

Essay Topic I: On a Nineteenth-century Sonnet

Choose *one* sonnet from the list of 19th-century sonnets in the *Norton Anthology* provided below and write a detailed analysis of it. (The list includes all the 19th-century sonnets not assigned for reading on the syllabus.)

A good analysis should connect the poetic devices in a poem with the ideas and emotions it conveys to a reader. An analysis should discuss form as well as content: not just the themes or argument, but also how the author presents, manipulates, and styles the material.

Quote the whole sonnet early in your essay and refer to it frequently throughout your analysis. Begin your paper with a genuine question about how the sonnet works. Make that question the last sentence of your first paragraph. The rest of the essay should answer this question. Present your analysis in a clear and well-organized manner. Each paragraph should deal with a specific element of the sonnet, explain how that element works, and present its main point in a clear topic sentence. Draw your conclusions in your final paragraph by briefly summing up the answers to the question posed at the start of your essay.

Read your chosen sonnet slowly, carefully, and repeatedly in order to make worthwhile observations on it. The more specific you are, the better your analysis will be. So focus on small things (like an ambiguous word or phrase, a striking simile, a peculiar grammatical inversion, or other small particulars) and offer some interesting and truthful insight into them. Everything you say in your analysis must relate directly to the actual words of the text. Don't get sidetracked; stick with the words.

Make your prose as clear and concise as possible. Don't waste your time (or mine) trying to sound impressive. Write, instead, in a conversational voice: the clear, plainspoken, engaging voice of a person talking about a subject they find interesting. Don't let your essay run longer than what you have to say. One sentence that actually says something is better than a paragraph that doesn't. Make every word count.

In evaluating your essay, I will focus on the intelligence and specificity of your ideas, the precision of your analysis, the clarity of your prose, and the originality and persuasiveness of your thesis.

Your essay should be between 800–1,200 words — not counting the sonnet you quote at the start of the paper. Use MLA Format for quotations and citations.

See drmarkwomack.com/mla-style/: “Document Format,” “Citation Format,” “How to Quote Verse,” and “Documenting Sources.”

Submit your essay through the TurnItIn link on the class Blackboard page labeled “Critical Essay – Spring 20.”

Due Dates:

- **COMMENTS DEADLINE: March 30**
If you want my comments on your essay, you must submit it on or before Monday, March 30.
(Please Note: You will NOT be able to revise and then re-submit your paper after seeing my comments.)
- **FINAL DEADLINE: April 20**
Although I will make few or no comments on essays submitted after Monday, April 20, I will grade these papers just the same as those turned in by the earlier date.

Please Note:

Although you may hear some references during the lectures to two separate essays, **there is only ONE required essay for this version of the course.** You may write on either this topic or on Essay Topic 2: On a Novel’s First Chapter.

How to Analyze a Sonnet

Here is a list of suggestions to help you analyze your sonnet. Use these suggestions as a guide, not as an ironclad set of rules. They are not comprehensive, nor is every recommendation invariably useful.

1. Read the sonnet for meaning. Pay attention to the sentence, not the line, as the principal unit of organization. Find the subject and verb. Forget, for the moment, about the poetry.
2. Write a modern English prose **paraphrase** of the sonnet. This will help you understand what the poem is saying and make you more

aware of all its verbal details. (Don't include your paraphrase in your essay.)

3. Look at the rhyme scheme to identify the **type of sonnet** (Italian, English, Spenserian). Identify the major sections of the sonnet (octave and sestet, quatrains and couplet). How is the sonnet organized? Are there shifts in direction? Antitheses? Repetitions?
4. What is the specific and general **context**? How does context (speaker, situation, addressee) modify the poem?
5. Is **irony** a factor? Is there, in other words, a discrepancy between the speaker's words and meanings?
6. What is the speaker's attitude towards the subject of the poem? towards the hearers? towards themselves? In other words, what is the **tone**?
7. Examine the **diction** of the sonnet. After reading for denotation (straightforward meaning), think about connotation. Look up key words in the *Oxford English Dictionary* to determine their currency in the nineteenth century and to discover implied significance. Notice connections among roots of words, as well as alternative or archaic meanings.
8. Think about **wordplay**, remembering that puns aren't always funny. Consider multiple or ambiguous senses of words.
9. Notice **imagery**. Do the images repeat or suggest patterns? How do the images promote or clarify the subject?
10. What about **figurative language**: similes, metaphors, symbols? Analyze metaphors with an eye on the *tenor* (the thing being described), the *vehicle* (the thing used to describe it), and the connotations of the comparison.
11. Do you find other **figures of speech** like understatement, hyperbole, personification, paradox, anaphora, chiasmus?
12. Are there any classical, biblical, or historical **allusions**? What do they contribute?
13. Study the **syntax**, the arrangement of words into sentences. Is word order normal or inverted? Do sentences seem simple or complex?
14. Examine **meter** as you have syntax. Is it regular or not? Look for run-on lines or important instances of caesura.
15. Pay attention to **musical devices** such as alliteration, rhyme, assonance, consonance, euphony, cacophony, onomatopoeia. How do they contribute to the sonnet's effect on a reader?
16. For every device, the *essential* question is "**How does it work?**"

Nineteenth-century Sonnets in the *Norton Anthology*

CHARLOTTE SMITH

Elegiac Sonnets: “Written at the Close of Spring,” “To Sleep,” “To Night,”
“Written in the Church-Yard at Middleton in Sussex,” “On Being Cautioned ...,” “The Sea-View” (54–57)

WILLIAM WORDSWORTH

“It is a beauteous evening,” “To Toussaint l’Overture,” “September 1st, 1802,” “London, 1802,” “The world is too much with us,” “Surprised by joy,” “Mutability,” “Steamboats, Viaducts, and Railways” (345–48)

PERCY BYSSHE SHELLEY

“To Wordsworth,” “Ozymandias,” “England in 1819” (752, 776, 790)

JOHN CLARE

[Mouse’s Nest] (880)

JOHN KEATS

“On Seeing the Elgin Marbles,” “On Sitting Down to Read *King Lear* Once Again,” “When I have fears that I may cease to be,” “To Homer,” “Why did I laugh tonight? No voice will tell,” “On Fame,” “Sonnet to Sleep” (906, 910–11, 922–23, 925)

ELIZABETH BARRETT BROWNING

“To George Sand: A Desire,” “To George Sand: A Recognition,” *Sonnets from the Portuguese* 21, 22, 32, 43 (1128–30)

DANTE ROSSETTI

The House of Life: “The Sonnet,” “Nuptial Sleep,” “19. Silent Noon,” “77. Soul’s Beauty,” “78. Body’s Beauty” (1487–89)

CHRISTINA ROSSETTI

“After Death,” “Dead before Dead,” “Cobwebs,” “A Triad,” “In an Artist’s Studio,” “In Progress,” *Later Life* 17, “Cardinal Newman” (1491–93, 1510–11)

MICHAEL FIELD (Katherine Bradley & Edith Cooper)

“To Christina Rossetti,” “Nest of Elms,” “Eros” (1674–75)