Sonnets

...
Sonnets

Historical Overview

• evolved over centuries; endured for over 700 years
• originally devised as a lyric, developed in southern France, northern Italy
• the term means little song in Italian

Defined

• the sonnet is a poem composed with a recognized formula (rhyme/meter) and is concerned with a single theme, which sometimes twists to a secondary theme
• traditional seen with 14 lines, iambic pentameter, and a volta (a turn or shift)
Types of Sonnets

Because of its popularity, the poem has transformed over time, retaining important categorizing elements, yet metamorphosing some components.

- Italian sonnet > or Petrarchan sonnet
- English sonnet > or Shakesperian sonnet
- Spenserian sonnet
- Blank sonnet (modern)

No matter the type of sonnet:

- Both the octave and the sestet must contain parallel themes or two stories which relate to one another.
- Typically the octave presents a situation, event, image, or generalization and the sestet presents a reflection or meditation on the previous section, a reaction, or a result.
Basic Characteristics of Traditional Sonnet

• fourteen lines
• chosen rhyme scheme and strategic meter
• a turn or shift in theme (referred to as the *volta*)

Important Terms

• octave     eight lines  || For sonnets the first eight lines carry a theme.
• sestet     six lines    || The remaining six lines can twist the theme.
• tercet     three lines
• quatrain   four lines
• couplet    two lines
Sonnets

Francesco Petrarch (July 20, 1304 – July 19, 1374)

It is often suggested that Francesco Petrarch created the sonnet form, —however it is more appropriate to say he popularized the form during his lifetime

- he is known as the Father of Humanism
- not allowed to marry due to clerical duties with the Roman Catholic Church
- it is believed he fathered two children nonetheless
- was a European celebrity from his early writings in Latin
- died of the Plague in his late sixties
- he established common themes in the sonnet form which became traditional elements for hundreds of years
- his full collection consists of 317 sonnets dedicated to a woman simply named: Laura
Petrarch’s Italian Sonnet: Themes Expressed in his poems

• sonnets must be written about a Beloved
• the Poet-writer must be obsessed with the Beloved; he would do anything for her
• the Poet’s love is so great he eventually becomes sick with want
• it is acknowledged that love is a trial; a frustration for the Poet
• the Poet falls in love at first sight of the Beloved
• the Beloved cannot be named in the work; they are given a secret name to hide their true identity; the Poet will make puns out of the Beloved’s name
• the Beloved is unattainable, either because they are already betrothed or they are not interested in the Poet at all
• the Beloved is an intense beauty, an Ideal example of the Perfect Woman living in the Material World; the Beloved is so beautiful and moral she is loved even by Heaven;
• in some cases, (as with Petrarch) the Beloved is fated to die an early death (This allows further creation of sonnets commenting on the Material World’s loss.)
• the sonnets will immortalize the Beloved on earth
• idolatry and in some cases intense sensuality and erotic allusions
• Roman/Greek deities are shown frequently in these works, specifically Venus (Aphrodite) and Cupid (Eros) due to their control over love.
The various themes and images utilized by Petrarch are referred to as **Petrarchan conceits**.

These are still used today in various ways, even by pop singers.

- a common conceit is the image of a lover in despair over rejection
- the poet-speaker is shown as a humble, willing servant or slave of the Beloved
- the Beloved is blonde, blue-eyed, pale skin, and bright red cheeks and lips; she is described through stereotype and not realistic metaphors
- when over-used, a conceit becomes cliché, expected

*To simplify, these poems can appear, when poorly written, over-dramatic, pathos driven, scenes filled with heaving bosoms, and self-centered whining.*

*When well-crafted, the poems share a common story of lost love with the reader.*
The Form’s Popularity

- consider these as pop-songs of their day
- Petrarch’s poems were composed in a common vernacular of Italian, not the academic Latin
- this allows his work to be accessible to the average person
- likewise, Petrarch’s main theme deals with the psychology of a spurned lover, a concept anyone can relate to, no matter what social class or occupation
Sonnet Sequence

Through Petrarch’s full collection of poems the concept of a sonnet sequence was created: numerous poems bridged together with a common story line.

