

The Art of the Sonnet

This 6 session course will deal with the sonnet poetic form in all its varieties. We will study many examples of the sonnet's enduring power over a history of hundreds of years.

The Structure of the Sonnet

This session analyzes the basics of the sonnet form – number of lines, meter, rhyming. The tension between content and structure is a key feature. There are many varieties within this structure: dialogue sonnets, echo sonnets, picture sonnets, sonnet sequences and more. “How to write a sonnet” will be explained for anyone who wants to try.

Shakespeare's Sonnets – the Mysteries

These remain the greatest sequence of love poems in our literature, but there are many questions about them. When exactly were they written? To whom were they addressed? Do we have them in the right sequence? We will review the mysteries surrounding them and come up with a plausible explanation.

Shakespeare's Sonnets – the Content

W.H. Auden judged that of the 154 sonnets by Shakespeare, some 49 were excellent. (He didn't tell us which ones.) We will each take one of the greater sonnets (we hope from those 49), dive deep into its language and meaning, and discuss in class.

The History of the Sonnet – Early to Elizabethan

Some of the best sonnets written within the historic tradition will be reviewed in this session. We will cover the early Italian masters (Dante and Petrarch) through the flourishing of the sonnet in the Elizabethan era (Spenser, Donne) to Milton.

The History of the Sonnet – Romantic to Modern

We will continue with the romantics (Wordsworth, Keats, Browning) through to the moderns (Millay, Yeats) with a survey of current sonnet writing.

Review

Finally, we will summarize what we have learned, and share some of our favorites, or our own originals in this field (no pressure).

No preparation is required. The emphasis will be on class interaction and participation with most of the material available on the internet. There is a huge literature on the subject. Two recommended books are *The Penguin Book of the Sonnet*, ed. Levin, 2001 and *The Book Known as Q* by Robert Giroux, 1983. These can be found on Amazon as used books at low cost. Other books will be recommended during the course.

Leader: Peter M. Smith has been studying sonnets for many years and has written over 100.

Thursdays: 10:00 a.m. to 12 noon, 6 weeks: September 27 through November 1

Location: Presbyterian Church of Lawrenceville