



THE ART OF THE SONNET

WHAT IS A SONNET?

Well . . .

One way to answer that question is to talk about where the sonnet comes from.

After all, one way to understand what anything *is* is to understand something about its origins.

So let's time-travel a little.

Let's go back to . . . say . . . circa . . .

AD 1500-ish

Well, wait.

Let's back up even more.

The sonnet is a poetic form which, like so much of our language, came to us from someplace else.

So let's time-travel to Medieval Italy:

In the 1200s, we have one Fra Guittone of Arezzo inventing, or at least popularizing, this form, known as the “little song,” or sonetto.

Its distinguishing features were that it had

- Fourteen lines
- A strict rhyme scheme (though the rules wound up varying a good bit)

But the really happening time/place is Arezzo, circa 1326. . .

When a man named Francesco Petrarca, born around 1300, abandons the study of the law and devotes himself to literature.

Here is Petrarch, not studying law, but thinking poetical thoughts.

[image source](#)



Coincidentally . . .

. . . if one can say that there's such a thing as
coincidence . . .

the very next year . . .

Petrarch encounters a woman named Laura de Noves, with whom he becomes obsessed -- from a chaste and basically anonymous distance -- for the rest of his life.

But, this being the high Middle Ages, at the flowering of the courtly love tradition, which involved being in love with ladies you never saw except from a distance . . .

Petrarch wrote a sequence of 366 poems dedicated to Laura, including 317 . . .

SONNETS

So . . .

You can go out and spray-paint ***FRANCESCO
HEARTS LAURA*** on some overpass.

Or you can do it the
change-the-course-of-world-literature way:
by writing a sonnet.

What's that?

You choose the spraypaint-overpass method of declaring your undying, if unrequited love?

**Laura says,
“Thanks
for
playing.”**



We'll come back to talk about Petrarch's sonnets to Laura, and what they looked like, but first . . .

Let's discuss how the sonnet made its way to England, and into the English language.

Sir Thomas Wyatt (c. 1503-1542)

- Government bureaucrat under Henry VIII
- 1527: On an official trip to Italy, encounters Italian popular love poetry, including Petrarch's sonnets (old news in Italy by now, but new & exciting to Wyatt)
- Likes them enough to translate them into English, for the English reading public.

[image source](#)



**READING PUBLIC
GOES
WILD
FOR SONNETS**

Henry Howard, Earl of Surrey (c. 1517-1547)

- Friend of Wyatt (also cousin of one of Henry VIII's "beheaded" wives, Catherine Howard, which does not bode well for poor Surrey)
- Translator of Italian poetry, innovator of sonnet form
- Credited with inventing what we now call the "Shakespearean" sonnet
- Executed for treason in 1547 (basically because enemies of Surreys are looking for reasons to frame them and have them killed off)

[image source](#)



Mid-16th Century: Sonnets All the Rage

Brought to you, the discerning 16th-century reader, by:

- **Edmund Spenser (c. 1552-1599)**
 - author of pro-Elizabeth-I propaganda epic *The Faerie Queene*
 - wrote an 88-sonnet cycle, the *Amoretti* (see how fashionable Italian was?), probably inspired by his courtship of the lady he eventually married

Also . . .

- Sir Philip Sidney
 - courtier of Elizabeth I
 - nephew of Earl of Leicester
 - friend of Spenser
 - author of sonnet cycle, *Astrophel and Stella*, best-seller in Renaissance England

Aaaaaand . . .

- **Some guy named William Shakespeare**
 - 1564-1616
 - also wrote some plays

Traditionally the sonnet was a love poem (in case a title like *Amoretti* didn't tip you off).

Often sonnets were about unrequited love.

Other themes include the **love of God**, **human frailty** and **mortality**, the various **strangenesses of the universe** . . .

In England, as in Italy, the sonnet's distinguishing characteristic was that it still had **fourteen lines.**

But let's look closely at some examples of sonnets, to see how the English sonnet came to differ from Petrarch's form.

**“Me first,” says
Petrarch.**

[image source](#)



Here is a (translated) sonnet of Petrarch:

He who with foresight boundless and divine
Showed in His office proof of wondrous art,
Who shaped our globe, its each and every part,
Formed fearsome Mars and made a Jove benign;
Coming on earth, His promise to define,
Which ancient prophets darkly did impart,
Called Peter, caused John from his nets to part,
And set them in His heaven crystalline.
A-borning He shed not on Rome His grace,
But on poor Judah, for His purpose high
Is e'er to raise the lowly of this earth.
Whence such a sun shines on our humble place
As to call blessings on its happy sky
Whereunder my fair lady came to birth.