- A popular form of writing even in 16th Century England, 200 years later.
- It is crucial to focus on the unity of the work as a whole.
- The sequence is a public declaration of an artist’s devotion to a Beloved.
- The original intention was not to just read one of these poems randomly out of sequence, but rather to read the entire collection from beginning to end to see the transformation of the characters and to see a story unfold.
- His manuscript is referred to as Rime Sparse, in English: Scattered Rhymes.
- Also called: Canzoniere
- The poems are arranged as if composed in chronological order, but recent studies have shown that he wrote them out of proper sequence.
The Story within *Rime Sparse*

- in Petrarch’s poems, the beloved is named Laura
- he wrote over 366 poems to her, 317 are sonnets
- the collection evolves to include themes of bereavement over her untimely death, and the lost possibilities to be with her, and memories of her beauty
- a blurring of fiction and reality occur here as well; it is currently acknowledged that she more than likely never existed:
  - he claims she was a real person he saw at a church on April 6, 1327
  - fell in love instantly
  - she died on Easter Sunday, April 6, 1348 by the reckoning at that time.
- his love for her was unreciprocated; he indicates Laura was already married
- it is unknown if the two ever actually spoke face to face (if she really existed)
The Italian Rhyme Scheme

octave:
in this case composed of two quatrains

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| \text{B} | \text{B} |
| \text{B} | \text{A} |
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sestet:
in this case composed of two tercets
Francesco Petrarch (July 1304 - July 1374)
from *Rime Sparse* original Italian

1

Voi ch’ascoltate in rime sparse il suono
di quei sospiri ond’io nudriva ‘l core
in sul mio primo giovenile errore
quand’era in parte altr’uom da quel ch’i’ sono,

del vario stile in ch’io piango et ragiono
fra le vane speranze e ‘l van dolore,
ove sia chi per prova intenda amore,
spero trovar pietà, nonché perdono.

Ma ben veggio or sí come al popol tutto
favola fui gran tempo, onde sovente
di me mesdesmo meco mi vergogno;

et del mio vaneggiar vergogna è ‘l frutto,
e ‘l pentersi, e ‘l conoscere chiaramente
che quanto piace al mondo è breve sogno.

English translation

1

You who hear the sound, in scattered rhymes,
of those sighs on which I fed my heart,
in my first vagrant youthfulness,
when I was partly other than I am,

I hope to find pity, and forgiveness,
for all the modes in which I talk and weep,
between vain hope and vain sadness,
in those who understand love through its trials.

Yet I see clearly now I have become
an old tale amongst all these people, so that
it often makes me ashamed of myself;

and shame is the fruit of my vanities,
and remorse, and the clearest knowledge
of how the world’s delight is a brief dream.

taken from:
http://petrarch.petersadlon.com/canzoniere.html

trans: A.S. Kline
Sonnet One from *Rime Sparse*

- the main theme of full collection is expressed in opening poem:
  - a story of unrequited love
  - the poet is suffering from remorse
  - and he is in despair from failures in love
- establishes introduction to story of a failed love affair, twenty years prior
- this poem acts as the thesis of the full sonnet sequence
- Poet is love-lorn and foolish
- the reader is shown as wise, knowledgeable in love
- Poet is shown as ridiculed by society, an object of gossip
- the main point is revealed: the world is temporal
Francesco Petrarch

3

It was on that day when the sun’s ray
was darkened in pity for its Maker,
that I was captured, and did not defend myself,
because your lovely eyes had bound me, Lady.

It did not seem to me to be a time to guard myself
against Love’s blows: so I went on
confident, unsuspecting; from that, my troubles
started, amongst the public sorrows.

Love discovered me all weaponless,
and opened the way to the heart through the eyes,
which are made the passageways and doors of tears:

so that it seems to me it does him little honour
to wound me with his arrow, in that state,
he not showing his bow at all to you who are armed.

Francesco Petrarch

5

When I utter sighs, in calling out to you,
with the name that Love wrote on my heart,
the sound of its first sweet accents begin
to be heard within the word LAUdable.

