t.s. poetry press

Top 10 Shakespeare Sonnets

also includes “about Shakespeare”
& “how to write a sonnet”!

Top 10 Shakespeare Sonnets, *About Shakespeare: Poet and Playwright*, and *Glass Slipper Sonnets* first appeared at *Tweetspeak Poetry*.

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About Shakespeare: Poet and Playwright

by Karen Swallow Prior, author of *Booked: Literature in the Soul of Me*

Recently, Shakespeare was deemed by a famous radio personality as "unrelatable," aloof, as he is, in language and distant in time. This critic is not alone in his thoughts about Shakespeare. Many today associate Shakespeare with the elite—the royalty of his day and the cultured of ours.

But Shakespeare truly was—and still is—a poet and playwright of the people and for the people—all people.

ABOUT SHAKESPEARE'S LIFE

Unlike most well-known writers who lived before the modern age, Shakespeare was born into the working class, the son of a struggling tradesman who dabbled in a number of jobs after arriving in 1551 in Stratford-Upon-Avon, where William was born (1564), lived, and died (1616).

While Shakespeare attended the local grammar school, he did not go to university as other well-known writers of the age did. Rather, when he was just 18, he married Anne Hathaway, who was pregnant with their first child. Several years later, after the birth of two more children, Shakespeare's first plays appeared on the London stage. This poor, provincial family man who dared to compete with aristocrats was described by a contemporary as an "upstart crow."

But his humble origins and great achievements helped his work reflect the universals of the human condition. Both Shakespeare's life and his works mirror the highs and lows of the age and its people. While his wife was likely illiterate, he counted Queen Elizabeth among his friends. When King James came to the throne, Shakespeare's acting company was renamed "The King's Men," and

they performed at court as well as on the stage. In Shakespeare's day, plays were attended by everyone: royalty and commoners alike. For a mere pittance, the so-called "groundlings" gained a standing space in the pit, or yard, in which the theater sat. As many as 500 people squeezed into this space, where they stood for the duration of the three-hour production, which is why these folks were often called "stinkards." Shakespeare's productions brought members from every level of society together.

ABOUT SHAKESPEARE'S WORK

While Shakespeare's language sounds fancy today, much of it reflected the tongue of his day. In fact, his works employ many common literary devices: puns, double entendres, innuendo, and slapstick humor. Shakespeare is credited with coining or changing the use of over 1,700 words, in a fashion similar to the way slang terms are developed today. A writer with a classical university education would not likely have been so daring and innovative.

Yes, Shakespearean verse is elegant and lofty, to be sure, often unfamiliar and difficult at first for most readers today. But even popular music on the radio is written in verse and quickly becomes familiar with repeated listening. Shakespeare's poetry stands up even better than this to repeated exposure. And some of the words and usages attributed to Shakespeare in regular use today are staples in our vocabulary for common experience: *lonely, generous, jaded, bedroom, majestic, gloomy, luggage, blanket*, and *dawn*.

ABOUT SHAKESPEARE'S THEMES

Over the course of his life, Shakespeare wrote nearly 40 plays (tragedies, comedies, and histories), 154 sonnets, and two narrative poems—that we know of. While many of his works deal with weighty themes and noble characters, his works are generously populated with rascals, drunks, witches, and buffoons. His primary subjects—love, loyalty, ambition, betrayal, greed, friendship, suicide, murder, and death—are the things that concern us all as a people:

All the world's a stage,
And all the men and women merely players:
They have their exits and their entrances;

And one man in his time plays many parts,
His acts being seven ages. At first the infant,
Mewling and puking in the nurse's arms.
And then the whining school-boy, with his satchel
And shining morning face, creeping like snail
Unwillingly to school. And then the lover,
Sighing like furnace, with a woeful ballad
Made to his mistress' eyebrow. Then a soldier,
Full of strange oaths and bearded like the pard,
Jealous in honour, sudden and quick in quarrel,
Seeking the bubble reputation
Even in the cannon's mouth. And then the justice,
In fair round belly with good capon lined,
With eyes severe and beard of formal cut,
Full of wise saws and modern instances;
And so he plays his part. The sixth age shifts
Into the lean and slipper'd pantaloon,
With spectacles on nose and pouch on side,
His youthful hose, well saved, a world too wide
For his shrunk shank; and his big manly voice,
Turning again toward childish treble, pipes
And whistles in his sound. Last scene of all,
That ends this strange eventful history,
Is second childishness and mere oblivion,
Sans teeth, sans eyes, sans taste, sans everything.

