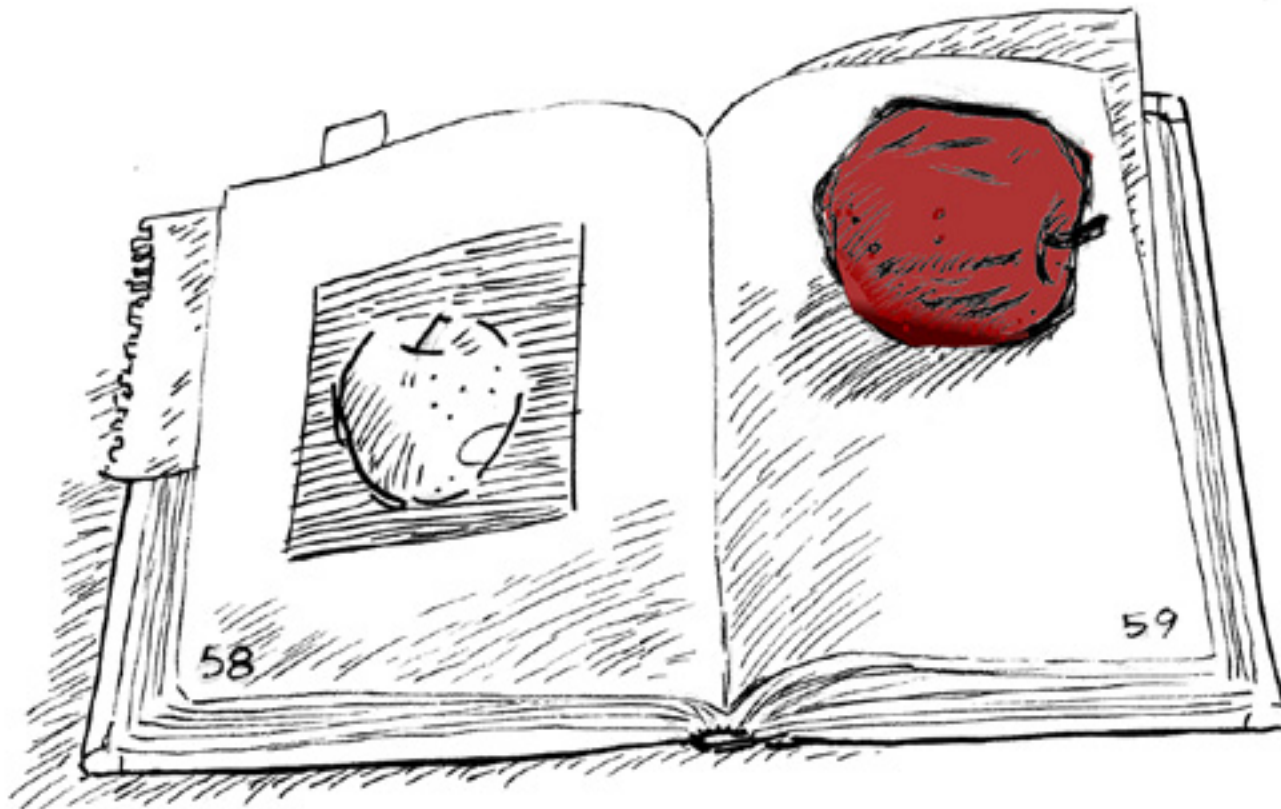


Sonnets



Sonnet Form

Historical Overview

- evolved over centuries; endured for over 700 years
- originally devised as a lyric, developed in southern France, northern Italy
- creation and traditionally attributed to Francesco Petrarch, (July 20, 1304 – July 19, 1374) the Father of Humanism— however it is clear he popularized the form during his lifetime

Defined

- The sonnet is a poem composed with a recognized formula and is concerned with a single thought or theme, and may have a secondary theme.
- The term means little song in Italian

Sonnet Form

Types of Sonnets

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

Common forms:

- Italian sonnet > or Petrarchan sonnet
- English sonnet > or Shakesperian sonnet
- Spenserian sonnet
- Blank sonnet

Sonnet Form

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

Sonnet Form

Charles Simic || *History*

On a gray evening
Of a gray century,
I ate an apple
While no one was looking.

