The Sonnet at a Glance

1) It is a poem of fourteen lines, usually iambic.

2) There are two kinds of sonnet, with very different histories behind their different forms: the Petrarchan and the Shakespearean.

3) The Petrarchan sonnet is Italian in origin, has an octave of eight lines and a sestet of six. The rhyme scheme of the octave is *ababcdcd* and of the sestet *cdecde*.

4) The Shakespearean sonnet was developed in England and has far more than just surface differences from the Petrarchan.

5) The rhyme scheme of the Shakespearean sonnet is *ababcdcdefefgg*. There is no octave/sestet structure to it. The final couplet is a defining feature.

The History of the Form

The sonnet's origins are in the small, sunlit courts of Sicily. It lingered there for two hundred years before it made the journey into English poetry.

The wildfire and historic development of the form began when Francesco Petrarca, who lived in Tuscany and was born in 1304, published his *Canzoniere,* a sequence of 366 poems, 317 of which were sonnets to an idealized lover, called Laura. Petrarch had been influenced by Dante.

With their wit, their yearning, and their ability to make a narrative out of a necklace of short poems, *Canzoniere* became a European bestseller. By the time of Petrarch's death in 1374, his circle of influence included Chaucer and Boccaccio.

It was the Italian originators who developed one of the features of the sonnet that survives to the present day, the octave and sestet division: One strong opening statement of eight lines is followed by a resolution to the emotional or intellectual question of the first part of the poem. This shape made the sonnet a self-sufficient form, open to shades of mood and tone. They also established the rhyme scheme *abbaabba* in the octave and *cdecde* in the sestet. This degree of close and repetitive rhyme, in turn, reflected the rich resources of Italian rhyme.

The sonnet took time to come to England. When it did it fell into

the hands of Thomas Wyatt a doomed master and one of its first champions there, who adapted it to his own uses and talents: He used the Petrarchan octave but introduced a rhyming couplet at the end. His contemporary and friend the Earl of Surrey also introduced more rhymes into it. In Italian there were only five rhymes. After Wyatt and Surrey the sonnet could have seven—a change that benefited practitioners in a language with less abundant rhymes than Italian.

Wyatt and Surrey, by shifting the English sonnet away from the slightly more intellectual and argumentative Petrarchan form, gave a new resonance to the ending, through the often declamatory couplet. By Shakespeare's time, this couplet was often the loudest, most powerful part of the sonnet.

The powerful and enriching development of the sonnet in the English language certainly owes something to the fact that it presented poets with this choice. On the one hand, there was the Shakespearean sonnet, with its three quatrains and final couplet, which allowed a fairly free association of images to develop lyrically toward a conclusion. Or there was the Petrarchan sonnet as Milton used it in "On His Blindness," with all the dignity of proposal and response.

The Contemporary Context

On one level, the sonnet suits our world. Despite the fact that its origins are in the formality and decorum of Italian court poetry, it has kept pace with some of the most important developments in modern poetry.

To start with it is short, easily comprehended and its historic structure still opens the way for living debate and subtle argument. One of the characteristics of recent poetic history, on both sides of the Atlantic, has been a tension between lyric and narrative. The sonnet is able to take its place in the debate: to suggest narrative progress through its sequence structure, while, in single units, it is capable of the essential lyric qualities of being musical, brief, and memorable.

Contemporary poets, for over two hundred years, have continued to be drawn to the sonnet. But few modern poets have been willing to commit themselves to the major, architectural sequences of a Petrarch or a Shakespeare. Instead the sonnet—with either the couplet at the end or the octave/sestet structure—has become a part of speech. Many poets have used it at one time or another. Some of the finest sonnets in the language have been written by poets who were only occasional sonneteers, such as Yeats.

It might be argued that an occasional form is what it has become: a fossil of its former life. Its imagistic compression of argument re-

mains a major influence on the course of the stanza. It is one of the copingstones of poetic form. And it endures.

WILLIAM SHAKESPEARE

Shall I compare thee to a summer's day?

Sonnet 18

Shall I compare thee to a summer's day?
Thou art more lovely and more temperate:
Rough winds do shake the darling buds of May,
And summer's lease hath all too short a date;
Sometimes too hot the eye of heaven shines,
And often is his gold complexion dimmed;
And every fair from fair sometime declines,
By chance or nature's changing course untrimmed;
But thy eternal summer shall not fade,
Nor lose possession of that fair thou ow'st;
Nor shall death brag thou wand'rest in his shade,
When in eternal lines to Time thou grow'st:
  So long as men can breathe, or eyes can see,
  So long lives this, and this gives life to thee.

MICHAEL DRAYTON

Farewell to Love

Since there's no help, come, let us kiss and part;
Nay, I have done, you get no more of me,
And I am glad, yea glad with all my heart
That thus so cleanly I myself can free.
Shake hands forever, cancel all our vows,
And when we meet at any time again,
Be it not seen in either of our brows
That we one jot of former love retain.
Now at the last gasp of love's latest breath,
When, his pulse failing, passion speechless lies,
When faith is kneeling by his bed of death,
And innocence is closing up his eyes;
Now if thou wouldst, when all have given him over,
From death to life thou mightst him yet recover.

PERCY BYSSHE SHELLEY

Ozymandias

I met a traveler 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.

JOHN KEATS

Bright Star

Bright star, would I were steadfast as thou art—
  Not in lone splendor hung aloft the night
And watching, with eternal lids apart,
  Like nature's patient, sleepless Eremite,
The moving waters at their priestlike task
  Of pure ablution round earth's human shores,
Or gazing on the new soft fallen mask
  Of snow upon the mountains and the moors—
No—yet still steadfast, still unchangeable,
  Pillowed upon my fair love's ripening breast,
To feel forever its soft fall and swell,
  Awake forever in a sweet unrest,
Still, still to hear her tender-taken breath,
And so live ever—or else swoon to death.