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Explication Essay on "Sonnet in Primary Colors," by: Rita Dove

"Sonnet in Primary Colors" by author Rita Dove is a traditional sonnet written largely in the true iambic pentameter form of fourteen lines which utilizes the poetic elements of imagery, tone, symbolism, irony, metaphor, oxymoron, and some assonance, among other poetic elements, to vividly describe the many self-portraits and the difficult life of renowned Spanish artist, Frida Kahlo.

The poem begins as follows:

"This is | for the | woman | with one | black wing"

The | symbol used throughout this explication essay is used to mark the feet of the first line of this poem or the unit of rhythmic text which creates the meter of the poem. The hand-written ~ unstressed symbol is used to identify the unstressed sounds in the words, while the hand-written ' accent symbol is used to identify the stressed sounds in the words. As part of explicating this poem, I will be utilizing these measuring symbols to outline both the meter and the unstressed/stressed words for each line of the poem to identify the true meter or rhythm of the poem.

Iambic pentameter is defined as a rhythmic pattern of one unstressed and one stressed word where the words are measured in pairs to indicate a group of five syllables. The first group in this line consists of "This is for the wo" which marks the first five unstressed/stressed syllables. The second group of five in the first line consists of "...man with one black wing."

The division of the syllables in the word “woman” is what separates the first five syllables from the second five syllables in the first line of the poem which is a mark of the true iambic pentameter form.

The phrase “This is for...” is an imaginative piece of text, going to the element of imagery, to include tone, which indicates that one is making a present of the poem for someone. The second phrase in the first line, “with one black wing” is clearly a metaphor as it is comparing a physical characteristic of Frida Kahlo to that of a thing with similar looking characteristics. In this instance, it is that of “a black wing.” This comparison of these two similar, yet clearly different things, enables the text to start to become a visual picture of Frida Kahlo.

The second line of the poem continues to demonstrate the true iambic pentameter form utilizing the poetic element of enjambment in continuing the first line of the poem into the second line as follows:

“perched ov | er | her eyes; | lovely | Frida, erect”

The first five syllables are “perched over her eyes;” while the second five are “lovely Frida, erect(....)” in measuring the iambic pentameter form.

Again, this piece of poetic text is utilized in an imaginative form, going to the poetic form of imagery, to identify the “black wing” in the previous line of the poem as a physical characteristic of Frida Kahlo which is “perched over her eyes....” In this phrase alone, the text identifies where this physical characteristic of Frida Kahlo which “looks like a black wing” is located. It is over her eyes. Therefore, in looking at a picture of the Spanish artist, it is easily realized that the text is referring to the unibrow of the artist, as it does resemble a pair of “black wings” joined together in the middle.

The second textual phrase in this line of “lovely Frida erect” is symbolic of a difficult part of Frida Kahlo’s life where, during her youth, she spent a great deal of time lying down, due to the severe injuries she sustained in a bus accident. Therefore, the poetic form of symbolism is clearly used in both words “lovely” and “erect” to demonstrate both the inner and outward beauty of Frida Kahlo, to include her inner, emotional strength. The term “lovely” also denotes the tone of the poem lending it a worshipful quality which conveys both admiration and respect for the subject.

The third line of the poem continues the second line of the poem, again, utilizing the poetic element of enjambment and continuing in the true iambic pentameter form as follows:

“among | parrots, | in the | stern petti | coats of | the peasant,(.)”

However, it should be noted that while the first two lines of the poem are similar in form and function, this third line is longer visually and more is complex than the first two in its textual form. There are clearly more two syllable words than one syllable words.

