

Sonnets -- a quick guide

Sonnets are of fouretene lynes, every line conteyning tenne syllables. The firste twelve do ryme in staves of foure lines by crosse meetre, and the last two ryming together do conclude the whole.

George Gascoigne, *Certain Notes of Instruction* (1575)

Essential characteristics:

- 14 lines, iambic pentameter: five sets of syllables with 10 in total, alternating weak/strong stresses
- Emotional content: the problem of unrequited love, desire vs virtue
- A volta (lit: "turn"), which signals the problem's resolution, change of approach/focus ("Yet", "But")
- Stock metaphors: love as a battle, chain of being,
- Use of paradox: contrasting experiences (ice and fire)
- Allusions to classical mythology: comparisons with gods and demi-gods and their experiences
- Repetition, alliteration and assonance
- Overall thematic device, such as a repeating line, metaphor, or idea

Italian or Petrarchan Sonnet

Sonnets originated in Italy in the 12-13th centuries. Dante and Petrarch (1307-1374), are the most famous Italian sonneteers, with Petrarch encouraging very secular topics following his many sonnets concerning his love for the unattainable Laura.

One Octave : eight lines, abbaabba, setting up a problem

One Sestet: six lines, cdcdce or cdcdcd, cddcdc, cdecde, cdecde, cdcedc, resolving the problem

The change from the octave to the sestet is called the volta, or turn, and represents the change in focus. Petrarchian sonnets did not use rhyming couplets, though the example cited overleaf from Sir Philip Sydney (1554-1586) breaks this rule. This is not an easy form in "rhyme poor" English (Miller), so the octet rhyming pattern was often changed to abbaacca to make it easier.

English Sonnets

The first English sonneteer was Thomas Wyatt (1503-1543), who wrote 32 sonnets. His contemporary Henry Howard, Earl of Surrey, deviated more widely of the Petrarchan mark and is credited with developing the English or Elizabethan sonnet form, the most famous exemplar of which being Shakespeare.

Spenserian Sonnet

Invented by Edmund Spenser based on the stanza pattern he used in *The Faerie Queene*.

Three Quatrains: three groups of four lines, abab bcbc cdcd

One Couplet: two lines, ee

Each quatrain develops a specific idea, with the overlapping rhymes linking the main unit in a series of distinct but closely related ideas, with a separate final couplet providing a commentary.

English, Elizabethan or Shakespearian Sonnet

The simplest of all sonnets, calling for only pairs of rhyming words rather than groups of four, and also the most flexible in terms of the placement of the volta, typically at L9 (as in the Petrarchan) or at the couplet.

Three Quatrains: three groups of four lines, abab cdcd efef

One Couplet: two lines, gg

Typically involves a three-part argument and conclusion; or three examples of the problem posed, with a resolution or comment in the couplet.

References

Miller, Nelson; Basic Sonnet Forms: <http://www.sonnets.org/basicforms.htm>

Rosemounde of Mercia; The Elizabethan Sonnet : http://webpages.charter.net/wildrose/Articlefolder/elizabethan_sonnet.htm

Sonnet Central: <http://www.sonnets.org/index.htm>

Examples

Petrarchan Sonnet: Sonnet LXXI, Sir Philip Sidney

Who will in fairest book of Nature know
How Virtue may best lodged in Beauty be,
Let him but learn of Love to read in thee,
Stella, those fair lines, which true goodness show.
There shall he find all vices' overthrow,
Not by rude force, but sweetest sovereignty
Of reason, from whose light those night-birds fly;
That inward sun in thine eyes shineth so.
And not content to be Perfection's heir
Thyself, dost strive all minds that way to move,
Who mark in thee what is in thee most fair.
So while thy beauty draws the heart to love,
As fast thy Virtue bends that love to good.
"But, ah," Desire still cries, "give me some food."

Sidney modified the Petrarchan, often following his octet with two tercets, as here (abbaabba cdc dee); the volta is not until the final line in this example.

Spenser: Sonnet LIV

Of this World's theatre in which we stay,
My love like the Spectator idly sits,
Beholding me, that all the pageants play,
Disguising diversely my troubled wits.
Sometimes I joy when glad occasion fits,
And mask in mirth like to a Comedy;
Soon after when my joy to sorrow flits,
I wail and make my woes a Tragedy.
Yet she, beholding me with constant eye,
Delights not in my mirth nor rues my smart;
But when I laugh, she mocks: and when I cry
She laughs and hardens evermore her heart.
What then can move her? If nor mirth nor moan,
She is no woman, but a senseless stone.

Although the volta looks to be at L9 (as in Petrarchan mode), it is not in fact until the couplet.

Shakespeare: Sonnet XXIX

When in disgrace with Fortune and men's eyes,
I all alone beweepe my outcast state,
And trouble deaf heaven with my bootless cries,
And look upon myself and curse my fate,
Wishing me like to one more rich in hope,
Featured like him, like him with friends possessed,
Desiring this man's art and that man's scope,
With what I most enjoy contented least,
Yet in these thoughts my self almost despising,
Haply I think on thee, and then my state,
(Like to the lark at break of day arising
From sullen earth) sings hymns at heaven's gate,
For thy sweet love remembered such wealth brings,
That then I scorn to change my state with kings.

Volta at L9.