



Evolution of sonnet and its journey in english literature

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Abstract

Every literary form has its own story of evolution and journey in a particular literature. In context of a specific literature, some literary forms are invented and some are transported from other literature. This article researches and explains the origin and development of sonnet in English literature with due examples. Sonnet is more than seven hundred fifty years old as a literary form. It basically narrates the evolution process of sonnet particularly in English literature. This article has highlighted the course of progress with respect to sonnet with the varieties and styles available so far. Sonnet types like Petrarchan, Spenserian and Shakespearean are taken into account with suitable examples. The research encompasses the invention of sonnet its Transportation to English literature, changes and modifications occurred in the process of development. Many legendary poets in English have tried their hands in Sonnet and many have glorified and modified it too. This article gives all possible brief accounts regarding this subject.

Keywords: sonnet, literary forms, English literature, types of sonnet

Introduction

The sonnet is unique among poetic forms in Western literature in that it has retained its appeal for major poets for seven centuries. The form seems to have originated in the 13th century among the Sicilian school of court poets, who were influenced by the love poetry of Provençal troubadours. From there it spread to Tuscany, where it reached its highest expression in the 14th century in the poems of Petrarch. His *Canzoniere*—a sequence of poems including 317 sonnets, addressed to his idealized beloved, Laura—established and perfected the Petrarchan (or Italian) sonnet, which remains one of the two principal sonnet forms, as well as the one most widely used. The other major form is the English (Shakespearean) sonnet. Sonnet was invented in Italy in the thirteenth century, the Sicilian poet Giacomo da Lentini is credited with its invention. It was brought to a high form of development in the fourteenth century by Francesco Petrarch (1304–74), Italian poet and humanist best remembered now for his sonnets dedicated to an idealized lady named Laura glimpsed in a church, and with whom he fell in love at first sight, or so the legend goes. Laura's true identity is unknown; supposedly, she married someone else and, being ideally virtuous as well as beautiful, was permanently unavailable. There's no evidence Petrarch ever talked to her.

As a form the sonnet is about seven hundred & fifty years old. They have been written in English from around the turn of the sixteenth century. Most European languages have produced sonnets. There is a strong possibility that it has its ultimate origin in a Sicilian song form. Piero delle Vigne & Giacomo de Lentini in the early thirteenth century produced the initial forms of the sonnet as we would recognise them today. Guittone d'Arezzo (1230-94) first used the classical 'Italian' sonnet (a strict ABBAABBACDCDCD rhyme scheme). Dante (1265-1321) & Petrarch (1304-74) perfected it in their respective sonnet cycles 'Vita Nuova' & 'Canzoniere'. Petrarch was the first to really extol the

virtues of the sonnet. His 'Rime to Laura' (possibly a pun on the word laurel, as in 'laureate') established the essential romantic form & stylistic model of the sonnet we think of today.

Sir Thomas Wyatt, the poet & diplomat, brought the sonnet to the English court by translating the sonnets of Petrarch. Then Henry Howard, the soldier, poet, & Earl of Surrey became the innovator of the form of three quatrains followed by a heroic couplet. This was primarily to solve the problem of rhyming in a language which does not have a natural abundance of them. Its effect on the Elizabethans cannot be underestimated. The sonnet seemed to have the uncanny ability to crystallise thought succinctly & with some potency (not unlike the haiku in Japan). All this in an era when the English idiom was in the most rapidly developing phase it has ever been. New concepts & words were being introduced into the language at an alarming rate. The sonnet quickly developed into more than just a poem & had whole layers & conceits within its pithy form. It reached its apotheosis with Shakespeare's cycle of a hundred & fifty-three.

The Italian (or Petrarchan) Sonnet

The Petrarchan sonnet characteristically treats its theme in two parts. The first eight lines, the Octave, state a problem, ask a question, or express an emotional tension. The last six lines, the sestet, resolve the problem, answer the question, or relieve the tension. The octave is rhymed *abbaabba*. The rhyme scheme of the sestet varies; it may be *cdecde*, *cdccdc*, or *cdedce*. The Petrarchan sonnet became a major influence on European poetry. It soon became naturalized in Spain, Portugal, and France and was introduced to Poland, where it spread to other Slavic literatures. In most cases the form was adapted to the staple metre of the language—e.g., the Alexandrine (12-syllable iambic line) in France and Iambic pentameter in English.

The basic meter of all sonnets in English is 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 are called the *octave* and rhymes:

a b b a a b b a

The remaining 6 lines are 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, 1802"

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 skilful 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 L 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 13 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 able 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 4 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:

The uses Petrarch made of the conventions of courtly love for a beautiful, unattainable lady became known as "Petrarchan conventions." Some of these are that love is excruciatingly painful; the angelically beautiful and virtuous lady is cruel in rejecting the poet's love; and love is a religion, the practice of which ennoble the lover. Christian and classical imagery coexist. The god of Love, Cupid, is unpredictable, powerful, and cruel. The eyes are the "windows to the soul," and love usually begins at first sight. The poet is subject to extremes of feeling and internal conflict—the "war within the self." Life is short and art, fortunately, is long. The poetry will outlive the poet.

