

I. The Italian (or Petrarchan) Sonnet:

The basic meter of all sonnets in English is iambic pentameter.

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:

a b b a a b b a

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

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

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.

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.

II. The English (or Shakespearian) Sonnet:

The English sonnet has the simplest and most flexible pattern of all sonnets, consisting of 3 quatrains of alternating rhyme and a couplet:

a b a b
c d c d
e f e f
g g

Each quatrain develops a specific idea, but one closely related to the ideas in the other quatrains.

Not only is the English sonnet the easiest in terms of its rhyme scheme, calling for only pairs of rhyming words rather than groups of 4, but it is the most flexible in terms of the placement of the volta. Shakespeare often places the "turn," as in the Italian, at L9:

"Sonnet XXIX"

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

Equally, Shakespeare can delay the volta to the final couplet, as in this sonnet where each quatrain develops a metaphor describing the aging of the speaker, while the couplet then states the consequence--"You better love me now because soon I won't be here":

"Sonnet LXXIII"

That time of year thou mayst in me behold,
When yellow leaves, or none, or few do hang
Upon those boughs which shake against the cold,
Bare ruined choirs, where late the sweet birds sang.
In me thou seest the twilight of such day,
As after sunset fadeth in the west,
Which by and by black night doth take away,
Death's second self that seals up all in rest.
In me thou seest the glowing of such fire,
That on the ashes of his youth doth lie,

As the deathbed, whereon it must expire,
Consumed by that which it was nourished by.
This thou perceivest, which makes thy love more strong,
To love that well, which thou must leave ere long.

III. The Indefinables

There are, of course, some sonnets that don't fit any clear recognizable pattern but still certainly function as sonnets. Shelley's "Ozymandias" belongs to this category. Its rhyming pattern of a b a b a c d c e d e f e f is unique; clearly, however, there is a volta in L9 exactly as in an Italian sonnet:

"Ozymandias"

I met a traveller 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.