

Principles of Literary Study
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Office hours: Thursdays 11:45–12:45 in MU 040A or by appt.

March 2, 2026. Open forms, again; couplets, again (Shahid).

upcoming

- ▶ draft introduction due Wednesday at noon
 - ▶ build from a quotation to a motive
 - ▶ forecast an interpretive argument

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Throughout history, poets have written about poetry. Anne Bradstreet was an American Colonial Period poet who wrote many poems. She was a woman and back then women poets were frowned on, but Bradstreet wrote poems anyway. In her poem “The Author to Her Book” Bradstreet talks to her own poem as if it were her child. Through form and content she proves that even if her child has flaws she loves it anyway.

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AG showing you what not to do.

introduction exercise: actual sample

(1) In Anne Bradstreet's poem "The Author to Her Book," the speaker criticizes her book: "I cast thee by as one unfit for light, / Thy visage was so irksome in my sight" (10–11). (2) Throughout the poem, the speaker explores the complicated relationship she has with her creative work through the use of metaphor. Specifically, the metaphor in question describes her relationship as an author to her book as the relationship between a highly critical mother and her child. (3) As an increasing number of people read the speaker's book, the speaker deprecates and attempts to "fix" it.

introduction exercise: actual sample

(1) In Anne Bradstreet's poem "The Author to Her Book," the speaker criticizes her book: "I cast thee by as one unfit for light, / Thy visage was so irksome in my sight" (10–11). (2) Throughout the poem, the speaker explores the complicated relationship she has with her creative work through the use of metaphor. Specifically, the metaphor in question describes her relationship as an author to her book as the relationship between a highly critical mother and her child. (3) As an increasing number of people read the speaker's book, the speaker deprecates and attempts to "fix" it. Although the speaker genuinely harbors affection towards her book, she speaks of it critically and ultimately chooses to sell it for profit as a coping mechanism to deal with criticism. (4) The deprecatory way the speaker refers to her book reveals the speaker's own self-doubt surrounding her creativity. In order to come to terms with outside criticism, the speaker releases her book for outside consumption and continues to speak of it disparagingly despite personally viewing the book fondly.

Wallace Stevens on poetry in wartime

The mind has added nothing to human nature. It is a violence from within that protects us from a violence without. It is the imagination pressing back against the pressure of reality. It seems, in the last analysis, to have something to do with our self-preservation; and that, no doubt, is why the expression of it, the sound of its words, helps us to live our lives.

Wallace Stevens, "The Noble Rider and the Sound of Words" (1941), in *Collected Poetry and Prose*, ed. Frank Kermode and Joan Richardson (New York: Library of America, 1997), 665.

review: (Melville speaks!)

- ▶ Do “swallows fly low” and “Shiloh” rhyme?
 - ▶ can violence be redeemed by natural rebirth as “April rain / Solaced”?
 - ▶ can violence be redeemed by “natural prayer” when “the church...echoed”?
 - ▶ can violence be redeemed by the ephemeral masculine fellowship of “friends at eve”?
 - ▶ can violence be redeemed by poetry?
- ▶ “(What like a bullet can undeceive!)”
- ▶ Warner: “Hooray for bullets! (Obviously, that isn’t the point.)”

But now they lie low,
While over them the swallows skim
And all is hushed at Shiloh.
[And where are you?]

open forms

- ▶ poems making their own rules
 - ▶ look for organizing principles within the poem
- ▶ doesn't mean no form at all
 - ▶ “Lycidas”: rhyme (also: series of speakers)
 - ▶ Ramanujan's tercets (more shortly)
 - ▶ geographic survey in “An Octopus”
 - ▶ the coastline-form of “Corsons Inlet”

What is Ramanujan made of?

- ▶ What defines the “I” who speaks in “Elements of Composition”?

Ramanujan's recipes

elements on certain well-known lists [which ones?]

father's seed and mother's egg

earth, air, fire, mostly / water

calcium, // carbon, even good, magnesium

love and work

uncle's eleven fingers...the look / of panic on sister's face

a dated newspaper map...that a friend carried in his passport

lepers of Madurai...stone-eyed // goddesses of dance

millennia of fossil records / of insects

legend half-heard...of a half-man searching

- ▶ What does the list form do to the idea of composition?

“I”: three(?) takes

1–35 Composed as I am...

