

Literary Criticism

Capital Conference

2023

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Explicating Poetry

London, 1802

Milton! thou shouldst be living at this hour:
England hath need of thee: she is a fen
Of stagnant waters: altar, sword, and pen,
Fireside, the heroic wealth of hall and bower, 4
Have forfeited their ancient English dower
Of inward happiness. We are selfish men;
Oh! raise us up, return to us again;
And give us manners, virtue, freedom, power. 8
Thy soul was like a Star, and dwelt apart:
Thou hadst a voice whose sound was like the sea:
Pure as the naked heavens, majestic, free,
So didst thou travel on life's common way, 12
In cheerful godliness; and yet thy heart
The lowliest duties on herself did lay.

William Wordsworth

Once by the Pacific

The shattered water made a misty din.
Great waves looked over others coming in,
And thought of doing something to the shore
That water never did to land before. 4
The clouds were low and hairy in the skies,
Like locks blown forward in the gleam of eyes.
You could not tell, and yet it looked as if
The shore was lucky in being backed by cliff, 8
The cliff in being backed by continent;
It looked as if a night of dark intent
Was coming, and not only a night, an age.
Someone had better be prepared for rage. 12
There would be more than ocean-water broken
Before God's last Put out the light was spoken.

Robert Frost

haiku

a leaf spirals
in the summer wind—
his good-bye letter

senryu

men o pause . . .
the men suck in their guts
as a blonde walks by

Arms and the Boy

Let the boy try along this bayonet-blade
How cold steel is, and keen with hunger of blood;
Blue with all malice, like a madman's flash;
And thinly drawn with famishing for flesh. 4

Lend him to stroke these blind, blunt bullet-heads
Which long to nuzzle in the hearts of lads.
Or give him cartridges of fine zinc teeth,
Sharp with the sharpness of grief and death. 8

For his teeth seem for laughing round an apple.
There lurk no claws behind his fingers supple;
And God will grow no talons at his heels,
Nor antlers through the thickness of his curls. 12

Wilfred Owen

Epilogue

"O where are you going?" said reader to rider
"That valley is fatal when furnaces burn,
Yonder's the midden whose odours will madden,
That gap is the grave where the tall return." 4

"O do you imagine," said fearer to farer,
"That dusk will delay on your path to pass,
Your diligent looking discover the lacking
Your footsteps feel from granite to grass?" 8

"O what was that bird," said horror to hearer,
"Did you see that shape in the twisted trees?
Behind you swiftly the figure comes softly,
The spot on your skin is a shocking disease?" 12

"Out of this house"—said rider to reader
"Yours never will"—said farer to fearer
"They're looking for you"—said hearer to horror
As he left them there, as he left them there. 16

W. H. Auden

Rattler, Alert

Slowly he sways that head that cannot hear,
Two-leveled cone of horn the yellow rust,
Polled on the current of his listening fear.
His length is on the tympanum of earth,
And by his tendril tongue's tasting the air 5

He sips, perhaps, a secret of his race
Or feels for the known vibrations, heat, or trace
Of smoother satin than the hillwind's thrust
Through grass: the aspirate of half-held breath,
The crushing of my weight upon the dust, 10
My foamless heart, the bloodleap at my wrist.

Brewster Ghiselin

Acquainted with the Night

I have been one acquainted with the night.
I have walked out in rain—and back in rain.
I have outwalked the furthest city light.

I have looked down the saddest city lane. 4
I have passed by the watchman on his beat
And dropped my eyes, unwilling to explain.

I have stood still and stopped the sound of feet
When far away an interrupted cry 8
Came over houses from another street,

But not to call me back or say good-bye;
And further still at an unearthly height,
One luminary clock against the sky 12

Proclaimed the time was neither wrong nor right.
I have been one acquainted with the night.