Let's look closely at this sonnet to discover its distinguishing features:

- Its length
- Its rhyme scheme
- Its structure

Quatrain 1

He who with foresight boundless and divine
Showed in His office proof of wondrous art,
Who shaped our globe, its each and every part,
Formed fearsome Mars and made a Jove benign

Do we see a pattern in the rhyme?

He who with foresight boundless and divine (a)
Showed in His office proof of wondrous art, (b)
Who shaped our globe, its each and every part, (b)
Formed fearsome Mars and made a Jove benign (a)

**Wait! We have the name of a strangely-enduring
Swedish pop band of the 1970s . . .**

In other words . . .

The rhyme scheme of quatrain 1 is . . .

abba?

(yes, yes, in fact it is. but let's carry on)

Now let's look at quatrain 2:

Coming on earth, His promise to define,
Which ancient prophets darkly did impart,
Called Peter, caused John from his nets to part,
And set them in His heaven crystalline.

Holy shag haircuts, Batman! Don't tell me . . .

Coming on earth, His promise to define **(a)**
Which ancient prophets darkly did impart **(b)**
Called Peter, caused John from his nets to part **(b)**
And set them in His heaven crystalline **(a)**

Mamma mia. Here we go again.

As if one ABBA sighting weren't enough . . .

Quatrain 2 ALSO has the rhyme scheme

abba

DOUBLE ABBA.

That's right. The rhyme scheme for the Petrarchan **octet** (i.e., eight lines, or the first two quatrains) is

abbaabba

In fact . . .

One reason why our minds fairly readily perceive this as an **octet**, a cohesive 8-line stanza, is that the consistent rhyme scheme -- nothing new, for 8 whole lines -- causes it to hang together as a whole.

So, again:

Petrarchan octet =

abbaabba

but wait. there's more.

we're only at line 8.

6 lines still to go.

**Because a sonnet has
how many lines?**

Just checking.

Anyway, we've dispensed with the octet.

Six lines to go means that we still have to deal with the **sestet** (i.e., a set of six lines)

The next three lines go like . . .

A-borning He shed not on Rome His grace,
But on poor Judah, for His purpose high
Is e'er to raise the lowly of this earth.

Wait, what?

A-borning He shed not on Rome His grace (**c**)
But on poor Judah, for His purpose high (**d**)
Is e'er to raise the lowly of this earth. (**e**)

cde?

What kind of rhyme is that?

Our rhyme scheme so far is

abbaabbacde

Which seems a little lame.

Massively repetitive rhyme,

and then the whole poem just jumps the track?

Or does it?

A-borning He shed not on Rome His grace (**c**)

But on poor Judah, for His purpose high (**d**)

Is e'er to raise the lowly of this earth. (**e**)

Whence such a sun shines on our humble place (**c**)

As to call blessings on its happy sky (**d**)

Whereunder my fair lady came to birth. (**e**)

Aha!

Looking at the entire sestet, we see that, like the octet, it hangs together as a section **because of its rhyme**. It establishes itself as something entirely different from the octet (even without a stanza break between, which is also helpful), and something coherent within itself.

So the whole rhyme scheme of a Petrarchan sonnet is

abbaabbacdecde

If it helps you to say,
“Abba Abba Seedy Seedy,”
then by all means do so.

Having looked at rhyme . . .

Which is a distinguishing feature of the sonnet .
. .

Let's look at how the **thought process of the sonnet** follows that structure.

A sonnet works, generally, by setting up some problem or situation, and then solving it, or telling us why it's significant.

In a Petrarchan sonnet, we have eight lines -- the octet -- to establish this argument, and six lines -- the sestet -- in which to resolve it.

Petrarch's octet:

He who with foresight boundless and divine
Showed in His office proof of wondrous art,
Who shaped our globe, its each and every part,
Formed fearsome Mars and made a Jove benign;
Coming on earth, His promise to define,
Which ancient prophets darkly did impart,
Called Peter, caused John from his nets to part,
And set them in His heaven crystalline.

From the very first line we have a sense of forward momentum:

He who with foresight boundless and divine

Notice that this entire line is the subject of a sentence. We don't find out yet what "He" does, though we should figure out fairly quickly who "He" is. Who else has "foresight boundless and divine?" **Who's "divine?"**

If you said anything other than “God,”

the Holy Father says,
“Thanks for playing.”

[image source](#)



So the poem begins, essentially, “God who, in His infinite holy foresight . . . “

and then the octet goes on to list all the various things which God in His infinite holy foresight has, in fact, done. You have to keep reading of course, to find out what they are.

Let's do that now.

He who with foresight boundless and divine
Showed in His office proof of wondrous art,
Who shaped our globe, its each and every part,
Formed fearsome Mars and made a Jove benign;
Coming on earth, His promise to define,
Which ancient prophets darkly did impart,
Called Peter, caused John from his nets to part,
And set them in His heaven crystalline.