36–52 I pass through them... / as they pass through me

53–60 and even as I add, / I lose...eating, / being eaten.

formal alternatives

In the course of a casual conversation, he showed me the draft of a poem called ‘Elements of Composition’, which was then a single, long poem of a few hundred lines arranged in about twenty-five sections. It was a meditation on what we call the ‘nature’ of self and poetry, interspersed at various points with passages reflecting on certain ‘epiphanic’ moments in his life. I thought that it was a major poem...But Ramanujan was sure that his readers would misread it if he published it as it stood, because they would look in it for traces of earlier poems of a similar kind, from Wordsworth’s *The Prelude* to Eliot’s *Four Quartets*. He also felt strongly that the formal and thematic unity asserted by the long poem contradicted one of his central insights in it, that his own ‘truth is in fragments’... When he prepared the final manuscript of *Second Sight*, Ramanujan broke up the poem into fourteen relatively short poems [of which “Elements” is one].

Vinay Dharwadker, [introduction](#) to *The Collected Poems*, xxxvii.

form

Two lines of 10 and/or 8 syllables followed by a 4–5 syllable, an expanded *kural* where the short lines allow you to clinch a thought, and run on.

AKR, Diary, May 14, 1984, qtd. in Guillermo Rodríguez, *When Mirrors Are Windows: A View of A.K. Ramanujan's Poetics* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), 444–45, [Oxford Scholarship Online](#).

kural! classical Tamil poetic form consisting of a four-foot line and a three-foot line, exemplified by the *Tirukkural*, a ca. 5th c. CE philosophical poem. (Wikipedia s.v. “[Kural \(poetic form\)](#)”)

a distinctive relation to language

Ramanujan writes from within English yet as if outside it.

Jahan Ramazani, *The Hybrid Muse: Postcolonial Poetry in English* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2001), 77.

As we grew up [in Mysore], Sanskrit and English were our father tongues, and Tamil and Kannada our mother tongues. The father tongues distanced us from our mothers, from our own childhoods, and from our villages and many of our neighbors in the cowherd colony next door. And the mother tongues united us with them....

Sanskrit stood for the Indian past; English for colonial India and the West, which also served as a disruptive creative other that both alienated us from and revealed us (in its terms) to ourselves; and the mother tongues, the most comfortable and least conscious of all, for the world of women, playmates, children, and servants....Each had a literature that was unlike the others'. Each was an other to the others.

AKR, "Telling Tales," *Daedalus* 118, no. 4 (Fall 1989): 241–42, [JSTOR](#).

caterpillar on a leaf, eating,
being eaten. (59–60)

And what eats is eaten,
and what's eaten, eats
in turn.

Taittirīya Upaniṣad (7th–6th century BCE), 2.2, AKR's translation in "Some Thoughts on 'Non-Western' Classics, with Indian Examples," *World Literature Today* 68, no. 2 (Spring 1994): 333, [JSTOR](#).

From food beings come into being;
By food, once born, they grow.
"It is eaten and it eats beings."
Therefore it is called "food."

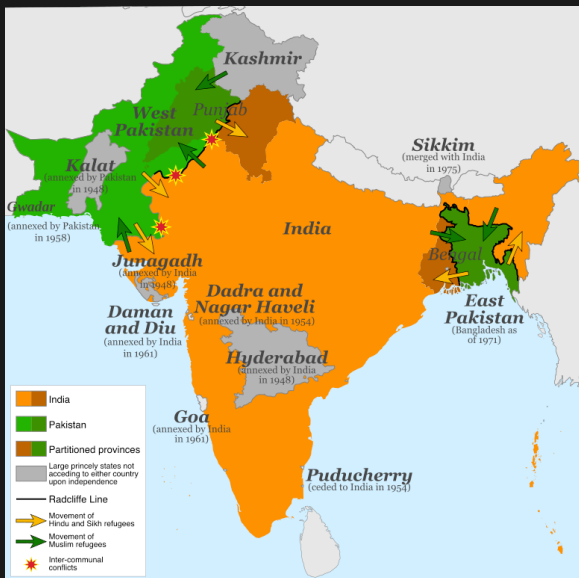
Taittirīya Upaniṣad 2.2, Patrick Olivelle, ed. and trans., *The Early Upanishads: Annotated Text and Translation* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1998), 301, [ProQuest](#).