Your REgal state, that I next encounter,
doubles my power for the high attempt;
but: ‘TAcit’, the ending cries, ‘since to do her honour
is for other men’s shoulders, not for yours’.

So, whenever one calls out to you,
the voice itself teaches us to LAUd, REvere,
you, O, lady worthy of all reverence and honour:

except perhaps that Apollo is disdainful
that morTAl tongue can be so presumptuous
as to speak of his eternally green branches.

taken from:
http://petrarch.petersadlon.com/canzoniere.html
trans: A.S. Kline
Sir Thomas Wyatt (1503 – 11 October 1542)

Is credited for introducing the Italian sonnet to the English

- sometimes credited as establishing the modern literary tradition in England, picking up where Geoffrey Chaucer left off from the Fourteenth Century
- like Chaucer, Wyatt is interested in the Italian Renaissance, using aspects of their culture for the developing English arts movement
- like Petrarch, Wyatt is interested in the Ancient Classical period, using the poetry and prose of that time as a means of embellishing the current literature
- keep in mind, he is mainly considered a nobleman, diplomat, and courtier of Henry VIII’s court; poetry and arts were a secondary activity, a hobby
- his poetry and translations were not published until after his death
- often he employed a literary technique called *imitatio*, which means emulation or imitation of another arist’s work; in this fashion, a poet may “borrow” an image or phrase from another writer, then twist the concept into something new
In his own work or in translations he promotes the Petrarchan model.

Wyatt uses Petrarch as a prototype for the English poem.

- typical Petrarchan conceits appear frequently:
  - love as a hunting trip, the female figure as a doe
  - love as a ship on a stormy sea

- particularly in his *imitatio* verses he will maintain the original intentions of the work, rarely diverging away from the primary source

- at times he will utilize an experimental sonnet rhyme scheme:
  
  ABBA CDDC EFFE GG

  which refigures the closing sestet with *a quatrain and a couplet*, rather than two tercets

- due to his time period in history, his language and spelling are out-dated to the average reader; however, with patience, his work can be accessible
## Sonnets

### The Italian Rhyme Scheme

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### Wyatt Rhyme Schemes

(when experimenting)

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Francesco Petrarch (July 1304 - July 1374)
from Rime Sparse original Italian

189

Passa la nave mia colma d’oblio
per aspro mare, a mezza notte il verno,
enfra Scilla et Caribdi; et al governo
siede ‘l signore, anzi ‘l nimico mio.

A ciascun remo un penser pronto et rio
che la tempesta e ‘l fin par ch’abbi a scherno;
la vela rompe un vento humido eterno
di sospir’, di speranze, et di desio.

Pioggia di lagrimar, nebbia di sdegni
bagna et rallenta le già stanche sarte,
che son d’error con ignorantia attorto.

Celansi i duo bei dolci usati segni;
morta fra l’onde è la ragion et l’arte,
tal ch’incomincio a desesperar delporto.

Modern English translation

189

My ship, full of oblivion, sails
on a bitter sea, at winter’s midnight,
between Scylla and Charybdis: at the helm
sits that Lord, or rather my enemy.

At each oar there’s a cruel eager thought,
that scorns the tempest and its end:
the sail’s torn by an eternal moist wind
of sighs, of hopes, and of desire.

A rain of tears, a mist of disdain
drench and slacken the already tired shrouds,
woven from error and ignorance.

My two usual guiding lights are so hidden:
reason and art so drowned by the waves,
that I begin to despair of finding harbour.

taken from:
http://petrarch.petersadlon.com/canzoniere.html

trans: A.S. Kline
Francesco Petrarch

Modern English translation (A.S. Kline)

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My ship, full of oblivion, sails
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drench and slacken the already tired shrouds,
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My two usual guiding lights are so hidden:
reason and art so drowned by the waves,
that I begin to despair of finding harbour.