— from *As You Like It*

Top 10 Shakespeare Sonnets

by LW Lindquist, author of *Adjustments: A Novel*

Word on the street (and the English wing of your high school campus) is that William Shakespeare wrote 154 sonnets. Among other things about which I was a little skeptical in literature classes, this number is one of them.

Personally, I think he wrote several hundred more.

If you've ever tried to write a sonnet, you know that more often than not, it doesn't come out right the first time. Odds are you will at least tinker with it, but more likely there's a pile of discarded wads of crumpled paper around your wool-stocking'd feet under your writing desk before you ever get to the one that you'll actually let a person read.

Shakespeare wrote 154 sonnets that were published and have survived into perpetuity. And that's 154 sonnets that are so good that a lot of modern day sonneteers try to imitate them.

The traditional Shakespearean Sonnet form has 14 lines comprised of three quatrains (four-line stanzas) and one rhyming couplet (two-line stanza). The poem is written in iambic pentameter, meaning each line has 10 syllables with the stress falling on the second syllable of each pair.

Of those 154 surviving sonnets, we've collected 10 of our favorites for you to enjoy. Do you have a favorite that is not on the list? Share it with us in the comments at Tweetspeak Poetry.

1. Sonnet 106

When in the chronicle of wasted time
I see descriptions of the fairest wights,
And beauty making beautiful old rhyme
In praise of ladies dead, and lovely knights,
Then, in the blazon of sweet beauty's best,
Of hand, of foot, of lip, of eye, of brow,
I see their antique pen would have express'd
Even such a beauty as you master now.
So all their praises are but prophecies
Of this our time, all you prefiguring;
And, for they look'd but with divining eyes,
They had not skill enough your worth to sing:
For we, which now behold these present days,
Had eyes to wonder, but lack tongues to praise.

2. Sonnet 138

When my love swears that she is made of truth
I do believe her, though I know she lies,
That she might think me some untutor'd youth,
Unlearned in the world's false subtleties.
Thus vainly thinking that she thinks me young,
Although she knows my days are past the best,
Simply I credit her false speaking tongue:
On both sides thus is simple truth suppress'd.
But wherefore says she not she is unjust?
And wherefore say not I that I am old?
O, love's best habit is in seeming trust,
And age in love loves not to have years told:
Therefore I lie with her and she with me,
And in our faults by lies we flatter'd be.

3. Sonnet 98

From you have I been absent in the spring,
When proud-pied April dress'd in all his trim
Hath put a spirit of youth in every thing,
That heavy Saturn laugh'd and leap'd with him.
Yet nor the lays of birds nor the sweet smell
Of different flowers in odour and in hue
Could make me any summer's story tell,
Or from their proud lap pluck them where they grew;
Nor did I wonder at the lily's white,
Nor praise the deep vermilion in the rose;
They were but sweet, but figures of delight,
Drawn after you, you pattern of all those.
Yet seem'd it winter still, and, you away,
As with your shadow I with these did play.

4. Sonnet 29

When, in disgrace with fortune and men's eyes,
I all alone beweep my outcast state,
And trouble deaf heaven with my bootless cries,
And look upon myself, and curse my fate,
Wishing me like to one more rich in hope,
Featur'd like him, like him with friends possess'd,
Desiring this man's art and that man's scope,
With what I most enjoy contented least;
Yet in these thoughts myself almost despising,
Haply I think on thee, and then my state,
Like to the lark at break of day arising
From sullen earth, sings hymns at heaven's gate;
For thy sweet love remember'd such wealth brings
That then I scorn to change my state with kings.

5. Sonnet 24

Mine eye hath play'd the painter and hath stell'd
Thy beauty's form in table of my heart;
My body is the frame wherein 'tis held,
And perspective it is the painter's art.
For through the painter must you see his skill,
To find where your true image pictured lies;
Which in my bosom's shop is hanging still,
That hath his windows glazed with thine eyes.
Now see what good turns eyes for eyes have done:
Mine eyes have drawn thy shape, and thine for me
Are windows to my breast, where-through the sun
Delights to peep, to gaze therein on thee;
Yet eyes this cunning want to grace their art;
They draw but what they see, know not the heart.

6. Sonnet 134

So, now I have confess'd that he is thine,
And I myself am mortgaged to thy will,
Myself I'll forfeit, so that other mine
Thou wilt restore, to be my comfort still:
But thou wilt not, nor he will not be free,
For thou art covetous and he is kind;
He learn'd but surety-like to write for me
Under that bond that him as fast doth bind.
The statute of thy beauty thou wilt take,
Thou usurer, that put'st forth all to use,
And sue a friend came debtor for my sake;
So him I lose through my unkind abuse.
Him have I lost; thou hast both him and me:
He pays the whole, and yet am I not free.

