

Three General Categories for the Renaissance Lyric courtesy of Prof. Harold Toliver

I. Elizabethan (especially the sonneteers):

A. subject matter:

1. conventional, even stereotypical; emphasizes typical or traditional passions or experiences.
2. depicts an artificial, fictional world of human action or emotion, often pastoral, always courtly.
3. represents the world generally in tableaux in which the human or natural world is presented for its picturesque effects.

B. technique:

1. formal--careful workmanship, ingenious use of the sonnet form.
2. personal emotion subordinate to expression of conventional situations/feelings.
3. hyperbolic--enhances or exaggerates natural or human features.

Sidney--an Elizabethan poet:

1. conventional in tone.
2. picturesque in expression.
3. amplifies or expands a single theme through a variety of evocative comparisons.
4. composes orderly, symmetrical, and often predictable poetic arguments.
5. employs highly emotive diction that valorizes hyperbole and oxymoron.
6. imagery--conventional medieval courtly comparisons, classical mythology, neoplatonism.

II. Neoclassical--Cavalier:

A. subject matter:

1. social, public; emphasizes the qualities that people have in common.
2. depicts basic human types, events, and emotions.
3. represents a static, orderly, hierarchical world in which human and natural entities are presented in their most permanent aspects.

B. technique:

1. formal--careful workmanship, traditional forms--ode, elegy, satire, panegyric.
2. emotional content subordinate to larger poetic purpose, whether graceful compliment (Cavalier lyric) or profound meditation (an ode).
3. objective--gathers materials dispassionately from observation of surroundings.

Jonson--a neoclassicist (not in the Italianate/Petrarchan sense of Elizabethan poets):

1. impersonal in tone.
2. clear and straightforward in expression.

3. plentiful use of symmetry--balance, antithesis, parallel sentence structures.
4. closed forms, with definite beginning and end (the closed couplet).
5. plain in style--unequivocal, restrained in feeling, moderate in diction.
6. optimistic: emphasizes *this* world and all its attributes.
7. imagery--employs classical types and mythology, Petrarchanisms, pastoral, etc.
8. employs all classical genres--epigram, satire, elegy, ode.

III. Metaphysical:

A. subject matter:

1. individual and idiosyncratic--emphasizes qualities that differ from the norm, both in worldview and poetic expression.
2. plays upon the medieval doctrine of correspondences, in which humans and their passions and experiences can be compared insightfully to anything in the animate or inanimate worlds.
3. represents a world of hidden resemblances and affinities, in which the human and natural worlds are seen in their most transient and dynamic aspects.

B. technique:

1. informal, colloquial expression embodied in experimental verse forms that imitate or stress the speaker's act of passion or meditation.
2. passionate in tone, though emotion is conveyed in very intellectual or intellected (look up the difference) arguments and comparisons.
3. subjective, almost private in its materials--gathers its imagery from obscure associations or from theology, natural philosophy, and arcane sciences.

Donne--a metaphysical poet:

1. personal, introspective in tone.
2. myopic, muddled, enigmatic, obscure in meaning and image.
3. makes often excessive use of witty devices such as paradox and irony.
4. uses forms that mirror immediate passion or thought, and distorts conventional forms to fit an individual conception.
5. argumentative, rhetorical, and dramatic in style, often displaying real intensity of feeling; flamboyant or unusual in diction.
6. pessimistic--emphasizes the inconstancy and mutability of this world while constantly referring to a spiritual or transcendent realm.
7. imagery--employs typology, emblems, biblical commentary, alchemy, hermeticism, mysticism, neoplatonism.

Note: The categories listed above reduce each poet to his most obvious and consistent attributes; they do not encompass every kind of poetic performance each poet might enact. Milton and Shakespeare both encompass and defy any attempt at categorization.