Robert Frost

The Author to Her Book

Thou ill-form'd offspring of my feeble brain,
Who after birth didst by my side remain,
Till snatched from thence by friends, less wise than true,
Who thee abroad, expos'd to publick view, 4
Made thee in raggs, halting to th' press to trudge,
Where errors were not lessened (all may judg).
At thy return my blushing was not small,
My rambling brat (in print) should mother call, 8
I cast thee by as one unfit for light,
Thy Visage was so irksome in my sight;
Yet being mine own, at length affection would
Thy blemishes amend, if so I could: 12
I wash'd thy face, but more defects I saw,
And rubbing off a spot, still made a flaw.
I stretched thy joynts to make thee even feet,
Yet still thou run'st more hobbling then is meet; 16
In better dress to trim thee was my mind,
But nought save home-spun Cloth, I' th' house I find.
In this array 'mongst Vulgars mayst thou roam.
In Criticks hands, beware thou dost not come; 20
And take thy way where yet thou art not known,
If for thy Father askt, say, thou hadst none:
And for thy Mother, she alas is poor,
Which caus'd her thus to send thee out of door. 24

Anne Bradstreet

The Destruction of Sennacherib *excerpted*

The Assyrian came down like the wolf on the fold,
And his cohorts were gleaming in purple and gold;
And the sheen of their spears was like stars on the sea,
When the blue wave rolls nightly on deep Galilee.

George Gordon, Lord Byron

Mutability

From low to high doth dissolution climb,
And sink from high to low, along a scale
Of awful notes, whose concord shall not fail;
A musical but melancholy chime, 4
Which they can hear who meddle not with crime,
Nor avarice, nor over-anxious care.
Truth fails not; but her outward forms that bear
The longest date do melt like frosty rime, 8
That in the morning whitened hill and plain
And is no more; drop like the tower sublime
Of yesterday, which royally did wear
His crown of weeds, but could not even sustain 12
Some casual shout that broke the silent air,
Or the unimaginable touch of Time.

William Wordsworth

The True Story of Snow White

Almost before the princess had grown cold
Upon the floor beside the bitten fruit,
The Queen gave orders to her men to shoot
The dwarfs, and thereby clinched her iron hold 4
Upon the state. Her mirror learned to lie,
And no one dared speak ill of her for fear
She might through her devices overhear.
So, in this manner, many years passed by, 8
And now today not even children weep
When someone whispers how, for her beauty's sake,
A child was harried once into a grove
And doomed, because her heart was full of love, 12
To lie forever in unlovely sleep
Which not a prince on earth has power to break.

--Bruce Bennett

Sonnet XXXV *excerpted*

No more be grieved at that which thou hast done:
Roses have thorns, and silver fountains mud,
Clouds and eclipses stain both moon and sun,
And loathsome canker lives in sweetest bud.

William Shakespeare

Aftershocks

We are not in the same place after all.
 The only evidence of the disaster,
 Mapping across the bedroom wall,
 Tiny cracks still fissuring the plaster— 4
 A new cartography for us to master,
 In whose legend we read where we are bound:
 Terra infirma, a stranger land, and vaster.
 Or have we always stood on shaky ground? 8
 The moment keeps on happening: a sound.
 The floor beneath us swings, a pendulum
 That clocks the heart, the heart so tightly wound,
 We fall mute, as when two lovers come 12
 To the brink of the apology, and halt,
 Each standing on the wrong side of the fault.

A. E. Stallings

Non-exhaustive Listing of Literary Concepts Possibly Addressed during This Explication Session

alliteration	envelope stanza	kenning	rhythm (metrical pattern)
allusion	epilogue	liminality	roundel
biblical	eye rhyme	litotes	run-on lines
classical	feminine ending	metaphor	scansion
historical	foot (metrical feet)	leonine rhyme	senryu
literary	anapest	masculine ending	sestet
mythological	dactyl	melopoeia	sigmatism
topical	iamb	metonymy	simile
amphisbaenic rhyme	pyrrhic	octave	slant rhyme
analogy	spondee	onomatopoeia	sonnet
anaphora	trochee	pantoum	Anglo-Norman
antanaclasis	formula / formulaic	pathetic fallacy	caudate
anthropomorphism	haiku	paradox	curtal
apostrophe	heroic couplet	personification	Miltonic
assonance	heteromorous (mosaic) rhyme	persona	Petrarchan (Italian)
asyndeton	homonym / homograph	plote	Shakespearean (English)
chiasmus	homeoteleuton	polyptoton	Spenserian
connotation	imagery	polysyndeton	sigmatism
consonance	auditory	pun	speaker
controlling image	gustatory	quatrain	stanza
couplet	olfactory	refrain	synaesthesia
denotation	tactile	reification	syncope
diction	visual	rhetorical question	synecdoche
elision (syncope)	internal rhyme	rhyme scheme	tone
enclosed rhyme	inversion (hyperbaton, anastrophe)	feminine rhyme	volta
end stop	irony	masculine rhyme	zeugma
enjambment		true rhyme	

