Forms of Poetry

Acrostic

- Any poem in which the first letter of each line forms a word or words. The words formed are often names—the poet's or the dedicatee's. Longer acrostic poems can create entire sentences from the first letter of each line.
  - Acrostic poems are free to rhyme or not rhyme and can be metered or free verse.

Ballad

- A short narrative poem with stanzas of two or four lines and possibly a refrain that most frequently deals with folklore or popular legends and is suitable for singing.
  - Ballads are constructed of alternating lines of four and three beats (feet). The lines are usually iambic, but need not be. This accordion-like construction creates a lilting, sing-song style.
    - An example of a ballad would be Coleridge's "The Rime of the Ancient Mariner" (the first three stanzas are excerpted here):

      It is an ancient Mariner,
      And he stoppeth one of three.
      `By thy long beard and glittering eye,
      Now wherefore stopp'st thou me ?

      The Bridegroom's doors are opened wide,
      And I am next of kin ;
      The guests are met, the feast is set :
      May'st hear the merry din.'

      He holds him with his skinny hand,
      `There was a ship,' quoth he.
      `Hold off ! unhand me, grey-beard loon !'
      Eftsoons his hand dropt he.

Blank Verse

- Blank verse is poetry that has no set stanzas or line length. It is a common form of poetry seen often in Shakespeare, Milton, Yeats, Auden, Stevens, and Frost. In fact, a great deal of the greatest literature in English has been written in blank verse.
  - Blank verse is **unrhymed** lines that follow a strict rhythm, usually iambic pentameter.
    - An example of unrhymed iambic pentameter (Blank Verse) is John Milton's *Paradise Lost:*

      Of Man's first disobedience, and the fruit
      Of that forbidden tree whose mortal taste
      Brought death into the world, and all our woe,
      With the loss of Eden, till one greater Man
      Restore us and regain the blissful seat…

Cinquain

- Despite the French name, the cinquain is actually an American poem influenced by the Japanese haiku. Cinquains are usually light verse used to express the brief thoughts or moments. This form utilizes few adverbs and adjectives, working best with a profusion of nouns and verbs.
  - Cinquains have a strict syllabic count that must be adhered to. The poem is five lines and 22 syllables long. It need not follow any metric pattern, though an iambic cinquain is not unusual. The first line of the poem has 2 syllables, the second line 4, the third line 6, the fourth has 8, and the final line has 2.
    - For an example of a cinquain, we turn to its inventor, Adelaide Crapsy:

      These be
      Three silent things:
      The falling snow... the hour
      Before the dawn... the mouth of one
      Just dead.

Elegy

- A poem of lament and praise and consolation, usually formal and about the death of a particular person. Elegies can also mourn the passing of events or passions. They can be meditative and distressed, such as "Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard" by Thomas Gray (arguably the most famous poem to take this form).
  - Elegies are seldom without form, though the form varies from poem to poem.

Epic

- The epic is a long narrative poem that usually unfolds a history or mythology of a nation or race. The epic details the adventures and deeds of a hero and, in so doing, tells the story of a nation. Epic poetry is the oldest form of poetry dating back to classics like *Gilgamesh*, *The Iliad*, and *Beowulf*. Though too long to be excerpted here, any of these works would serve as fine examples of an epic.
  - Epics often follow a recognizable pattern, but there is no set pattern. The form changes from culture to culture, language to language.

Epistle

- Poems written in the form of a letter are called epistles.
  - Epistle can adhere to form or can be free of meter and rhyme. The only requirement is that it is in letter form.
    - One of the better known epistles is Alexander Pope's "Epistle to Dr. Arbuthnot."

Limerick

- A short, humorous form known for off-color statements.
  - The limerick is a five line poem with meter and rhyme. The first, second, and fifth lines are all iambic tetrameter with end rhyme. The third and fourth lines are iambic trimeter and rhyme with each other but not the other three lines.
    - The following is an example of a limerick by Rudyard Kipling:

There was a small boy of Quebec
Who was buried in snow to his neck
When they said, "Are you friz?"
He replied, " Yes, I is —
But we don't call this cold in Quebec"

Ode

- Often written in praise of a person, an object, or an event, odes tend to be longer in form and, generally, serious in nature.
  - The patterns of the stanzas within an ode follow no prescribed pattern.
    - A well known example of an ode would be "Ode on a Grecian Urn" by John Keats.

