History of the Sonnet

Italian Origins

Dante (1265–1321) La Vita Nuova Beatrice

Petrarch (1304–1374) Rime Sparse Laura

Petrarchan Conventions

Dramatic Situation
- an introspective, autobiographical persona
- follows the conventions of Courtly Love
  (an unrequited love for an unattainable beloved)
- no resolution

Arrangement and Organization
- not chronological, no consistent narrative
- each sonnet represents a specific moment
- emotional rollercoaster
- often includes songs as well as sonnets

Petrarchan conceits
- love is a war or a battle
- love is a deadly disease or wound
- love is torment or torture
- love is bondage or slavery
- love is a hunt
- love is a ship on stormy seas
- beloved is the ruler or master
- power of the beloved’s gaze
- physical beauty of the beloved (blazon)
- name of the beloved (puns)
- immortalizing the beloved in verse
- pain and pleasure of lovesickness
- oxymoron and paradox
Why then, O brawling love, O loving hate,
O anything, of nothing first create!
O heavy lightness, serious vanity,
Misshapen chaos of well-seeming forms,
Feather of lead, bright smoke, cold fire, sick health,
Still-waking sleep, that is not what it is!
This love feel I, that feel no love in this.

Romeo and Juliet (1.1.175–81)

**English Sonneteers**

Sir Thomas Wyatt (1503–1542) translated some of Petrarch's sonnets into English

Henry Howard, Earl of Surrey (1517–1547) invented the rhyme scheme for the English sonnet

Sir Philip Sidney (1554–1586) *Astrophil and Stella*
“Stella” / Penelope Rich

Edmund Spenser (1552–1599) *Amoretti*
Elizabeth Boyle

William Shakespeare (1564–1616) *Shakespeare's Sonnets*
fair young man & dark lady
Notes on Sonnet Form

Sonnet

A fourteen-line poem in iambic pentameter that follows a strict rhyme scheme.

Iambic Pentameter

pentameter: five feet

foot: one stressed syllable plus one or more unstressed syllables in a repeating pattern

iambic: an unstressed syllable followed by a stressed syllable: ˘ ´

Iambic Words

belief arise defend prepare conceive

Iambic Pentameter Lines

Shall I compare thee to a summer’s day? Shakespeare, Sonnet 18

˘     ˘     ˘     ˘    ˘    ˘

Shall I compare thee to a summer’s day

When I consider how my light is spent. John Milton

˘     ˘     ˘     ˘     ˘    ˘     ˘    ˘

When I consider how my light is spent
Iambic Variations

A Feminine Ending

The line ends with an extra, unstressed syllable.

A woman’s face with Nature’s own hand painted
Shakespeare, Sonnet 20

A woman’s face with Nature’s own hand painted

He straight perceived himself to be my lover.
Barnfield, Sonnet 11

An Initial Stress

The line starts with a single, stressed syllable followed by an anapustic foot
(two unstressed syllables followed by one stressed syllable: " ″ ″″")

Seeing the game from him escaped away
Spenser, Sonnet 67

Batter my heart, three-personed God; for you
Donne, Holy Sonnet 14

Notes on Sonnet Form
### Italian Sonnet Rhyme Scheme

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>A</th>
<th>A</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Octave</strong></td>
<td>B</td>
<td>B</td>
<td><strong>octave</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8 lines with 2 rhymes</td>
<td>B</td>
<td>A</td>
<td>usually follows one of two set patterns.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>{ A / B }</td>
<td>A</td>
<td>B</td>
<td><strong>sestet</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>A</td>
<td>A</td>
<td>may follow several different patterns.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>B</td>
<td>B</td>
<td><strong>turn (or volta)</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>B</td>
<td>A</td>
<td>occurs on 9th line</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>A</td>
<td>B</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Sestet</strong></td>
<td>c</td>
<td>c</td>
<td>c</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6 lines with 2 (or 3) rhymes</td>
<td>d</td>
<td>d</td>
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<tr>
<td>{ c / d / e }</td>
<td>e</td>
<td>c</td>
<td>d</td>
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<td></td>
<td>c</td>
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</tbody>
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Dear, cherish this and with it my soul’s will, 
Nor for it ran away do it abuse. 
Alas, it left poor me your breast to choose 
As the blest shrine where it would harbor still. 
Then favor show and not unkindly kill 
The heart which fled to you, but do excuse 
That which for better did the worse refuse, 
And pleased I’ll be, though heartless my life spill. 
But if you will be kind and just indeed, 
Send me your heart, which in mine’s place shall feed 
On faithful love to your devotion bound. 
There shall it see the sacrifices made 
Of pure and spotless love, which shall not fade 
While soul and body are together found. 

— Mary Wroth, Sonnet 3
Dear, why should you command me to my rest
When now the night doth summon all to sleep?
Methinks this time becometh lovers best;
Night was ordained together friends to keep.
How happy are all other living things
Which, though the day disjoin by several flight,
The quiet evening yet together brings,
And each returns unto his love at night.
O thou, that art so courteous else to all,
Why shouldst thou, Night, abuse me only thus,
That every creature to his kind doth call
And yet 'tis thou dost only sever us.

Well could I wish it would be ever day
If when night comes you bid me go away.

— Michael Drayton, Idea 37
Spenserian Sonnet Rhyme Scheme

Three Quatrains
(with interlocking rhymes)

A
B
A
B

B
C
B
C

C
D
C
D

C

Closing Couplet

e
e

My hungry eyes through greedy covetize,
Still to behold the object of their pain,
With no contentment can themselves suffize:
But having pin and having not complain.
For lacking it they cannot life sustain,
And having it they gaze on it the more:
In their amazement like Narcissus vain
Whose eyes him starved: so plenty make me poor.
Yet are mine eyes so fillèd with the store
Of that fair sight, that nothing else they brook,
But loath the thing which they did like before,
And can no more endure on them to look.
All this world's glory seemeth vain to me,
And all their show but shadows, saving she.

— Edmund Spenser, Sonnet 35