Literary Criticism
UIL Student Activity Conference
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Explicating Poetry

Rattler, Alert

Slowly he sways that head that cannot hear,	a	direct address
Two-leveled cone of horn the yellow rust,	b	rhyme scheme
Polled on the current of his listening fear.	a	scansion
His length is on the tympanum of earth,	c	meter
And by his tendril tongue's tasting the air	a	imagery: visual, auditory
He sips, perhaps, a secret of his race	d	alliteration and imagery
Or feels for the known vibrations, heat, or trace	d	sigmatism
Of smoother satin than the hillwind's thrust	b	imagery: auditory, tactile
Through grass: the aspirate of half-held breath,	c	imagery: tactile, auditory; simile
The crushing of my weight upon the dust,	b	sigmatism and alliteration
My foamless heart, the bloodleap at my wrist.	b	imagery: auditory, olfaction (kenning)

Brewster Ghiselin

Mother, among the Dustbins

Mother, among the dustbins and the manure	a	apostrophe
I feel the measure of my humanity, an allure	a	run-on
As of the presence of God, I am sure	a	simile
In the dustbins, in the manure, in the cat at play,	b	internal rhyme
Is the presence of God, in a sure way	b	sigmatism
He moves there. Mother, what do you say?	b	rhetorical question
I too have felt the presence of God in the broom	c	anaphora
I hold, in the cobwebs in the room,	c	imagery: visual, tactile
But most of all in the silence of the tomb.	c	sigmatism
Ah! but that thought that informs the hope of our kind	d	masculine rhyme
Is but an empty thing, what lies behind?—	d	true rhyme
Naught but the vanity of a protesting mind	d	enjambment
That would not die. This is the thought that bounces	e	feminine ending
Within a conceited head and trounces	e	feminine rhyme
Inquiry. Man is most frivolous when he pronounces.	e	tercets, not villanelle
Well Mother, I shall continue to think as I do,	f	emphatic spondees
And I think you would be wise to do so too,	f	assonance
Can you question the folly of man in the creation of God?	g	theme
Who are you?	f	truncation

Stevie Smith

The Destruction of Sennacherib *excerpted*

The Assyrian came down like the wolf on the fold,
And his cohorts were gleaming in purple and gold;
And the sheen of their spears was like stars on the sea,
When the blue wave rolls nightly on deep Galilee.

George Gordon, Lord Byron

a anapestic tetrameter; simile
a anaphora; visual imagery
b alliteration and simile
b alliteration; wrenched accent

from **Don Juan**

'Tis pity learned virgins ever wed
With persons of no sort of education,
Or gentlemen, who, though well born and bred,
Grow tired of scientific conversation:
I don't choose to say much upon this head,
I'm a plain man, and in a single station,
But—Oh! ye lords of ladies intellectual,
Inform us truly, have they not henpeck'd you all?

George Gordon, Lord Byron

a iambic pentameter
b feminine ending and rhyme
a masculine ending and rhyme
b alliteration
a sigmatism
b aporia
c apostrophe
c heteromeric/mosaic rhyme

Song [Fish in the unruffled lakes]

Fish in the unruffled lakes
Their swarming colours wear,
Swans in the winter air
A white perfection have,
And the great lion walks
Through his innocent grove;
Lion, fish and swan
Act, and are gone
Upon Time's toppling wave.

We, till shadowed days are done,
We must weep and sing
Duty's conscious wrong,
The Devil in the clock,
The goodness carefully worn
For atonement or for luck;
We must lose our loves,
On each beast and bird that moves
Turn an envious look.

Sighs for folly done and said
Twist our narrow days,
But I must bless, I must praise
That you, my swan, who have
All gifts that to the swan
Impulsive Nature gave,
The majesty and pride,
Last night should add
Your voluntary love.

