Petrarch and the Sonnet Tradition

Sonnet - A lyric poem of fourteen lines, usually in iambic pentameter, with rhymes arranged according to certain definite patterns. It usually expresses a single, complete idea or thought with a reversal, twist, or change of direction in the concluding lines. There are two major forms:

    (1) Italian or Petrarchan

    (2) English or Shakespearean

The **Petrarchan sonnet,** or Italian sonnet, has an eight line stanza (called an octave) followed by a six line stanza (called a sestet).

The **octave** has two quatrains (4 line stanzas) rhyming
    abba, **abba**,
The first quatrain presents the theme, the second further develops it.

In the **sestet**, typically the first three lines reflect on or exemplify the theme, while the last three bring the poem to a unified end. The sestet may have the following rhyme schemes: **cdecde; cdcdcd**, or **cdedce**.

The **Shakespearean sonnet** uses three quatrains; each rhymed differently, with a final, independently rhymed couplet that makes an effective, unifying climax to the whole. Its rhyme scheme is **abab**, **cdcd**, **efef**, **gg**. Typically, the final two lines follow a "turn" or a "volta," (sometimes spelled *volte*, like *volte-face*) because they reverse, undercut, or turn from the original line of thought to take the idea in a new direction.

The **Miltonic sonnet** is similar to the Petrarchan sonnet, but it does not divide its thought between the octave and the sestet--the sense or line of thinking runs straight from the eighth

Additional Sonnet Concepts

poetic speaker - The narrative or elegiac voice in a poem (such as a sonnet, ode, or lyric) that speaks of his or her situation or feelings. It is a convention in poetry that the speaker is *not* the same individual as the historical author of the poem.

Petrarchan Conceit: A **conceit** used by the Italian poet Petrarch or similar to those he used. In the Renaissance, English poets were quite taken with Petrarch's conceits and recycled them in their own poetry. Examples of conceits include: comparing eyes to the stars or sun, hair to golden wires, lips to cherries, women to goddesses, and so on.

His use of **oxymorons**, or paired opposites ex. freezing fire or burning ice, were also common.

Implied audience - The "you" a writer or poet refers to or implies when creating a dramatic monologue. This implied audience might be (but is not necessarily) the reader of the poem, or it might be the vague outline or suggestion of an extra character who is not described or detailed explicitly in the text itself. Instead, the reader gradually learns who the speaker addresses by garnering clues from the words of the speaker. The "you" might be the actual reader of the poem, or it might be an implied audience, or it might be that the implied audience is the speaker himself; i.e., speaker is talking to himself.

Sonnet cycle - Also called a sonnet cycle, this term refers to a gathering or arrangement of sonnets by a single author so that the sonnets in that group or arrangement deal with a single theme, situation, a particular lady, or alternatively deal with what appears to be a sequential story. Petrarch, Sidney, Spenser, and Shakespeare all engaged in this practice, Shakespeare's 154 sonnets, however, are best known of any sonnet sequences today.

THE SONNET — Part One

A sonnet is a poetic construct which allows the poet to examine the nature and ramifications of two usually contrasting ideas, emotions, states of mind, beliefs, actions, events, images, etc., by juxtaposing the two against each other, and possibly resolving or just revealing the tensions between the two.

Each of the three major types of sonnets accomplishes this in a somewhat different way.

I. The Italian (or Petrarchan) Sonnet:

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 is called the *octave* and rhymes:

<p align="center">a b b a a b b a</p>

The remaining 6 lines is called the *sestet* and can have either two or three rhyming sounds, arranged in a variety of ways:

<p align="center">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</p>

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. This is 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 Italian sonnet by the English poet 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 skillful poet can manipulate the placement of the *volta* for dramatic effect, although this is difficult to do well. An extreme example is the next sonnet, by the English poet 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 biassing 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 amenable 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:

"Scorn Not the Sonnet"

Scorn not the Sonnet; Critic, you have frowned,

Mindless of its just honours; with this key

Shakespeare unlocked his heart; the melody

Of this small lute gave ease to Petrarch's wound;

A thousand times this pipe did Tasso sound;

With it Camoens soothed an exile's grief;

The Sonnet glittered a gay myrtle leaf

Amid the cypress wtih which Dante crowned

His visionary brow: a glow-worm lamp,

It cheered mild Spenser, called from Faery-land

To struggle through dark ways; and when a damp

Fell round the path of Milton, in his hand

The Thing became a trumpet; whence he blew

Soul-animating strains--alas, too few!