

John Clare: Summer Sonnet



Although this is described as a sonnet, it's the only one I knew which was written in rhyming couplets. That was till I read more of Clare's poems and discovered that he wrote several in this form. The poem does not obviously divide into an octave and a sestet, either. That may sound a bit picky but if you've laboured this point with students, they may well want to know why it doesn't apply here. Is this a sonnet just because it's 14 lines and iambic pentameter? It seems to be the case that it's a sonnet because Clare called it a sonnet.

Leaving aside the form, we have a closely observed appreciation of specific summer scenes. Clare is well known for his observation of and knowledge of nature so this is what we would expect. You might like to introduce it to students after getting them to come up with some examples of 'things seen in summer' themselves. (They may find this surprisingly difficult, especially if you restrict it to plants and animals and exclude 'shorts', 'suntan lotion' and so on.) Read the poem to them a couple of times and then see what words they can recall. You could do this in teams and award a point for each correctly remembered word - excluding articles and prepositions. You could then give them the following prose description and see how many of the original words they can spot after a final reading. (They are all there).

Summer's Day

What I love to see when the summer finally comes, is the sun beaming down and the birds dodging back and forth in the hawthorn and holly trees. The clouds are white as cotton wool or, on the evening sky, a creamy sack of duck-feathers. It's best when the clouds are sailing to the north – for that means a warm southerly wind.

I love to see the wild flowers coming out, too. The old favourites come into bloom again in May and June. Mare blobs look like a stain on the fields with their lovely gold colour. They tend to grow along the meadow drain near to where the rushes and the water lilies flourish. They whiten the water, floating on the floods like that, near where the reed clumps rustle – they sound like a wind shaking miniature trees. I remember how the breeze shook the wood and the reeds, where water birds were nesting. Out she shot from her hiding place, the startled Moor Hen! I can imagine her now as she pushes the vegetation to one side and seeks her nest next to the flag irises. I like the way her nest seems to be floating in the bull rushes.

Another thing I like is the willow leaning half way over the water. It's such a clear deep lake; I love to stand upon its shore and look at the reflections of the branches.

There's so much to appreciate at this time of year. Everything is growing so fast. I love the hay grass, especially when the flower heads are wafting in the breeze. Each one swings in time to the summer winds.

And I even like the little insects. They seem to have a short but happy life. Their wings are so busy, that they seem to be playing some sport all round and about the meadow. Ah, here's to the bright summer's days and evenings when we can see the water beetles in their dozens skimming across the clear lake as if they were at play.