Sestina

- A sestina is a complex form relying on the repetition of end-words. As with all poetic forms, the sestina works best when read aloud. A good poet will make the incessant repetition of words, necessary in this form, seem natural.
  - The form of the sestina is demanding. There are 39 lines in the sestina broken into 6 stanzas of 6 lines each and one final stanza of 3 lines. The last word in each of the first six lines of the poem is repeated as the last word in varying lines throughout the poem. If we assign the last word of each line a letter, the pattern of last words would fall as follows: ABCDEF FAEBDC CFDABE ECBFAD DEACFB BDFECA the final stanza, or the tag stanza, ends with either ACE or ECA. This tag stanza usually includes the other three words. On top of this complex pattern it is not unusual to see sestinas follow a strict metered rhythm (often iambic pentameter).
    - Despite its complexity, there are several famous poets who have written sestinas including Elizabeth Bishop and Ezra Pound. The following is "Sestina" by Bishop:

September rain falls on the house.
In the failing light, the old grandmother
sits in the kitchen with the child
beside the Little Marvel Stove,
reading the jokes from the almanac,
laughing and talking to hide her tears.

She thinks that her equinoctial tears
and the rain that beats on the roof of the house
were both foretold by the almanac,
but only known to a grandmother.
The iron kettle sings on the stove.
She cuts some bread and says to the child,

It's time for tea now; but the child
is watching the teakettle's small hard tears
dance like mad on the hot black stove,
the way the rain must dance on the house.
Tidying up, the old grandmother

hangs up the clever almanac

on its string. Birdlike, the almanac
hovers half open above the child,
hovers above the old grandmother
and her teacup full of dark brown tears.
She shivers and says she thinks the house
feels chilly, and puts more wood in the stove.

It was to be, says the Marvel Stove.
I know what I know, says the almanac.
With crayons the child draws a rigid house
and a winding pathway. Then the child
puts in a man with buttons like tears
and shows it proudly to the grandmother.

But secretly, while the grandmother
busies herself about the stove,
the little moons fall down like tears
from between the pages of the almanac
into the flower bed the child
has carefully placed in the front of the house.

Time to plant tears, says the almanac.
The grandmother sings to the marvelous stove
and the child draws another inscrutable house.

Sonnet

- One of the most popular forms, the sonnet has two major styles, English (or Elizabethan or Shakespearean) and Italian (or Petrarchan). Both forms are fourteen lines long and are renowned for focusing on love. Often, the first eight lines of the poem (the first two quatrains in an English sonnet) demonstrate the problem to be solved, and the final six lines (the last quatrain and a couplet in the English sonnet) resolve it.
  - Sonnets are written in iambic pentameter. The English sonnet adheres to this rhyme pattern: ABAB CDCD EFEF GG, or a variation on it. The Italian sonnet usually follows this pattern: ABBA ABBA CDE CDE. Sometimes the tercets (groups of three lines) vary. These variations can look like: CDC DCD or CDC DDC or CDC EDC. Finally, there is a second form of English sonnet known as the Spenserian sonnet. It rhymes ABAB BCBC CDCD EE. It follows the same basic pattern as the Shakespearean sonnet but varies the rhyme.
    - Shakespeare's sonnet 18 is one of the most recognized examples of this form:

Shall I compare thee to a summer's day?
Thou art more lovely and more temperate.
Rough winds do shake the darling buds of May,
And summer's lease hath all too short a date.
Sometime too hot the eye of heaven shines,
And often is his gold complexion dimm'd;
And every fair from fair sometime declines,

By chance or nature's changing course untrimm'd;
But thy eternal summer shall not fade
Nor lose possession of that fair thou ow'st;
Nor shall Death brag thou wander'st in his shade,
When in eternal lines to time thou grow'st:
So long as men can breathe or eyes can see,
So long lives this, and this gives life to thee.

Villanelle

- Borrowed from the French, the villanelle is a poem of heavy repetition made famous by Dylan Thomas's "Do Not Go Gentle Into That Goodnight." In this poem, as in all villanelles, entire lines are repeated.
  - Nineteen lines long, the villanelle not only repeats lines, it rhymes. The pattern is **ABA ABA ABA ABA ABA ABAA.** The first and third lines of the poem repeat alternatively at the ends of every subsequent stanza. Usually completed in iambic tetrameter or pentameter, the poem has a clear cadence.
    - The villanelle looks like this:

      DO NOT GO GENTLE INTO THAT GOOD NIGHT

      Do not go gentle into that good night,
      Old age should burn and rave at close of day;
      Rage, rage against the dying of the light.

      Though wise men at their end know dark is right,
      Because their words had forked no lightning they
      Do not go gentle into that good night.

      Good men, the last wave by, crying how bright
      Their frail deeds might have danced in a green bay,
      Rage, rage against the dying of the light.

      Wild men who caught and sang the sun in flight,
      And learn, too late, they grieved it on its way,
      Do not go gentle into that good night.

      Grave men, near death, who see with blinding sight
      Blind eyes could blaze like meteors and be gay,
      Rage, rage against the dying of the light.

      And you, my father, there on the sad height,
      Curse, bless me now with your fierce tears, I pray.
      Do not go gentle into that good night.
      Rage, rage against the dying of the light.