

# The Sonnet / “Little Song”

For Middle- and High-School Students

BERTHA ROGERS

**A**S A HIGH-SCHOOL POET, my writing, like that of many teens, was virtually all emotion and very little craft. After high school and college I was a sporadic writer until, at last, I returned to words in poetic form in the late 1980s. Poetry was not alien to me, however; there were poetry collections on my shelves that I read many times over. But when I came back to writing, I was again filled with a fever of words; like that teenager, I couldn't get them on the page fast enough. Those new poems were all in free verse—my word choices, line breaks, and other literary devices sprang more from a felt conviction than from attention to craft.

After a while, feelings were not enough for me; I wanted to take my poetry to another level. Through reading and re-reading poetry collections and anthologies, and through studying poets I admired, I found myself fascinated with formal poetry and falling in love all over again, not only with the power of words but with the capacity of craft to make the words sing in ways that I had been too deaf to hear.

I tried many forms, but I was particularly interested in the sonnet, the “little song,” both as an exercise for me, the writer, and as a tool for teaching poetry; I liked the discipline of iambic pentameter (or near iambic pentameter) coupled with the freedom of blank verse. Now I teach the sonnet to middle- and high-school students, who find the idea of it odd yet compelling; they like the beat and enjoy counting syllables, and it's like a puzzle to them, a game that they can play, a wonderful introduction to poetry.

Among the writers whose sonnets I have found particularly suited to teaching the form are Adrienne Rich and Charles Simic. Below are Rich's poem “14” and Simic's “History.” Each of these poems presents a very big idea written in the deceptive, gently rocking rhythm that characterizes the blank verse sonnet; it is that rhythm that we

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respond to—the heart’s pulse, the easy-to-speak line—that show why the sonnet has had such a long life in letters.

A sonnet is a 14-line poem, thought to have been invented around the year 1200 by the poet Giacomo da Lentino (ca. 1200–1250). It is one of the most well known of all the verse forms in the Western world.<sup>1</sup>

The form is challenging because it presents, in the first eight lines (the octave), an idea or an argument, then responds, in the next six lines (the sestet). Often the octave is divided into two quatrains, and the sestet into two tercets. Sometimes the sonnet is written in 12 lines followed by a couplet written in highly-charged words, a definite conclusion to the poem.

In a way, the sonnet is a perfect beginning formal structure for the 10- to 18-year old because the statement/debate and resolution/response are readily comprehended by students. One of the beauties of the blank verse sonnet written in iambic pentameter, too, is that rhyme is not an element; therefore, students are not searching for a word that sounds right and, in the process, losing the poem to the most convenient sound. After the student is familiar with the form, he can move on to one of the many rhyming forms.

Adrienne Rich writes, in this sonnet, in a conversational tone, easily guiding the reader through the recounting of her dreams (“and in another dream one of my old teachers / shows me a letter for reference / he has written for me, in a language”), but ending the poem in a shocking and sad statement from her dream-father, “You don’t know how lonely I am,” a heartbreaking and breath-stopping message about which the writer can do nothing at all.

## 14

### ADRIENNE RICH

Lately in my dreams I hear long sentences  
 meaningless in ordinary American  
 like, Your mother, too, was a missionary of poets  
 and in another dream one of my old teachers  
 shows me a letter for reference  
 he has written for me, in a language  
 I know to be English but cannot understand,  
 telling me it’s in “transformational grammar”  
 and that the student who typed the letter  
 does not understand this grammar either.  
 Lately I dreamed about my father,  
 how I found him, alive, seated on an old chair.  
 I think what he said to me was,  
 You don’t know how lonely I am.<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Padgett, Ron, editor. *The Teachers & Writers Handbook of Poetic Forms*. New York: Teachers & Writers Collaborative, 1987.

<sup>2</sup>Rich, Adrienne. *Contradictions: Tracking Poems, Your Native Land, Your Life*. New York: WW Norton, 1986.

Consider how this poem would sound if it had been written in free verse, minus the rhythm; its very strictness, its end-of-line pauses give the reader room to participate in the poet's preoccupation, catapulting her into the richness of the words, the poignancy of the experience. Rich is a master of the poetry of love written in colloquial language; the sonnet is highly accessible yet deep with meaning. Her line endings move the reader from one idea to the next, allowing the reader time to "read" between the lines.

Charles Simic's "History" is a perfect example of the "small moment" expanded to encompass a whole world and time.

### History

CHARLES SIMIC

On a gray evening  
Of a gray century,  
I ate an apple  
While no one was looking.

A small, sour apple  
The color of woodfire,  
Which I first wiped  
On my sleeve.

