

## Variations on a theme:

### the sonnet form in English poetry

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**A** The form of lyric poetry known as 'the sonnet', or 'little song', was introduced into the English poetic corpus by Sir Thomas Wyatt the Elder and his contemporary Henry Howard, Earl of Surrey, during the first half of the sixteenth century. It originated, however, in Italy three centuries earlier, with the earliest examples known being those of Giacomo de Lentino, 'The Notary' in the Sicilian court of the Emperor Frederick II, dating from the third decade of the thirteenth century. The Sicilian sonneteers are relatively obscure, but the form was taken up by the two most famous poets of the Italian Renaissance, Dante and Petrarch, and indeed the latter is regarded as the master of the form.

**B** The Petrarchan sonnet form, the first to be introduced into English poetry, is a complex poetic structure. It comprises fourteen lines written in a rhyming metrical pattern of iambic pentameter, that is to say each line is ten syllables long, divided into five 'feet' or pairs of syllables (hence 'pentameter'), with a stress pattern where the first syllable of each foot is unstressed and the second stressed (an iambic foot). This can be seen if we look at the first line of one of Wordsworth's sonnets, 'After-Thought': 'I thought of thee my partner and my guide'. If we break down this line into its constituent syllabic parts, we can see the five feet and the stress pattern (in this example each stressed syllable is underlined), thus: 'I thought/ of thee/ my partner and/ my guide'.

**C** The rhyme scheme for the Petrarchan sonnet is equally as rigid. The poem is generally divided into two parts, the octave (eight lines) and the sestet (six lines),

which is demonstrated through rhyme rather than an actual space between each section. The octave is usually rhymed abbaabba with the first, fourth, fifth and eighth lines rhyming with each other, and the second, third, sixth and seventh also rhyming. The sestet is more varied: it can follow the patterns cdecde, cdccdc, or cdedce. Perhaps the best interpretation of this division in the Petrarchan sonnet is by Charles Gayley, who wrote: "The octave bears the burden; a doubt, a problem,. a reflection, a query, an historical statement, a cry of indignation or desire, a vision of the ideal. The sestet eases the load, resolves the problem or doubt, answers the query or doubt, solaces the yearning, realizes the vision." Thus, we can see that the rhyme scheme demonstrates a twofold division in the poem, providing a structure for the development of themes and ideas.

D Early on, however, English poets began to vary and experiment with this structure. The first major development was made by Henry Howard, Earl of Surrey, altogether an indifferent poet, but was taken up and perfected by William Shakespeare, and is named after him. The Shakespearean sonnet also has fourteen lines in iambic pentameter, but rather than the division into octave and sestet, the poem is divided into four parts: three quatrains and a final rhyming couplet. Each quatrain has its own internal rhyme scheme, thus a typical Shakespearean sonnet would rhyme abab cdcd efef gg. Such a structure naturally allows greater flexibility for the author and it would be hard, if not impossible, to enumerate the different ways in which it has been employed, by Shakespeare and others. For example, an idea might be introduced in the first quatrain, complicated in the second, further complicated in the third, and resolved in the final couplet -indeed, the couplet is almost always used as a resolution to the poem, though often in a surprising way.

E        These, then, are the two standard forms of the sonnet in English poetry, but it should be recognized that poets rarely follow rules precisely and a number of other sonnet types have been developed, playing with the structural elements. Edmund Spenser, for example, more famous for his verse epic 'The Faerie Queene', invented a variation on the Shakespearean form by interlocking the rhyme schemes between the quatrains, thus: abab bcbc cdcd ee, while in the twentieth century Rupert Brooke reversed his sonnet, beginning with the couplet. John Milton, the seventeenth-century poet, was unsatisfied with the fourteen-line format and wrote a number of 'Caudate' sonnets, or 'sonnets with the regular fourteen lines (on the Petrarchan model) with a 'coda' or 'tail' of a further six lines. A similar notion informs George Meredith's sonnet sequence 'Modern Love', where most sonnets in the cycle have sixteen lines.

F        Perhaps the most radical of innovators, however, has been Gerard Manley Hopkins, who developed what he called the 'Curtal' sonnet. This form varies the length of the poem, reducing it in effect to eleven and a half lines, the rhyme scheme and the number of feet per line. Modulating the Petrarchan form, instead of two quatrains in the octave, he has two tercets rhyming abc abc, and in place of the sestet he has four and a half lines, with a rhyme scheme dcbdc. As if this is not enough, the tercets are no longer in iambic pentameter, but have six stresses instead of five, as does the final quatrain, with the exception of the last line, which has three. Many critics, however, are sceptical as to whether such a major variation can indeed be classified as a sonnet, but as verse forms and structures become freer, and poets less satisfied with convention, it is likely that even more experimental forms will out.

Reading Passage 91 has eight paragraphs labelled A-H.

Choose the most suitable heading for each paragraph from the list of headings below.

Write the appropriate numbers (i-xiii) in boxes 28-32 on your answer sheet.

One of the headings has been done for you as an example. Any heading may be used more than once.

*Note: There are more headings than paragraphs, so you will not use all of them.*

List of Headings

- i    Octave develops sestet
- ii   The Faerie Queene and Modern Love
- iii   The origins of the sonnet
- iv   The Shakespearean sonnet form
- v    The structure of the Petrarchan sonnet form
- vi   A real sonnet?
- vii   Rhyme scheme provides structure developing themes and ideas

viii Dissatisfaction with format

xi The Sicilian sonneteers

x Howard v. Shakespeare

xi Wordsworth's sonnet form

xii Future breaks with convention

xiii The sonnet form: variations and additions

28. Paragraph A

29. Paragraph B

30. Paragraph C

31. Paragraph D

32. Paragraph E

Example: Paragraph A Answer iii

Questions 33-37

Using NO MORE THAN THREE WORDS from the passage, complete the sentences below.

33. Sir Thomas Wyatt the Elder and Henry Howard were .....

34. It was in the third decade of the thirteenth century that the  
..... was introduced.

35. Among poets of the Italian Renaissance ..... was  
considered to be the better sonneteer.

36. The Petrarchan sonnet form consists of .....

37. In comparison with the octave, the rhyming scheme of the sestet is  
..... varied.

#### Questions 38-40

Choose the correct letters A-D and write them in boxes 38-40 on your answer  
sheet.

38. According to Charles Gayley,

A. the octave is longer than the sestet.

B. the octave develops themes and ideas.

C. the sestet provides answers and solutions.

D. the sestet demonstrates a twofold division.

**39. The Shakespearean sonnet is**

- A. an indifferent development.**
- B. more developed than the Petrarchan sonnet.**
- C. more flexible than the Petrarchan sonnet.**
- D. enumerated in different ways.**

**40. According to the passage, whose sonnet types are similar?**

- A. Spenser and Brooke**
- B. Brooke and Milton**
- C. Hopkins and Spenser**
- D. Milton and Meredith**

<b>ANSWER</b>
28. v 29. vii 30. iv 31. xiii 32. vi 33. contemporaries 34. sonnet/little song 35. Petrarch 36. fourteen lines/octave and sestet 37. more 38. C 39. C 40. D