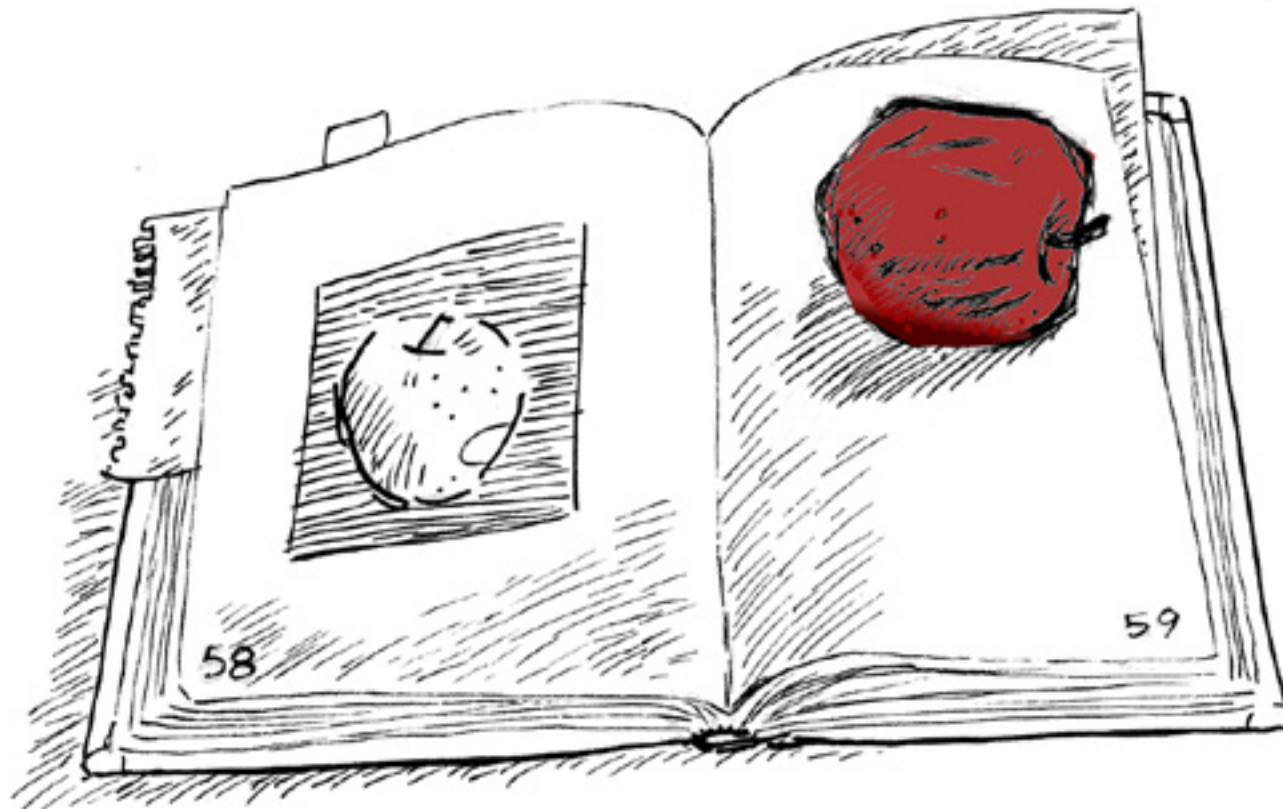


Edgar Allan Poe and the Sonnet Form



Sonnet Form

Historical Overview

- evolved over centuries; endured for over 700 years
- originally devised as a lyric, developed in southern France, northern Italy
- creation and traditionally attributed to Francesco Petrarch, (July 20, 1304 – July 19, 1374) the Father of Humanism— however it is clear he popularized the form during his lifetime

Sonnet Defined

- The sonnet is a poem composed with a recognized formula and is concerned with a single thought or theme, and may have a secondary theme.
- The term means little song in Italian

Sonnet Form

Types of Sonnets

Because of its popularity, the poem has transformed over time, retaining important categorizing elements, yet metamorphosing some components.

Common forms:

- Italian sonnet > or Petrarchan sonnet
- English sonnet > or Shakesperian sonnet
- Spenserian sonnet
- Blank sonnet > or a free-verse sonnet

Sonnet Form

Basic Characteristics of Traditional Sonnet

- fourteen lines
- chosen rhyme scheme and strategic meter
- a turn or shift in theme (referred to as the *volta*)

Important Terms

- octave eight lines || For sonnets the first eight lines carry a theme.
- sestet six lines || The remaining six lines can twist the theme.

- tercet three lines
- quatrain four lines
- couplet two lines

Sonnet Form

Charles Simic || *History*

On a gray evening
Of a gray century,
I ate an apple
While no one was looking.

A small, sour apple
The color of woodfire,
Which I first wiped
On my sleeve.

8



octave:
in this case composed of two quatrains

Then I stretched my legs
As far as they'd go,
Said to myself
Why not close my eyes now

Before the Late
World News and Weather.

