A Brief Guide to Metaphysical Poets

The term "metaphysical," as applied to English and continental European poets of the seventeenth century, was used by Augustan poets John Dryden and Samuel Johnson to reprove those poets for their "unnaturalness." As Goethe wrote, however, "the unnatural, that too is natural," and the metaphysical poets continue to be studied and revered for their intricacy and originality. John Donne, along with similar but distinct poets such as George Herbert, Andrew Marvell, and Henry Vaughn, developed a poetic style in which philosophical and spiritual subjects were approached with reason and often concluded in paradox. This group of writers established *meditation*—based on the union of thought and feeling sought after in Jesuit Ignatian meditation—as a poetic mode.

The metaphysical poets were eclipsed in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries by romantic and Victorian poets, but twentieth century readers and scholars, seeing in the metaphysicals an attempt to understand pressing political and scientific upheavals, engaged them with renewed interest. In his essay "The Metaphysical Poets," T. S. Eliot, in particular, saw in this group of poets a capacity for "devouring all kinds of experience."

Conceit[1]:

A conceit is a figure of speech which makes an unusual and sometimes elaborately sustained comparison between two dissimilar things. Related to wit, there are two main types:

1. The **Petrarchan conceit**, used in love poetry, exploits a particular set of images for comparisons with the despairing lover and his unpitying but idolized mistress. For instance, the lover is a ship on a stormy sea, and his mistress "a cloud of dark disdain"; or else the lady is a sun whose beauty and virtue shine on her lover from a distance.

The paradoxical pain and pleasure of lovesickness is often described using oxymoron, for instance uniting peace and war, burning and freezing, and so forth. But images which were novel in the sonnets of Petrarch became clichés in the poetry of later imitators. Romeo uses hackneyed Petrarchan conceits in describing his love for Rosaline as "bright smoke, cold fire, sick health"; and Shakespeare parodies such conceits in Sonnet 130: "My mistress' eyes are nothing like the sun."

2. The **metaphysical conceit** is characteristic of seventeenth-century writers influenced by John Donne, and became popular again in this century after the revival of the metaphysical poets. This type of conceit draws upon a wide range of knowledge, from the commonplace to the esoteric, and its comparisons are elaborately rationalized.

For instance, Donne's "The Flea" (1633), partially quoted above, compares a flea bite to the act of love; and in "A Valediction: Forbidding Mourning" (1633) separated lovers are likened to the legs of a compass, the leg drawing the circle eventually returning home to "the fixed foot."

Poetic Form: Sonnet[2]

From the Italian *sonetto*, which means "a little sound or song," the sonnet is a popular classical form that has compelled poets for centuries. Traditionally, the sonnet is a fourteen-line poem written in iambic pentameter, which employ one of several rhyme schemes and adhere to a tightly structured thematic organization. Two sonnet forms provide the models from which all other sonnets are formed: the Petrachan and the Shakespearean.

Petrarchan Sonnet

The first and most common sonnet is the Petrarchan, or Italian. Named after one of its greatest practitioners, the Italian poet Petrarch, the Petrarchan sonnet is divided into two stanzas, the octave (the first eight lines) followed by the

[1] From http://web.uvic.ca/wguide/Pages/RhetConceit.html

[2] From Poets.org **http://www.poets.org/viewmedia.php/prmMID/5791**

answering sestet (the final six lines). The tightly woven rhyme scheme, abba, abba, cdecde or cdcdcd, is suited for the rhyme-rich Italian language, though there are many fine examples in English. Since the Petrarchan presents an argument, observation, question, or some other answerable charge in the octave, a turn, or volta, occurs between the eighth and ninth lines. This turn marks a shift in the direction of the foregoing argument or narrative, turning the sestet into the vehicle for the counterargument, clarification, or whatever answer the octave demands.

Sir Thomas Wyatt introduced the Petrarchan sonnet to England in the early sixteenth century. His famed translations of Petrarch's sonnets, as well as his own sonnets, drew fast attention to the form. Henry Howard, Earl of Surrey, a contemporary of Wyatt's, whose own translations of Petrarch are considered more faithful to the original though less fine to the ear, modified the Petrarchan, thus establishing the structure that became known as the Shakespearean sonnet. This structure has been noted to lend itself much better to the comparatively rhyme-poor English language.

