

Sonnet: Definition and Origin

The sonnet is one of the most enduring poetic forms in European literature. The word “sonnet” derives from the Italian *sonetto*, meaning “a little sound” or “a little song.” It refers to a poem of fourteen lines, usually written in iambic pentameter, and organized according to a particular rhyme scheme. Though sonnets can explore various themes, they are traditionally associated with love, beauty, time, and mortality.

The sonnet originated in Italy in the 13th century, perfected by Francesco Petrarch (1304–1374). The Petrarchan or Italian sonnet consists of an octave (eight lines) followed by a sestet (six lines). The octave typically has the rhyme scheme *abbaabba*, and it presents a problem, situation, or emotional tension. The sestet, with varying rhyme schemes such as *cdecde* or *cdcdcd*, offers a resolution, reflection, or counterargument. A clear “volta” or turn occurs between the octave and sestet, marking a shift in thought or emotion.

The sonnet was introduced into English literature by Sir Thomas Wyatt and Henry Howard, Earl of Surrey, in the early 16th century. They adapted the Petrarchan model into English, but since the English language has fewer rhyming words than Italian, they modified the rhyme scheme. Surrey is credited with developing the English or Shakespearean sonnet structure, which later became the dominant form.

The Shakespearean Sonnet: Structure

The Shakespearean sonnet consists of:

- Three quatrains (each of four lines), followed by
- A final rhymed couplet (two lines).

The rhyme scheme is:

abab cdcd efef gg

Each quatrain develops a particular aspect of the theme, often using metaphors, images, or arguments, while the final couplet usually provides a conclusion, twist, or epigrammatic

statement. Like the Petrarchan sonnet, Shakespearean sonnets are written in iambic pentameter—a rhythmic pattern of five iambic feet per line (unstressed-stressed).

This English structure allowed for greater flexibility in development and argumentation, and the couplet offered a memorable closure. It suited the rhetorical and dramatic tendencies of Elizabethan English.

Shakespeare's Contribution to the Sonnet Form

William Shakespeare (1564–1616) made an extraordinary contribution to the development of the sonnet. He wrote 154 sonnets, first published in 1609 (though most were likely composed in the 1590s). These sonnets, along with his plays, stand as a monumental achievement in English literature. His contributions can be examined in terms of thematic innovation, technical mastery, and psychological depth.

1. Expansion of Themes Beyond Petrarchan Love

Earlier English sonneteers, such as Wyatt, Surrey, Sidney (*Astrophel and Stella*), and Spenser (*Amoretti*), largely followed the Petrarchan tradition: the sonnet sequence depicted a lover's devotion to an unattainable lady, often idealizing her beauty and virtue. Shakespeare departed from this convention in several important ways.

- **Complex Treatment of Love:** Shakespeare's sonnets are not mere expressions of courtly admiration. They explore the changing, conflicting, and sometimes dark aspects of love—jealousy, infidelity, obsession, and betrayal. For example, Sonnet 138 (“When my love swears that she is made of truth”) deals with mutual deception in love, with a tone of irony.
- **Time and Mortality:** Many of Shakespeare's early sonnets (1–17) urge a young man to marry and beget children, so that his beauty may be preserved against the destructive power of Time. Sonnets like 18 (“Shall I compare thee to a summer's day?”) and 55 (“Not marble, nor the gilded monuments”) express the poet's faith in poetry's power to immortalize beauty. Here, love is intertwined with the theme of artistic creation and the human struggle against mortality.

- **The Dark Lady and the Young Man:** Shakespeare's sonnets are addressed not only to a beloved woman but also to a young man of great beauty and promise (the "Fair Youth," sonnets 1–126) and to a mysterious "Dark Lady" (sonnets 127–152). This complex triangulation of relationships—involving affection, admiration, eroticism, betrayal, and artistic inspiration—was unprecedented in sonnet sequences of his time.
- **Philosophical Depth:** Shakespeare frequently moves beyond personal emotion to meditations on truth, time, art, beauty, and human nature. For instance, Sonnet 60 compares human life to waves moving relentlessly toward the shore, illustrating the inevitability of time's passage.

In this way, Shakespeare expanded the thematic range of the sonnet far beyond the Petrarchan idealization of love.

2. Mastery of Form and Language

Shakespeare's technical skill in handling the Shakespearean sonnet form is unparalleled. He uses the three quatrains and a couplet structure with remarkable ingenuity:

- **Development of Argument:** Each quatrain often builds on the previous one, allowing Shakespeare to develop a logical or emotional progression, culminating in a striking conclusion in the couplet.

For example, in Sonnet 18:

- Q1 compares the beloved to a summer's day.
 - Q2 explains why the summer's day is inferior (it fades, it's too hot, etc.).
 - Q3 shows how the beloved's beauty transcends time.
 - The couplet asserts that the poem itself will immortalize the beloved.
- **Use of the Couplet:** Shakespeare's couplets are often aphoristic, offering a memorable closing thought. Sometimes they resolve a paradox, provide a witty twist, or underline the emotional climax.

- **Imagery and Metaphor:** Shakespeare's sonnets display extraordinary richness of imagery. He draws metaphors from nature, art, music, law, commerce, and everyday life, giving his sonnets both universality and vividness.
- **Flexibility of Tone:** His language ranges from lyrical to conversational, serious to playful, and intimate to public, making his sonnets dramatic miniatures rather than static meditations.

3. Psychological Realism

Perhaps Shakespeare's greatest contribution lies in his psychological insight. Unlike the one-dimensional Petrarchan lover and beloved, Shakespeare's speakers and subjects are emotionally complex, self-aware, and sometimes contradictory. The poet admits his own jealousy, self-deception, or moral failings, as in Sonnet 129 ("The expense of spirit in a waste of shame") or Sonnet 147 ("My love is as a fever, longing still").

This dramatic self-consciousness gives Shakespeare's sonnets a modern quality. They read not only as poems but also as intimate confessions, psychological explorations, or even theatrical monologues.

4. Influence and Legacy

Shakespeare's sonnets exerted a profound influence on subsequent English poetry. They solidified the English (abab cdcd efef gg) structure as a dominant form. Later poets—from John Milton to William Wordsworth, Elizabeth Barrett Browning, Gerard Manley Hopkins, and modern poets—continued to experiment with and reinvent the sonnet, often inspired by Shakespeare's example.

His thematic innovations opened the sonnet to new subjects, including personal doubt, philosophical reflection, and human frailty, thereby transforming the sonnet into a flexible poetic instrument suitable for a wide range of emotions and ideas.

Conclusion

In summary, the sonnet began as a short lyrical form in Italy, perfected by Petrarch, and was adapted into English by Wyatt and Surrey. Shakespeare's contribution, however, marks a turning point: he perfected the English structure, broadened thematic concerns, infused psychological depth, and exercised supreme technical mastery. His 154 sonnets stand not only as jewels of Elizabethan lyricism but also as profound meditations on love, time, beauty, and art. Through them, Shakespeare transformed the sonnet from a vehicle of conventional love expression into a mirror of human experience itself.