7. Sonnet 18

Shall I compare thee to a summer's day?
Thou art more lovely and more temperate.
Rough winds do shake the darling buds of May,
And summer's lease hath all too short a date.
Sometime too hot the eye of heaven shines,
And often is his gold complexion dimmed;
And every fair from fair sometime declines,
By chance, or nature's changing course, untrimmed;
But thy eternal summer shall not fade,
Nor lose possession of that fair thou ow'st,
Nor shall death brag thou wand'rest in his shade,
When in eternal lines to Time thou grow'st.
So long as men can breathe, or eyes can see,
So long lives this, and this gives life to thee.

8. Sonnet 116

Let me not to the marriage of true minds
Admit impediments. Love is not love
Which alters when it alteration finds,
Or bends with the remover to remove:
O no; it is an ever-fixed mark,
That looks on tempests, and is never shaken;
It is the star to every wandering bark,
Whose worth's unknown, although his height be taken.
Love's not Time's fool, though rosy lips and cheeks
Within his bending sickle's compass come;
Love alters not with his brief hours and weeks,
But bears it out even to the edge of doom.
If this be error and upon me proved,
I never writ, nor no man ever loved.

9. Sonnet 130

My mistress' eyes are nothing like the sun;
Coral is far more red than her lips' red;
If snow be white, why then her breasts are dun;
If hairs be wires, black wires grow on her head.
I have seen roses damask'd, red and white,
But no such roses see I in her cheeks;
And in some perfumes is there more delight
Than in the breath that from my mistress reeks.
I love to hear her speak, yet well I know
That music hath a far more pleasing sound;
I grant I never saw a goddess go;
My mistress, when she walks, treads on the ground:
And yet, by heaven, I think my love as rare
As any she belied with false compare.

10. Sonnet 104

To me, fair friend, you never can be old,
For as you were, when first your eye I ey'd,
Such seems your beauty still. Three winters cold
Have from the forests shook three summers' pride,
Three beauteous springs to yellow autumn turn'd
In process of the seasons have I seen,
Three April perfumes in three hot Junes burn'd,
Since first I saw you fresh, which yet are green.
Ah! yet doth beauty, like a dial-hand,
Steal from his figure and no pace perceiv'd;
So your sweet hue, which methinks still doth stand,
Hath motion and mine eye may be deceiv'd:
For fear of which, hear this, thou age unbred;
Ere you were born, was beauty's summer dead.

Glass Slipper Sonnets: Or, How to Write a Sonnet

By Angela Alaimo O'Donnell, author of *Saint Sinatra and Other Poems*

A while back, I was corresponding by email with a poet friend, when the subject of The Sonnet inevitably came up. (There is no escaping the long reach of the small song—which is literally what the Italian word "sonetto" means.) My friend declared that the challenge of trying to fit her ideas into a fourteen-line container of such careful construction felt like trying to squeeze her big foot into a glass slipper. (She is from Texas, and people do speak in a colorful way in that part of the world.)

Though many poets have spoken and written (complained and kvetched) about the difficulties of this form, this particular metaphor had the ring of both originality and truth. I responded with delight and immediately challenged us to a sonnet duel, of sorts: we would both write a Glass Slipper Sonnet—a sonnet describing the process of writing a sonnet in terms of her comparison. We liked the idea—were eager to begin—charged our weapons, took our twenty paces. Then we promptly forgot about it.

Later, as I was culling through old emails, I came upon this exchange and thought it high time to take a shot at it (not her, mind you), based on the assumption that a late sonnet is better than no sonnet at all. The result was this poem:

Glass Slipper Sonnet

Pity the poor step-sister those big feet
she'll never stuff in a size-six sonnet,

her flesh so fulsome the slipper seems effete,
unworthy of the labor spent on it.

But try she must, and so she makes a pass,
jams four fat toes in the narrow throat,

the fifth pig smarting, pressed against the glass
(though pain's no stranger—she knows it by rote.)

The other shoe drops—as it is wont to do—
a second foot is squeezed into the vamp.

She stands up straight and takes a stride towards you,
her footfall heavy as a farmgirl's tramp.

The slipper strains against those excess feet.
She hobbles onward—she has a prince to meet.

CONTENT

Though the poem above will certainly garner no prizes, I must confess—it was fun to write.