14



sestet:
*in this case composed of a quatrain and
a couplet*

Simic, Charles. "History." *The Making of a Sonnet: A Norton Anthology*.
Edward Hirsch and Eavan Boland, eds. New York: W. W. Norton. 2008. Print.

Sonnet Form

- Both the octave and the sestet contain parallel themes, or two stories which are related to one another.
- Typically the octave presents a situation, event, image, or generalization and the sestet presents a reflection or meditation on the previous section, a reaction, or a result.

To simplify, these poems can appear, when poorly written, over-dramatic, pathos driven, scenes filled with heaving bosoms, and self-centered whining.

When well-crafted, the poems share a common story of lost love with the reader.

Sonnet Form

The Italian Rhyme Scheme

A
B
B
A

A
B
B
A

C
D
E

C
D
E

A
B
A
B

A
B
A
B

C
D
C

C
D
C



octave:
in this case composed of two quatrains



sestet:
in this case composed of two tercets

Sonnet Form

English or Shakespearean Sonnet

The Earl of Surrey, Henry Howard, invented what is now known as the English or Shakespearean Sonnet.

- follows octave + sestet formula slightly
- allows for three sets of quatrains with individual rhymes
- an independent couplet, which serves as an effective “moral” to the poem
- traditionally follows iambic pentameter

Sonnet Form

Henry Howard (1517 – 19 January 1547)

Complaint of the Lover Disdained

In Cyprus springs, whereas Dame Venus dwelt,
A well so hot, that whoso tastes the same,
Were he of stone, as thawed ice should melt,
And kindled find his breast with fixed flame;
Whose moist poison dissolved hath my hate.
This creeping fire my cold limbs so opprest,
That in the heart that harbour'd freedom, late:
Endless despair long thraldom hath imprest.
Another so cold in frozen ice is found,
Whose chilling venom of repugnant kind,
The fervent heat doth quench of Cupid's wound,
And with the spot of change infects the mind;
 Whereof my dear hath tasted to my pain:
 My service thus is grown into disdain.

Rhyme scheme || Meter

A	5	}	octave
B	5		
A	4.5		
B	4.5		
C	4.5		
D	5		
C	5		
D	5		
<hr/>			
E	5.5	}	sestet
F	5		
E	5		
F	5		
G	5		
G	5		

Surrey, Henry Howard, Earl of. *The Poetical Works of Henry Howard, Earl of Surrey*.
Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1854. Print.

Sonnet Form

Emund Spenser (1552 – 1599)

from *Amoretti* || **IX**

*thesis:
problem
established*

Long while I sought to what I might compare
Those powerful eyes, which lighten my dark sight,
Yet find I nought on earth to which I dare
Resemble th' image of their goodly light.

Rhyme scheme || *Meter*

A **5**

B **5.5**

A **5**

B **5**

Not to the sun, for they do shine by night;

B **5**

Nor to the moon, for they are changed never;

C **5**

Nor to the stars, for they have purer sight;

B **5**

Nor to the fire, for they consume not ever;

C **5.5 / (6?)**

(octave ends/sestet begins; Spenser blurs the two together)

Nor to the lightning, for they still persevere;

C **5.5**

Nor to the diamond, for they are more tender;

D **5.5**

Nor unto crystal, far nought may them sever;

C **5.5**

Nor unto glass, such baseness might offend her;

D **5.5**

Then to the Maker self they likest be,

E **5**

Whose light doth lighten all that here we see.

E **5**

*problem
discussed
in following
octave.*

*problem
resolved
in couplet*

English Sixteenth-Century Verse: An Anthology. Richard S. Sylvester, ed. W.W. Norton & Co.,
New York, © 1974. Print.

Sonnet Form

William Shakespeare (1564 – 1616)

130

*thesis:
problem
established
and
discussed
in octave*

My mist/ress' eyes / are noth/ing 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 ros/es da/mask, 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.

*sestet
shifts
in tone,
slightly*

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:

*problem
resolved
in couplet*

And yet, / by heav/en, I / think my / love as /rare
As an/y she /belied / with false / compare.

Rhyme scheme || Meter

A	5
B	5
A	5
B	5
C	5
D	5
C	5
D	5
E	5
F	5
E	5
F	5
G	5•5
G	5

The Sonnets and Narrative Poems: The Complete Non-Dramatic Poetry. Sylvan Barnet, ed.
Signet Classic, Penquin Books, New York, 1989. Print.

Sonnet — Silence

Edgar Allan Poe created his own experimental form.

In this case, he purposely de-constructed the traditional formula to develop his own concept.