This poetic phrase is also another use of visual imagery where the text is being used to describe the various self-portraits of Frida Kahlo where typically, she painted herself with parrots wearing the traditional Spanish attire for the women of her culture and era. See the three examples below:



The word “peasant” is also used as an irony in the context of this poetic phrase as prior to achieving any significant success, Frida Kahlo’s role in her culture was just that of a peasant. In that effect, the word “peasant” also takes the form of a double entendre where the word has a dual meaning referring not only to Frida’s traditional attire in the paintings, yet also her role in society prior to her achieving any great success as an artist. The use of the word “stern” in context with the word “petticoats” is also a use of imagery which appears to also be an oxymoron as the petticoats of that era were the loose, flowing part of the traditional attire, while the “stern” part of it was the corset, typically only worn with formal attire and only available to the aristocratic class of that society. Therefore, the word “stern” seems to be referring more to the symbolic meaning of strictness of her role as a woman in that culture.

The third line of the poem continues into the fourth line of the poem, again, utilizing the poetic element of enjambment, and breaks somewhat from the true iambic pentameter form as follows:

“who pain | ted her | self a | present-(.)”

The first five syllables to mark the meter are “who painted herself(.)” However, the last part of this line breaks from the true iambic pentameter form with only a meter of three syllables in the end phrase “a present.” What is also more notable about this phrase, as it relates the previous poetic phrase, are the words “peasant” and “present.” The vowel sound of the short e in each of these words creates a similar sound which has the ringing effect of a slant rhyme between both the third and fourth lines of this poem. This is also a form of assonance as both words create a similar sound with the use of the same vowel sound.

The use of imagery also continues to be used in this line, again reflecting on the artists’ difficult life after her accident with a bus. It is told that for many years, Frida laid on a cot trying

to recover from the injury of her spine and other internal injuries after being impaled by a rail in a bus accident. Obviously being of the poorer class and not able to work, due to the significance of her injuries, she would rise from her cot to “(paint) herself a present-(-.)” It was most likely, the only luxury she could afford to herself, due to her cultural circumstances and her long-lasting injuries. This line of text also speaks to the hope which Frida must have felt or attempted to create inside of herself as she struggled to look forward to the future of a healing within herself. A physical healing so profound that she could go on without so much suffering. This was her present to herself, and probably the only one she truly had hope for.

The fifth line of the poem falls from the hyphen after the fourth line and continues to use the poetic element of enjambment and, as in the previous line, breaks from the true iambic pentameter form, utilizing even more vivid imagery as follows:

“wildflō^ˈw^ərs^{ən} | twīn^ɪng | the plā^s | tēr^ə cōr^sēt”

The first five syllables are measured in the text of “wildflowers entwīn” and the last five are measured in the text of “the plaster cor...” The part where it breaks from the true iambic pentameter form is in the last part of the syllable “set” as the end part of the word “corset” where one extra syllable is added making the full measure of six syllables rather than the traditional five which mark the true iambic pentameter form. In this line, as it relates to the previous poetic line, it is almost as though the balance of sound in the meter is being worked out with a short in the line before this one of a syllable and an extra syllable being added to this line to make up the difference. In explicating or analyzing it, going to a rhythmic context, it is to balance the text with the sound of the chosen words via a break in the proper meter form from which the poem started.

The tone of which this poetic phrase creates is one of beauty. It is well documented that Frida Kahlo, due to her damaged spine, had to wear plaster corsets for the rest of her life after the bus accident. Probably because she was so bored, lying in bed, loved to paint, and had nothing else much to do, she would paint them with animals and cover them with scraps of fabric. She also would paint blood-red hammers and sickles on her plaster corsets as symbols of the accident she had been through. What is interesting, as I researched the subject of this poem and attempted to draw my own explication using poetic elements, it is not mentioned that Frida regularly and traditionally painted wildflowers on her plaster corsets. This suggests that perhaps this poetic phrase is another use of imaginative irony going to what could have been painted, but wasn't, due to Frida's significant pain and incomplete recovery which haunted her until the end of her life.

The sixth line carries into the seventh line of the poem without a stop, again utilizing the poetic element of enjambment and falls again into the true iambic pentameter form as follows:

“Her spine | resides | in, that | flaming | pillar-(.)”

The first five syllables are held within the words “(h)er spine resides in” while the last five are “that flaming pillar-(.)” The first phrase of “her spine resides in” is use of sympathetic irony creating a tone of emotional sympathy. It is ironic as the human spine resides in the upper vertebral column. The phrase “her spine resides in” is more referring to the extensive damage done to Frida's spine which made it necessary for her to essentially live in her plaster corsets.