After growing up (like most of us) channeling Cinderella (whose story is the obvious origin of the Glass Slipper image) and holding the wicked step-sisters in contempt, I enjoyed adopting the perspective of her nemesis. (It's not easy being ugly and ungainly, unloved and un-princed—and that awful mother!) So the poem satisfied my desire to give the silent sufferers in the tale their due. I also enjoyed learning some new words that describe shoe construction ("vamp" being my personal favorite) and using slang to describe certain body parts ("the fifth pig" having arrived as a complete surprise, coming as it does out of another—very different—childhood story, one involving, mysteriously enough, roast beef).

FORM

The form of this sonnet is traditional, in most ways, but the attentive reader (and would-be sonneteer) will also note that it breaks with tradition, as well:

1. The rhyme scheme corresponds to that of the Shakespearean Sonnet (ABAB

CDCD EFEF GG). However, instead of being grouped into 3 quatrains (4-line stanzas) and a concluding couplet, the lines form a series of seven couplets.

The effect of this is to make the poem move more slowly, one step followed by another, and then another. In fact, the pairings suggest the image of feet (which tend to come in pairs) and the act of walking (which is actually described in the latter portion of the poem).

The pairing of lines—which I did instinctively rather than intentionally–allowed me to control the pacing of the revisionist tale. Thus, the poem both conforms to and breaks with sonnet tradition. This kind of playing within and also against the boundaries of the form lies at the heart of sonnet writing. The goal for the poet ought to be to obey the rules as much as possible—unless he or she comes up with a better idea.

2. The length of the lines in the poem is more or less equivalent. The traditional sonnet form calls for 14 lines of iambic pentameter, and, accordingly, most lines in the poem have 10 syllables, 5 of them stressed and 5 unstressed. I do confess that these are "loose iambics," as Robert Frost liked to call colloquial-sounding lines. There are times that I have violated this rule in the interest of creating some variation in the meter and introducing some tonal changes.

For example, the final line contains 11 syllables instead of 10, in part because of the repetition of "she" in the line. This redundancy, together with the awkward pause in the middle of the line, seems to be a rhythmic echo of the step-sister's awkward gait, as she hobbles along, putting one big foot after another, trying to wear a shoe that doesn't really fit. Again, the poem both obeys and flouts the rules in attempt to meet the expectations of the reader and then to surprise him or her—pleasantly, I hope—by upsetting those expectations. The immediate goal, of course, is to create a humorous conclusion to the poem. The ultimate goal is to write a sonnet (or wear the slipper), but to do so on my own terms (like the step-sister!).

TRYING IT ON

As you set out to write your sonnet, you'll want to make a few choices. These will help you to create a blueprint for your poem:

1. Which rhyme scheme—and which rhetorical structure—will you adopt?

The Petrarchan (or Italian) Sonnet is divided into two parts: the first 8 lines (the Octave), rhyming ABBAABBA tend to present a problem or situation, and the last 6 lines (the Sestet), rhyming CDCDCD, tend to resolve it. This works well when you want to present two sides of a story or to establish contrast or tension between two entities or ideas.

The Shakespearian (or English) Sonnet is divided into four parts: three four-line stanzas (or quatrains) rhyming ABAB CDCD EFEF and a couplet rhyming GG. Each of the four parts tends to present some aspect of the poem's subject, each one building upon the previous assertion. The couplet tends to resolve the difficulty or challenge expressed in the poem. This tends to work well when you have a series of ideas you want to explore.

You'll want to decide whether either of these rhyme schemes is easier for you to execute and/or whether either of these structures is more or less suitable for the story you want to tell.

2. What rhyming words would you like to use?

Some poets like to decide in advance which rhyming words they might like to use. If you choose to do this, you might even block out the poem, writing the rhyme words at the (imagined) end of each line by and then creating lines to fit them.

Another option is to begin with your first line and simply see where it takes you, allowing the rhymes to develop more organically as the poem proceeds.

In either case, feel free to have a rhyming dictionary handy. It serves as a great aid to memory!

3. Which characters (if any) will appear in your Glass Slipper Sonnet? What voice might you adopt/what point of view might you assume?

Your choices are, of course, unlimited. They range from the traditional characters in the fairy tale—Cinderella, the Prince, the wicked step-mother,

the wicked step-sisters, the fairy godmother, etc.—to characters who have absolutely nothing to do with the story. In fact, introducing a new, unexpected character into the sonnet is more likely to lead you away from safe and familiar paths.

4. What will the tone and approach of your poem be?

Do you want to write a humorous poem? a tragic poem? a satire? a revision of the story? an indictment of it? Or some combination? (The tone of the poem ought to change—and most likely will as you follow out the implications of your "story.")

