

The Sonnet in English

The sonnet is one of the most enduring and influential poetic forms. The rules are simple: fourteen lines with regular meter and rhyme. They're broad enough to accommodate a range of styles and preoccupations, but tight enough to challenge some of the greatest poets to achieve their most intense and refined work. The sonnet in English is also a deeply playful tradition. Already in the sixteenth century, poets were writing sonnets about how artificial sonnets are. Moreover, the brevity of the sonnet makes it a great entrance point for learning to love a poet (or poetry in general). In this course, which will be enjoyable for both people new to reading poetry and aficionados alike, we'll explore how great poets across the centuries have used the sonnet.

Each session will have a theme, but our discussions will be guided by your interests. Likely topics will include love, idolatry, and lust; feeling trapped; attention; the massive amount of effort required to seem effortless; the difficulty of meaning what you say; and the morbid implications of our desperate attempts to capture moments in time.

March 12 – Sprezzatura

William Shakespeare, Sonnet 18 ("Shall I compare thee to a summer's day?")
—, Sonnet 73 ("That time of year thou mayst in me behold")
Gwendolyn Brooks, "First fight. Then fiddle."

March 26 – Attention

Edmund Spenser, Sonnet 23 ("Penelope for her Ulises sake")
Christina Rossetti "In the Artist's Studio"
Elizabeth Barrett Browning, Sonnet 29 ("I think of thee! – my thoughts do twine and bud")

April 2 – Constraint

John Donne, Sonnet 14 ("Batter my heart, three-personed God")
Terence Hayes, "American Sonnet for My Past and Future Assassin" ("I lock you in an American Sonnet that is part prison")
William Butler Yeats, "Leda and the Swan"

April 16 – Presence and Absence

John Keats, "On Seeing the Elgin Marbles"
Percy Shelley, "Ozymandias"
Gerard Manley Hopkins, "Carrion Comfort"

NB: All texts will be made available as PDFs by the instructor.

Optional Supplemental Reading

Joel Fineman from *Shakespeare's Perjured Eye: The Invention of Poetic Subjectivity in the Sonnets*

Marilyn Hacker, "A Few Cranky Paragraphs on Form and Content" from *Dwelling in Possibility*

Anthony Hecht, "The Sonnet: Ruminations on Form, Sex, and History"

Arthur F. Marotti, "'Love is Not Love': Elizabethan Sonnet Sequences and the Social Order"

Additional Resources from the Instructor

A Brief Guide to the Sonnet

A Brief Guide to Analyzing Poetry

On the Difficulties of Poetry

Sean Hughes is a Philly-based writer and editor who has taught at Bryn Mawr College and Rutgers University – New Brunswick, where he completed a Ph.D. in English Literature in 2020. His research interests include nineteenth-century literature, the relationship between literature and philosophy, historicism, and poetics. His article "George Eliot, Typology, and the Moral Psychology of Historicism" was published in the Spring 2022 issue of *English Literary History*. He has previously taught courses on Virginia Woolf and on George Eliot's *Middlemarch* for the Rosenbach.