This model exerted a strong influence on numerous English Renaissance poets: Spenser, Sidney, Sidney's brilliant niece Mary Wroth, among others, and of course, Shakespeare himself. Writing sonnet sequences became popular among gentlemen, and these poems were often circulated in manuscript form, evidently including Shakespeare's. Publication was not generally considered gentlemanly or ladylike.

Shakespearian sonnet

The English sonnet has the simplest and most flexible pattern of all sonnets, consisting of 3 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 idea 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 4, but it is the most flexible in terms of the placement of the *volta*. Shakespeare often places the "turn, as in the Italian, at L9:

"Sonnet XXIX"

When in disgrace with Fortune and men's eyes,
 I all alone beweep 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.

The sonnet has proved to be a remarkably durable and adaptable form—a "fixed form" that is, paradoxically, enormously flexible. Although no one has ever equalled Shakespeare's sonnets, nearly every notable poet writing in English has had a go at a sonnet or two. Among the best-known British writers of sonnets are John Donne, Milton, Wordsworth, W.H. Auden, and Dylan Thomas.

The new forms precipitated the great Elizabethan flowering of lyric poetry, and the period marks the peak of the sonnet's English popularity. In the course of adapting the Italian form to a language less rich in rhymes, the Elizabethans gradually arrived at the distinctive English sonnet, which is composed of three quatrains, each having an independent rhyme scheme, and is ended with a rhymed couplet. The rhyme scheme of the English sonnet is *abab cdcd efef gg*. Its greater number of rhymes makes it a less demanding form than the Petrarchan sonnet, but this is offset by the difficulty presented by the couplet, which must summarize the impact of the preceding quatrains with the compressed force of a Greek epigram. An example is Shakespeare's Sonnet CXVI:

The typical Elizabethan use of the sonnet was in a sequence of love poems in the manner of Petrarch. Although each sonnet was an independent poem, partly conventional in content and partly self-revelatory, the sequence had the added interest of providing something of a narrative

development. Among the notable Elizabethan sequences are Sir Philip Sidney's *Astrophel and Stella* (1591), Samuel Daniel's *Delia* (1592), Michael Drayton's *Idea's Mirrour* (1594), and Edmund Spenser's *Amoretti* (1591). The last-named work uses a common variant of the sonnet (known as Spenserian) that follows the English quatrain and couplet pattern but resembles the Italian in using a linked rhyme scheme: *abab bcbc cdcd ee*. Perhaps the greatest of all sonnet sequences is Shakespeare's, addressed to a young man and a "dark lady." In these sonnets the supposed love story is of less interest than the underlying reflections on time and art, growth and decay, and fame and fortune.

Shakespeare's 154 sonnets published in 1609 are a "collection" rather than a sequence, although there are some groupings that look like mini-sequences. And they are remarkably various: Shakespeare explores the same theme in different ways but never exactly repeats a pattern. He is keenly aware of Petrarchan conventions and often uses them, but just as often upends them, as in Sonnet 130. The cruel loved one in many of his sonnets is a young man, not a woman, and the "Dark Lady" of sonnets 127–152 is neither virtuous nor ideally beautiful. Shakespeare's Sonnets represented a kind of apogee of the English sonnet-writing fashion, and, in fact, may have contributed to the vogue's fading away, since no one could outdo him or even come close to matching his skill and versatility.

In the seventeenth century George Herbert (1593-1633) & John Donne (1572-1631) wrote glorious religious sonnets. Prayer & Redemption being two of the finer examples of the former. Donne, who is often seen as the father of the metaphysical poets, wrote some of the most witty & beautiful in the English language in his Songs & Sonnets. He also brought a new realism & urgency with an opposite almost psychological penetration which would have a powerful accumulative effect on later poets. John Milton (1608-74) best known for his long narrative poem *Paradise Lost*, the longest in the English canon, pushed the envelope with the form & often expressed deeply held personal feelings, notwithstanding the addressing of certain political subjects close to his heart. By the time of Doctor Johnson, the celebrated lexicographer & his even more famous dictionary, (1755) the sonnet had become unfashionable. Johnson claimed in his now legendary lexicon that it (the sonnet) was not very suitable for the English language & nobody had done much with it since Milton. In the late eighteenth century the sonnet made a comeback. Spearheaded by William Lisle Bowles & by the nineteenth century the Romantics had raised the form to new heights. Wordsworth & Keats particularly had a lot to do with this. The Victorians sentimentalised the form somewhat, although Gerard Manley Hopkins had his own particular spin on the type, the sonnet survived to become one of the most popular forms of poetry enjoyed today.