W. H. Auden 1939

a assonance, alliteration
b masculine rhyme
b consonance
c inversion
a visual imagery
c pathetic fallacy
d run-on
d true rhyme
c personification, imagery: visual, auditory

a sigmatism and alliteration
b internal rhyme
b reification
c metaphor
a contrast
c consonance
d alliteration
d eye rhyme
c anthropomorphism

a alliteration
b metaphor
b asyndeton
c apostrophe
d emphasis through absent rhyme
c pathetic fallacy
a anthropomorphism
a consonance
c vocalic quality

UIL Literary Criticism

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Poetry Explication: Sonnet Forms

The sonnet is a poem almost invariably of fourteen lines and following, perhaps with variance, one of several set rhyme schemes.

Petrarchan (Italian) sonnet	abbaabba cdcddc (or one of several two-rhyme or three-rhyme combinations <i>without</i> couplet)
envelope sonnet	abba cddc . . .
Spenserian sonnet	abab bcbc cdcd ee
Shakespearean (English) sonnet	abab cdcd efef gg
Miltonic sonnet	abbaabba cdcddc (no volta: octave and sestet "combined")
Anglo-Italian sonnet	abab cdcd efefg ababcdcd efggfe (Italian-Anglo sometimes)
hybrid sonnet	various combinations of elements characterizing the Italian and the English forms
French sonnet	eleven-syllable lines
caudate sonnet	the Italian (usually) sonnet with an additional (usually six) lines: "tails"
curtal sonnet	a sonnet whose octave is curtailed to six lines and sestet is curtailed to four and a half lines
variants	tributes, no doubt, to the basic form

Petrarchan sonnet (Italian sonnet)

London, 1802

Milton! thou shouldst be living at this hour:
England hath need of thee: she is a fen
Of stagnant waters: altar, sword, and pen,
Fireside, the heroic wealth of hall and bower,
Have forfeited their ancient English dower
Of inward happiness. We are selfish men;
Oh! raise us up, return to us again;
And give us manners, virtue, freedom, power.
Thy soul was like a Star, and dwelt apart;
Thou hadst a voice whose sound was like the sea:
Pure as the naked heavens, majestic, free,
So didst thou travel on life's common way,
In cheerful godliness; and yet thy heart
The lowliest duties on herself did lay.

William Wordsworth

Sonnet 90

She let her gold hair scatter in the breeze
that twined it in a thousand sweet knots,
and wavering light, beyond measure, would burn
in those beautiful eyes, which are now so dim:
and it seemed to me her face wore the colour
of pity, I do not know whether false or true:
I who had the lure of love in my breast,
what wonder if I suddenly caught fire?
Her way of moving was no mortal thing,
but of angelic form: and her speech
rang higher than a mere human voice.
A celestial spirit, a living sun
was what I saw: and if she is not such now,
the wound's not healed, although the bow is slack.

Francesco Petrarch
(trans. A. S. Kline)

Anglo-Italian sonnet

Leda and the Swan

A sudden blow: the great wings beating still
 Above the staggering girl, her thighs caressed
 By the dark webs, her nape caught in his bill,
 He holds her helpless breast upon his breast.
 How can those terrified vague fingers push
 The feathered glory from her loosening thighs?
 And how can body, laid in that white rush,
 But feel the strange heart beating where it lies?
 A shudder in the loins engenders there
 The broken wall, the burning roof and tower
 And Agamemnon dead.

Being so caught up,
 So mastered by the brute blood of the air,
 Did she put on his knowledge with his power
 Before the indifferent beak could let her drop?

William Butler Yeats

Shakespearean sonnet (English sonnet)

Sonnet 18

Shall I compare thee to a summer's day?
 Thou art more lovely and more temperate:
 Rough winds do shake the darling buds of May,
 And summer's lease hath all too short a date:
 Sometime too hot the eye of heaven shines,
 And often is his gold complexion dimm'd;
 And every fair from fair sometime declines,
 By chance or nature's changing course untrimm'd;
 But thy eternal summer shall not fade
 Nor lose possession of that fair thou owest;
 Nor shall Death brag thou wander'st in his shade,
 When in eternal lines to time thou growest:
 So long as men can breathe or eyes can see,
 So long lives this and this gives life to thee.

