

## The Sonnet pt

<http://www.spcmc.ac.in/the-elizabethan-sonnet/>

Along with the above powerpoint presentation, the students can go through the following note for further elucidation.

### The Sonnet

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- The **sonnet** is a form of lyric poetry which originated in Sicily and Italy, way back in the thirteenth century and in the later Medieval Period of European history. The word *sonnet* derives from the Italian *sonnetto*, which means a 'little sound' or a 'song'. Usually, a sonnet consists of fourteen lines, divided either into an octave or a sestet, or into quatrains and couplets. But the most important aspect of a sonnet is to fit a particular thought, idea or feeling within the structure and form of a fourteen lined, usually iambic pentameter stanza. It demands tremendous discipline of thought, integrity of feeling and expertise of language.
- Most commonly, a sonnet concerns itself with love, although there have been sonnets on other themes, through various periods of history. At its time of origin, the sonnet, most probably, performed the function of private love letters towards the beloved from the lover, in order to apprise her of his condition. They were seldom meant for publication, its mode was primarily circulation among a rather closed circle.
- The sonnet probably owes its origin to the French Provençal song and Troubadour poetry. Both these genres of poetry dealt with the expression of sentiments related to love and dated back to the eleventh and twelfth centuries AD. The term *trobador* is related to the verb *trobar*, which means 'to find, invent, write poetry and compose melodies'. The emphasis then, was not only towards the composition of the poem, but also to its singing. Troubadour poetry, then, had within it the associated traditions of minstrelsy and bardolatory. It is interesting to understand that both these kinds of poetry were in the vernacular, and henceforth we shall be concerned with the expression of feelings in the vernacular only. It is also interesting and noteworthy to mention that previous to these songs, the genre of 'love' poetry did not perhaps exist.
- From the traditions of troubadour poetry and provençal song, we arrive at the thirteenth and fourteenth century Sicily and Italy, where the form of the sonnet was being profusely used for the celebration of love. Among the most well-known practitioners of the genre

we might mention Dante and Petrarch. Francesco Petrarch (1304-1374) has immortalized himself with his collection of sonnets or *Canzoniere*, a collection of 366 poems in all, 317 being sonnets, 29 odes, 9 sestine, 7 ballate and 4 madrigals. The entire collection is dedicated to the poet's love for Laura or Laureta de Noves, who was wife of Hugues de Sade. Petrarch's love for Laura remained unreciprocated, unrequited and unconsummated till the end, although it gave rise to unforgettable poetry. Laura died of the Black Death at Avignon on 6<sup>th</sup> April 1348, exactly twenty-one years after Petrarch first set his eyes on her on 6<sup>th</sup> April 1327. The first 263 poems in the *Canzoniere* are dedicated to the memory of Laura's life, while the rest concerns the poet's life after her death.

- Was Laura real or imagined? Scholars are divided on this issue. While some feel that Laura was a real individual, others feel her to be a result of the poet's imagination. One powerful justification in favour of this latter view is the identification of Laura and Daphne. The latter was the beloved of Apollo the Greek god of music and poetry. Daphne was metamorphosed into a laurel tree when pursued by Apollo, and justifies Apollo's fondness for this tree. Is Petrarch's Laura a derivative of the laurels that poets won after a competition? The Laura-Daphne myth for Petrarch's Laura is an important contribution to the history of Petrarch scholarship. Petrarch became familiar with the Daphne myth from his reading of Ovid's first book of *Metamorphoses*. It is also important here to mention that Petrarch's journey to glory and to poetic laurels, have been through his poems on Laura. Hence, even if he could not attain her in love, he did attain her in glory. This dichotomy between love-laurels-glory is ever present in the understanding and appreciation of Petrarch's *Canzoniere*. Interestingly, Byron, the English Romantic poet, has written very interesting lines on Petrarch and Laura '*Think you, if Laura had been Petrarch's wife, / He would have written sonnets all his life?*' The couplet justifies Petrarch's continuous outpouring of passion in his poems followed by the unattainability of Laura.
- Petrarch's poems to and about Laura follow a certain style: that of the **courtly love tradition**. The courtly love tradition is a behavioural mode where the beloved is arrogated to the position of a demi-god as well as an emblem of perfection, and to whose every whim the lover must condition himself. The relationship between the lover and the beloved is also sometimes that of a vassal and his feudal lord, who must always be propitiated. Hence the lover is prepared for the capricious moods of his beloved and is ready to please the slightest wish expressed by her. Petrarch's sonnets not only make use of this courtly love tradition, they have also immortalized themselves for the **Petrarchan conceits** or specific images and elaborate comparisons peculiar to Petrarch, contained in them.
- Among the Petrarchan conceits, one may describe the state of a lover as a ship who has lost its bearings in the tempest-tossed ocean of love. The beloved is usually lauded as an epitome of virtue. When the lover complains that she does not respond to his overtures, it is usually justified as a resultant of her virtuous nature: because she is overtly virtuous, she cannot respond to her lover as that would sully her chastity. The manifestations of Petrarchan conceits are many; usually it is the image of a suppliant lover trying to appease a 'fair, cruel maiden'.