What is also interesting about this poetic phrase, which sets it apart from the others, is the use of the word “flaming” as a form of onomatopoeia and “pillar” as a metaphor. The use of the word “flaming” can be defined as a use of poetic onomatopoeia as the word sounds very much

like the action associated with it. The word is also denotative of pain as it is used in this poetic context creating a double meaning or a double entendre.

The word “pillar” is used metaphorically in comparison with the phrase “plaster corset” in the sixth line. The word “pillar” denotes the function of the plaster corset which was to keep Frida’s spine straight so that it could properly heal. Therefore, the two words, “flaming pillar” as paired together are an excellent use of visual imagery to denote the pain Frida must have felt while wearing the plaster corset which was critical to the full recovery of her spine.

The sixth line carries into the seventh line of poetry without a punctual element, again utilizing the poetic element of enjambment and breaks again slightly from the true iambic pentameter form as follows:

“^uthis ⁱpriest | ^uess ⁱn | ^uthe ^ro | ^umance | ⁱof ^umirrors.”

The first five syllables are held in the phrase of “this priestess in the” while the last four syllables, being short of one consonant sound of the true iambic pentameter form are held within the phrase of “romance of mirrors.” Again, in my analysis I do believe it is the choice of words and the effort to balance out the meter and sounds of the poem in a true rhythmic form, being just a little short of the true iambic pentameter form here and there.

What is also interesting about this line of text is that it finally stops with a period and does not carry into the next line using the repetitive form of the poetic element of enjambment. Again, the tone turns more worshipful which is denotive of Frida being worshiped as a feminist icon of her Spanish culture and era. Particularly the word “priestess” denotes this meaning and sets a worshipful tone for this line of text.

The phrase “in the romance of mirrors” is denotative of the tool of a mirror which was mounted under the canopy of Frida’s bed by a member of her family so that she could see herself

well enough to be able to paint her self-portraits. The use of the word “romance” is another use of imagery in an ironic form as although there was nothing romantic about Frida’s accident and its results, her life was romantic in the tragic sense of the word. It is also noted that Frida was a very sensual woman and was very desirable to the men of that era. Nudity of herself was painted in some of her self-portraits suggesting that Frida, despite her physical limitations after the accident, did love herself, her womanly curves, and found beauty in herself by being able to see herself in the mirror on the canopy over her bed.

The next phrase of the poem departs again slightly from the true iambic pentameter form and matches the previous line in being short one syllable of the true iambic pentameter form in its effort to balance the form as follows:

“Each night | she lay | down in | pain and | rose(.)”

The first five syllables in this text are held within the words “(e)ach night she lay down” while the second phrase just again contains four syllables being short of a fifth to make it true to the iambic pentameter form as follows: “in pain and rose(.)” As this rhythm matches the previous line, it strongly indicates that the short in the meter is being used to balance out the selected words and their individual sounds which seems to depart from the true iambic pentameter form, yet still maintains it.

This phrase is, once again, a use of imagery to describe a daily event in Frida’s life. That of going to sleep and regularly dealing with the pain associated with the healing of her internal injuries. The word “rose” has a weighted or dual meaning and is used as a double entendre which indicates the simple fact that Frida “rose” every morning yet the fact that she rose every morning to paint at the easel placed next to her bedside was a very remarkable event for her and those who have studied her life, given the extent of her injuries from the bus accident. Therefore, the

use of the word “rose” sets a worshipful tone to this poetic phrase suggesting a recognition of the difficulty of Frida’s life and of her ability to rise above those difficulties.

