

ENGL 3000  
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## GENERIC INQUIRY 1: ORIGIN AND DEVELOPMENT OF THE SONNET FORM

The information on sonnets in our anthology is a bit thin (10th ed. 832-43; 9th ed. 780-89), especially the almost complete lack of information on the interesting history of the sonnet, which is a history of writers tweaking and bending the conventions used by earlier writers. So I thought it best to supplement the anthology with the following information. Please read for our next class session.

### I. Introduction

When people consider the genres of Western literature, why is the sonnet among the first to come to mind? Perhaps because the sonnet, along with tragic drama, has become a paradigmatic genre; that is, the sonnet clearly embodies what we expect from a genre and, thus, provides a general model for the study of genres. So, what do we expect from sonnets? We expect the subject matter to be love; that is, we expect certain *thematic conventions*. In addition, we expect a specified length, rhyme scheme, and meter; that is we expect certain *formal conventions*. We will begin our unit on generic inquiry (or genre criticism) with the sonnet not only because it provides us a general model for studying thematic and formal convention but, in addition, its long history provides us an opportunity to examine its evolution over time. That is, just as our study of symbol and allegory focused on how authors manipulate conventional meanings (e.g., Poe's manipulation of the traditional symbolic meaning of the raven), we will want to see how authors manipulate the conventions of the sonnet and other genres.

The *Norton Introduction to Literature* devotes a section to sonnets, including a brief introduction, which like most brief introductions is useful but overly simple. So, as a supplement to the *Norton Introduction*, this handout provides additional information on the sonnet's conventions and how those conventions have developed over time, beginning with the sonnet's origin in thirteenth-century Florence and its introduction, 300 years later, into sixteenth-century English poetry.

Let's begin with a sonnet we discussed several weeks ago, when studying enjambment and caesura: William Wordsworth's "It is a beauteous evening." You might recall that I mentioned this poem is a Petrarchan (or Italian) sonnet in that its rhyme scheme divides the poem into two parts: octave (8-line unit) and sestet (6-line unit). I also mentioned that, because of this two-part structure, a crucial feature of the Petrarchan sonnet is the connection, or relationship between the two parts, which is called the *volta*, the Italian word meaning "turn." As you read the poem again, notice how the formal features (that is, the octave-sestet pattern) parallels the shift in the poem's content (that is, an *octave* marked by the speaker's description of his own experience of the walk followed by a *sestet* in which the speaker *turns* from his own experience to that of the girl). As soon as we recognize that Wordsworth's poem is a Petrarchan sonnet, we know that its meaning depends on the *volta*, that is, the *relationship* between the two parts.

- a It is a beauteous evening, calm and free,
- b The holy time is quiet as a nun
- b Breathless with adoration; the broad sun
- a Is sinking down in its tranquility;
- a The gentleness of heaven broods o'er the Sea:
- c Listen! the mighty Being is awake,
- c And doth with his eternal motion make
- a A sound like thunder—everlastingly.

- d Dear Child! dear Girl! that walkest with me here,  
 e If thou appear untouched by solemn thought,  
 f Thy nature is not therefore less divine:  
 d Thou liest in Abraham's bosom all the year;  
 f And worshipp'st at the Temple's inner shrine,  
 e God being with thee when we know it not.

Even though Wordsworth's poem is regarded as a Petrarchan sonnet, notice that it does not follow exactly the *formal conventions* of a Petrarchan sonnet:

- rhyme scheme of octave is not *abbaabba*
- rhyme scheme of sestet is not *cdecde*

Moreover, Wordsworth's poem does not seem to follow the basic *thematic convention* of the sonnet, which according to the *Norton Introduction* (and most accounts) is the subject of *romantic love*. In order to get a better sense of how a genre approach can illuminate Wordsworth's poem, it will help to know a little about the sonnet's origin and development. In fact, as we will see, a little historical knowledge will provide a good foundation for understanding many sonnets, including those written in the twentieth century.