A small, sour apple
The color of woodfire,
Which I first wiped
On my sleeve.



octave:
in this case composed of two quatrains

8

Then I stretched my legs
As far as they'd go,
Said to myself
Why not close my eyes now

Before the Late
World News and Weather.



sestet:
*in this case composed of a quatrain and
a couplet*

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Simic, Charles. "History." *The Making of a Sonnet: A Norton Anthology*.
Edward Hirsch and Eavan Boland, eds. New York: W. W. Norton. 2008. Print.

Sonnet Form

- Both the octave and the sestet contain parallel themes, or two stories which are related 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.

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

- 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 become traditional elements for hundreds of years

Sonnet Form

The Italian Sonnet

- sonnets must be written about a Beloved
- the Poet writer must be obsessed with 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 Poet is beneath their class
- in some cases the Beloved raises the lowly status of the Poet to higher status
- —or condemns him to damnation
- the Beloved is an intense beauty, an Ideal example
- traditionally the Beloved is blonde, blue-eyed
- the Beloved is loved even by Heaven
- 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

Sonnet Form

- in some cases, (as with Petrarch) the Beloved is fated to die an early death.
- the sonnets will immortalize the Beloved on earth
- love is shown almost in a manner of stalking
- idolatry and in some cases intense sensuality and erotic allusions
- love is equal to feudal service between the Poet and the Beloved
- the Poet would kill for the Beloved
- the Poet would kill himself if asked
- Venus (Aphrodite) plays important role here at times
- Cupid (Eros) is often shown as well

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.

Sonnet Form

The Form's Popularity

- consider these as pop-songs of their day
- the poems were composed in the vernacular 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 Form

The Sonnet Sequence

- Through Petrarch's full collection of poems the concept of a sonnet sequence was created.
- A popular form of writing even in 16th Century England, 200 years later.
- It is crucial to focus was 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 titled *Rime Sparse*, or 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.

Sonnet Form

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 full manuscript is dedicated to her
- 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:
 - > 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; she never responds in kind
- Laura was already married and turned down all of Petrarch's advances
- it is unknown if the two ever actually spoke (if she really existed)