Then I stretched my legs  
As far as they'd go,  
Said to myself  
Why not close my eyes now

Before the Late  
World News and Weather<sup>3</sup>

Simic writes an unadorned line, then immediately puts down words that turn the first thought upside down, "On a gray evening / Of a gray century," forcing the reader to understand that it's not just a dark evening, it's a dark period in history. He moves back to the bare thought with "I ate an apple" and counteracts it with "While no one was looking," letting the reader know that he probably shouldn't have been eating at that time, that the act of eating the apple was wrong, and bringing to mind the Genesis story of eating the apple of knowledge. The poem moves back and forth, at last ending with the jarring "Late / World News and Weather."

I read poems like "14" and "History" to the students to encourage them to think beyond the student idea of "poetry," to help them find a way to mine their own experiences in order to write. I start them "small," asking them to think about something as mundane as a pencil or paper or a shoelace, what it would be like to be that object if it were a person, what it would be thinking about. This past year, while working with fifth-graders on the sonnet form, I was delighted to read this one:

<sup>3</sup>Simic, Charles. *Austerities*. New York: George Braziller, 1982. Reprinted with permission of the publisher.

### Paper Sonnet

OBADIAH G.

Its plain white features are boring and dull.  
 Its bright red margin stares me in the face,  
 making me write something on its blue lines.  
 Why can't you have more opulent designs?  
 You bore me with your absolute whiteness;  
 change color at least once in your lifetime,  
 for writing on you is like dying twice!  
 I feel that I should quit and move along  
 but, sometimes, you're not so white, after all;  
 you come in complex designs and, sometimes,  
 I forget about your boringness and dullness  
 and focus on your delightful features.  
 Plain and white was your description before.  
 For now, you have lovely, adequate features.

“Paper Sonnet” begins with a simple description, followed by complaints about the paper’s appearance, then thoughts about what to do when the narrator is finished with the paper, then back. When Obadiah makes the “turn,” after “I feel I should quit and move along”, the reader is ready to move with him. The last couplet, as in traditional sonnets, brings the poem to its resolution.

Another fifth-grader, Eugene V., when asked to write a sonnet about time, came up with this amazing piece:

### Time Sonnet

EUGENE V.

I hate bedtime, when time blinks away,  
 Blinks away, like the warm days of summer.  
 Time is the bleak hall, full of timeless photos  
 Painting the walls as you go through.  
 The paint behind you peels off as you move,  
 The memories slowly disintegrating.  
 Yet, what is time but the sister of age?  
 Is not dead paint remembered by its walls?  
 Does not the shattered glass memorate the cup?  
 What are we but boats, sinking in the lake—  
 But do we ever show our wet skeletons,  
 Or do we never make another ripple  
 On the great pool of everlasting time?  
 Do we decay in the mud of the pool?

The poet has already grasped how to use the metaphor to bring images to the reader—“time is the bleak hall, full of timeless photos”—and he clearly delights in play-

ing with language. This poem encourages the reader to think about time, what it means, and the fact that a fifth-grader wrote it is more than exciting; not only does it charm with its beginning, "I hate bedtime," telling the reader that the child is only a child, but then shocking with the next phrase, "when time blinks away," The reader is now confronted with student writing that clearly shows the student is learning to think, which is, after all, the basis for all learning. The poem is philosophical and obsessive, yearning and sad, the nature of a sonnet. 📖

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# Dear T&W

## Letters to the Editor

### Abel Garcia—Homeboy Poet

In the summer of 2007 (*T&W Magazine*, vol. 38, no. 4) I wrote an article about my experiences teaching poetry and creative writing to the young ex-gang members and ex-cons of Homeboy Industries. I wrote how many of them found their voices for the first time and began to write themselves into a new narrative and for some, a new life.

This was perhaps no more evident than for Abel Garcia. Sadly, Abel, known to many of us as Mousey, was shot and killed on Saturday, November 15, 2008. He was 20 years old.

We all mourn our beloved friend and brilliant Homeboy Poet. Abel was so passionate about his writing that he would often write a hole right through the paper. For Abel, the pen had indeed become his sword, the page his weapon. We have lost a peaceful, passionate, and memorable poet and friend.

To honor him, I reprint here one of his best and favorite poems—this in loving memory of Mousey, may he rest in peace.

#### Imagine This

**ABEL G.**

I am whatever I imagine.  
I desire, I admire  
but I am trapped in a circle of fire

trapped in my own world, these wires  
just deciding to be what I am.  
What is my name?  
I struggle and still trouble comes  
I could be whatever I want

in my own thoughts.  
an astronaut, a fire fighter, a cop  
or this—a criminal getting caught

It's my own mind leading me to  
my own short timeline  
I could be blind and next morning  
see the sun shine.

It's a new day to be.  
Again, who I am.  
Abel, in vain, to entertain, i could do it  
and even more in my brain.  
I could be insane, or in pain.  
I could heal my sins like the saints

So I am.  
A new day to be

(June 19, 2007)

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