

Poetic Form: Ghazal

The ghazal is composed of

- a minimum of five couplets (or two-line stanzas)—and typically no more than 15—that are structurally, thematically, and emotionally autonomous
- a beginning couplet with lines of roughly the same length; the first couplet introduces a scheme, made up of a rhyme followed by a refrain
- the rhyme is called the qafia, and it repeats in the 2nd line of subsequent couplets
- the refrain is called the radif, and it repeats at the end of the 2nd line in subsequent couplets
- a final couplet which usually includes the poet's signature, referring to the author in the first or third person, and frequently including the poet's own name or a derivation of its meaning.

The form has roots in 7th century Arabic poetry, and gained prominence in the 13th and 14th centuries thanks to such Persian poets as Rumi and Hafiz. In the 18th century, the ghazal was used by poets writing in Urdu (Ghalib is the recognized master here). Goethe experimented with the form, as did Federico Garcia Lorca. It was the contemporary late poet Agha Shahid Ali who introduced it, in its classical form, to Americans. Ali called the ghazal an example of "ravishing disunity" and compared each couplet in a ghazal to "a stone from a necklace," which should continue to "shine in that vivid isolation."

Ghazals traditionally invoke melancholy, love, longing, and metaphysical questions, though any subject that lends itself to obsession, analysis, and complexity of feeling will find the form useful and inviting.

GHAZAL ON GHAZALS

For couplets the ghazal is prime; at the end
Of each one's a refrain like a chime: "at the end."

But in subsequent couplets throughout the whole poem,
It's this second line only will rhyme at the end.

On such a string of strange, unpronounceable fruits,
How fine the familiar old lime at the end!

All our writing is silent, the dance of the hand,
So that what it comes down to's all mime, at the end.

Dust and ashes? How dainty and dry! We decay
To our messy primordial slime at the end.

Two frail arms of your delicate form I pursue,
Inaccessible, vibrant, sublime at the end.

You gathered all manner of flowers all day,
But your hands were most fragrant of thyme, at the end.

There are so many sounds! A poem having one rhyme?
—A good life with sad, minor crime at the end.

Each new couplet's a different ascent: no great peak,
But a low hill quite easy to climb at the end.

Two armed bandits: start out with a great wad of green
Thoughts, but you're left with a dime at the end.

Each assertion's a knot which must shorten, alas.
This long-worded rope of which I'm at end.

Now Qafia Radif has grown weary, like life,
At the game he's been wasting his time at. THE END.

—John Hollander

GHAZAL

The only language of loss left in the world is Arabic—
These words were said to me in a language not Arabic.

Ancestors, you've left me a plot in the family graveyard—
Why must I look, in your eyes, for prayers in Arabic?

Majnoon, his clothes ripped, still weeps for his Laila.
O, this is the madness of the desert, his crazy Arabic.

Who listens to Ishmael? Even now he cries out:
Abraham, throw away your knives, recite a psalm in Arabic.

From exile Mahmoud Darwish writes to the world:
You'll all pass between the fleeting words of Arabic.

At an exhibition of miniatures, such delicate calligraphy:
Kashmiri paisley tied into the golden hair of Arabic!

The Koran prophesied a fire of men and stones.
Well, it's all now come true, as it was said in the Arabic.

When Lorca died, they left the balconies open and saw
his gasidas braided, on the horizon, into knots of Arabic.

Memory is no longer confused, it has a homeland—
Says Shammas: Territorialize each confusion in a graceful Arabic.

Where there were homes in Deir Yassin, you'll see dense forests—
That village was razed. There's no sign of Arabic.

I too, O Amichai, saw the dresses of beautiful women.
And everything else, just like you, in Death, Hebrew, and Arabic.

They ask me to tell them what Shahid means—
Listen: It means "The Beloved" in Persian, "Witness" in Arabic.

DRIZZLE

Baudelaire: "The dead, the poor dead, have their bad hours."
But the dead have no watches, no grief and no hours.

At first not smoking took all my time: I did it
a little by little and hour by hour.

Per diem. Pro bono. Cui bono? Pro rata.
But the poor use English. Off and on. By the hour.

"I'm sorry but we'll have to stop now." There tick but
fifty minutes in the psychoanalytic hour.

Vengeance is mine, yours, his or hers, ours, yours again
(you-all's this time), and then (yikes!) theirs. I prefer ours.

Twenty minutes fleeing phantoms at full tilt and then
the cat coils herself like a quoit and sleeps for hours.

—William Matthews

MISCEGENATION

In 1965 my parents broke two laws of Mississippi;
they went to Ohio to marry, returned to Mississippi.

They crossed the river into Cincinnati, a city whose name
begins with a sound like *sin*, the sound of wrong—*mis* in Mississippi.

A year later they moved to Canada, followed a route the same
as slaves, the train slicing the white glaze of winter, leaving Mississippi.

Faulkner's Joe Christmas was born in winter, like Jesus, given his name
for the day he was left at the orphanage, his race unknown in Mississippi.

My father was reading *War and Peace* when he gave me my name.
I was born near Easter, 1966, in Mississippi.

When I turned 33 my father said, *It's your Jesus year—you're the same
age he was when he died.* It was spring, the hills green in Mississippi.

I know more than Joe Christmas did. Natasha is a Russian name—
though I'm not; it means *Christmas child*, even in Mississippi.

—Natasha Trethewey