## II. Italian Origin and Early Development

The origin of the sonnet has been traced back to Giacomo da Lentini (fl. 1215-1233), who wrote poems structured with the rhyme scheme *ababab cdecde*. It was Guittone d'Arezzo (1230-1294) who introduced the *abbaabba* octave, which became the established form through its preference by two of the most important poets of Western literature, Dante (*Vita Nuova*, c. 1293) and, especially, Petrarch (*Canzoniere*, 1330-74). It is also in the early-14th century that we find the earliest theoretical discussion of the sonnet as a specific type of poetry, Antonio da Tempo's *Summa Artis Rithimici* (1332).

Petrarch, in addition to establishing the formal conventions of the Italian sonnet, also established the thematic subject of the sonnet as love, though not as simple expressions of love. Instead, these poems treat complexities regarding the experience of love; and Petrarch, who was a central figure in the revival of classical learning that grounded the Renaissance, used the sonnet to explore the conflict between two types of love originally examined in ancient Greek philosophy, especially in the works of Plato: the tension between *erôs* ("sexual passion") and *philia* ("affectionate regard," or "friendship"). In addition, for Petrarch this ancient dichotomy was further complicated by the Christian concept of *agapê* ("love of God for man and of man for God"). Thus, it is too simple to say that the sonnet treats of love; instead, Petrarch established a thematic convention in which the sonnet treats more philosophical and theological aspects of love. (Notice how this theological aspect helps to explain Wordsworth's choice of the sonnet for his poem.) In addition, the sonnet is one of several literary genres influenced by the *encomium*, the traditional rhetorical category for speeches of praise, for example, funeral orations. (And notice how even a basic understanding of this thematic convention begins to illuminate Wordsworth's "It is a beauteous evening.")

Petrarch's sonnets have been so influential that the Italian form is often referred to as the "Petrarchan sonnet." Here is an especially influential sonnet, *Sonnetto in Vita* 91 (in the original Italian and in a modern English translation from *The Canzoniere*, trans. Mark Musa [Indiana UP, 1996]). Notice that Musa's translation does not reproduce Petrarch's rhyme scheme; so we need to look at the original Italian. As you read, note how Petrarch presents a conflict between *erôs* and *philia*. As we shall see, this particular sonnet also played a central role when, 200 years later, the sonnet form was introduced to English literature.

## Sonnetto in Vita 91 (Canzoniere 140)

a Amor, che nel penser mio vivre et regna	Love, who lives and reigns within my thought
b e 'l suo seggio maggior nel mio cor tene,	and holds the highest seat inside my heart
b talor armato ne la fronte vene;	at times appears all armed upon my face,
a ivi si loca et ivi pon sua insegna.	and there he camps, and there he sets his banner.
a Quella ch' amare et sofferir ne 'nsegna	The one who teaches us patience and love
b e vol che 'l gran desio, l'accesa spene	and wants my great desire, my burning hope
b ragon, vergogna, et reverenza affrene,	to be controlled by reason, shame, and reverence,
a di nostro ardir fra se stessa si sdegna.	is angry at our boldness—more than she shows.
c Onde Amor paventoso fugge al core,	And so Love full of fear flees to my heart,
d lasciando ogni sua impresa, et piange et trema;	abandoning his plans, and weeps and trembles;
c ivi s'asconde et non appar più fore.	and there he hides and never comes outside.
c Che poss' io far, temendo il mio signore,	What can I do, if my own lord is frightened
d se non star seco infin a l'ora estrema?	except stay with him till the final hour?
c Ché bel fin fa chi ben amando more.	Who loves well dying comes to a good end.

**III. Origins of the English Sonnet**

The sonnet was introduced into English literature not in the form of original compositions but, instead, by translations of Petrarch's sonnets. Sir Thomas Wyatt the Elder (1503-1542), who was a foreign diplomat serving in Italy, was the first to translate Petrarch's poems for English readers. Below is his translation of Petrarch's *Sonnetto in Vita 91*. Notice the elimination of stanza breaks and, especially, the alteration of the sestet's rhyme scheme to include a *concluding couplet* (which will become a distinguishing feature of the English sonnet). Also important is the establishment of *iambic pentameter* as the meter (French sonnets, by the way, are *iambic hexameter*, also known as the Alexandrine).