PUTTING YOUR BEST FOOT FORWARD

Start your poem by writing down the first sentence that comes into your head. Even if it seems to have nothing to do with sonnets or glass slippers, just write it down. If it isn't a 10-syllable line, try to cut or introduce more words and/or syllables to make it close.

Once you've got a first line, you've got a foundation to build on. Your second line can be a reaction to or a continuation of the first—or it may have nothing to do with it at all. Your goal should be to come up with approximately ten syllables and to conclude the line with a word that you will be able to find a rhyme for pretty readily. That's it! (If you work to satisfy the form—the content will come.)

Proceed in this way in writing the 3rd and 4th lines, making sure to create rhymes in keeping with the pattern you've selected. Your goal is the accumulation of 4 lines which present or loosely describe a particular scenario or situation having to do with shoes and feet.

With the 5th line, you can begin a new sub-topic—something related to the theme you've already explored, but one that takes the theme in a slightly (or entirely) new direction. The 6th, 7th, and 8th lines should then follow suit, addressing this new theme and fulfilling the rhyme scheme.

Lines 9-12 of the sonnet might introduce yet another theme or set of images,

once again allowing you to deviate from what has been said and to go in a new direction.

Lines 13-14 of the sonnet should, in some way, attempt to tie up some loose ends, sum up a central theme—perhaps gesture back towards the beginning—and leave the reader with something to ponder.

RETRACING YOUR STEPS

Once you have your 14 lines, the blueprint of your sonnet is complete. Now you can begin re-vamping with them in several ways:

1. Eliminate and introduce words in attempt to come up with the best, most precise, most entertaining or surprising words, whose denotation(s) and connotation(s) enrich the poem's possibilities.

2. Count out the syllables and stresses in each line, adding some where the lines fall short and removing some where the lines are too long. (You don't want to be too mechanical about this or to strive for metronomic exactitude—feel free to make some allowances for variation.)

3. Substitute end rhymes, to get the most satisfying sounds, and in the process feel free to write alternate endings and/or beginnings of lines.

4. Pay attention to the music made by the words inside the lines, as well as those at the end. Try to make your sonnet sound like the "little song" that it is by introducing as much alliteration, assonance, consonance, onomatopoeia, and internal rhyme as you can.

DISCOVERIES

What you'll discover in this process is that the sonnet form is very elastic and expansive—that there is plenty of room to move around inside the fourteen-line structure you have built—and that it is a pleasure to play within the rules, as well as to occasionally break them, as you attempt to create the most satisfying form that says what you want it to say.

To return to our original metaphor, you may also discover that the Glass Slipper isn't quite as delicate or as rigid as it may have seemed at the outset. Instead, you will find, good shoe that it is, that it will expand to accommodate your foot, and will prove a sturdy sole-mate as you continue along your poetic journey.

You might also discover the secret to the celebrated sonnet sequences written by Petrarch, Shakespeare, Sidney, Spenser, Donne, Wordsworth, Barrett Browning, and so many other poets: writing sonnets is addicting. Once you have experienced the satisfaction of producing a small, well-made sonnet, you will want to do it again. And again.

I can readily attest to this.

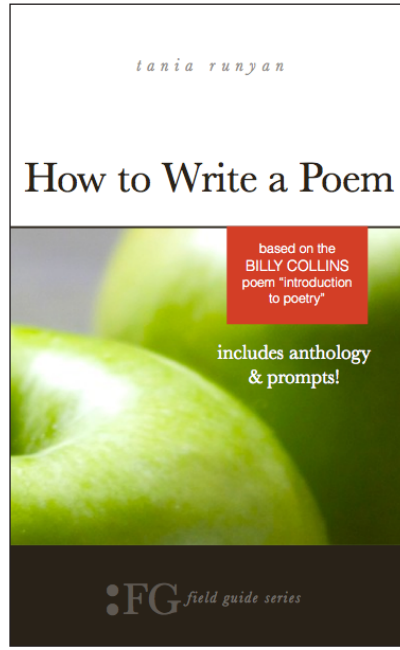
Perhaps part of the pleasure of the sonnet lies in knowing that you will almost certainly fail to include everything you wish to say in fourteen lines—but you can always pick up where you left off and write another.

Glass Slipper Sonnet #2

Sister Two tries her hand—or feet—
and fits more flush in the fragile shoe
(as if that were possible to do,
given her sibling's previous feat).

But she—well-versed in the art of snugly
stuffing in clothes so small (this gets ugly)
the seams perform an undulant dance
along her sides and posterior expanse—

yes, she quite matches her sister's skill
in making that slipper conform to her will.
(When the shoe breaks, the sonnet must fall
two lines short, no sonnet at all.)



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