

Nancy Martin

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The Logical Sonnet

How do we define artistic and creative disciplines in terms of logical systems? The main objection is that creativity can't be pinned down logically. However mathematics is not so uncreative as to be inherently limiting to a creative discipline such as poetry. Although while we are creating poetry or reading poetry we often don't think of the rules and structure behind the poem, rules and structure do in fact exist. By examining these axioms of poetry, we can understand how the structure of a poem informs and affects its meaning. Since mathematics is a broad subject, and poetry is a rather broad subject as well, I focus on the sonnet.

Poetry began as lyrics to songs, and therefore they had certain rhyme and rhythm structures that were usually rather predictable so they could be more easily remembered, since in their origins they were not written down, but passed on by rote. Poetry has specific structure and intentions that make it poetry. These formulas and rules have adapted during different literary periods. The sonnet has specific structure that has also evolved and questioned its own rules. Shakespearean sonnets have strict structure with specified meter, rhyme scheme, stanza structure, length and theme, and modernist poems take traditional forms and change them, often to make a comment about the nature of poetry itself and the way that form affects a poem (called meta-poetry).

Definitions:

Stress Emphasis: where the weight of the word falls

Foot: a part of poetry containing 2 or three syllables, with the stress emphasis specified by the

specific name; examples of feet: iamb = 2 syllables, weak strong; dactyl = 3 syllables, strong weak weak; anapest = 3 syllables, weak weak strong; and spondee = strong strong.

Meter: number of feet per line (pentameter = 5 sets of whichever foot you are using)

Theme: subject focused on/commented on in the poem

Imagery: use of words to create mental images in the reader's head.

Meter/text relationship: interplay between the words and the rhythm of the poetry.

Metaphor: a figure of speech in which a word or phrase literally denoting one kind of object or idea is used in place of another to suggest a likeness or analogy between them (as in *drowning in money*)

Simile: a figure of speech comparing two unlike things that is often introduced by *like* or *as* (as in *cheeks like roses*) (Miriam-Webster Dictionary)

Rhyme: correspondence in terminal sounds of units of composition or utterance.

Symbolism: the art or practice of using symbols, especially by investing things with a symbolic meaning or by expressing the invisible or intangible by means of visible or sensuous representations: as **a**: artistic imitation or invention that is a method of revealing or suggesting immaterial, ideal, or otherwise intangible truth or states **b**: the use of conventional or traditional signs in the representation of divine beings and spirits. (Miriam Webster Dictionary.)

Rhyme Scheme: order or sequence of rhymes. Often *abab cdcd efef gg* (but you can write a Shakespearean style sonnet with an alternate rhyme scheme; for example, Wordsworth often uses: *abbaaccb dedeff*).

Syntax: the way in which linguistic elements (as words) are put together to form constituents

(as phrases or clauses).

Undefined terms:

Love: It is the subject of the poem. The poet either attempts to define it, describe it, explore its nature and the properties we observe about it, or make a comment on it.

Sonnet Axioms

Sonnet Axiom 1: Must have 14 lines.

Sonnet Axiom 2: Each line must contain readable characters.

Sonnet Axiom 3: The 14 lines may be divided as follows:

- a) Italian Sonnet: divided into 2 parts: the octave (8 lines), and the sestet (6 lines)
- b) Shakespearean Sonnet: divide the octave into two 4-line stanzas and the sestet into a 4-line stanza with a couplet (two lines at the end). (Padgett, 178)
- c) not divided
- d) divided every two lines (seven groups)

Sonnet Axiom 4: Must set up or develop a unique thought.

Sonnet Axiom 5: This unique thought must experience a shift (as in the attitude toward the idea or theme of the poem must transform or develop throughout the poem), and then conclude at the end of the poem. A thought concludes when it has transformed, and leaves the reader with a sense of something discovered or revealed.

Sonnet Axiom 6: The theme must be of, about, or relating to love.

Sonnet Axiom 7: Must employ a literary device, such as imagery, meter/text relationship, metaphor, simile, meter, rhyme, symbolism, or (inclusive or) attention to syntax.

Models and Interpretations

Example 1: *My Mistress' Eyes are Nothing Like the Sun*

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 damasked, 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.

-William Shakespeare

My Mistress' Eyes are Nothing like the Sun is intriguing because in terms of form it is very much a traditional Elizabethan sonnet. It fulfills Axiom 2 (readable characters) and Axiom 3, in that it is not divided. Fulfilling Axioms 1 and 7, it has 14 lines, with the appropriate *abab cdcd efef* rhyme scheme with the rhyming couplet at the end, which sums up the whole point of the poem nicely. However, the content of the poem seems to be in contrast to the form, at least most of the way through the poem. Writing for an audience who has heard all of these flattering metaphors, Shakespeare uses all the traditional images in an unflattering comparison to the mistress of the speaker. She is compared unfavorably to the divine qualities described by these metaphors. The speaker tells us,

"I have seen roses damasked 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." (5-8)