## The Long Love That in My Thought Doth Harbor (first published in 1557)

a The long love that in my thought doth harbor,	
b And in my heart doth keep his residence,	
b Into my face presseth with bold pretense	
a And therein campeth, spreading his banner.	
a She that me learneth to love and suffer	
b And wills that my trust and lust's negligence	
b Be reined by reason, shame, <sup>o</sup> and reverence	modesty
a With his hardiness taketh displeasure.	
c Wherewithal unto the heart's forest he fleeth,	
d Leaving his enterprise with pain and cry,	
c And there him hideth, and not appeareth.	
c What may I do, when my master feareth,	
d But in the field with him to live and die?	
d For good is the life ending faithfully.	

Here is Petrarch's poem yet again, translated by a young friend of Wyatt's, Henry Howard, Earl of Surrey (1517-1547). Surrey is credited with establishing the rhyme scheme that we call the "English" sonnet form: three quatrains followed by a couplet, rhyming *abab cdcd efef gg*. You'll notice that the rhyme scheme of Surrey's third quatrain, below is not *efef* but *ecec*; still, the basic structure has been changed from Petrarch's octave-sestet to quatrain-quatrain-quatrain-couplet. This change of the poem's basic structure leads the reader to consider the content not in terms of a single "turn" but, instead, more as a gradual progression through the series of three quatrains culminating in the couplet.

Love, That Doth Reign and Live Within My Thought (first published 1557)

- a Love, that doth reign and live within my thought,  
 b And built his seat within my captive breast,  
 a Clad in the arms wherein with me he fought,  
 b Oft in my face he doth his banner rest.  
 c But she that taught me love and suffer pain,  
 d My doubtful hope and eke my hot desire  
 c With shamefast look to shadow and refrain,  
 d Her smiling grace converteth straight to ire.  
 e And coward Love, then, to the heart apace  
 c Taketh his flight, where he doth lurk and plain,<sup>o</sup> complain  
 e His purpose lost, and dare not show his face.  
 c For my lord's guilt thus faultless bide I pain,  
 f Yet from my lord shall not my foot remove:  
 f Sweet is the death that taketh end by love.

#### IV. The Spenserian Sonnet

In addition to the Italian and English forms, Edmund Spenser (1552-1599) introduced a third form, with a rhyme scheme that borrows from both the Italian and English forms (though much closer to the quatrain-couplet structure of the English form than the octave-sestet structure of the Italian): *abab bcbc cdcd ee*. Here is Sonnet 1 from Spenser's sonnet cycle, *Amoretti* (1595):

##### Sonnet 1

Happy ye leaves when as those lilly hands,  
 which hold my life in their dead doing might,  
 Shall handle you and hold in loves soft bands,  
 Lyke captives trembling at the victors sight.  
 And happy lines, on which with starry light,  
 Those laming eyes will deigne sometimes to look  
 And reade the sorrowes of my dying spright,<sup>o</sup> spirit  
 Written with teares in harts close<sup>o</sup> bleeding book. secret  
 And happy rymes bathed in the sacred brooke,  
 Of Helicon whence she derivéd is,  
 When ye behold that Angels blessed looke,  
 My soules long lackéd foode, my heavens blis.  
 Leaves, lines, and rymes, seeke her to please alone,  
 Whom if ye please, I care for other none.

The Spenserian form has not been as successful as the Petrarchan and Shakespearean forms. Here, though, is a modern use of the Spenserian form by the American writer Richard Wilbur (1921-):

##### Praise in Summer

Obscurely yet most surely called to praise,  
 As sometimes summer calls us all, I said  
 The hills are heavens full of branching ways  
 Where star-nosed moles fly overhead the dead;  
 I said the trees are mines in air, I said  
 See how the sparrow burrows in the sky!  
 And then I wondered why this mad instead  
 Perverts our praise to uncreation, why  
 Such savor's in this wrenching things awry.  
 Does sense so stale that it must needs derange  
 The world to know it? To a praiseful eye  
 Should it not be enough of fresh and strange  
 That trees grow green, and moles can course in clay,  
 And sparrows sweep the ceiling of our day?