Let's trace this out in quatrain 1:

God who in His infinite, holy foresight (line break, but not a subject/predicate break) **demonstrated, in His role, proof of “wondrous art”** (which can mean not only “creativity,” but also “composition, planning, cunning . . . “), **who made all the world** (notice that we're in line 3 but still haven't reached a predicate yet, so we're still moving forward) **and the planets --**

still moving forward into . . .

Quatrain 2:

Quatrain 1 ends on a semicolon, but we still haven't really reached the end of our subject yet (in a poem, especially, you can have a really, really non-simple subject that goes on and on and on).

So we're still in "God, who . . . " mode here.

God who . . . has done many things including coming to fulfill His promise on earth, foretold by prophets, *called the apostles and brought them to Heaven.*

Aha. Finally the sentence ends. There is a period. All that momentum through all those lines, to establish that Peter and John, called by God, shine now in Heaven.

At this point you may be wondering:

Where is the problem?

The speaker of this poem doesn't seem worried about anything. Nobody's about to argue that Peter and John aren't saints. There's no conflict to speak of. No argument.

Why spend eight lines establishing a non-problem?

Well, that in itself is something of a problem, isn't it? You arrive at line 8, and you're asking, "So . . . ?"

And now to the sestet

Traditionally, whether there's a stanza break or not between the octet and the sestet, we look for what is called the **turn**.

This is precisely what it sounds like -- the moment when the poem **turns** from the laying-out of its argument to the resolution of it.

So, into the homestretch . . . getting to the point at last:

***A-borning He shed not on Rome His grace,
But on poor Judah, for His purpose high
Is e'er to raise the lowly of this earth.***

All right, this God whose designs are wonderful, and who showed the wonderfulness of His design by calling mere fishermen to be saints, has this as His overall purpose: the last shall be first, and so forth. See? He was born not in mighty Rome, but in tiny Bethlehem.

Yes, yes, we say, we know, but what's this got to do with the price of tea in China?

***Whence such a sun shines on our humble place
As to call blessings on its happy sky
Whereunder my fair lady came to birth.***

From God then comes the sun that shines its blessings on our “humble” corner of the world, where my lady was born. Humble though she is, she is part of His great design. **In fact, in this sonnet, she's the culmination of that design.** She gets the last line. The whole weight of the poem rests on her. If indeed God comes to raise the lowly, then she is most greatly raised, and praised -- by her secret sonnet-writing admirer, at any rate.

“If only I
had
known.”



Now, let's return to England . . .

And see how the imported and translated English sonnet stacks up against the Petrarchan.

Remember . . .

The sonnet is brought back to England from Italy by Sir Thomas Wyatt, who translates Petrarch into English and begins writing sonnets of his own . . .

... as does his friend Henry Howard, the Earl of Surrey, who is credited with inventing the form we are about to see.

Perhaps unfairly, we don't call this
the "Surrey Sonnet."

The Earl of Surrey is trying not to mind.

[image source](#)



Sometimes it's called the "English sonnet," to distinguish it from the "Italian" or "Petrarchan" sonnet.

But mostly it's called after its most famous practitioner:

SHAKESPEARE

So we know this form as

THE SHAKESPEAREAN SONNET



“Ha ha ha. Stinketh for thee, Surrey.”

[image source](#)

Ahem. Well. Never mind all that.

The Shakespearean sonnet is distinguished from the Petrarchan sonnet chiefly by its rhyme scheme, as we shall see:

Sonnet 73, by William Shakespeare

That time of year thou mayest in me behold
When yellow leaves, or none, or few, do hang
Upon those boughs which shake against the cold,
Bare ruined choirs where late the sweet birds sang.
In me thou see'st the twilight of such day
As after sunset fadeth in the west:
Which by and by black night doth take away,
Death's second self that seals all up in rest.
In me thou see'st the glowing of such fire
That on the ashes of his youth doth lie,
As the deathbed whereon it must expire,
Consumed by that which it was nourished by.
This thou perceiv'st, which makes thy love more strong,
To love that well which thou must leave ere long.

Rhyme Scheme

That time of year thou mayest in me behold **(a)**
When yellow leaves, or few, or none, do hang **(b)**
Upon those boughs which shake against the cold **(a)**
Bare ruined choirs where late the sweet birds sang. **(b)**

So, in this first *quatrain*, or rhyming-set-of-four-lines, we see a pattern established, of alternating rhymes: **abab**.

Let's see what happens next . . .

In me thou see'st the twilight of such day (c)
As after sunset fadeth in the west: (d)
Which by and by black night doth take away (c)
Death's second self that seals all up in rest. (d)

We clearly see how our regular rhyming pattern, or **rhyme scheme**, continues through the second **quatrain**. So even though the poem isn't divided into separate stanzas, it's moving forward in little groups of four lines, advancing its thought process from quatrain to quatrain.

