

The Anatomy of a Poem: “A Hand-Mirror”

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WRITER'S COMMENT: Professor Clover assigned his Intro to Poetry students a deceptively simple final prompt: to explain what one poem communicates, and most importantly, how it communicates. The thing that makes a poem a poem and not a novel or a news article is that its message is inextricable from its form: the means are the ends. In “The Anatomy of a Poem,” I looked at the interesting features of one little poem and tried to draw out the effects of each one. Finally, I realized that reading a poem isn't about figuring out what the words say and extracting a “meaning.” To paraphrase Clover, poets are people who spend their lives putting words together: they better not make accidents. Every feature of a poem, from the number of lines to the distribution of stressed syllables, is intentional. Reading a poem is the process of asking, “Why?” Instead of writing Sonnet 130 (“My mistress' eyes are nothing like the sun”), why didn't Shakespeare just write one line: “She's not perfect, but that's why I love her”? Each of the poet's choices adds something. If you can ask “why this and not that,” you can understand any poem.

—Emily Goyins

INSTRUCTOR'S COMMENT: Emily Goyins' essay covers a remarkable amount of territory for a relatively brief assignment, at a remarkably high level of analysis. However, it is perhaps most notable for what it doesn't say. In a careful study of a shorter Whitman poem, it offers no homilies about “the poet of democratic yearnings” or any of the usual commonplaces that attach to the poet. This is not to say the essay is ignorant of Whitman's historical place: it ends with an elegant turn toward the new world of mixed virtue, freed from bindings of tradition but rushing toward an urbanized, industrialized modernity. But it gets to this revelation through the portal of the poem itself, its form (specifically in relation to the traditional sonnet), all that is not abstract about it. The author is keenly sensitive to the poem's finest and most subtle maneuverings; the essay misses nothing, and weights the significance of its discoveries unerringly. It is this which allows it both to command and exceed formalist criticism, to reach the truth of Whitman and of his moment—and which promises truly exceptional critical work, should Miss Goyins choose to pursue it.

—Joshua Clover, English Department

A Hand-Mirror

BY WALT WHITMAN

- 1 Hold it up sternly—see this it sends back, (who is it? is it you?)
Outside fair costume, within ashes and filth,
No more a flashing eye, no more a sonorous voice or springy step,
Now some slave's eye, voice, hands, step,
- 5 A drunkard's breath, unwholesome eater's face, venerealee's flesh,
Lungs rotting away piecemeal, stomach sour and cankerous,
Joints rheumatic, bowels clogged with abomination,
Blood circulating dark and poisonous streams,
Words babble, hearing and touch callous,
- 10 No brain, no heart left—no magnetism of sex;
Such, from one look in this looking-glass ere you go hence,
Such a result so soon—and from such a beginning!

THE POEM “A HAND-MIRROR,” BY WALT WHITMAN, confronts the reader with its unevenness: its form suggests a familiar poetic formula, but doesn't quite follow convention and breaks every pattern it seems to establish. This paper will explore how “A Hand-Mirror” invokes but does not embody poetic traditions, and how this invocation contributes to the poem's feeling of corruption and decay. Specifically, this feeling of decay is linked to both human aging and the aging of the sonnet form. While the poem's resemblance to a sonnet may not be immediately apparent—its twelve lines are unmetrical and lack uniform line lengths and rhyme scheme—it still suggests a sonnet strongly enough in both form and content to establish a basis in that genre.

The poem's shape on the page is roughly within typical proportions for a sonnet, but “A Hand-Mirror” clearly strives for jaggedness. No line is excessively long—all twelve stay between seven and seventeen syllables—but the two longest lines are on both sides of the shortest line. The range of line lengths is wide enough that a casual glance at the page reveals their unevenness. Without even reading the poem, the reader notices two things: the text conforms to the size and length expected of a sonnet, though it is certainly not a sonnet. In a formulaic sonnet, each line would have ten syllables with 140 in all; “A Hand-Mirror” averages thirteen syllables per line and has about 154 total (even its syllable count is elusive). It is two lines short of sonnet length, and a line and a half

longer than a curtal sonnet. Its size and shape may be sonnet-*like*, but its variance from the fixed form is at least as noticeable as its resemblance.

