

PERRINE'S SOUND & SENSE: AN INTRODUCTION TO POETRY

Your task, in short: From our poetry text, *Sound & Sense*, select and learn by heart a total of four (4) poems. Together, they will consist of at least 60 lines:

- 1 Italian/Petrarchan sonnet = 14 lines
- 1 English/Shakespearean sonnet = 14 lines
- 1 poem by Emily Dickinson in the ballad meter quatrain = 12+ lines
- 1 unrhymed, free verse poem (20th century) = 20+ lines

All poems by heart are due at the beginning of the second (2nd) week of class.

Why are we doing this? This deserves a long answer, but here I'll resort to a rhetorical question: What better way to learn poetry? When we commit a poem to memory, just as with a song or a piece of music we are learning to perform, we learn it "by heart"—that is to say, we take full ownership of it; it becomes fully ours. We learn it from the inside out.

Now for a bit more detail:

1. No other poetic form in English has a richer legacy than **the sonnet**. From the 1300s to the present, the sonnet reigns supreme as the go-to form challenging poets to sing their souls in 140 syllables (10 per line x 14 lines). All sonnets share these basic features: 14 lines, 10 syllables per line with a dominant iambic pentameter rhythm, and a rhyme scheme that usually conforms to the Italian or English style. In the early centuries the sonnet typically sang of love—more specifically, the frustration of unrequited love—but more recently the sonnet may address virtually any subject.

a. **the Italian sonnet** (aka **the Petrarchan sonnet**): First brought to full mastery in the 14th century by its "father," Francesco Petrarch of Italy, the Italian sonnet is organized rhetorically into two parts: an **octave** (lines 1-8) and a **sestet** (lines 9-14), with the all-important **volta** (turn, shift, transition, hinge, pivot) occurring between them. The Italian sonnet's argument, consequently, unfolds in two parts—watch for it! The **rhyme scheme** of the octave usually follows the pattern *abba abba*, while the sestet's rhyme scheme is quite flexible, but typically introduces two different rhyming sounds, for example, *cdc cdc* (or *cdc cdd*, etc.).

b. **the English sonnet** (aka **the Shakespearean sonnet**): English writers imported the sonnet from Italy in the 16th century. However, a significant structural/rhetorical re-design occurred as it crossed the English Channel: In place of the octave & sestet, now **3 equal quatrains** and a **final couplet** were substituted. This new sonnet architecture significantly changed the **rhyme scheme** as well, which typically follows the pattern *abab cdcd efef gg*. As a result of its form, the English sonnet follows a 1-2-3 argumentative pattern, culminating in a final couplet knock-out punch—beware that left hook! William Shakespeare's 154 sonnets published in 1609 showed his impressive mastery of the English sonnet; and since then, in the bard's honor, the English sonnet is also called the "Shakespearean sonnet."

Our poetry text, *Sound & Sense*, introduces the sonnet form in Chapter 14, “Pattern” (246-63). A multitude of sonnets can be found in the text besides these. Browse well, and choose one sonnet of each type (Italian & English) to commit to memory.

2. On to **Emily Dickinson** (1830-1886): To describe an artist as “ahead of her time” surely ranks among the most tiresome clichés—but in Emily Dickinson’s case the cliché happens to be true! Unpublished during her lifetime (except for a handful poems, and all of those anonymously), Dickinson’s reputation soared among post-World War I Modernists who appreciated her poetry for its crisp and surprising imagery; for its fearless, skeptical voice; and for its clear-eyed, unsentimental vision. Then in the mid-1950s her reputation soared again when her complete body of poetry was republished—*but now, for the first time, as she actually wrote it*—including her signature use of the dash, her unorthodox use of upper-case letters, and her preference for innovative slant end rhymes (also called “approximate rhymes” or “off rhymes”)! The word was out: In both content and style, Emily Dickinson’s poetry was something *new*.

Sound & Sense honors Ms. Dickinson as one of four (4) “Featured Poets” on page xiii, listing 21 of her poems (the same ones are found in the index). Read through the selection, and choose one (1) to commit to memory; it must have at least three (3) stanzas.

3. **Free verse poetry**: Occurring simultaneously with Expressionist Art and with the bold new rhythms of jazz music, many—although of course not all—early 20th century poets felt ready to innovate, to depart from the centuries-old metrical patterns and rhyme schemes that had come to define the music of poetry. The American poet Walt Whitman pioneered free verse in his 1855 *Leaves of Grass*, but 19th century readers had largely rejected it. Now, however, coinciding with World War I era Modernism, free verse was poised to take center stage. *Sound & Sense* defines free verse as “non-metrical poetry in which the basic rhythmic unit is the line, and in which pauses, line breaks, and formal patterns develop organically from the requirements of the individual poem rather than from established poetic forms” (426); Chapter 12, “Rhythm and Meter,” elaborates on this concept.

Our text abounds with examples of free verse poetry. Enjoy browsing the full collection. Choose a single example of a free verse poem and commit it to memory. The poem’s length? For goodness sake, I don’t want this assignment to become a silly exercise in quantity, but aim for a complete free verse poem of at least 20 lines.

Evaluation: How will you show that you truly know your four (4) poems inside and out?

1. During the second week of school, I will ask you to **write out** the four poems in class, from memory. I will expect 100% accuracy.

2. During that same second week, you will sign up for a time to **meet with me after school**. I will hear you recite your four poems. We’ll chat about them, too.

3. We will host an in-class Poetry Slam, during which you will **take the stage to recite with expression** at least one of your poems. Prizes to the best readers!

4. As we examine the sonnet form (Italian and English) in class, you will be called upon to recite your sonnets.

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