The next poetic phrase is perhaps the most complicated of the poem and still maintains the iambic pentameter form as follows:

“^ˌto the | cĕllu | loid butt | ɛrflĭes | ɔf her | Bĕlov | ɛd Deəd,”

The first five syllables of this phrase are held within the words “to the celluloid(.”) The next five are “butterflies of her” and the last words of this line contain four syllables with the phrase “(b)loved (d)ead.” Although the line seems to be short one syllable, as I started counting syllables moving towards the end of the poem I have a greater certainty, through this explication, that it is to balance out the true iambic pentameter form to carry through in equal measurements to the very end of the poem. However, I did not realize this, until I started measuring and reached the measurements halfway through the poem and started looking at the end pieces of poetic phrases or text.

The poetic phrase of celluloid butterflies is again a use of imagery to describe the stopping of a butterfly and its preservation in the celluloid form. This is a symbol of Frida herself as a butterfly that was stopped in mid-flight, due to her tragic accident, where she had to reevaluate her talents, skills, and goals. The accident itself was a prelude to her beautiful paintings as it was the only thing she could do given her medical condition.

The use of the phrase “Beloved Dead” with both words capitalized when they are not proper nouns indicates emphasis on these two words. Although I researched Frida’s life to determine what could be the symbolism behind this phrase, I could not find much. About the only relative event I could find was that her father died shortly after she started to receive some recognition as an artist. Towards the end of her life, she also started to contemplate committing

suicide, due to her life of pain and suffering, which had become unbearable. The end of her life and what caused it is still in question. Given such facts, I can only logically assume this phrase refers to her father's death and anyone else she loved who died during her life adding to her grief and causing her to contemplate her own demise.

The next phrase of the poem continues in the iambic pentameter form continuing the use of enjambment from the previous line flowing into the next line as follows:

“Lénin | and Marx | and Sta | lin array | ed at | the foot | stead.”

The first five syllables are held with the text of “Lenin and Marx and....” The next five are “and Stalin arrayed....” with the last four syllables as “at the footstead.” Given the way the iambic pentameter in the poem is flowing based on my explication, one of the next lines in the poem will probably make up for the one short in a syllable. It is still a balancing act of the true iambic pentameter form against the choice of words used in the poem and the way they have been laid out.

This phrase is symbolic of Frida's political views during her young adult life and her break from them because her husband, Diego Rivera, was essentially kicked out of the communist party for supporting the Mexican government at that time with his art work. To support him, Frida left the party as well, yet from my research, I gather that it was not willingly. Therefore, the visual imagery of her political views being “arrayed at the footstead,” I believe is symbolic of her having to lay them down, at the foot so to speak, in support of her marriage.

There is also an interesting relation between the word “Dead” and the end of the word “footstead.” Both end with the letters “ead” indicating a similar sound of a slant rhyme and again indicating the poetic element of assonance as the same was used in lines three and four of this poem. Therefore, some of the poetic elements seem to be matching up from the beginning of the

poem with the end parts. It is also interesting that this phrase ends with a period, somewhat indicating an end middle part between the beginning lines of the poem which used enjambment with the end part. It also follows the pattern use of enjambment within the six previous lines.

The next line of the poem or the eleventh line is essentially a fresh line or a starting point, not moving forward as part of the previous line and it continues to follow the iambic pentameter form as follows:

“And rose | to her | easel, | the hund | red dogs | panting....”

The first five syllables are held within the text of “and rose to her ea....” The next five are “sel the hundred dogs” with two syllables at the end in the word of “panting.” As I am measuring, the iambic form seems to be staying true to form and is not deviating as I originally thought it did. Again, the shortness of a few syllables here and there in some of the lines is being made up in other line suggesting the genius behind the rhythm of this poem, going to a true, idealistic Shakespearian sonnet form. In essence, it is beautiful.

The phrase “(a)nd rose to her easel,” is an element of imagery which indicates what Frida did nearly every morning after her injury and after the many operations she had to correct the problems of that injury. She essentially “rose to her easel” to paint. Again, the use of the word rose is used with a double meaning or double entendre to indicate an ordinary act which was not ordinary given the seriousness of her medical condition. The term “rose” is again used as a verb in this poetic context to indicate a weightier meaning than the word typically has. The tone is one of triumph in this phrase at the beginning.