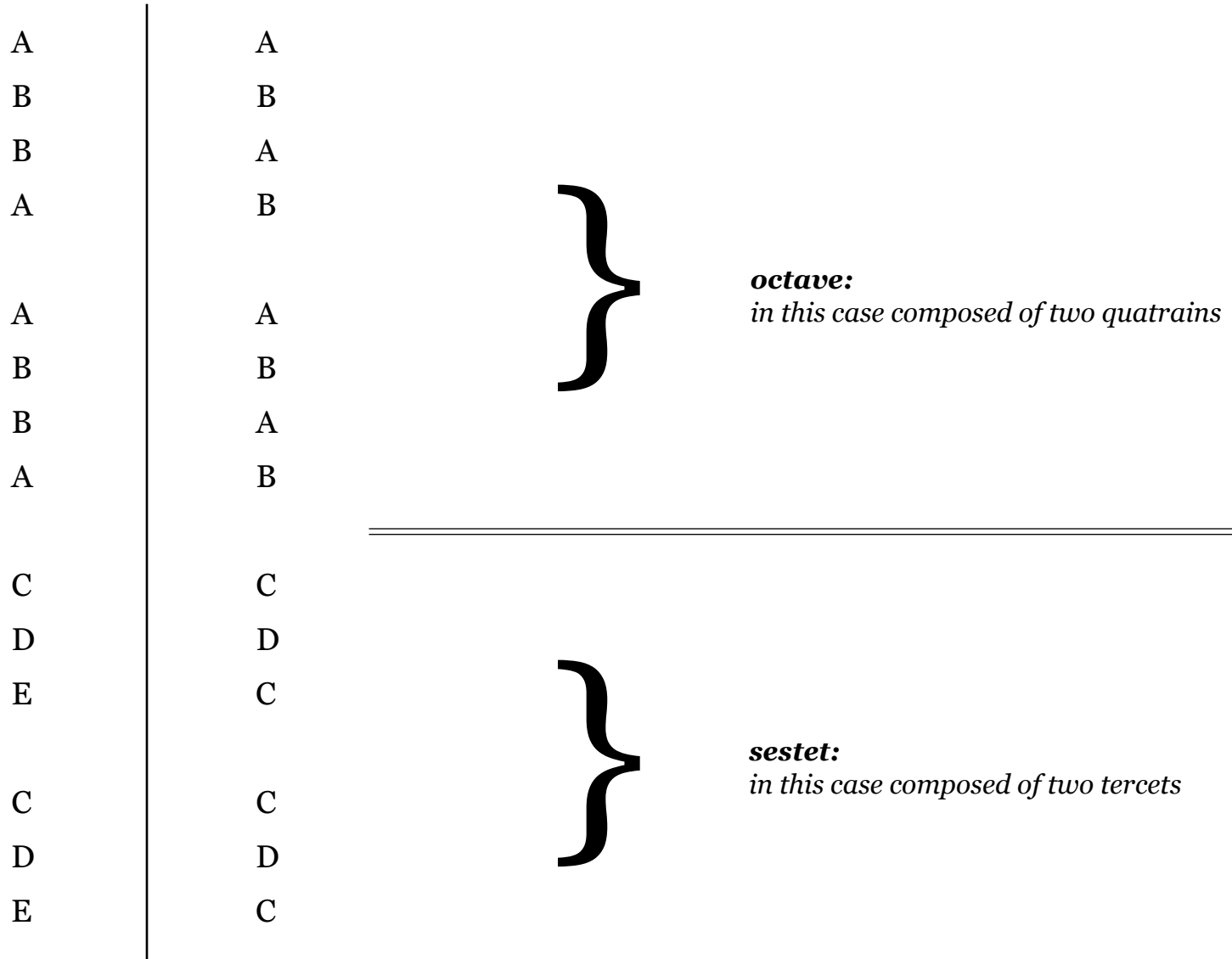
Sonnet Form

Sonnet One from *Rime Sparse*

- the main theme of collection expressed:
 - >unrequited love
 - > remorse
 - > despair
- establishes introduction to story of a failed love affair, twenty years prior
- poem acts as the thesis of the sequence
- Poet is love-lorn and foolish
- the reader is wise
- Poet is ridiculed by society
- the world is temporal

Sonnet Form

The Italian Rhyme Scheme



octave:
in this case composed of two quatrains

sestet:
in this case composed of two tercets

Sonnet Form

English or Shakespearean Sonnet

The Earl of Surrey, Henry Howard, invented what is now known as the English or Shakespearean Sonnet.

- follows octave + sestet formula slightly
- allows for three sets of quatrains with individual rhymes
- an independent couplet, which serves as an effective “moral” to the poem
- traditionally follows iambic pentameter

Sonnet Form

Henry Howard (1517 – 19 January 1547)

Complaint of the Lover Disdained

In Cyprus springs, whereas Dame Venus dwelt,
A well so hot, that whoso tastes the same,
Were he of stone, as thawed ice should melt,
And kindled find his breast with fixed flame;
Whose moist poison dissolved hath my hate.
This creeping fire my cold limbs so opprest,
That in the heart that harbour'd freedom, late:
Endless despair long thraldom hath imprest.
Another so cold in frozen ice is found,
Whose chilling venom of repugnant kind,
The fervent heat doth quench of Cupid's wound,
And with the spot of change infects the mind;
 Whereof my dear hath tasted to my pain:
 My service thus is grown into disdain.

A	5	}	octave
B	5		
A	4.5		
B	4.5		
C	4.5		
D	5		
C	5		
D	5		
<hr/>			
E	5.5	}	sestet
F	5		
E	5		
F	5		
G	5		
G	5		

Surrey, Henry Howard, Earl of. *The Poetical Works of Henry Howard, Earl of Surrey*.
Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1854. Print.