It would appear that the speaker is not at all enamored with the lady he speaks of. However, in true Shakespearean sonnet style, the couplet at the end sums everything up and reveals the meaning of

the poem: “And yet, by heaven, I think my love as rare / As any she belied with false compare,” (13-14). This fulfills Axiom 4, the development of a unique thought, Axiom 5, the shift and conclusion at the end of the poem, and Axiom 6, the condition that the subject of the poem be love. We may expect a romantic love poem when we first see the sonnet form, but when we encounter all the usual metaphors, we’re shocked by their unexpected use. They seem to have no place in the type of poem suggested by this structure – but then we realize as we reach the couplet, that this is, after all, a traditional sonnet, though wittier than we had expected. Shakespeare plays with the reader’s expectations of content and form in a way that seems to make fun of traditional Elizabethan poems, which often use metaphors to flatter and to convey divine love. The images and metaphors are used in an unconventional way in order to convey that this is an even more sincere sort of love expressed by the speaker. In this poem the metaphors still serve an Elizabethan sonnet purpose – they convey the very real love of the speaker, and this love is portrayed as more special, and more earnest because the speaker looks at his beloved mistress without the illusions of immortal love clouding his vision. He sees her for who she is, and points out the rarity of love that can see clearly and yet still love what is not perfect and is far from divine. Relating the form to the content (Axiom 7), Shakespeare uses standard Elizabethan sonnet form to parody a sonnet, but then comes through at the end with a theme that actually is a traditional element of Shakespearean sonnet: defining what love is. It is the form of the sonnet, and the previously established uses of the metaphors that help us understand the meaning of this sonnet, and the special significance of the couplet at the end. Without the form and established metaphors, we wouldn’t be as startled by the insulting metaphors, or notice how he cleverly both insults deceived love and compliments sincere love.

Example 2: *Joy Sonnet in a Random Universe*

Sometimes I'm happy: la la la la la la
la la la la la la la la la la la la la la

la la la la. Tum tum ti tum. La la la la la
 la la la la la la la la la la la la la la.
 Hey nonny nonny. La la la la la la la la
 la la la la la la la la la la. Vo do di o do.
 Poo poo pi doo. la la la la la la la la la la
 la la la la la la la la la la la la la la la
 la la. Whack a do. La la la la la la la la. Sh-
 boom, sh-boom. La la la la la la la la la la
 la la la la la la la la la la la la la la la
 la la. Dum di dum. La la la la la la la la.
 la la la la la la la la. Tra la la. Tra la la
 la la la la la la la la la la. Yeah yeah yeah.

-Helen Chasin, 1968

What is the point of *Joy Sonnet in a Random Universe*? It appears to be a bunch of “la la la,” with a few other silly phrases, spread out over 14 lines. And it’s called a sonnet. Some people might look at that and say, “Now that is not a sonnet.” That, I believe, is exactly the point. This 14-lined bunch of nonsense has the audacity to claim it is a sonnet, and it’s the reader’s job to consider whether it is or is not actually a sonnet. It makes the reader ponder exactly what it is that defines a sonnet. Is it the 14 lines, or the Shakespearean language? The sonnet does have “Hey nonny nonny” in the fifth line. But it also has “Sh-boom sh-boom” (9-10), which is a word used in 1930’s music and swing dancing, and, as far as I can tell, is unrelated to any traditional idea of sonnets. But what do we make of all these letters and little silly words, when they’re put in the very smallest definition of what it is to be a sonnet? We turn to our sonnet axioms. We ask ourselves, is there a rhyming couplet with a summarizing idea? Is there a rhyme scheme? Is it divided into four stanzas or eight lines and six lines? The answer in this poem is most likely, no. But it makes us look closer for meaning based on the form. It makes us look at all the words that aren’t “la la la”, and consider if there is any significance in those deviations from the normal. While there might not be a glaring theme for this sonnet, it undoubtedly points out our expectations of a sonnet as readers, and our process for looking for significance based on form. This seems to be the intention of the piece, and

whether it be a sonnet or not, if it were not labeled a sonnet and put in 14 lines, the most basic part of sonnet form, it would not convey the same meaning, and would not be analyzed in the same manner.

So while this poem uses the reader's expectation of the form of a sonnet in order to make a point, the poem is an interpretation of a sonnet, and not a model. It fulfills S-A1, S-A2, and S-A3 easily, and also S-A8 in that it is extremely aware of traditional form, and its own divergence from that form. But in terms of S-A4, S-A5, and SA-6, the development of a unique thought, the shift in attitude, and the requirement of love as the theme of the sonnet, this poem falls short. The development of thought within the poem is hard to argue for, the shift is not explicit in terms of attitude or subject matter, and the poem is not specifically about love. It has its own value in that it makes us ponder what a sonnet's form is, and why it is what it is, but this is an interpretation, and not a model of a sonnet.

If we see this poem as a partial model of a sonnet, we notice that the Sonnet Axioms are at least partially independent of each other. Because the *Joy Sonnet in a Random Universe* poem fulfills several of the Axioms, and yet cannot be considered a sonnet, the Axioms can't be 'proven' from one another; that is, they don't rely on one another, and you must have all elements in order to create this system effectively (to create a model, and not an interpretation). As in mathematics, there are several possible models of this system, and they are not all by Shakespeare. In creative writing, creativity often comes from bending or breaking rules (but only if done skillfully). However, it is the development of those rules, the history behind them, and the interplay between form and meaning that develops effective writings, and also contributes to new genres with their own rules. While authors may take the form of a sonnet and bend it to comment upon it and readers' expectations, their bending does not make their poem a sonnet; they perhaps lean toward

the creation of a new system with perhaps similar, but ultimately unique axioms.

Conclusion

While creative artists are ever changing the parameters and rules that define and describe their art, those rules do exist, and they give structure and meaning to an artist's work. Whether readers of poetry are consciously aware of these axioms or not, they are affected by their own expectations of what poetry is, and they are affected by the poet's adherence to the axioms of their art. If there were no structural guidelines and inherent elements to poetry, creative writing teachers would surely be at a loss. Besides the fact that without principles of structure, teaching creative writing would be impossible, literary critics would have no basis for criticism. Even in as creative and flexible a genre as poetry, there are systems of thought that lie beneath the spontaneity, and these are what an artist must accept as a structure to be the foundation of their work.

Work Cited

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