William Shakespeare

Anniversary

At dinner, in that careful rouge of light
 of five or six martinis, you could pass
 for Ginger Rogers; we could dance all night
 on tiny tabletops as slick as glass
 in flying, shiny shoes. As Fred Astaire,
 my wrinkles grow distinguished as we dine,
 my bald spot festers with the growth of hair,
 I grow intelligent about the wine.
 But such high life is taxing; urgencies
 excuse us from the table. Hand in hand
 we seek the restrooms, trembling at the knees,
 and find our grins grown horrid in that land
 of flare-lit, glaring mirrors. Through the wall
 you flush your toilet like a lonely call.

Ted Kooser

Spenserian sonnet

Sonnet LIV

Of this World's theatre in which we stay,
 My love like the Spectator idly sits,
 Beholding me, that all the pageants play,
 Disguising diversely my troubled wits.
 Sometimes I joy when glad occasion fits,
 And mask in mirth like to a Comedy;
 Soon after when my joy to sorrow flits,
 I wail and make my woes a Tragedy.
 Yet she, beholding me with constant eye,
 Delights not in my mirth nor rues my smart;
 But when I laugh, she mocks: and when I cry
 She laughs and hardens evermore her heart.
What then can move her? if nor mirth nor moan,
 She is no woman, but a senseless stone.

Edmund Spenser

Miltonic sonnet

[When I consider how my light is spent]

When I consider how my light is spent
 Ere half my days in this dark world and wide,
 And that one Talent which is death to hide
 Lodged with me useless, though my soul more bent
 To serve therewith my Maker, and present
 My true account, lest He returning chide,
 "Doth God exact day-labour, light denied?"
 I fondly ask. But Patience, to prevent
 That murmur, soon replies, "God doth not need
 Either man's work or his own gifts. Who best
 Bear his mild yoke, they serve him best. His state
 Is kingly: thousands at his bidding speed,
 And post o'er land and ocean without rest;
 They also serve who only stand and wait."

John Milton

curtal sonnet

Pied Beauty

Glory be to God for dappled things—
 For skies of couple-colour as a brinded cow;
 For rose-moles all in stipple upon trout that swim;
 Fresh-firecoal chestnut-falls; finches' wings;
 Landscape plotted and pieced—fold, fallow, and plough;
 And áll trádes, their gear and tackle and trim.

All things counter, original, spare, strange;
 Whatever is fickle, freckled (who knows how?)
 With swift, slow; sweet, sour; adazzle, dim;
 He fathers-forth whose beauty is past change:
 Praise him.

Gerard Manley Hopkins

To His Book

Wafer; thin and hard and bitter pill I
 Take from time to time; pillow I have lain
 Too long on; holding the brief dreams, the styled
 Dreams, the nightmares, shadows, red flames high
 High up on mountains; wilted zinnias, rain
 On dust, and great weight, the dead dog, and wild

Onions; mastodonic woman who knows how,—
 I'm tired of you, tired of your insane
 Acid eating in the brain. Sharp stones, piled
 Particularly, I let you go. Sink, or float, or fly now,
 Bad child.

Leon Stokesbury

envelope sonnet (Italian sonnet variant)

The Rural Carrier Stops to Kill a Nine-Foot Cottonmouth

Lord God, I saw the son-of-a-bitch uncoil
 In the road ahead of me, uncoil and squirm
 For the ditch, squirm a hell of a long time.
 Missed him with the car. When I got back to him, he was all
 But gone, nothing left on the road but the tip-end
 Of his tail, and that disappearing into Johnson grass.
 I leaned over the ditch and saw him, balled up now, hiss.
 I aimed for the mouth and shot him. And shot him again.

Then I got a good strong stick and dragged him out.
 He was long and evil, thick as the top of my arm.
 There are things in this world a man can't look at without
 Wanting to kill. Don't ask me why. I was calm
 Enough, I thought. But I felt my spine
 Squirm, suddenly. I admit it. It was mine.

T. R. Hummer

hybrid sonnet

Visionary Oklahoma Sunday Beer

The small window opened. I asked for the six-pack
 I paid for, then I saw the women playing pool
 In the loud and common light where ball and stick
 Have always met.

The oldest on a high stool

Was as big as a mound but wasn't simply fat.
 She glistened and shouted—she was having great fun
 With all the other Indians—each one great
 With child in a way to make that bulb a sun.