Shakespearean Sonnet

The second major type of sonnet, the Shakespearean, or English sonnet, follows a different set of rules. Here, three quatrains and a couplet follow this rhyme scheme: abab, cdcd, efef, gg. The couplet plays a pivotal role, usually arriving in the form of a conclusion, amplification, or even refutation of the previous three stanzas, often creating an epiphanic quality to the end. In Sonnet 130 of William Shakespeare's epic sonnet cycle, the first twelve lines compare the speaker's mistress unfavorably with nature's beauties. But the concluding couplet swerves in a surprising direction:

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.

Sonnet Variations

Though Shakespeare's sonnets were perhaps the finest examples of the English sonnet, John Milton's Italian-patterned sonnets (later known as &quuot;Miltonic" sonnets) added several important refinements to the form. Milton freed the sonnet from its typical incarnation in a sequence of sonnets, writing the occasional sonnet that often expressed interior, self-directed concerns. He also took liberties with the turn, allowing the octave to run into the sestet as needed. Both of these qualities can be seen in "When I Consider How my Light is Spent."

The Spenserian sonnet, invented by sixteenth century English poet Edmund Spenser, cribs its structure from the Shakespearean--three quatrains and a couplet--but employs a series of "couplet links" between quatrains, as revealed in the rhyme scheme: abab, bcbc, cdcd, ee. The Spenserian sonnet, through the interweaving of the quatrains, implicitly reorganized the Shakespearean sonnet into couplets, reminiscent of the Petrarchan. One reason was to reduce the often excessive final couplet of the Shakespearean sonnet, putting less pressure on it to resolve the foregoing argument, observation, or question.

Sonnet Sequences
There are several types of sonnet groupings, including the sonnet sequence, which is a series of linked sonnets dealing with a unified subject. Examples include Elizabeth Barrett Browning's *Sonnets from the Portuguese* and Lady Mary Roth's *The Countess of Montgomery's Urania*, published in 1621, the first sonnet sequence by an English woman.

Within the sonnet sequence, several formal constraints have been employed by various poets, including the corona (crown) and sonnet redoublé. In the corona, the last line of the initial sonnet acts as the first line of the next, and the ultimate sonnet's final line repeats the first line of the initial sonnet. *La Corona* by John Donne is comprised of seven sonnets structured this way. The sonnet redoublé is formed of 15 sonnets, the first 14 forming a perfect corona, followed by the final sonnet, which is comprised of the 14 linking lines in order.

Modern Sonnets
The sonnet has continued to engage the modern poet, many of whom also took up the sonnet sequence, notably Rainer Maria Rilke, Robert Lowell, and John Berryman. Stretched and teased formally and thematically, today's sonnet can often only be identified by the ghost imprint that haunts it, recognizable by the presence of 14 lines or even by name only. Recent practitioners of this so-called "American" sonnet include Gerald Stern, Wanda Coleman, Ted Berrigan, and Karen Volkman. Hundreds of modern sonnets, as well as those representing the long history of the form, are collected in the recent anthology *The Penguin Book of the Sonnet: 500 Years of a Classic Tradition in English*, edited by Philis Levin.

"Sonnet XIX: Devouring Time, Blunt thou the Lion's Paws"

BY WILLIAM SHAKESPEARE HTTP://POETRYFOUNDATION.ORG/ARCHIVE/POEM.HTML?ID=174355

Devouring Time, blunt thou the lion's paws,
And make the earth devour her own sweet brood;
Pluck the keen teeth from the fierce tiger's jaws,
And burn the long-liv'd Phoenix in her blood;
Make glad and sorry seasons as thou fleets,
And do whate'er thou wilt, swift-footed Time,
To the wide world and all her fading sweets;
But I forbid thee one more heinous crime:
O, carve not with the hours my love's fair brow,
Nor draw no lines there with thine antique pen!
Him in thy course untainted do allow
For beauty's pattern to succeeding men.
Yet do thy worst, old Time! Despite thy wrong
My love shall in my verse ever live young.