Like many sonnets, the poem is organized around a list of personal attributes—but this poem's list upends the expected format. In Petrarchan tradition, the list of the beloved's features, called a blazon, was a common trope. A blazon examines a particular person's beauty by analyzing its components, but it is here that Whitman's poem diverges. The outside of the unnamed "you" may be clothed in "fair costume" (2), but underneath that artifice there are "ashes and filth" (2). Instead of focusing on a beautiful form metaphorically separated and examined piece by piece, here are "lungs rotting away piecemeal" (6). The word "piecemeal," while it suggests the gradual corruption of a decaying body, is also a link to the blazon. Even the first line's command for readers to "hold [the mirror] up *sternly*" (1, emphasis added) signals that this poem is the antithesis of Petrarchan romanticism. Of course, by so explicitly subverting sonnet tradition, "A Hand-Mirror" also brings it to the forefront.

The center of the poem is a seven-line list of what is "Now" (4) reflected in the mirror, with each line adding intensity. The list follows a grammatical formula, but breaks it in a pivotal line. All the poem's finite verbs (except two surprises) are in its first line, so the tense is established immediately and stretched across the other eleven lines. The rest of the poem is essentially a string of nouns with implied verbs (an ellipsis), each one further from the concreteness of a verb. The list is patterned as follows: every noun in the list is modified by an adjective (or adjectival verb group), except one. Each case but this one follows the same formula: a noun, an implied, present-tense form of "to be," and optional modifiers before or after. The only deviation is in line nine: "Words babble, hearing and touch callous." The unexpected verb, "babble," is placed at the end of the seven-line list, where it is most surprising. The reappearance of a verb is incongruous, and it creates an ambiguity in the following clause, "hearing and touch callous" (9). There are now two competing schemas by which to evaluate the word "callous": the pattern suggests "callous" should be read as an adjective: "hearing and touch [are] callous." But the exception in the same line allows for a second interpretation. If there can be one independent clause, why not two? Read as an intransitive verb, "callous" would mean "to become insensitive or hardened." "Hearing and touch callous" would then be another complete sentence. Line ten returns to the pattern. Its structure is more complex than the phrases before it,

but the formula is the same: the subject is “No brain, no heart . . . no magnetism of sex,” the implied verb is “are,” and the object complement is “left.” The list ends with this extremity, the most deviant structure, and in line ten, the most complex of the expected structures. This attention-grabbing deviation, especially in a blazon enumerating the symptoms of senility, shouts that this is not a sonnet.

Finally, the list ends on the poem’s strongest punctuation mark: its only semicolon. Whitman was famous for revising and re-publishing his poems many times, but his choice here is consistent across most editions. Every line is end-stopped, but the break between lines ten and eleven is the sharpest of all. The division marks a “turn” in thought, a movement from the list to a conclusion drawn from it. In an English sonnet, the volta, or “turn,” would divide the quatrains from the strong closing couplet. “A Hand-Mirror” has no end rhyme and therefore no couplet, but its last three lines make a slippery approximation of a couplet. A four-syllable metric pattern, occurring throughout the poem, becomes audible in the last few lines: **stressed**–unstressed–unstressed–**stressed**. In lines eleven and twelve, the rhythm approaches regular meter—dactylic pentameter—but the name is unimportant. What matters is the regularity of sound it creates in an otherwise unmeasured, free verse poem. These last lines come closer to iambic meter than any other lines in the poem. Both of the final lines have thirteen syllables, five of which are stressed. Line eleven ends with a dactyl followed by another stressed syllable (“*é*re you go *hé*nce”), so that its last four syllables are **stressed**–unstressed–unstressed–**stressed**. This rhythmic unit appears eleven times throughout the poem, with four instances in the last three lines alone. Three other lines in the poem end with this pattern: “*á*shes and filth” (2), “*pó*isonous *stré*ams” (8), and “*má*gnétism of *sé*x” (10), and it is most audible at the end. Lines ten and eleven end with the same sound pattern and eleven and twelve are almost couplet-like, metrically. The extra syllables and uneven rhythm warp the pattern, but the stresses fall regularly enough that they contribute to the couplet-like feeling.