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### Development of the Sonnet in English - Some Examples

Now that we know something of the origins of the sonnet in late-medieval Italy (13th & 14th centuries) and at its early development, 200 years later, in England, let's look at a few examples that will help us outline some important trends in the sonnet's historical development, especially *thematic* developments.

Henry Constable, [My lady's presence makes the roses red] (1594)

- a My lady's presence makes the roses red,  
b Because to see her lips they blush for shame.  
b The lily's leaves, for envy, pale became,  
a And her white hands in them this envy bred.  
a The marigold the leaves abroad doth spread  
b Because the sun's and her power is the same.  
b The violet of purple colour came,  
a Dyed in the blood she made my heart to shed.  
c In brief: all flowers from her their virtue take;  
d From her sweet breath their sweet smells do proceed;  
c The living heat which her eyebeams doth make  
d Warmeth the ground and quickeneth the seed.  
e The rain, wherewith she watereth the flowers,  
e Falls from mine eyes, which she dissolves<sup>o</sup> in showers.      <sup>o</sup>disperses

William Shakespeare, [My mistress' eyes are nothing like the sun] (1609)

- a My mistress' eyes are nothing like the sun;  
b Coral is far more red than her lips' red;  
a If snow be white, why then her breasts are dun;  
b If hairs be wires, black wires grow on her head.  
c I have seen roses demasked red and white,  
d But no such roses see I in her cheeks;  
c And in some perfumes is there more delight

Development of the English-Language Sonnet (2)

- d Than in the breath that from my mistress reeks.  
e I love to hear her speak, yet well I know  
f That music hath a far more pleasing sound;  
e I grant I never saw a goddess go;  
f My mistress, when she walks, treads on the ground.  
g And yet, by heaven, I think my love as rare  
g As any she belied with false compare.

John Donne, Holy Sonnet 14

- a Batter my heart, three-person'd God; for you  
b As yet but knock, breathe, shine, and seek to mend;  
b That I may rise, and stand, o'erthrow me, and bend  
a Your force, to break, blow, burn, and make me new.  
a I, like an usurp'd town, to another due,  
b Labour to admit you, but O, to no end.  
b Reason, your viceroy in me, me should defend,  
a But is captived, and proves weak or untrue.  
c Yet dearly I love you, and would be loved fain°, °gladly  
d But am betroth'd unto your enemy;  
c Divorce me, untie, or break that knot again,  
e Take me to you, imprison me, for I,  
d Except you enthrall me, never shall be free,  
d Nor ever chaste, except you ravish me.

Claude McKay, "Harlem Dancer" (1922)

- a Applauding youths laughed with young prostitutes  
b And watched her perfect, half-clothed body sway;  
a Her voice was like the sound of blended flutes  
b Blown by black players upon a picnic day.  
c She sang and danced on gracefully and calm,  
d The light gauze hanging loose about her form;

Development of the English-Language Sonnet (3)

- c To me she seemed a proudly-swaying palm
- d Grown lovelier for passing through a storm.
- e Upon her swarthy neck black, shiny curls
- f Profusely fell; and, tossing coins in praise,
- e The wine-flushed, bold-eyed boys, and even the girls,
- f Devoured her with their eager, passionate gaze;
- g But, looking at her falsely-smiling face
- g I knew her self was not in that strange place.

Robert Frost, "Design" (1936)

- a I found a dimpled spider, fat and wide,
  - b On a white heal-all, holding up a moth
  - b Like a white piece of rigid satin cloth--
  - a Assorted characters of death and blight
  - a Mixed ready to begin the morning right,
  - b Like the ingredients of a witches' broth--
  - b A snow-drop spider, a flower like froth,
  - a And dead wings carried like a paper kite.
- 
- a What had that flower to do with being white,
  - c The wayside blue and innocent heal-all?
  - a What brought the kindred spider to that height,
  - a Then steered the white moth thither in the night?
  - c What but design of darkness to appall?--
  - c If design govern in a thing so small.