NOTES:

"Amoretti LXXIX: Men Call you Fair"

BY EDMUND SPENSER HTTP://WWW.POETRYFOUNDATION.ORG/ARCHIVE/POEM.HTML?ID=174457

Men call you fair, and you do credit it,
For that your self ye daily such do see:
But the true fair, that is the gentle wit,
And vertuous mind, is much more prais'd of me.
For all the rest, how ever fair it be,
Shall turn to naught and lose that glorious hue:
But only that is permanent and free
From frail corruption, that doth flesh ensue.
That is true beauty: that doth argue you
To be divine, and born of heavenly seed:
Deriv'd from that fair Spirit, from whom all true
And perfect beauty did at first proceed.
He only fair, and what he fair hath made,
All other fair, like flowers untimely fade.

NOTES:

Sonnet 131

by Petrarch

Translated by David Young

I'd sing of Love in such a novel fashion
that from her cruel side I would draw by force
a thousand sighs a day, kindling again
in her cold mind a thousand high desires;

I'd see her lovely face transform quite often
her eyes grow wet and more compassionate,
like one who feels regret, when it's too late,
for causing someone's suffering by mistake;

And I'd see scarlet roses in the snows,
tossed by the breeze, discover ivory
that turns to marble those who see it near them;

All this I'd do because I do not mind
my discontentment in this one short life,
but glory rather in my later fame

NOTES:

Andrew Marvell (1621 - 1678)

Today Andrew Marvell (1621-1678) is best known for his *carpe diem* poem "To His Coy Mistress." His wit and humor make this English metaphysical poet's work memorable. Marvell was also a talented statesman and worked as an assistant to John Milton when Milton was Oliver Cromwell's Latin secretary for foreign affairs.

A DIALOGUE BETWEEN THE SOUL AND BODY

Soul. O, WHO shall from this dungeon raise
A soul enslaved so many ways ?
With bolts of bones, that fettered stands
In feet, and manacled in hands **;**
Here blinded with an eye, and there
Deaf with the drumming of an ear **;**
A soul hung up, as 'twere, in chains
Of nerves, and arteries, and veins **;**
Tortured, besides each other part,
In a vain head, and double heart ?

Body. O, who shall me deliver whole,
From bonds of this tyrannic soul ?
Which, stretched upright, impales me so
That mine own precipice I go **;**
And warms and moves this needless frame,
(A fever could but do the same),
And, wanting where its spite to try,
Has made me live to let me die
A body that could never rest,
Since this ill spirit it possessed.

Soul. What magic could me thus confine
Within another's grief to pine ?
Where, whatsoever it complain,
I feel, that cannot feel, the pain **;**
And all my care itself employs,
That to preserve which me destroys **;**
Constrained not only to endure
Diseases, but, what's worse, the cure **;**
And, ready oft the port to gain,
Am shipwrecked into health again.

Body. But Physic yet could never reach

The maladies thou me dost teach ;
Whom first the cramp of hope does tear,
And then the palsy shakes of fear ;
The pestilence of love does heat,
Or hatred's hidden ulcer eat ;
Joy's cheerful madness does perplex,
Or sorrow's other madness vex ;
Which knowledge forces me to know,
And memory will not forego ;
What but a soul could have the wit
To build me up for sin so fit ?
So architects do square and hew
Green trees that in the forest grew.

“The Flea” by John Donne

MARK but this flea, and mark in this,
How little that which thou deniest me is ;
It suck'd me first, and now sucks thee,
And in this flea our two bloods mingled be.
Thou know'st that this cannot be said
A sin, nor shame, nor loss of maidenhead ;
Yet this enjoys before it woo,
And pamper'd swells with one blood made of two ;
And this, alas ! is more than we would do.

O stay, three lives in one flea spare,
Where we almost, yea, more than married are.
This flea is you and I, and this
Our marriage bed, and marriage temple is.
Though parents grudge, and you, we're met,
And cloister'd in these living walls of jet.
Though use make you apt to kill me,
Let not to that self-murder added be,
And sacrilege, three sins in killing three.

Cruel and sudden, hast thou since
Purpled thy nail in blood of innocence?
Wherein could this flea guilty be,
Except in that drop which it suck'd from thee?
Yet thou triumph'st, and say'st that thou
Find'st not thyself nor me the weaker now.
'Tis true ; then learn how false fears be ;
Just so much honour, when thou yield'st to me,
Will waste, as this flea's death took life from thee.