

# Class 9 : The Ideal Image

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## B. Six Sonnets About Love

### 1. Poets' portraits

Since we have been looking at artworks whose formal qualities are at least as important as their subjects, I thought we might follow up by doing the same thing with poetry, looking at six sonnets over a four-century span. To narrow it down further, I have chosen only poems about love. Most of them are very famous, though they are not all love poems as such; two are about the loss of love, and another starts with twelve lines of apparent insults! Anyway, let's start with the earliest of them, a sonnet from the *Arcadia* (c.1580) of **Sir Philip Sidney** (1554–86). It is a female declaration of love, and the reader is **Stella Gonet**.

### 2. Sir Philip Sidney: "My true love hath my heart" (Stella Gonet)

### 3. — text of the above

I'm going to give you another sonnet to compare this with, but I want to take a moment to point out the Elizabethan sonnet form: 14 lines of iambic pentameters, grouped in three quatrains with a couplet at the end, giving a rhyme scheme **abab cdcd efef gg**. The unusual aspect of this one is that Sidney does not use a new rhyme for his closing couplet, as Shakespeare would do, but returns to the rhyme of the opening and even repeats the first line, which adds a beautiful circular quality, as of a love that will endure for ever. The sonnet form is tight and quite demanding, but the struggle between sense and structure gives it a special edge. All the poets we shall see today run variations on the form. Mostly, these are subtle, but **E. E. Cummings** (1894–1962) is really quite radical. All the same, it is still a sonnet, and its debt to the Sidney (or others like it), is palpable. This is a recording of Cummings himself reading.

### 4. E. E. Cumming: "I carry your heart with me" (read by the author)

### 5. — text of the above with the Sidney poem

Let's compare the two, first from the perspective of what they say: is there any difference in the basic message? And then in terms of form: what does Cummings gain by his curious punctuation? Or turning this around, what does he gain by using sonnet form?

### 6. Elizabeth Barrett Browning: *Sonnets from the Portuguese* #43 (Helen Mirren)

That one was pretty famous; here is an even more famous one, number 43 in the *Sonnets from the Portuguese* written in 1846 by **Elizabeth Barrett** (1806–61) to her future husband **Robert Browning**. It has a different form: the first two quatrains are rhymed **abba** rather than **abab**, and there are only two rhymes between them; the sestet at the end is a single unit, **cdcdcd**, rather than another quatrain and a couplet. Does this make a difference? See what you think as you listen to **Helen Mirren** reading it.

7. Elizabeth Barrett Browning: *Sonnets from the Portuguese* #43 (Helen Mirren)
8. — text of the above

Again, I'll ask simply, What does it do for you? If you want to go further, consider the place of all the religious references in the poem. What happens to the religious element in the last section?

9. George Meredith: *Modern Love* (1862), Sonnet 1

Now for something different: the first poem in a 50-sonnet sequence by the poet and painter **George Meredith** (1828–1909). It is different technically, in that each poem uses 16 lines rather than 14, divided into four quatrains of the same **abba** shape that Elizabeth Barrett used. Even more surprising is the way that Meredith does not pause at each quatrain as she had done, but runs on into the next. And most surprising of all is that it is not a love poem in the normal sense, but an account of the **break-up** of a marriage. I shall have to read it myself.

What did you think? I find the opening image of the couple in bed together astoundingly realistic for Victorian times, and almost modern. Many of us, I imagine, have been there at some earlier stage in our lives, though I hope not now.

10. Gwendolyn Brooks: *The Sonnet-Ballad* (1949)

I promise something more upbeat at the end, but let's hang out with the tragic muse a little longer with a poem called *The Sonnet-Ballad* by African-American author (and Poet Laureate) **Gwendolyn Brooks** (1917–2000). The meaning of the title, I think, is that it is a sonnet (in the Elizabethan form), but it is also in the manner of one of those ballads about soldiers going off to war. The reader is **Sylvia Freeman**.

11. Gwendolyn Brooks: *The Sonnet-Ballad* (read by Sylvia Freeman)
12. — text of the above

There is a story here; did it come across clearly? Why does she repeat "Would have to be untrue," and what does it mean? Notice that, like Sidney and Cummings, she ends with a repeat of her opening line; what does this do?

13. Shakespeare: Sonnet CXXX

This last sonnet, by **Shakespeare** (1564–1616), turns into a love poem at the end—it's a beautiful example of his fondness for using his closing couplet as a punchline—but it starts in quite the opposite sense. So, as you listen to this reading by Daniel Radcliffe, I'd ask you: what is it really about?

14. Shakespeare: Sonnet CXXX (read by Daniel Radcliffe)
15. Main title 3 (poet portraits)