

Basic Sonnet Forms

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A sonnet is fundamentally a dialectical construct which allows the poet to examine the nature and ramifications of two usually contrastive ideas, emotions, states of mind, beliefs, actions, events, images, etc., by juxtaposing the two against each other, and possibly resolving or just revealing the tensions created and operative between the two.

O. K., so much for the fancy language. Basically, in a sonnet, you show two related but differing things to the reader in order to communicate something about them. Each of the three major types of sonnets accomplish this in a somewhat different way. There are, of course, other types of sonnets, as well, but I'll stick for now to just the basic three (Italian, Spenserian, English), with a brief look at some non-standard sonnets.

I. The Italian (or Petrarchan) Sonnet:

The basic meter of all sonnets in English is iambic pentameter ([basic information](#) on iambic pentameter), although there have been a few tetrameter and even hexameter sonnets, as well.

The Italian sonnet is divided into two sections by two different groups of rhyming sounds. The first 8 lines is called the octave and rhymes:

a b b a a b b a

The remaining 6 lines is called the sestet and can have either two or three rhyming sounds, arranged in a variety of ways:

c d c d c d

c d d c d c
 c d e c d e
 c d e c e d
 c d c e d c

The exact pattern of sestet rhymes (unlike the octave pattern) is flexible. In strict practice, the one thing that is to be avoided in the sestet is ending with a couplet (dd or ee), as this was never permitted in Italy, and Petrarch himself (supposedly) never used a couplet ending; in actual practice, sestets are sometimes ended with couplets (Sidney's "Sonnet LXXI" given below is an example of such a terminal couplet in an Italian sonnet).

The point here is that the poem is divided into two sections by the two differing rhyme groups. In accordance with the principle (which supposedly applies to all rhymed poetry but often doesn't), **a change from one rhyme group to another signifies a change in subject matter**. This change occurs at the beginning of L₉ in the Italian sonnet and is called the *volta*, or "turn"; the turn is an essential element of the sonnet form, perhaps the essential element. It is at the *volta* that the second idea is introduced, as in this sonnet by Wordsworth:

"London, 1799"

Milton! thou shouldst be living at this hour:
 England hath need of thee: she is a fen
 Of stagnant waters: altar, sword, and pen,
 Fireside, the heroic wealth of hall and bower,
 Have forfeited their ancient English dower
 Of inward happiness. We are selfish men;
 Oh! raise us up, return to us again;
 And give us manners, virtue, freedom, power.
 Thy soul was like a Star, and dwelt apart;
 Thou hadst a voice whose sound was like the sea:
 Pure as the naked heavens, majestic, free,
 So didst thou travel on life's common way,
 In cheerful godliness; and yet thy heart
 The lowliest duties on herself did lay.

Here, the octave develops the idea of the decline and corruption of the English race, while the sestet opposes to that loss the qualities Milton

possessed which the race now desperately needs.

A very skillful poet can manipulate the placement of the volta for dramatic effect, although this is difficult to do well. An extreme example is this sonnet by Sir Philip Sidney, which delays the volta all the way to Line 14:

"Sonnet LXXI"

Who will in fairest book of Nature know
 How Virtue may best lodged in Beauty be,
 Let him but learn of Love to read in thee,
 Stella, those fair lines, which true goodness show.
 There shall he find all vices' overthrow,
 Not by rude force, but sweetest sovereignty
 Of reason, from whose light those night-birds fly;
 That inward sun in thine eyes shineth so.
 And not content to be Perfection's heir
 Thyself, dost strive all minds that way to move,
 Who mark in thee what is in thee most fair.
 So while thy beauty draws the heart to love,
 As fast thy Virtue bends that love to good.

"But, ah," Desire still cries, "give me some food."

Here, in giving 14 lines to arguing why Reason makes clear to him that following Virtue is the course he should take, he seems to be heavily biasing the argument in Virtue's favor. But the volta powerfully undercuts the arguments of Reason in favor of Virtue by revealing that Desire isn't amenable to Reason.