English literature

- ▶ Where is English literature written?

English literature

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- ▶ What traditions are important for English literature?



Partition of India in 1947, [Wikimedia Commons](#).



“Kashmir Profile,” January 24, 2023, [BBC](#). The BBC no longer updates its regional and country profile pages. This map appears to be relatively up to date, to judge from a [2025 Newsweek article](#) written with AI “assistance.”

the location of Agha Shahid Ali

► Where is Agha Shahid Ali's poetry located?

1949	Agha Shahid Ali b. in New Delhi, India. Childhood in Srinagar , Kashmir.
1951-3?	In Indiana with his parents.
1968	BA University of Kashmir, Srinagar.
1970	MA University of Delhi, where he then teaches.
1972	<i>Bone-Sculpture</i> (Kolkata: Writers Workshop).
1975	Moves to the US permanently.
1979	<i>In Memory of Begum Akhtar</i> (Writers Workshop).
1984	PhD in English, Penn State (diss. on T.S. Eliot).
1985	MFA, University of Arizona.
1987	<i>The Half-Inch Himalayas</i> (Wesleyan UP).
1987	Professor, Hamilton College (NY).
1991	<i>A Nostalgist's Map of America</i> (Norton).
1991	<i>The Rebel's Silhouette</i> trans. Agha Shahid Ali.
1993	Professor at UMass Amherst.
1997	<i>The Country Without a Post Office</i> (Norton).
2000	Agha Shahid Ali, ed., <i>Ravishing DisUnities</i> (Wesleyan UP).
2001	d.
2003	<i>Call Me Ishmael Tonight</i> (Norton).

► What does “shahid” mean?

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They ask me to tell them what Shahid means—

Listen: it means “The Beloved” in Persian, “witness” in Arabic.

“Arabic.”

They ask me to tell them what *Shahid* means: Listen, listen:

It means “The Beloved” in Persian, “witness” in Arabic.

“In Arabic.”

the form

- ▶ What makes a ghazal? Describe the form.

the form

- ▶ What makes a ghazal? Describe the form.
- ▶ *aa ba ca...* rhyme (monorhyme)
- ▶ every couplet has repeated final word (Farsi *radīf*) after rhyme
- ▶ includes pen-name or *takhalluṣ* in last couplet
- ▶ (usually) every line has the same syllable count
- ▶ couplets are end-stopped, almost independent

so what?

- ▶ What does the ghazal form make Shahid do?

The first line (same length) of every succeeding couplet sets up a suspense, and the second line (same length but with the rhyme and refrain—the rhyme immediately preceding the refrain) delivers on that suspense by amplifying, dramatizing, imploding, exploding.

“The Ghazal,” 19.

For You (26–27)

Did we run out of things or just a name for you?
Above us the sun doubles its acclaim for you.

Negative sun or negative shade pulled from the ground . . .
and the image brought in one ornate frame for you.

At my every word they cry, “Who the hell are you?”
What would you reply if they thus sent Fame to you?

Love

Love

Love

Love

Love

Love

Love

Love

Love

Love

Love

Love

Love

Love

Love

Love

Love

Love

Love

Love

What a noise the sentences make writing themselves—
Here's every word that we used as a flame for you.

Because in this dialect the eyes are crossed or quartz,
A STATUE A RAZOR A FACT I exclaim for you.

The birthplace of written language is bombed to nothing.
How neat, dear America, is this game for you?

The angel of history wears all expressions at once.
What will you do? Look, his wings are aflame for you.

On a visitor's card words are arranged in a row—
Who was I? Who am I? I've brought my claim. For you.

A pity I don't know if you're guilty of something!
I would—without your knowing—take the blame for you.

Still for many days the rain will continue to fall . . .
A voice will say, "I'm burning, God, in shame for You."

Something like smoke rises from the snuffed-out distance . . .
Whose house did that fire find which once came for you?

God's dropped the scales. Whose wings will cover me, Michael?
Don't pronounce the sentence Shahid overcame for you.

Cf. "Over the field where April rain..."

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Cf. "Over the field where April rain..."

next

- ▶ intro exercise due Weds.
 - ▶ print out your peer groups' introductions for Thursday
- ▶ keep rereading *Call Me Ishmael Tonight*