All fancy with no men around they played.
 Hey, let me in is what I think I said.
 I meant of course to ask where are your men
 And what of pageantry and life and death?

Her break and a brown arm closed down
 A show I would have stayed a season with.

James Whitehead

caudate sonnet (tailed sonnet)

The Only Comfort Always There

No one to hold brings tears to downcast eyes;
 I know there is no one to see them through
 the lonely nights when I am one, not two.
 No mental tricks or voiced words could disguise
 the pain brought to light by all past goodbyes.
 I need a way to sleep and not feel blue,
 when I can't find true peace by holding you.
 As a child would, I turn to face the skies.

Sad thoughts make it so hard to sleep at night,
 as so much turmoil lives in my worn mind.
 I can't sleep with the pain of each heartbeat.
 Now I go out and look to see night's light,
 the stars and moon; a friend to always find
 when I need a friend who's free of deceit.

One Bliss that does repeat.

The only comfort that is always there,
 to brightly shine down and make me aware;
 they'll free me of despair.

At night it's worst but I can bare my scars,
 with shining light from the eternal stars.

Stephen J. Napolitano

further variations

Double Mock Sonnet

(excerpted second half)

A moment ago this stage was perfect, bare,
 Inspiring like Hardy heath, despair
 The catchword of the landscape's monologue
 (Soliloquy, I mean). Now there's a dog.
 Though almost thin and low and nondescript
 Enough to fit my fine pet of a script,
 He's making too much noise. His barks assail
 The silence, lake trees, seagulls, his own tail,
 Whatever. Single-voiced, he's nearly raised
 An echo from the mist that hangs amazed.
 However, he affronts my counterfeit
 Drama, he gets my thanks for making it
 (Amid this wind-swept, sullen antonym)
 Unnecessary to imagine him.

Charles O. Hartman

Air-Raid Warning

Though
 Night
 Fright
 Grow
 No
 Bright
 Light
 Show!

This
 Law
 Is
 For
 YOU
 TOO!

Noel Petty

This is my play's last scene; here heavens appoint

This is my play's last scene; here heavens appoint
 My pilgrimage's last mile; and my race,
 Idly, yet quickly run, hath this last pace,
 My span's last inch, my minute's latest point;
 And gluttonous death will instantly unjoint
 My body and my soul, and I shall sleep a space;
 But my'ever-waking part shall see that face
 Whose fear already shakes my every joint.
 Then, as my soul to'heaven, her first seat, takes flight,
 And earth-born body in the earth shall dwell,
 So fall my sins, that all may have their right,
 To where they're bred, and would press me, to hell.
 Impute me righteous, thus purg'd of evil,
 For thus I leave the world, the flesh, the devil.

John Donne

Why are we by all creatures waited on?

Why are we by all creatures waited on?
 Why do the prodigal elements supply
 Life and food to me, being more pure than I,
 Simple, and further from corruption?
 Why brook'st thou, ignorant horse, subjection?
 Why dost thou, bull, and bore so seelily,
 Dissemble weakness, and by one man's stroke die,
 Whose whole kind you might swallow and feed upon?
 Weaker I am, woe is me, and worse than you,
 You have not sinned, nor need be timorous.
 But wonder at a greater wonder, for to us
 Created nature doth these things subdue,
 But their Creator, whom sin nor nature tied,
 For us, His creatures, and His foes, hath died.

John Donne

Some of the Literary Terms with Which We've Worked

alliteration	elision	metaphor	scansion	foot
allusion	enjambment	meter	sestet	iambic
ambiguity	heroic couplet	metonymy	sigmatism	spondaic
anastrophe	hyperbole	octave	simile	trochaic
hyperbaton	imagery	oxymoron	sprung rhythm	pyrrhic
inversion	visual	paradox	synæsthesia	anapestic
apostrophe	auditory	personification	synecdoche	dactylic
assonance	tactile	quatrain	tenor and vehicle	metrics
consonance	olfactory	reification	tone	pentameter
couplet	gustatory	rhyme scheme	volta	tetrameter
diction	melopoeia	run-on line	zeugma	trimeter

A Far-from-Exhaustive Bibliography

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