decay
Of that colossal wreck, boundless and bare,
The lone and level sands stretch far away".

-Percy Bysshe Shelley

The most obvious place to start analyzing the poem is with the speaker. The poem is written in the first person with the speaker recalling how he or she has forgotten “loves” (Millay 12) of the past. Since the sonnet is written in the first person, it is as if the reader is actually able to become the speaker. The tense is obviously noted because all lines except the last contain words in the past tense, such as “kissed” (Millay 1), “unremembered” (Millay 7), and “sang” (Millay 13). Upon reaching the last line, the poem instantly changes to the present tense with the word “sings” (Millay 14). This seemingly insignificant switch in tense means the poem is a reflection the speaker is having on the past and, judging by the melancholy vocabulary, the speaker is quite sad about how the past has affected the present.

This gloomy tone is emphasized in the use of sad words in the following lines:

And in my heart there stirs a quiet pain
For unremembered lads that not again
Will turn to me at midnight with a cry...

I only know that summer sang in me

A little while, that in me sings no more. (6-8, 13-14)

Although all of these lines are obviously depressing for the speaker, the last line is especially distressing because of the placement of the comma. Without stopping, the speaker says, “I only know that summer sang in me / A little while...” (Millay 13-14), slight pause, “that in me sings no more” (Millay 14). The short pause enhances the sad tone because the speaker is declaring that his or her happiness is gone and it appears it will not return.

Furthermore, the vocabulary the speaker uses stresses the speaker’s sadness with words like “forgotten” (Millay 2), “ghosts” (Millay 4), “pain” (Millay 6), “lonely” (Millay 9), “vanished” (Millay 10), and “silent” (Millay 11). From the beginning all of these words convey an overall gloomy, secluded feeling. In addition, the sounds the words make help enhance the overall gloomy feeling with lines like: “What lips my lips have kissed, and where, and why, / I have forgotten, and what arms have lain” (Millay 1-2). Here, the calm, smooth w sound is repeated constantly. The quiet sounds this alliteration makes is only broken by the harsh k sound in “kissed” (Millay 1). This cut into an otherwise monotonous line may have been done to make the word “kissed” (Millay 1) stand out. After all, the sonnet is about a speaker who is recalling how he or she does not remember past lovers he or

she has kissed. With such a melancholy tone, depressing vocabulary, and the calm, quiet sound of words used it is evident that the speaker wants the reader to really suffer the same sadness he or she is feeling through the text.

Additionally, the figurative language, primarily metaphors, really brings the poem to life. The reader is forced to visualize the past “loves” (Millay 12) as the constant tapping sound the rain makes on a window pane late at night. Then the speaker is equated to a “lonely tree” (Millay 9) from whom all the birds have fled for the winter. These metaphors, though maybe not observed right away, also portray the speaker’s feelings as wrought with sadness and loneliness.

Finally, the evaluation concludes by examining the poem’s structure. The sonnet has been constructed in a way that the octave is made into one sentence and the sestet is also one sentence. It is noteworthy to state that the two sentences are so packed together with detail that one may feel intense enjambment in the poem if it were not permeated with commas and other pauses. The break between the octave and the sestet also serve as a shift in the poem. Before the break, the poem is highly reflective and afterward, the poem becomes more remorseful.

Together all of these literary concepts allow the reader to convincingly become the speaker in only fourteen lines of poetry. The sonnet, “What lips my lips have kissed,” becomes more complex and significant through the use of literary concepts that carry the speaker’s feelings of sadness and remorse from the page into the reader’s mind. These intensely gloomy emotions are emphasized by the presence of a speaker, the tone, vocabulary, sounds of language, figurative language, and structure used. Just like an artist may employ color, texture, medium, and space to bring their piece of art to life, a poet must use these kinds of literary concepts to bring their ideas, emotions, and story to life.