- maintains expected iambic meter, *however*
- uses 15 lines
- invented a new rhyme scheme to compensate additional line
- heightened theme of duality

Sonnet — Silence

Edgar Allan Poe (January 1809 – October 1849)

Sonnet — Silence

There are some qualities — some incorporate things,
That have a double life, which thus is made
A type of that twin entity which springs
From matter and light, evinced in solid and shade.
There is a two-fold Silence — sea and shore —
Body and soul. One dwells in lonely places,
Newly with grass o’ergrown; some solemn graces,
Some human memories and tearful lore,
Render him terrorless: his name’s “No More.”
He is the corporate Silence: dread him not!
No power hath he of evil in himself;
But should some urgent fate (untimely lot!)
Bring thee to meet his shadow (nameless elf,
That haunteth the lone regions where hath trod
No foot of man) commend thyself to God!

Rhyme scheme || Meter

A	6	}	<i>quatrain</i>
B	5		
A	5		
B	6		
<hr/>			
C	5	}	<i>cinquain</i>
D	5.5		
D	5.5		
C	5		
C	5		
<hr/>			
E	5.5	}	<i>sestet</i>
F	5.5		
E	5		
F	5		
G	5		
G	5		

incorporate: combined in one body (in this case: body and soul)

evince: to show clearly

corporate: united; combined

Sonnet Form

Notice Poe is playing off the notion that a conventional sonnet has two themes.

In his case he creates a “two-headed” convoluted theme regarding the multiple types of silence:

- basic definition of silence: without sound
- silence of isolation and loneliness
- silence associated with the loss of a loved one
- silence of the body of the deceased; of a grave site over time

One of his many tricks in this elusive strategy is to show that just as a traditional sonnet has two themes, a person is composed of body and soul, body and shadow, body and mind.

- Duality is a common occurrence in the universe.

Sonnet — Silence

Multiple dualistic imagery exists in “Sonnet — Silence”:

- incorporate (l 1)
- double life (l 2)
- twin entity (l 3)
- matter and life / solid and shade (l 4)
- two-fold Silence / Sea and Shore (l 5)
- Body and Soul (l 6)
- grass and graces (l 7)
- memories and lore (l 8)
- corporate Silence (l 10)
- shadow (l 13)

Sonnet — Silence

The opening quatrain establishes the main theme of the poem:

There are some qualities — some incorporate things,
That have a double life, which thus is made
A type of that twin entity which springs
From matter and light, evinced in solid and shade.

- Many forms of duality exist in Nature; these are essential to establish meaning to our existence. To embellish this, Poe uses the following concepts:

<u>Body</u>	<u>Soul</u>
shore	sea
logic	emotion / passion
death	life
matter	light
solid	shade

- Just as humanity's existence remains confusing and contradictory, so are the themes running in the poem.

Sonnet — Silence

The remaining lines of the sonnet introduce a confusing character:

- these lines refer to the awkwardly named element: “No More”
- this personification is “one (who) dwells in lonely places” — that is a grave.
- this personified-element is not to be feared (“rendered terrorless”) by a person
 - > who has with “solemn graces”
 - > with positive “human memories” (non-animalistic) and “lore” (education)
- usually interpreted as a representation of Death, although some people argue it could be a representation of Isolation or Disconnection from Society, which in itself is another *form* of death.
- The real arguments begin with the remaining symbol of “his shadow / nameless elf, / That haunteth the lone regions”—
- Some refer to this as a representation of impulses of greed or illicit desires.
- If these factor in the waking self, one should commend oneself to God.

Sonnet Form

By commending oneself to God the soul is guaranteed existence in union with the Divine element.

The gloomy persona which Poe chooses to employ reaches a profound resolution.

- The loss of the mortal body should not be mourned; this is a natural process of life. We all must die according to Nature.
- However, he does warn it is important to avoid the death of the soul itself.
 - > With a sense of religion, this is a hell.
 - > With a sense of philosophy, this represents a life without direction.
- This is a hellish condition of eternal silence.

Sonnet — Silence

In Freudian logic, the “nameless elf” could be a representation for the **libido**, an element in the personality which is sexual in nature and influences the unconscious mind, and in part causes humans to react to circumstances based on desires rather than logic.

Edgar Allan Poe’s collection of work precede and predict the **Psychoanalytic** concepts discovered by Sigmund Freud. Poe’s personae often appear maniacal without background evidence supplied to the reader to explain their conflicts.

A branch of critics like to use a psychoanalytical approach when examining these poems and stories. In this manner, a detailed criticism can reveal hidden depths of behavioral motivations for such irrational figures.

Freudian Concepts in Brief

The human mind is divided up into components – the Ego, Superego, and Id.

- **Ego:** the conscious self, the “I” voice in your head; it defines and interprets reality; is influenced by social forces. It is formed at birth and modifies behavior by controlling impulses that are unacceptable by society.
- **Superego:** the conscious self image which modifies and inhibits instinct. It adopts standards of behavior from surroundings.
- **Id:** the unconscious; reservoir of instinctual desires and hidden motivations. Controlled by the pleasure principle, the gratification of desires.
- **Libido:** the basis for many of Freud’s understanding of hidden symbols in dreams, is an influential portion of the Id. These desires often conflict with what society dictates as “normal,” “polite,” or “correct.” Some believe a healthy libido is important; others say it should always be repressed.