The next phrase “the hundred dogs painting” was at first a large puzzle to me. Then it occurred to me that, once she started to have some success, it must have felt like everyone wanted a piece of her. Political activists, fans, real friends, fake friends, and maybe members of

her family that she did not want to deal with. It's also interesting to me how similar the choice of the word "panting" is so similar in form to that of "painting." Indeed, there is only a one letter difference between the two words. Such indicates that perhaps it was selected with that very idea in mind and that is symbolic of what Frida loved to do and what she had to do to hold her marriage together and to preserve the ideal society that she idealized. This phrase also changes the tone of the poem from that of triumph to that of a more difficult situation to deal with in the phrase of the "hundred dogs panting."

The eleventh line of the poem carries into the twelfth line with the use of enjambment and returns to the true or pure iambic pentameter form as follows:

“like child | rēn à | lōng | thē grāv | eléd walls | of thē | gārdēn, | Diēgo’s....”

The first five syllables in this poetic phrase are held within the text of “like children along....”

The next five are “the graveled walls of....” And the last five, putting a perfect iambic end to this poetic phrase are “the garden Diego’s....” In this, the third line to the last line of the poem, the iambic pentameter rounds off beautifully and perfectly, returning to the true iambic pentameter form as exhibited at the beginning of the poem.

The metaphor is again used in the phrase “like children along the graveled walls of the garden(,)” basically, comparing the children and their position to that of the “hundred dogs panting” in the eleventh line of the poem. Although I can’t visually see children in comparison to dogs, I can see how their excitement might be like a “hundred dogs panting” at the sight of a pretty garden. The use of the word “garden” I also believe is also symbolic of Frida’s work as an artist and refers to her work to be like a “garden” with the “hundred dogs” panting at the excitement, beauty, and possible profit of it adding to the difficulties of her life and yet, ironically preserving it as the one thing she could do, given her medical condition.

The twelfth line of the poem carries into the thirteenth line, once again, employing the poetic use of enjambment and returning to the true iambic pentameter form which marked the beginning of the poem as follows:

“love a | skull in | the cir | cular | window....”

The first five syllables are held within the text of “love a skull in the” with the last five being held within the phrase of “circular window.” Again, the end of the poem is rounding out beautifully and returning to the true iambic pentameter form as set in the first sentence. Also, interesting in this phrase as it relates to the previous or twelfth line of the poetic phrase is the use of the vowel sound of the long “o” in both “Diego” and “window.” It is again the use of a slant rhyme which also utilizes the poetic element of assonance.

The comparison of Frida’s husband or “Diego’s love” as “a skull” is a metaphor that once again uses irony in the comparison of the two very opposite, yet comparable elements given Frida’s difficult and sometimes emotionally abusive marital history with Diego. This comparison is also symbolic and is a use of imagery to describe the painting by Kahlo so entitled “Diego and I” where she painted his face in the middle of her forehead, indicating that she could not think her own thoughts and that his ideals and beliefs were always her thoughts. Therefore, I think the term “circular window” is a symbol of Frida’s mind and how Diego’s love as part of her life was an impediment to her own feminist ideals.

The very last line of the poem which marks the end of the poem as the fourteenth line, which is a standard of the true iambic pentameter form is measured as follows:

“of the | thumbprint | searing | her in | imi | table | brow.”

The first five syllables of the phrase are “of the thumbprint sear” with the next five being “her inimita....” with the two last and final two syllables being that of “....ble brow” tying the very

end of the poem to the beginning, referring this time directly to Frida's "brow." This last line and the slight irregularity of the rhythm seems to be rounding out the full rhythm of this poetic piece.

This phrase also refers to Frida's self-portrait so entitled "Diego and I" where Diego's face is painted in the middle of her brow very much resembling a "thumbprint" as a mark of Diego's values and ideals upon Frida's mind. The use of the word "inimitable" in this end phrase to describe Frida's brow defines it as unique and unable to be duplicated. It is also a word that is associated with inner strength returning to the overall worshipful tone of this poetic piece; suggesting that there is no way that this remarkable person and her artistic works could ever be duplicated by anyone else.

Works Cited

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