Sonnet Form

Spenserian Sonnet

This form was created by Edmund Spenser (1552 — 1599).

- It combines the Italian form with the English, following the three quatrains and couplet concept from the English.
- His rhyme scheme follows a modification of Italian version:

italian : ABAB / ABAB / CDC / CDC

spencerian : ABAB / BCBC / CDCD/ EE

- Likewise he divides the poem into three sections:
 - > statement of the problem, as a thesis; the opening quatrain is usually one sentence
 - > exploration of the problem in the resulting octave
 - > solution appears in the ending couplet

Sonnet Form

Emund Spenser (1552 – 1599)

from *Amoretti* || **IX**

*thesis:
problem
established*

Long while I sought to what I might compare
Those powerful eyes, which lighten my dark sight,
Yet find I nought on earth to which I dare
Resemble th' image of their goodly light.

Rhyme scheme || *Meter*

A **5**
B **5.5**
A **5**
B **5**
B **5**
C **5**
B **5**
C **5.5 / (6?)**

*problem
discussed
in following
octave.*

Not to the sun, for they do shine by night;
Nor to the moon, for they are changed never;
Nor to the stars, for they have purer sight;
Nor to the fire, for they consume not ever;

(octave ends/sestet begins; Spenser blurs the two together)

Nor to the lightning, for they still persevere;
Nor to the diamond, for they are more tender;
Nor unto crystal, far nought may them sever;
Nor unto glass, such baseness might offend her;

C **5.5**
D **5.5**
C **5.5**
D **5.5**
E **5**
E **5**

*problem
resolved
in couplet*

Then to the Maker self they likest be,
Whose light doth lighten all that here we see.

English Sixteenth-Century Verse: An Anthology. Richard S. Sylvester, ed. W.W. Norton & Co.,
New York, © 1974. Print.

Sonnet Form

Notice the emphasis in line 4 on the word “sight.” With it falling as the extra half foot, it is subconsciously stressed in the reader’s mind. This correlates with the theme of wanting to describe his Beloved’s eyes, which blind him with love.

With his new formula, in this particular case the octave establishes a hierarchy of icons, beginning with major elements first, the celestial objects, then works its way down to earthly elements, in descending order:

- sun
- moon
- stars
- fire
- lightning
- diamond
- crystal
- glass

Sonnet Form

- He likewise twists all the negatives into positives, all the while complimenting his Beloved's eyes.
- To force this idea, he utilizes a technique called **caesura**, which is a pause in natural speaking — which does not interfere with meter. Here, the caesura's represent an intake of breath.
- In Spenser's case, he employed this trick in the structure of the list itself, breaking between the inferior model and the perfection of the eyes.
- The resolution couplet transforms what appears to be obvious failure to assertion of positive: only God could be equal to her eyes. The Poet reaches salvation through his Beloved.

Sonnet Form

***The Sonnets of William Shakespeare* || English Sonnet**

- These follow the rhyme scheme ABAB, CDCD, EFEF, GG
- This is another example of why it is important to read the entire sequence as a whole, not lift one or two poems out of the series. There is a story unfolding between all 154 of the poems in this collection.
- *The Sonnets* are attributed to William Shakespeare, although lately it has been suggested other authors may have written these.
- The themes are closely linked to the Petrarchan concept introduced earlier in the course. However, often times the themes are twisted.

Sonnet Form

Themes include:

- love
- sex
- beauty
- politics
- (im)mortality

Four characters appear within the poems' plot-structure:

1. The Poet-Speaker
2. The Young Man
3. The Dark Lady
4. Rival Poet

Sonnet Form

Looking at the entire sequence of 154 poems:

- The first 17 sonnets are written to a young man, urging him to marry and have children, thereby passing down his beauty to the next generation. These are called the **procreation sonnets**. The earliest poems in the collection do not imply a close personal relationship; instead, they recommend the benefits of marriage and children. This was a common theme at the time.
- The following sonnets, 18-126, are addressed to a young man expressing the poet's love for him— critics argue whether this is a spiritual love, a brotherly affection, or a gay relationship—either way they are read, these poems definitely reshape the Petrarchan model of a Beloved.