There are a number of variations which evolved over time to make it easier to write Italian sonnets in English. Most common is a change in the octave rhyming pattern from a b b a a b b a to a b b a a c c a, eliminating the need for two groups of 8 rhymes, something not always easy to come up with in English which is a rhyme-poor language. Wordsworth uses that pattern in the following sonnet, along with a terminal couplet:

"Scorn Not the Sonnet"

Scorn not the Sonnet; Critic, you have frowned,
 Mindless of its just honours; with this key
 Shakespeare unlocked his heart; the melody
 Of this small lute gave ease to Petrarch's wound;
 A thousand times this pipe did Tasso sound;
 With it Camoens soothed an exile's grief;
 The Sonnet glittered a gay myrtle leaf
 Amid the cypress with which Dante crowned
 His visionary brow: a glow-worm lamp,
 It cheered mild Spenser, called from Faery-land
 To struggle through dark ways; and when a damp
 Fell round the path of Milton, in his hand
 The Thing became a trumpet; whence he blew
 Soul-animating strains--alas, too few!

Another variation on the Italian form is this one, by Tennyson's older brother Charles Tennyson-Turner, who wrote 382 sonnets, many in variant forms. Here, Turner uses an a b b a c d c d e f f e f e pattern, with the volta delayed until the middle of L₈:

"Missing the Meteors"

A hint of rain--a touch of lazy doubt--
 Sent me to bedward on that prime of nights,
 When the air met and burst the aerolites,
 Making the men stare and the children shout:
 Why did no beam from all that rout and rush
 Of darting meteors, pierce my drowsed head?
 Strike on the portals of my sleep? and flush
 My spirit through mine eyelids, in the stead
 Of that poor vapid dream? My soul was pained,
 My very soul, to have slept while others woke,
 While little children their delight outspoke,
 And in their eyes' small chambers entertained
 Far notions of the Kosmos! I mistook
 The purpose of that night--it had not rained.

II. The Spenserian Sonnet:

The Spenserian sonnet, invented by Edmund Spenser as an outgrowth

of the stanza pattern he used in *The Faerie Queene* (a b a b b c b c c), has the pattern:

a b a b b c b c c d c d e e

Here, the "abab" pattern sets up distinct four-line groups, each of which develops a specific idea; however, the overlapping a, b, c, and d rhymes form the first \simeq lines into a single unit with a separated final couplet. The three quatrains then develop three distinct but closely related ideas, with a different idea (or commentary) in the couplet. Interestingly, Spenser often begins L_{\simeq} of his sonnets with "But" or "Yet," indicating a volta exactly where it would occur in the Italian sonnet; however, if one looks closely, one often finds that the "turn" here really isn't one at all, that the actual turn occurs where the rhyme pattern changes, with the couplet, thus giving a \simeq and \simeq line pattern very different from the Italian \simeq and \simeq line pattern (actual volta marked by italics):

"Sonnet LIV"

Of this World's theatre in which we stay,
 My love like the Spectator idly sits,
 Beholding me, that all the pageants play,
 Disguising diversely my troubled wits.
 Sometimes I joy when glad occasion fits,
 And mask in mirth like to a Comedy;
 Soon after when my joy to sorrow flits,
 I wail and make my woes a Tragedy.
 Yet she, beholding me with constant eye,
 Delights not in my mirth nor rues my smart;
 But when I laugh, she mocks: and when I cry
 She laughs and hardens evermore her heart.
 What then can move her? If nor mirth nor moan,
 She is no woman, but a senseless stone.

III. The English (or Shakespearian) Sonnet:

The English sonnet has the simplest and most flexible pattern of all sonnets, consisting of \simeq quatrains of alternating rhyme and a couplet:

a b a b

c d c d
 e f e f
 g g

As in the Spenserian, each quatrain develops a specific idea, but one closely related to the ideas in the other quatrains.

Not only is the English sonnet the easiest in terms of its rhyme scheme, calling for only pairs of rhyming words rather than groups of 8, but it is the most flexible in terms of the placement of the volta. Shakespeare often places the "turn," as in the Italian, at L₃:

"Sonnet XXIX"

When in disgrace with Fortune and men's eyes,
 I all alone bewep my outcast state,
 And trouble deaf heaven with my bootless cries,
 And look upon myself and curse my fate,
 Wishing me like to one more rich in hope,
 Featured like him, like him with friends possessed,
 Desiring this man's art and that man's scope,
 With what I most enjoy contented least,
 Yet in these thoughts my self almost despising,
 Haply I think on thee, and then my state,
 (Like to the lark at break of day arising
 From sullen earth) sings hymns at heaven's gate,
 For thy sweet love remembered such wealth brings,
 That then I scorn to change my state with kings.