- The sonnet is most popularly and generally a secular genre, without any religious connotation. It is, of course, a different thing that John Donne has used sonnets for religious purposes. At the time that the form of the sonnet enjoyed popularity and abundance, the religious bias was very strong and there was an equal and urgent need for the redemption and salvation of the individual soul. The writer of sonnets was often reprimanded for his preference for a secular and amorous genre over that of religious verse. The sonnet, having more or less a secular bias, and negotiating secular, amorous even carnal desires had a problem arbitrating with religious ideas of redemption and salvation. In order to negotiate this dichotomy, poets have sometimes put forward their beloveds as the picture of purity. Dante's beloved Beatrice, for instance, was a 'donna angelicata', a Christ figure who had come down from heaven to earth to lead her lover up from earth to heaven. Petrarch was also confronted for his apparent preference for a mortal Madonna over the celestial one, to whom he remained faithful his entire life. The idea then is to again epitomise the beloved beyond all virtues, almost putting her at one with godhead.
- Petrarch's sonnets have distinguished themselves for their structure as well as their sentiment. A Petrarchan sonnet would mean a sort with a distinct form and content. When the sonnet was borrowed over into England, we must consider both this formal aspect as well as its subject matter. In England the sonnet underwent changes both in its formal as well as in its subject matter, to designate itself as the English sonnet and thus differentiating itself from the Petrarchan sonnet.
- The sonnet was imported into England mostly through the patronage and efforts of Sir Thomas Wyatt (1503-1542) and Henry Howard the Earl of Surrey (1517-1547), during the reign of King Henry VIII (1509 – 1547). They both worked at the form of the sonnet to make it a stanza of three quatrains and a couplet although the sentiment was primarily Petrarchan, with them trying to re-work the Petrarchan conceits. Many of their sonnets were published in Richard Tottel's *Tottel's Miscellany*, which was published in 1557, after both their deaths. The sonnet, however, developed over the years of the sixteenth century until in the Elizabethan period, at the end of the century, there were quite a few exponents of the genre beginning with Sir Philip Sidney (1554-86), and then Edmund Spenser (1552-99) and William Shakespeare (1564-1616)
- Sonnets in Elizabethan England were written in larger conglomerates called the **Sonnet Sequences**. For instance, we have Sidney's *Astrophil and Stella* (1591), Michael Drayton's (1563-1631) *Idea* (1619), Edmund Spenser's *Amoretti* (1595), *Shakespeare's Sonnets* (1609) and John Donne's *Songs and Sonets* (1633).
- In these sonnet sequences what one primarily observes is that there is an exploration of a single and sustained theme. For instance, in Sidney's *Astrophil and Stella*, one encounters

Sidney's love relationship with Penelope Devereaux, in *Amoretti*, Spenser talks about his relationship with Elizabeth Boyle. A very interesting case study is that of Shakespeare's *Sonnets*, where out of the 154 sonnets written, 126 are for a young man, and the remaining 28 poems are for a certain 'dark lady'. Being a dramatist, there are three prominent dramatis personae even in his sonnets: the fair youth, the dark lady and the rival poet. The sequence as a whole derives its power of continuity and sustenance from the interplay and tensions between these three individuals with the poet.

- By the time we come to Shakespeare's *Sonnets*, the English sonnet has evolved considerably, with a distinct form and subject matter different from that of Petrarch although the former poet's shadow is still present. Using Petrarch as a norm we sometimes critically analyse these sonnets in the light of deviations from Petrarch or in the light of originality and tradition of the 'modern' or later poet. Using these methods of analyses we evolve the poetics of two distinctly different kinds of sonnets: the Petrarchan and the English or Shakespearian form.

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