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BA English Honours | Semester IV | ENG4CJ203

Journey Through The World of Poetry

Module 2: Genres in Poetry: Sonnet, Haiku, Ode, Ballad, and Elegy • Comprehensive Notes

Chapter 2: Formal Poetic Genres and Metrical Architecture

Poetic genres represent time-honored architectural frameworks, each defined by specific metrical rhythms, strophic designs, rhyme schemes, and thematic trajectories. Far from being arbitrary formal constraints, genres such as the sonnet, haiku, ode, ballad, and elegy provide rigorous structures that concentrate linguistic power, heightening philosophical inquiry and emotional resonance.

2.1 The English Sonnet: Shakespeare's Sonnet 60

William Shakespeare's Sonnet 60 ("Like as the waves make towards the pebbl'd shore") is widely regarded as one of the English Renaissance's most profound meditations on temporal transience, biological aging, and artistic immortality. Composed in iambic pentameter with the classic English rhyme scheme (ABAB CDCD EFEF GG), the sonnet unfolds across three tightly organized quatrains leading to a resolute epigrammatic couplet.

- **First Quatrain (Temporal Inevitability):** The relentless passage of minutes is compared to ocean waves continuously breaking against a pebbled shore, each minute hastening toward extinction.
- **Second Quatrain (Biological Trajectory):** Human life is figured through astronomical ascendance and eclipse—infancy crowned with light, crawling toward maturity, only to be assailed by malignant celestial forces.
- **Third Quatrain (Time's Predation):** Time is personified as a ruthless harvester wielding a scythe, carving trenches in youth's beauty and consuming worldly wonders.
- **Final Couplet (Artistic Immortality):** Defies time's omnipotence, asserting that the poet's enduring verse shall eternally praise his beloved's worth despite time's cruel hand.

2.2 Japanese Zen Simplicity: The Haikus of Matsuo Basho

The Japanese haiku, perfected by the seventeenth-century Zen master Matsuo Basho, achieves supreme evocative power within seventeen on (phonetic units arranged in 5-7-5 syllables). Basho's iconic poems—including "The Old Pond," "O Tranquility," and "How Brief is this Life"—exemplify the aesthetic principles of *wabi-sabi* (appreciating impermanence and imperfect beauty) and *yugen* (profound, mysterious grace).

In "The Old Pond" (*Furu ike ya / kawazu tobikomu / mizu no oto*), the ancient stillness of an overgrown pond is momentarily punctured by the leap of a solitary frog and the acoustic splash of water. The poem captures the fleeting intersection of absolute eternal stillness with instantaneous physical movement, inviting quiet contemplative meditation.

2.3 The Romantic Ode: John Keats's "Ode on a Grecian Urn"

John Keats's "Ode on a Grecian Urn" (1819) stands as a monument of British High Romanticism and ekphrastic contemplation—the poetic description of visual art. Keats addresses a marble marble urn carved in classical antiquity, contemplating its frozen friezes: frantic lovers pursuing maidens, piping musicians beneath unwithering trees, and a solemn sacrificial procession led by a priest.

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Keats interrogates the paradox of artistic eternity versus mortal human vulnerability. The carved figures are immune to disease, old age, and cloyed passion, yet their immortality is achieved through cold, motionless stone. The famous concluding chiasmus—*"Beauty is truth, truth beauty,—that is all / Ye know on earth, and all ye need to know"*—provocatively claims that art provides a realm of harmonious, self-authenticating truth that transcends temporal suffering.

2.4 Gothic Balladry and Elegy: Poe's "Annabel Lee" and Wilde's "Requiescat"

Edgar Allan Poe's lyrical ballad "Annabel Lee" (1849) weaves hypnotic, rolling rhythms, internal rhymes, and gothic melancholia to commemorate an idealized love severed by death. Poe's speaker contends that their mutual love was so profound that winged angels in heaven envied them, dispatching a chilling wind to freeze his beloved.

In contrast, Oscar Wilde's touching elegy "Requiescat" (1881), written in memory of his sister Isola who died in childhood, displays delicate Victorian simplicity. Moving away from decadent aestheticism, Wilde crafts spare, tearful verses urging the quiet earth to lie gently upon the golden hair of the departed child, capturing quiet grief.

Advanced Critical Theory, Hermeneutics & Literary Praxis

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Critical inquiry into Module 2: Genres in Poetry: Sonnet, Haiku, Ode, Ballad, and Elegy reveals how textual forms construct meaning through complex aesthetic strategies and structural choices:

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2. Historiographical Context and Reception Theory

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