In me thou see'st the glowing of such fire **(e)**
That on the ashes of his youth doth lie, **(f)**
As the deathbed whereon it must expire, **(e)**
Consumed by that which it was nourished by. **(f)**

And a third quatrain, continuing this regular rhyme scheme. So by line 12, we can express this rhyme scheme this way: **ababcdcdefef.**

A sonnet has only 14 lines, so that leaves us with two lines to tie things off:

This thou perceiv'st, which makes thy love more strong, **(g)**
To love that well which thou must leave ere long. **(g)**

Obviously at this point we don't have room for a whole quatrain. Instead, the poem ends on a **couplet**, a pair of lines (a couple) which rhyme with each other.

We would express this poem's rhyme scheme this way:

ababcdcdefefgg.

Remember Petrarch's rhyme scheme:

abbaabbacdecde

So one thing we can say about the poem's structure, even before we plunge into what it's saying, is that it's three quatrains plus a couplet.

Let's see what this **stanza structure** has to do with the poem's **rhetorical structure**.

We've said that typically what a sonnet does is to establish some kind of problem, question, or conflict, and then arrive at some kind of resolution.

Let's see how this sonnet does that, quatrain by quatrain.

Quatrain 1

That time of year thou mayest in me behold
When yellow leaves, or none, or few, do hang
Upon those boughs which shake against the cold,
Bare ruined choirs where late the sweet birds sang.

What time of year is it that's being described here?

With what age in a person's life might we associate this season?

Problem:

You might have to see me get old.

Note that this is a very personal poem, with a first-person “I” speaker.

The “I” is addressing a “you,” though at this point we might not have a clear idea of who the “you” might be. But we can begin to ask, “Why would seeing someone get old be problematic?”

Quatrain 2

In me thou see'st the twilight of such day
As after sunset fadeth in the west:
Which by and by black night doth take away,
Death's second self that seals all up in rest.

Now we've moved from time of year to time of day. But what's consistent about both of those things? (and are we speaking of literal winter and literal sunset, or of something **figurative**, i.e. metaphorical or symbolic?) And what's "Death's second self?"

Quatrain 3

In me thou see'st the glowing of such fire
That on the ashes of his youth doth lie,
As the deathbed whereon it must expire,
Consumed by that which it was nourished by.

Now we've moved from the season, to the time of day, to the hearth -- our focus is becoming smaller and more personal with every quatrain.

At this point we hardly have to ask what this fire suggests, in terms of age . . .

. . . though of course we also associate fire with energy and passion, as well as simply with life, so there's an overtone here of more than just getting old.

At this point, do we have a clearer picture of the “you” whom the speaker addresses? What do we infer about this person from the problem the speaker has been establishing and compounding through these three quatrains?

Let's sum up where we are so far:

1. You're going to see me get old, and maybe lose my looks and charms (like the tree losing its leaves, no more birds singing there)
2. You're going to see me get old and close to death -- maybe having me around is even going to remind you of death more than you want to be reminded.
3. You're going to see me get old and lose my energy, vigor, passion -- I'm not going to be very romantic any more. No more fire. Burned out. How fun for you.

By now, though the “you” is never named, we should have a good idea who this is: the speaker’s loved one (wife, lover).

And we should have a good idea of what’s worrying him: that when he’s old, she won’t love him any more.

This has been building through three quatrains
-- twelve whole lines of snowballing *problem*.

But we've said that sonnets also tend to *resolve*
their problems. Let's see how this one does
that.

Final Couplet:

This thou perceiv'st, which makes thy love more strong,
To love that well which thou must leave ere long.

Aha. Twelve lines to develop the problem, two lines to solve it.

“This thou perceiv’st”:

okay, so you perceive (see) all this . . .

“ . . . which makes thy love more strong”:

But wait! I'm going to say my old age makes
you love me MORE, not less . . .

WHY??

Because . . .

“To love that well which thou must leave ere long.” --

You gotta love me while you got me, babe.

(or: even the prospect of absence makes the heart grow fonder)

The problem builds

through the three quatrains --

we have **ababcdcdefef** of problem, gaining weight and momentum like a snowball --

and in the couplet

it's like that problem-snowball hits the brick wall at the bottom of the hill and shatters.

That's the effect of that couplet -- as a resolution it's sharp, sudden, and total. BAM.

End of poem.

In summary

- We've looked at what makes a sonnet a sonnet
- We've taken a trip through the history of the sonnet
- We've looked at differences between the Italian/Petrarchan and English/Shakespearean sonnets.
- We've seen how the thought of the poem is inextricably tied to its form, especially its rhyme scheme