English imitatio (Thomas Wyatt)
(see page 669 in Longman for further comparison)

My galy charged with forgetfulnes
Thorough sharpe sees in wynter nyghtes doth pas
Twene Rock and Rock; and eke myn ennemy, Alas,
That is my lorde, sterith with cruelnes;
And every owre a thought in redines,
As tho that deth were light in suche a case.
An endles wynd doeth tere the sayl apase
Of forced sightes and trusty ferfulnes.
A rayn of teris, a clowde of derk disdain,
Hath done the wered cordes great hinderaunce,
Wrethed with errour and eke with ignoraunce.
The starres be hid that led me to this pain;
Drowned is reason that should me consort,
And I remain dispering of the port.

Francesco Petrarch

English translation (A.S. Kline)

190

A pure white hind appeared to me
with two gold horns, on green grass,
between two streams, in a laurel’s shade,
at sunrise, in the unripe season.

Her aspect was so sweet and proud
I left all my labour to follow her:
as a miser, in search of treasure,
makes his toil lose its bitterness in delight.

‘Touch me not,’ in diamonds and topaz,
was written round about her lovely neck:
‘it pleased my Lord to set me free.’

The sun had already mounted to mid-day,
my eyes were tired with gazing, but not sated,
when I fell into water, and she vanished.

English imitatio (Thomas Wyatt)
(see page 668 in Longman for comparison)

Who so list to hunt, I knowe where is an hynd,
But as for me, helas, I may no more;
The vayn travaill hath weried me so sore,
I ame of theim that farthest commeth behinde.

Yet may I by no meanes my weried mynde
Drawe from the Diere: but as she fleeth afore,
Faynting I folowe; I leve off therefore,
Sins in a nett I seke to hold the wynde.

Who list her hount, I put him owte of dubbte,
As well as I may spend his tyme in vain:
And, graven with Diamonds in letters plain,
There is written her faier neck rounde abowte,
Noli me tangere, for Caesars I ame,
And wyld for to hold, though I seem tame.

**Sonnets**

*English imitatio (Thomas Wyatt) in modern wording*
(see page 668 in Longman for comparison)

Who so wishes to hunt, I know where is an *hind*,
But as for me, alas, I may no more:
The vain travel has wearied me so sore.
I am of them that furthest come behind;
Yet may I by no means my wearied mind
Draw from the deer, but as she flees afore,
Fainting I follow; I leave off therefore,
Since in a net I seek to hold the wind.
Who desires her, hunt, I put him out of doubt,
As well as I, may spend this time in vain:
And graven with diamonds in letters plain,
There is written her fair neck round about:
*Noli me tangere*, for Caesar’s I am;
And wild for to hold, though I seem tame.
Francesco Petrarch

*original Italian*

140

Amor, che nel penser mio vive et regna
e ‘l suo seggio maggior nel mio cor tene,
talor armato ne la fronte vene;
ivi si loca et ivi pon sua insegna.

Quella ch’amare e sofferir ne ‘nsegna,
e vol che’l gran desio, l’accesa spene,
ragion, vergogna, e reverenza affrene,
di nostro ardir fra se stessa si sdegna.

Onde Amor paventoso fugge al core,
lasciando ogni sua impresa, et piange et trema;
ivi s’asconde et non appar piu fore.

Che poss’io far, temendo il mio signore,
se non star seco infin a l’ora estrema?
che bel fin fa chi ben amando more.

*English translation*

140

Love that lives and reigns in my thought
and holds the central place in my heart,
sometimes comes to my brow fully armed,
takes his stand there, and sets up his banner.

She who teaches love and suffering,
and wishes great desire and burning hope
to be restrained by reason, reverence, shame,
is angered in herself by our ardour.

Then Love retreats in fear to the heart,
relinquishing his aim, trembles, weeps:
hides himself there, and no more appears.

What can I do, now my lord’s afraid,
but stay with him until the final hour?
For he ends well, who dies loving well.

taken from:
http://petrarch.petersadlon.com/canzoniere.html

trans: A.S. Kline
Thomas Wyatt
(see page 667 in Longman for comparison)

The long love that in my thought doth harbor,
And in mine heart doth keep his residence,
Into my face presseth with bold pretense
And therein campeth, spreading his banner.
She that me learneth to love and suffer
And will that my trust and lust’s negligence
Be reined by reason, shame, and reverence
With his hardiness taketh displeasure.