Sonnet Form

- Finally, sonnets 127-152 are written to a female figure, the Dark Lady; these poems express a strong, earthy love—these also break the Petrarchan model of an Ideal Beauty.
- The Dark Lady is *not* blonde, nor blue eyed, but instead is a dark haired, olive skinned woman of middle class.
- All of the sonnets follow a format of three quatrains (4 lines) and a final couplet.
- They are mostly composed in iambic pentameter.

Sonnet Form

Sonnet 29: “When in Disgrace with Fortune and Men’s Eyes”

- one of the Young Man poems; most quoted from the full sequence
- the poem is presented as *one* long sentence
- rhyme scheme is an experiment in this case; the opening quatrain establishes same rhymes used in the third quatrain:

ABAB/CDCD/ABAB/EE

- ll 1-2: the Poet announces he is alone in the world, in disgrace
- ll 3-4: like Job, he complains to heaven, cursing his lost reputation
- ll 5-6: because of his bad luck, he wishes for other’s successes, another man’s popularity,
- l 7: another’s creativity, another’s vision
- l 8: at close of octave, the Poet is at least satisfied with his chosen career
- ll 9-10: Yet, despite these thoughts of self-hatred, just by thinking of the Young Man, the Poet feels a contentment
- ll 11-12: he forms an analogy comparing himself with a lark: just as a common bird sings to heaven at dawn: Poet (bird) to Young Man (sun)
- ll 13-14: The love of the Young Man is enough to help the poet survive; so much so he wouldn’t change his lot in life

Sonnet Form

William Shakespeare (1564 – 1616)

130

*thesis:
problem
established
and
discussed
in octave*

My mist/ress' eyes / are noth/ing like / the sun;
Coral / is far / more red / than her / lips' red;
If snow / be white, / why then / her breasts / are dun;
If hairs / be wires, / black wires / grow on / her head.
I have / seen ros/es da/mask, red / and white,
But no such roses see I in her cheeks;
And in some perfumes is there more delight
Than in the breath that from my mistress reeks.

*sestet
shifts
in tone,
slightly*

I love to hear her speak, yet well I know
That music hath a far more pleasing sound;
I grant I never saw a goddess go;
My mistress, when she walks, treads on the ground:

*problem
resolved
in couplet*

And yet, / by heav/en, I / think my / love as /rare
As an/y she /belied / with false / compare.

Rhyme scheme || Meter

A	5
B	5
A	5
B	5
C	5
D	5
C	5
D	5
E	5
F	5
E	5
F	5
G	5•5
G	5

The Sonnets and Narrative Poems: The Complete Non-Dramatic Poetry. Sylvan Barnet, ed.
Signet Classic, Penquin Books, New York, 1989. Print.

Sonnet Form

Sonnet 130: “My Mistress’ Eyes Are Nothing Like The Sun”

- The first line is ironic in the sense that all of the poems addressing the Young Man compare him to the sun, or assert he is as beautiful as Apollo, the Greek sun-god; the Dark Lady is of opposite characterization.
- The full poem explains the contrast of idealism and reality.
- The sonnet ends with an assertion that his beloved is as beautiful as any that has been falsely complimented by other poets.

A slight rewording of the final couplet for modern clarification:

And yet, I swear by heaven, I think my love as rare

As any she (*that is*: any other woman) misrepresented with false compliments.

The word “compare” in this case is being used by the Poet as a noun not a verb.

Sonnet Form

If you compare the Dark Lady against the characterization of Petrarch's Laura, you get a collection of extreme contrasting elements.

Laura:

beautiful

blonde/blue eyes

pale, fair skin

artificial idealism

icon/out of reach/goddess

Dark Lady:

average

brunette/brown eyes

olive tones

realistic beauty

down to earth/obtainable/mortal