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Characteristics of the Sonnet

All sonnets are lyrics of 14 lines, iambic (unstressed/stressed syllables – heartbeat), pentameter (five iambs to a line). The two major forms of the sonnet are the Italian, also called the Petrarchan, and the English, also called the Shakespearean.

Like much poetic literature, the sonnet has common figurative language and themes that we call conceits or conventions. Some of the most common ones found in Renaissance sonnets come from the Courtly Love tradition:

- 1. Love is viewed as torture, slavery, death, war, or a hunt.
- 2. The lady is treated as a master or queen, a "cruel fair," a celestial object (star, moon), a doe, a tyrant.
- 3. The lady is praised for her virtue and her beauty. Commonly, the poet objectifies her body by singling out specific parts to honor and worship, such as her eyes, lips, breasts, and hands.
- 4. The lady has power in her gaze and can destroy or inspire with a look.
- 5. The poet will often make puns with his and his lady's names. (See Petrarch's sonnet below).
- 6. The poet will often speak in apostrophe a poetic device where one talks to an inanimate object, such as the moon or a dead person.
- 7. The poet will engage in paradox: a statement that seems contradictory or absurd but may be true. This statement draws attention to something the poet thinks is important. (See Spenser's sonnet about ice and fire her ice enflames him and his fire freezes her).
- 8. Hyperbole is used to express the poet's emotions exaggeration for effect.

Italian Sonnet:

Most Italian sonnets have two distinct sections. The first eight lines, called the octave, generally follows the rhyme scheme: abba abba. The second is formed by the last six lines, the sestet, usually has more flexibility in rhyme schemes, though the most common ones are: cdcdcd; cddcdc; cdecde; cdeced; or cdcedc. Very rarely does the Italian sonnet end in a couplet (as do English sonnets): ee.

The second half of the Italian sonnet indicates a turn in the sonnet – a change of subject, an expression of enlightenment, etc. We call this a *volta*. The octave often forms a question or presents a problem that the poet is seeking greater insight to. The *volta* is his attempt to answer. This turn is what gives the sonnet form it's more philosophical bent. An example of the Italian sonnet is Petrarch's Sonnet 5 from his *Rima*

Quando io movo i sospiri a chiamar voi, e 'l nome che nel cor mi scrisse Amore, LAU dando s'incomincia udir di fore il suon de' primi dolci accenti suoi; vostro stato REal, ch'encontro poi, raddoppia a l'alta impresa il mio valore; ma: TAci, grida il fin, ché farle onore è d'altri omeri soma, che da' tuoi. Cosí LAU dare e REverire insegna la voce stessa, pur ch'altri vi chiami, o d'ogni reverenza e d'onor degna: se non che forse Apollo si disdegna ch'a parlar de' suoi sempre verdi rami lingua morTAI presuntuosa vegna.

- a When I utter sighs, in calling out to you,
- b with the name that Love wrote on my heart,
- b the sound of its first sweet accents begin
- a to be heard within the word **LAU**dable.
- a Your REgal state, that I next encounter,
- b doubles my power for the high attempt;
- b but: 'TAcit', the ending cries, 'since to do her honour
- a is for other men's shoulders, not for yours'.
- c So, whenever one calls out to you,
- d the voice itself teaches us to LAud, REvere,
- c you, O, lady worthy of all reverence and honour:
- c except perhaps that Apollo is disdainful
- d that morTAl tongue can be so presumptuous
- c as to speak of his eternally green branches.

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English Sonnet:

Unlike the Italian sonnet, the English sonnet breaks into 3 quatrains and an ending couplet. The rhyme scheme is: abab cdcd efef gg. This rhyme scheme is more suited to the English language where it is harder to find enough words to rhyme is following the abba abba scheme of the Italian sonnet. Each quatrain expresses a thought, oftentimes building in intensity to the couplet. Other times, the quatrains are parallel – using different metaphors to express the poet's concern. Like the Italian sonnet, the English sonnet usually poses a problem or question. The *volta* in the English sonnet can be at line 9, as in the Italian sonnet, or it can come at the couplet. An example of the English sonnet is Shakespeare's Sonnet XXIX

When in disgrace with Fortune and men's eyes, а I all alone beweep my outcast state, b And trouble deaf heaven with my bootless cries, a And look upon myself and curse my fate, b Wishing me like to one more rich in hope, С Featured like him, like him with friends possessed, d Desiring this man's art and that man's scope, С With what I most enjoy contented least, d Yet in these thoughts my self almost despising, e f Haply I think on thee, and then my state, (Like to the lark at break of day arising e From sullen earth) sings hymns at heaven's gate, f For thy sweet love remembered such wealth brings, g That then I scorn to change my state with kings. g

Spenserian Sonnet:

Developed by Edmund Spencer, this follows the quatrain/couplet division of the English sonnet, but with overlapping rhymes: abab bcbc cdcd ee. Usually, Spenser's *volta* is at the couplet. An example is sonnet 30:

MY love is like to ice, and I to fire;	а					
how comes it then that this her cold so great						
is not dissolv'd through my so hot desire,	a					
but harder grows the more I her intreat?	b					
Or how comes it that my exceeding heat	b					
is not delayed by her heart frozen cold:	С					
but that I burn much more in boiling sweat,	b					
and feel my flames augmented manifold?	С					
What more miraculous thing may be told	С					
that fire which all things melts, should harden ice:	d					
and ice which is congeal'd with senseless cold,	С					
should kindle fire by wonderful device.	d					
Such is the power of love in gentle mind,	е					
that it can alter all the course of kind.	е					

Fill in the meter – take a line from a sonnet, and break up the words by unstressed/stressed sounds.

U	S	U	S	U	S	U	S	U	S
When	in	dis-	grace	with	for-	tune	and	men's	eyes