Tradition and the Individual Talent: The Sonnet Through the Ages


The Sonnet Form:
Form: 14 lines for the most part arranged in one of the following rhyming patterns; a"b"a" marks the " volta" structure; a"b"a"b"c"d"e"f" marks the "volta" structure.

**Italian or Petrarchan Sonnet:**
- abba abba / cd ed cd (or cd ed cd)
- octave / sestet

**English or Shakespeare Sonnet:**
- abab cd ed ef / gg
- 3 quatrains / couplet

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**Text 1:** Sir Philip Sidney, *(1554-1586), Astrophil and Stella*, #5 c. 1582

It is most true, that eyes are form'd to serve
The inward light: and that the heavenly part
Ought to be king, from whose rules who do swerve,
Rebels to Nature, strive for their own smart.
It is most true, what we call Cupid's dart,
An image is, which for our selves we carve;
And, foole, adore in temple of our hart,
Till that good God make Church and Churchman starve.
True, that true Beauitue Vertue is indeed,
Whereof this Beauitue can be but a shade,
Which elements with mortall mixture breed:
True, that on earth we are but pilgrims made,
And should in soul up to our country move:
True, and yet true that I must Stella love.

**Text 2:** Sir Thomas Wyatt (1503-1542) *(Translation of Francesco Petrarcha, Rime 134)*

I find no peace and all my war is done.
I fear and hope, I burn and freeze like ice.
I fly above the wind yet can I not arise.
And naught I have and all the world I seize on.
That looseth nor locketh me, holdeth me in prison
And holdeth me not, yet can I scape no wise;
Nor letteth me live nor die at my device
And yet of death it giveth me occasion.
Without eyen I see and without tongue I plain.
I desire to perish and yet I ask health.
I love another and thus I hate myself.
I feed me in sorrow and laugh in all my pain.
Likewise displeaseth me both death and life,
And my delight is causer of this strife.

**Text 3 and 4:** William Shakespeare (1564-1616), *Sonnets* (1609), #137 and #31

Thou blind fool, Love, what dost thou to mine eyes, a
That they behold, and see not what they see? b
They know what beauty is, see where it lies, a
Yet what the best is take the worst to be. b
If eyes, corrupt by over-partial looks, c
Be anchored in the bay where all men ride, d
Why of eyes' falsehood hath thou forg'd hooks, e
Whereeto the judgement of my heart is tied? d
Why should my heart think that a several plot, e
Which my heart knows the wide world's common place? f
Or mine eyes seeing this, say this is not, e
To put fair truth upon so foul a face? f
In things right true my heart and eyes have erred, g
And to this false plague are they now transferred. g

Thy bosom is endeared with all hearts,
Which I by lacking have supposed dead,
And there reigns love and all love's loving parts,
And all those friends which I thought buried.
How many a holy and obsequious tear
Hath dear religious love stol'n from mine eye,
As interest of the dead, which now appear
But things removed that hidden in thee lie!
Thou art the grave where buried love doth live,
Hung with the trophies of my lovers gone,
Who all their parts of me to thee did give;
That due of many now is thine alone.
Their images I loved I view in thee,
And thou (all they) hast all the all of me.

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Text 5: Lady Mary Wroth, *Pamphilus and Amphilanthus* (1621)

How like a fire doth love increase in me,
The longer that it lasts, the stronger still,
The greater purer, brighter, and doth fill
No eye with wonder more, then hopes still be
Bred in my breast, when fires of love are free
To use that part to their best pleasing will,
And now impossible it is to kill
The heat so great where Love his strength doth see.
Mine eyes can scarce sustain the flames my heart
Doth trust in them my passions to impart,
And languishingly strive to show my love;
My breath not able is to breathe least part
Of that increasing fuel of my smart;
Yet love I will till I but ashes prove.

Christopher Reid (*1949)*

Text 6: Edna St. Vincent Millay (1892-1950)

I, being born a woman and distressed
By all the needs and notions of my kind,
Am urged by your propinquity to find
Your person fair, and feel a certain zest
To bear your body’s weight upon my breast:
So subtly list he fume of life designed,
To clarify the pulse and cloud the mind,
And leave me once again undone, possessed.

Think not for this, however, that poor treason
Of my stout blood against my staggering brain,
I shall remember you with love, or season
My scorn with pity, -- let me make it plain:
I find this frenzy insufficient reason
For conversation when we meet again.

Edwin Morgan (1920-2010)*

Fly

A fat fly fussles for an exit
at the window-pane.
Bluntly, stubbornly, it inspects it,
like a brain
nonplussed by a seemingly simple sentence
in a book,
which the glaze of unduly protracted acquaintance
has turned to gobbledygook.

A few inches above where the fly fixes
a gap of air
waits, but this has
not yet been vouchsafed to the fly.
Only retreat and a loop or swoop of despair
will give it the sky.

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5 101 Sonnets from *Shakespeare to Hardy*, ed. Don Paterson (London: Faber and Faber, 1999): 71