

Questions for Class #10, Session #2

The sonnet started life 700 years ago in Italy, 500 years ago in England, both with specific features:

- A fourteen-line lyric poem with a predictable rhyme sequence.
 - For the Italian sonnet, the first eight lines set up the scene, argument or plaint; the next six lines turn to an answer to the argument or reflect on the scene or situation. The rhyme scheme: abba abba cdcdcd or cde cde
 - For the English sonnet, the first eight lines set up the scene, argument or plaint; the next four lines deepen or reflect on the scene or situation. The final couplet turns – the volta—the gist of the argument into a final, neat resolution of the problem or theme. Rhyme scheme: abab cdcd efef gg
 - The dominant topic of these early sonnets was the unrequited love of a noble, knight or man for a beautiful, admirable, thoroughly remote lady. They are both tested by the enduring purity of their love. These early sonnets focus on the emotions of the poet or speaker, emotions of longing, loyalty, and the search for a unity with perfect beauty. This search is the key that opens a door to a transcendent experience.
1. Obviously, the genre quickly evolved. What are some of the prominent changes you have noticed as we progressed through the centuries? For you, which poet or poems—***across time***—changed the sonnet but in ways that expanded the form in interesting ways while keeping the genre recognizable?
 2. When you read a relatively short poem, how important are these elements for you to determine that is a sonnet?
 - number of lines
 - formal structure
 - rhyme scheme
 - volta
 - subject matter
 - other feature?
 3. Given all the specific features of a traditional sonnet, why would a poet in any era (ours or in times past) write within this genre? (“to be bound within the Sonnet’s scanty ground”?)
 4. With those answers in mind, what about a poem like Bishop’s “Sonnet”? pg. 218. What features of the genre are missing? Is this really a sonnet that fits in the tradition? How so? What other sonnets that we have read push against the sonnet tradition so hard? Why would a poet do this and still call the poem a sonnet?
 5. What is your favorite traditional sonnet or who is your favorite sonneteer? What is your favorite non-traditional sonnet or who is your favorite non-traditional sonneteer?
 6. With all the changes in the sonnet genre, is the sonnet still a separate poetic genre?