

Principles of Literary Study

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February 19, 2026. Stanza shapes.

the sonnet, typical and atypical: form

Genre, we might say, is a set of conventional and highly organized constraints on the production and interpretation of meaning....Generic structure both enables and restricts meaning, and is a basic condition for meaning to take place.

John Frow, *Genre*, 2nd ed. (London: Routledge, 2015), 10.

- ▶ 14 lines
 - ▶ but Meredith, “Modern Love”: 16 ll.
- ▶ iambic pentameter
 - ▶ but *Astrophil and Stella* I: hexameter
- ▶ rhyme schemes: two principal types
 - ▶ Petrarchan: *abbaabba* + *cdecde* or permutations
 - ▶ Shakespearean: *abab cdcd efef gg*
 - ▶ but Yeats, “Leda and the Swan”: mixed type
 - ▶ but Heaney, “Clearances”: slant rhymes (mostly)

sonnets, typical and atypical: rhetoric

- ▶ Shakespearean couplet is also rhetorical: closure effect
 - ▶ but: Sonnet 116
- ▶ Petrarchan *volta*: change in stance at l. 9
 - ▶ but: Heaney, "Clearances" 7
- ▶ rhetorical setting: private reading, "lyric" norm
 - ▶ Yeats: "all politics went out of it" (!?)
 - ▶ but Brooks, "rites": "Oh oh. Too much. Too much."
 - ▶ but Kavanagh: "Epic"

sonnets, typical and atypical: theme

- ▶ the sonnet is a poem about love
 - ▶ especially Platonic or frustrated love
 - ▶ heterosexual love?
 - ▶ the greatest sonnets in the language are mostly addressed by a man to a man, so...
- ▶ BUT
 - ▶ Donne, "Holy Sonnets"
 - ▶ Wordsworth, "Westminster Bridge"
 - ▶ Yeats, "Leda and the Swan"
 - ▶ Brooks, "rites for Cousin Vit"
 - ▶ Kavanagh, "Epic"
 - ▶ ...

Yeats: it's not a love poem

Yeats: it's not a love poem

- ▶ ruthlessly conjoins erotic and violent language
 - ▶ *caressed, nape, breast, thighs, body, heart*
 - ▶ *blow, beating, staggering, caught, helpless, terrified*
 - ▶ which is *body*?
- ▶ *volta* links the traumatic moment to historical catastrophe
 - ▶ (and lyric to epic: cf. Kavanagh)
 - ▶ the turn to history makes the last rhyme deteriorate (*up/drop*)
- ▶ the questions: are they rhetorical?
 - ▶ ll. 5–8 situates speaker with Leda
 - ▶ ll. 11–14 registers his difference from her

My fancy began to play with Leda and the Swan for metaphor, and I began this poem; but as I wrote, bird and lady took such possession of the scene that all politics went out of it, and my friend tells me that his 'conservative readers would misunderstand the poem.'

Yeats's note to the poem, in *Poems*, 2nd ed., ed. Richard J. Finneran (New York: Scribner, 1997), 664.

but Heaney, “Clearances” 7

(1) In the last minutes he said more to her	a
Almost than in all their life together.	a
‘You’ll be in New Row on Monday night	b
And I’ll come up for you and you’ll be glad	c
When I walk in the door ... Isn’t that right?’	b
His head was bent down to her propped-up head.	c
She could not hear but we were overjoyed.	d?
He called her good and girl. (2) Then she was dead,	c
The searching for a pulsebeat was abandoned	e?
And we all knew one thing by being there.	a
(3) The space we stood around had been emptied	d?
Into us to keep, it penetrated	d?
Clearances that suddenly stood open.	e??
(4) High cries were felled and a pure change happened.	e?

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Heaney, "Clearances" 8

I thought of walking round and round a space
Utterly empty, utterly a source
Where the decked chestnut tree had lost its place
In our front hedge above the wallflowers.
The white chips jumped and jumped and skited high.
I heard the hatchet's differentiated
Accurate cut, the crack, the sigh
And collapse of what luxuriated
Through the shocked tips and wreckage of it all.
Deep planted and long gone, my coeval
Chestnut from a jam jar in a hole,
Its heft and hush become a bright nowhere,
A soul ramifying and forever
Silent, beyond silence listened for.



The Sosibios vase, marble, ca. 50 BCE, [Louvre](#); The Townley vase, marble, 2nd c. CE, [British Museum](#).



Marble relief, Parthenon North frieze, 447–432 BCE, [British Museum](#).

Keats's "Urn"

1. Keats's "Urn" is a poem that explores the relationship between art and nature, and the power of art to preserve beauty and emotion.
2. The poem is written in a simple, direct style, with a focus on vivid imagery and emotional resonance.
3. The central theme of the poem is the idea of the "Urn," which serves as a metaphor for art and the human experience.
4. The poem is divided into three stanzas, each of which explores a different aspect of the Urn's significance.
5. In the first stanza, the speaker describes the Urn as a "foster-child" of the "silent" and "unconscious" world, suggesting that art is a product of the unconscious mind.
6. In the second stanza, the speaker describes the Urn as a "foster-child" of the "conscious" world, suggesting that art is a product of the conscious mind.
7. In the third stanza, the speaker describes the Urn as a "foster-child" of the "unconscious" world, suggesting that art is a product of the unconscious mind.
8. The poem concludes with a powerful statement about the power of art to preserve beauty and emotion, suggesting that art is a "foster-child" of the "unconscious" world.
9. The poem is a masterpiece of English literature, and its themes and imagery continue to resonate with readers today.
10. The poem is a testament to the power of art to preserve beauty and emotion, and its themes and imagery continue to resonate with readers today.

Keats's "Urn"

- ▶ 10 ll. iambic pentameter
- ▶ rhymed *abab cdedce*
 - ▶ triplet order varies: *cdedce cdecdec cdecde cdecde cdedce*
 - ▶ "more sweetly than our rhyme" (4)?

stanza as stance

- ▶ consider just one stanza in isolation
- ▶ think: what is particular to this stanza?
 - ▶ What kind of sentences?
 - ▶ What kind of images?
 - ▶ What kind of address?
 - ▶ What mood (how do you know?)
 - ▶ Why doesn't (5: does) the poem just stop here?

next

- ▶ bring back Keats's Ode
- ▶ speakers and addressees (implied and actual)
- ▶ focus on:
 - ▶ Wheatley, "On Being Brought..."
 - ▶ Melville, "Shiloh"
 - ▶ Eliot, "Prufrock"
- ▶ Hughes and Walcott poems are recommended but optional
- ▶ read Warner's essay on "Shiloh"
 - ▶ warning: quite challenging
 - ▶ pay attention to how Warner discusses speech and address