In English sonnets, the quatrains often make a progression of logic or chronology toward the volta and the closing couplet. In “A Hand-Mirror,” there are several shifts in time, but these shifts don’t constitute a progression. The poem is about the result of time’s progression—age, physical decay—and the list of body parts and organs builds toward the master organs: the brain and the heart. But the poem is firmly in the pres-

ent moment. It alternates positive statements (“Now some slave’s eye”) and negative ones (“No more a flashing eye”). Both are time-related, but the poem has only one tense: the present. Several lines look back to the past, notably the last line: “Such a result so soon—and from such a beginning!” There is a sense of time having passed, but the poem insists that the reader focus on the present, however awful it may be. “This looking-glass” offers no consolation over the natural progress of time. It demands to be held up “sternly” and show every revolting detail before the onlooker “goes hence.” The poem’s attitude towards the “you” who looks into the mirror and is increasingly revolted is not sympathetic. The decayed forms of the poem itself and the body it enumerates are taken as “stern” facts to be looked at straight on.

The poem’s title is the key to understanding how its butchery of sonnet form and its butchery of a human body converge. It is called “A Hand-Mirror,” so any reference it makes to a mirror is likely to be a self-reference. The first line makes the reader’s position as the poem’s central character explicit by asking, in a parenthetical chiasmus (a mirror-image construction), who is reading it: “(who is it? is it you?)” (1). The “result” is everything that happens after “looking into” the mirror: the poem’s imagined subject reacts to the ugliness of his or her body, the reader comes to the end of a poem, and the reader has a melded experience composed of both those realities. The reader is both a person reading a poem, and the main character in the poem who is experiencing his reflection. In this context, the poem’s loose invocations of sonnet form and content make sense: they are another way in which the poem is about itself. “Such a result so soon” is the lament of a person aging reluctantly. It is the mirror’s own commentary on what it reflects and a declaration of the end of the poem. It is also a comment on its sonnet origins and its early (two lines early, by sonnet standards) end. But the poem doesn’t end on the result. Its last word is “beginning!” The backwards glance reflects the aging person’s thought process, always returning uselessly to youth and beauty. It also reminds the reader of the poem’s formal “beginnings” in sonnet tradition. The reader is brought to notice how decomposed and broken-down that tidy form has become. But it also suggests a new beginning after the end. The death of a decomposing body results in more life as its matter is recycled, and the death of an aging poetic form can fuel a beginning also.

These two experiences of the poem—the reader’s participation as a gradually decaying body, and the suggestion of aging poetic forms—meld to form a third, distinct experience. The poem’s internal solution to the horror of seeing all this corruption at once is to put down the mirror and “go hence” (11). The poem looks critically at the mirror-watcher who despairs at his own aging, having been consumed by his youthful excesses. By making this comment through a contortion of an old poetic form, it transfers the criticism onto the tendency to use formal conventions excessively. “A Hand-Mirror” was first published in the late 1800s, as industrialization and urbanization began to push pastoral life aside and people were moving from the regular rhythms of farm life into the chaotic unpredictability of the city. Poetry made a similar shift in response: the age of the strictly-metered sonnet was over, and poetic realism emerged. Whitman was largely responsible for this shift, and Modernist and Beat poetry descended directly from his influential *Leaves of Grass*. “A Hand-Mirror,” composed in free verse but with its roots in sonnet tradition, exemplifies Whitman’s whole poetic endeavor. By ending on “beginning,” the poem launches the reader “hence”—against the instinct to cling to outdated romanticism—and opens up ways of thinking about a new world.