Wherewithal unto the heart’s forest he fleeth,
Leaving his enterprise with pain and cry,
And there him hideth, and not appeareth.
What may I do, when my master fear eth,
But in the field with him to live and die?
For good is the life ending faithfully.

Henry Howard, Earl of Surrey
(see page 670 in Longman for comparison)

Love, that doth reign and live within my thought,
And built his seat within my captive breast,
Clad in the arms wherein with me he fought,
Oft in my face he doth his banner rest.
But she that taught me love and suffer pain,
My doubtful hope and eke my hot desire
With shamefast look to shadow and refrain,
Her smiling grace converteth straight to ire.

And coward Love, then, to the heart apace
Taketh his flight, where he doth lurk and plain,
His purpose lost, and dare not show his face.
For my lord’s guilt thus faultless bide I pain,
Yet from my lord shall not my foot remove:
Sweet is the death that taketh end by love.
Sonnets

Henry Howard (1517 – 19 January 1547)
Description of Spring, Wherein Every Thing Renews, Save Only the Lover
(see page 671 in Longman for comparison)

The soote season, that bud and bloom forth brings,
With green hath clad the hill, and eke the vale.
The nightingale with feathers new she sings;
The turtle to her make hath told her tale.
Summer is come, for every spray now springs,
The hart hath hung his old head on the pale;
The buck in brake his winter coat he slings;
The fishes flete with new repairèd scale;
The adder all her slough away she slings;
The swift swallow pursueth the fliës male;
The busy bee her honey now she mings;
Winter is worn that was the flowers’ bale.

And thus I see among these pleasant things
Each care decays, and yet my sorrow springs!

1. soote: sweet
2. eke: also
   vale: abbreviation of valley
4. turtle: turtledove; make: mate
5. spray: twig or branch with flowers
6. his olde head: i.e. his antlers;
   pale: fence post
7. brake: bushes
9. sloughe: skin
11. minges: mingles; mixes
12. bale: harm; misfortune; woe;
    misery; sorrow:
      Wintertime is the bale for flowers.

The theme of this poem is linked to a common subject for the English sonnet writers: it displays a lover-poet outcast and isolated due to his failure in love.

- **Line 1** establishes the time of year, springtime, and establishes the positive aspects of nature: soote (sweet).
  > remember, previously Chaucer would have pronounced the word “soote” as “soot-ay”—now, this new generation of poets will drop the final “e” sound—creating the silent e in English.
  > this new phonetic approach has been coined the Great Vowel Shift—during the late Middle English period, sometime after Chaucer’s death, the manner many words were pronounced shifted to a new sound. It is still unclear why this happened. Politics, the Black Plague, and wars with the French are all candidates for the event.
  > furthermore, by Howard’s time, English spelling of words was becoming standardized—not to a great extent, but the process was beginning
• **Line 2** uses the word “eke”—pronounced “eeek,” meaning “also.”

• **Line 4** mentions a “turtle”—whenever this word appears in Renaissance poetry, a turtle is short hand for the turtle-dove. Keep in mind meter count is controlling some aspects of the poem—in this case Howard needs a perfect iambic pentameter throughout.

• **Line 6 and 7** bring up similar animals: a hart and a buck: keep in mind, the term “hart” is exclusively used for a specific species called the red deer; whereas, a buck is inclusive of many species, including a male deer, male antelope, male goat, or male sheep.

• **Line 9** uses the word “slough,” pronounced as “sluff.”

• **Line 10** utilizes an inversion of the noun/adjective relationship in order to abide by the rhyme scheme.

• **Line 13** contains the volta.

• **Line 14** uses a different meaning for the expected meaning of the word “care”—that is, care in this case means “anxiety,” “worry,” or “concern.”
Sonnet

- Notice the ironic placement of the last word; a play on words is being shown. Throughout the poem, the poet-speaker never mentions the name of the actual season of the year, yet he describes in strong detail the timing, so there is no questioning his mood.
- His depression deepens as he realizes it is spring. A sad epiphany moment is shown when he realizes he is isolated in the middle of natural activity surrounding him.