Equally, Shakespeare can delay the volta to the final couplet, as in this sonnet where each quatrain develops a metaphor describing the aging of the speaker, while the couplet then states the consequence--"You better love me now because soon I won't be here":

"Sonnet LXXIII"

That time of year thou mayst 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 seest 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 up all in rest.
 In me thou seest 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 perceivest, which makes thy love more strong,
 To love that well, which thou must leave ere long.

IV. The Indefinables

There are, of course, some sonnets that don't fit any clear recognizable pattern but still certainly function as sonnets. Shelley's "Ozymandias" belongs to this category. It's rhyming pattern of a b a b a c d c e d e f e f i s unique; clearly, however, there is a volta in L₉ exactly as in an Italian sonnet:

"Ozymandias"

I met a traveller from an antique land
 Who said: Two vast and trunkless legs of stone
 Stand in the desert . . . Near them, on the sand,
 Half sunk, a shattered visage lies, whose frown,
 And wrinkled lip, and sneer of cold command
 Tell that its sculptor well those passions read
 Which yet survive, (stamped on these lifeless things,)
 The hand that mocked them and the heart that fed:
 And on the pedestal these words appear:
 "My name is Ozymandias, king of kings:
 Look on my works, ye Mighty, and despair!"
 Nothing beside remains. Round the decay
 Of that colossal wreck, boundless and bare
 The lone and level sands stretch far away.

Frederick Goddard Tuckerman wrote sonnets with free abandon and with virtually no regard for any kind of pattern at all, his rhymes after the first few lines falling seemingly at random, as in this sonnet from his "Sonnets, First Series," which rhymes a b b a b c a b a d e c e d, with a volta at L₁₀:

"Sonnet XXVIII"

Not the round natural world, not the deep mind,
 The reconcilment holds: the blue abyss
 Collects it not; our arrows sink amiss
 And but in Him may we our import find.
 The agony to know, the grief, the bliss
 Of toil, is vain and vain: clots of the sod
 Gathered in heat and haste and flung behind
 To blind ourselves and others, what but this
 Still grasping dust and sowing toward the wind?
 No more thy meaning seek, thine anguish plead,
 But leave straining thought and stammering word,
 Across the barren azure pass to God:
 Shooting the void in silence like a bird,
 A bird that shuts his wings for better speed.

One wonders if the "sod"/"God" rhyme, being six lines apart, actually works, if the reader's ear can pick it up across that distance. Still, the poem has the dialectical structure that a sonnet is supposed to have, so there is justification for in fact considering it one.

V. Links to Various Sonnet Sequences

In addition to the sonnets and sequences available at Sonnet Central, there are several included in the Poets' Corner archive, listed below. www.geocities.com/Athens/...2052/poems

William Shakespeare, Sonnets:

www.geocities.com/~spanou...net05.html

Edmund Spenser, Amoretti: www.geocities.com/~spanou...nser05.html

Sir Philip Sidney, Astrophil and Stella:

www.geocities.com/~spanou...ney05.html

Samuel Daniel, Delia: www.geocities.com/~spanou...iel05.html

Michael Drayton, Idea: www.geocities.com/~spanou...yton05.html

John Donne, Holy Sonnets: www.geocities.com/~spanou...nne.html

Elizabeth Barrett Browning, Sonnets from the Portuguese:
www.geocities.com/~spanou...ebb.html

William Lisle Bowles, Fourteen Sonnets:
www.geocities.com/~spanou...les.html

Two "sonnet calendars":

Helen Hunt Jackson: www.geocities.com/~spanou...html#20

John Payne: www.geocities.com/~spanou...e.html#6

A few early 20th Century sonnets:

Wilfred Owen, "Anthem for Doomed Youth":
www.geocities.com/~spanou...n.html#6

William Carlos Williams, "The Uses of Poetry":
www.geocities.com/~spanou...m.html#30

William Carlos Williams, "On a Proposed Trip South":
www.geocities.com/~spanou...m.html#33

Ezra Pound, "A Virginal": www.geocities.com/~spanou...d.html#6

Elinor Wylie, "Wild Peaches: A Four-Sonnet Cycle":
www.geocities.com/~spanou...e.html#6

Edna St. Vincent Millay, "Only until this cigarette is ended":
www.geocities.com/~spanou...s.html#20

Claude McKay, "If We Must Die":
www.geocities.com/~spanou...s.html#86

Claude McKay, "The Harlem Dancer":

www.geocities.com/~spanou...02.html#06

Claude McKay, "The Lynching":

www.geocities.com/~spanou...03.html#80