One of the most misunderstood terms regarding the sonnet is the *volta*. This is a term borrowed from the Italian *volte face* meaning about turn. The turn is merely a subtle & often poignant change in the subject matter, in the Italian usually after the eighth line & in the English normally after the second stanza. This is often perceived as a psychological device to relieve tension by exacting a change. The Golden Mean was the ratio 8:5 & many people have pointed out that the sonnet seems to exhibit similar characteristics to that ratio that fascinated the ancient world so much. The main difference between the two predominant forms of

sonnet is that the Italian or Petrarchan consists of an Octet followed by a Sestet where the English or Shakespearean form has three quatrains followed by a rhyming couplet. In its subsequent development the sonnet was to depart even further from themes of love. By the time John Donne wrote his religious sonnets (c. 1610) and Milton wrote sonnets on political and religious subjects or on personal themes such as his blindness (i.e., "When I consider how my light is spent"), the sonnet had been extended to embrace nearly all the subjects of poetry.

It is the virtue of this short form that it can range from "light conceits of lovers" to considerations of life, time, death, and eternity, without doing injustice to any of them. Even during the Romantic era, in spite of the emphasis on freedom and spontaneity, the sonnet forms continued to challenge major poets. Many English writers—including William Wordsworth, John Keats, and Elizabeth Barrett Browning—continued to write Petrarchan sonnets. One of the best-known examples of this in English is Wordsworth's "The World Is Too Much with Us": In the later 19th century the love sonnet sequence was revived by Elizabeth Barrett Browning in *Sonnets from the Portuguese* (1850) and by Dante Gabriel Rossetti in *The House of Life* (1876). The most distinguished 20th-century work of the kind is Rainer Maria Rilke's *Sonnette an Orpheus* (1922). Sir Thomas Wyatt, the poet & diplomat, brought the sonnet to the English court & then Henry Howard, the soldier, poet, & Earl of Surrey became the innovator of the form of three quatrains followed by a heroic couplet. This was primarily to solve the problem of rhyming in a language which does not have a natural abundance of them. Its effect on the Elizabethans cannot be underestimated. The sonnet seemed to have the uncanny ability to crystallise thought succinctly & with some potency (not unlike the haiku in Japan). All this in an era when the English idiom was in the most rapidly developing phase it has ever been. New concepts & words were being introduced into the language at an alarming rate. The sonnet quickly developed into more than just a poem & had whole layers & conceits within its pithy form. It reached its apotheosis with Shakespeare's cycle of a hundred & fifty-three.

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The Spenserian Sonnet

Spenser used a distinctive verse form, called the Spenserian stanza, in several works, including *The Faerie Queene*. The stanza's main meter is iambic pentameter with a final line in iambic hexameter (having six feet or stresses, known as an Alexandrine), and the rhyme scheme is ababbcbcc. He also used his own rhyme scheme for the 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 12 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 L9 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 12 and 2 line pattern very different from the Italian 8 and 6 line pattern (actual *volta* marked by italics):

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

"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.

Conclusion

England was still following in the footsteps of Italy and France; it has been estimated that in the course of the century over three hundred thousand sonnets were written in Western Europe. In England as elsewhere most of these poems were inevitably of mediocre quality and imitative in substance, ringing the changes with wearisome iteration on a minimum of ideas, often with the most extravagant use of conceits. Petrarch's example was still commonly followed; the sonnets were generally composed in sequences (cycles) of a hundred or more, addressed to the poet's more or less imaginary cruel lady, though the note of manly independence introduced by Wyatt is frequent. First of the important English sequences is the 'Astrophel and Stella' of Sir Philip Sidney, written about 1580, published in 1591. 'Astrophel' is a fanciful half-Greek anagram for the poet's own name, and Stella (Star) designates Lady Penelope Devereux, who at about this time married Lord Rich. The sequence may very reasonably be interpreted as an expression of Platonic idealism, though it is sometimes taken in a sense less consistent with Sidney's high reputation. Of Spenser's 'Amoretti' we have already spoken. By far the finest of all the sonnets are the best ones (a considerable part) of Shakespeare's one hundred and fifty-four, which were not published until 1609 but may have been mostly written before 1600. Their interpretation has long been hotly debated. It is certain, however, that they do

not form a connected sequence. Some of them are occupied with urging a youth of high rank, Shakespeare's patron, who may have been either the Earl of Southampton or William Herbert, Earl of Pembroke, to marry and perpetuate his race; others hint the story, real or imaginary, of Shakespeare's infatuation for a 'dark lady,' leading to bitter disillusion; and Still others seem to be occasional expressions of devotion to other friends of one or the other sex. Here as elsewhere Shakespeare's genius, at its best, is supreme over all rivals; the first recorded criticism speaks of the 'sugared sweetness' of his sonnets; but his genius is not always at its best.

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