

# History of Sonnet

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**Abstract:** *The sonnet continued to flower and flourish in Italy during the fifteenth and the sixteenth centuries. By the sixteenth century, it had spread to Spain and France. It reached England through the work of Wyatt and Surrey in the first half of the sixteenth century. After their deaths, it was not practised for some years. Thus Sidney led the way to a great outburst of sonneteering. Thus sonneteering became a popular habit, a conventional code, a modish artifact of gallantry and compliment. No poet between 1590 and 1600 failed to try his poetic skill at this poetic device. During those ten years, more sonnets were composed in England than in any other decade. Thus, the Elizabethan sonnet took two forms : (i) the Italian or Petrarchan; (ii) the English or Shakespearean form. During this period, both kinds flourished to the full. But the English form of the sonnet flourished better than the foreign model. Wyatt began with a group of the Italian type. Surrey introduced the English form. The Elizabethan sonnets owed a great deal to the French sonneteers who had preceded them. It was contemporary French, rather than older Italian influences which first stirred in the Elizabethan mind a fruitful interest in the sonnet. The first inspiration came from Clement Marot the protestant French poet of the early years of the sixteenth century, who was a contemporary to Wyatt and Surrey. He studied Petrarch with ardour, translated into French some of his sonnets and odes and made two or three original experiments in the sonnet form under the title of Esigrammar. After his death, Ronard and his companions continued writing sonnets. Thomas Watson was the earliest Elizabethan to make a reputation as a sonneteer.*

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## INTRODUCTION

(1) The **Italian** (or **Petrarchan**) **sonnet** contains the following features:

An **octave** (eight lines) rhyming **abbaabba** A **sestet** (six lines) of varying rhyme patterns, such as **cdecde** or **cdccdc**. Sir Thomas Wyatt in the early 1500s first introduced the Italian sonnet into English. It rapidly became all the rage.

(2) The **English** (or **Shakespearean**) sonnet contains the following features:

Three **quatrains** (sections of four lines, also called "staves"): **abab cdcd efef**

A concluding **couplet** (two rhyming lines): **gg**. Sometimes, the concluding couplet after the turn is called the **gemel**. Note that, though this type of sonnet is called "Shakespearean," Shakespeare did not invent it. It was actually introduced by the Earl of Surrey and other English experimenters in the 1500s.

Normally, the first part of the sonnet introduces a problem or question of some sort, which is developed in the first octave (in Italian sonnets) or the first three quatrains (in English sonnets). Then, there is a change in direction, thought, or emotion called a **volta** or a **turn**. The last sestet (in Italian sonnets) or the final couplet (in English sonnets) illustrates this change in direction, thought, or

emotion.

Shakespeare's sonnets are very different from other sonnets of the day. Each sonnet deals with a highly personal theme and every sonnet can be taken on its own or in relation to the poems around it. We don't know whether his sonnets deal with real events or not, because no one knows enough about Shakespeare's life, so we tend to refer to the voice of the sonnets as "the speaker"--as though he were a dramatic creation like Hamlet or King Lear. There are certainly a number of intriguing continuities throughout the poems. The first 126 of the sonnets seem to be addressed to an unnamed young nobleman, whom the speaker loves very much; the rest of the poems (except for the last two, which seem generally unconnected to the rest of the sequence) seem to be addressed to a mysterious woman, whom the speaker loves, hates, and lusts for simultaneously. The two addressees of the sonnets are usually referred to as the "young man" and the "dark lady"; in summaries of individual poems, I have also called the young man the "beloved" and the dark lady the "lover," especially in cases where their identity can only be surmised. Within the two mini-sequences, there are a number of other discernible elements of "plot": the speaker urges the young man to have children; he is forced to endure a separation from him; he competes with a rival poet for the young man's patronage and affection. At two points in the sequence, it seems that the young man and the dark lady are actually lovers themselves--a state of affairs with which the speaker is none too happy. But while these continuities

give the poems a narrative flow and a helpful frame of reference, they have been frustratingly hard for scholars and biographers to pin down. In Shakespeare's life, who were the young man and the dark lady?

Sidney entered the field very soon after Watson set foot there. He undoubtedly, is a pioneer among Elizabethan sonneteers. He may fairly be credited with marching at the head of the contemporary cavalcade of sonneteers. His collection of sonnets *Astrophel and Stella* was written between the years 1580 and 1584. They were not published till 1591. Sidney's sonnets form a connected sequence. The poet, under the name of *Astrophel*, narrates the course of his love and passion for a lady to whom he gives the name of *Stella*. Thus the theme of the sonnet was nearly always love, the real or imaginary joys and sorrows of the love and his adoration of his mistress beauty. This is the theme of Sidney's sonnets. He writes a whole series of sonnets, which together tell the story of a real incident in his life, his love for *Stella* who is *Penelope Devereux*, daughter of the Earl of *Essex*, and his disappointment.

## CONCLUSION:

All sonnets are lyrics of 14 lines, iambic (unstressed/stressed syllables – heartbeat), pentameter (five iambs to a line). The two major forms of the sonnet are the Italian, also called the Petrarchan, and the English, also called the Shakespearean. Like much poetic literature, the sonnet has common figurative language and themes that we call conceits or conventions. Courtly love is the common feature of renaissance sonnets:

Love is presented as torture, slavery, death, war, or a hunt. The lady is treated as a master or queen, a "cruel fair," a celestial object (star, moon), a doe, a tyrant. The lady is praised for her virtue and her beauty. Commonly, the poet objectifies her body by singling out specific parts to honor and worship, such as her eyes, lips, breasts, and hands. The lady has power in her gaze and can destroy or inspire with a look. The poet will often make puns with his and his lady's names. (See Petrarch's sonnet below). The poet will often speak in apostrophe – a poetic device where one talks to an inanimate object, such as the moon or a dead person. The poet will engage in paradox: a statement that seems contradictory or absurd but may be true. This

statement draws attention to something the poet thinks is important. (See Spenser's sonnet about ice and fire – her ice enflames him and his fire freezes her). Hyperbole is used to express the poet's emotions – exaggeration for effect.

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