Poetry Explication: Sonnet Forms

The sonnet is a poem almost invariably of fourteen lines and following, perhaps with variance, one of several set rhyme schemes.

- **Petrarchan (Italian) sonnet**: abbaabba cddcdd (or one of several two-rhyme or three-rhyme combinations without couplet)
- **envelope sonnet**: abba cddc . . .
- **Spenserian sonnet**: abab bcbc cddc ee
- **Shakespearean (English) sonnet**: abab ccdc efe fg
- **Miltonic sonnet**: abbaabba cddcc (no volta: octave and sestet "combined"
- **Anglo-Norman sonnet**: abab cdcd efef gg
- **hybrid sonnet**: various combinations of elements characterizing the Italian and the English forms
- **French sonnet**: eleven-syllable lines
- **caudate sonnet**: the Italian (usually) sonnet with an additional (usually six) lines: "tails"
- **curtal sonnet**: a sonnet whose octave is curtailed to six lines and sestet is curtailed to four and a half lines
- **variants**: tributes, no doubt, to the basic form

**Petrarchan sonnet  (Italian sonnet)**

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.

*William Wordsworth*

**Sonnet 90**

She let her gold hair scatter in the breeze
that twined it in a thousand sweet knots,
and wavering light, beyond measure, would burn
in those beautiful eyes, which are now so dim:
and it seemed to me her face wore the colour
of pity, I do not know whether false or true:
I who had the lure of love in my breast,
what wonder if I suddenly caught fire?
Her way of moving was no mortal thing,
but of angelic form: and her speech
rang higher than a mere human voice.
A celestial spirit, a living sun
was what I saw: and if she is not such now,
the wound's not healed, although the bow is slack.

*Francesco Petrarch*

(trans. A. S. Kline)
Anglo-Norman sonnet

Leda and the Swan

A sudden blow: the great wings beating still
Above the staggering girl, her thighs caressed
By the dark webs, her nape caught in his bill,
He holds her helpless breast upon his breast.
How can those terrified vague fingers push
The feathered glory from her loosening thighs?
And how can body, laid in that white rush,
But feel the strange heart beating where it lies?
A shudder in the loins engenders there
The broken wall, the burning roof and tower
And Agamemnon dead.

Being so caught up,
So mastered by the brute blood of the air,
Did she put on his knowledge with his power
Before the indifferent beak could let her drop?

William Butler Yeats

Shakespearean sonnet  (English sonnet)

Sonnet 18

Shall I compare thee to a summer's day?
Thou art more lovely and more temperate:
Rough winds do shake the darling buds of May,
And summer's lease hath all too short a date:
Sometime too hot the eye of heaven shines,
And often is his gold complexion dimm'd;
And every fair from fair sometime declines,
By chance or nature's changing course untrimm'd;
but thy eternal summer shall not fade
Nor lose possession of that fair thou owest;
Nor shall Death brag thou wander'st in his shade,
When in eternal lines to time thou growest:
So long as men can breathe or eyes can see,
So long lives this and this gives life to thee.

William Shakespeare

Anniversary

At dinner, in that careful rouge of light
of five or six martinis, you could pass
for Ginger Rogers; we could dance all night
on tiny tabletops as slick as glass
in flying, shiny shoes. As Fred Astaire,
my wrinkles grow distinguished as we dine,
my bald spot festers with the growth of hair,
I grow intelligent about the wine.
But such high life is taxing; urgencies
excuse us from the table. Hand in hand
we seek the restrooms, trembling at the knees,
and find our grins grown horrid in that land
of flare-lit, glaring mirrors. Through the wall
you flush your toilet like a lonely call.

Ted Kooser
Spenserian sonnet

Sonnet LIV
Of this World's theatre in which we stay,
My love like the Spectator idly sits,
Beholding me, that all the pageants play,
Disguising diversely my troubled wits.
Sometimes I joy when glad occasion fits,
And mask in mirth like to a Comedy;
Soon after when my joy to sorrow flits,
I wail and make my woes a Tragedy.
Yet she, beholding me with constant eye,
Delights not in my mirth nor rues my smart;
But when I laugh, she mocks: and when I cry
She laughs and hardens evermore her heart.
What then can move her? if nor mirth nor moan,
She is no woman, but a senseless stone.

Edmund Spenser

Miltonic sonnet

[When I consider how my light is spent]

When I consider how my light is spent
Ere half my days in this dark world and wide,
And that one Talent which is death to hide
Lodged with me useless, though my soul more bent
To serve therewith my Maker, and present
My true account, lest He returning chide,
"Doth God exact day-labour, light denied?"
I fondly ask. But Patience, to prevent
That murmur, soon replies, "God doth not need
Either man's work or his own gifts. Who best
Bear his mild yoke, they serve him best. His state
Is kingly: thousands at his bidding speed,
And post o'er land and ocean without rest;
They also serve who only stand and wait."

John Milton

curtal sonnet

Pied Beauty

Glory be to God for dappled things—
For skies of couple-colour as a brinded cow;
For rose-moles all in stipple upon trout that swim;
Fresh-firecoal chestnut-falls; finches' wings;
Landscape plotted and pieced—fold, fallow, and plough;
And all trades, their gear and tackle and trim.
All things counter, original, spare, strange;
Whatever is fickle, freckled (who knows how?)
With swift, slow; sweet, sour; adazzle, dim;
He fathers-forth whose beauty is past change:
Praise him.

Gerard Manley Hopkins
To His Book
Wafer; thin and hard and bitter pill I
Take from time to time; pillow I have lain
Too long on; holding the brief dreams, the styled
Dreams, the nightmares, shadows, red flames high
High up on mountains; wilted zinnias, rain
On dust, and great weight, the dead dog, and wild

Onions; mastodonic woman who knows how,—
I'm tired of you, tired of your insane
Acid eating in the brain. Sharp stones, piled
Particularly, I let you go. Sink, or float, or fly now,
Bad child.

Leon Stokesbury

envelope sonnet  (Italian sonnet variant)

The Rural Carrier Stops to Kill a Nine-Foot Cottonmouth

Lord God, I saw the son-of-a-bitch uncoil
In the road ahead of me, uncoil and squirm
For the ditch, squirm a hell of a long time.
Missed him with the car. When I got back to him, he was all
But gone, nothing left on the road but the tip-end
Of his tail, and that disappearing into Johnson grass.
I leaned over the ditch and saw him, balled up now, hiss.
I aimed for the mouth and shot him. And shot him again.

Then I got a good strong stick and dragged him out.
He was long and evil, thick as the top of my arm.
There are things in this world a man can't look at without
Wanting to kill. Don't ask me why. I was calm
Enough, I thought. But I felt my spine
Squirm, suddenly. I admit it. It was mine.

T. R. Hummer

hybrid sonnet

Visionary Oklahoma Sunday Beer

The small window opened. I asked for the six-pack
I paid for, then I saw the women playing pool
In the loud and common light where ball and stick
Have always met.

The oldest on a high stool

Was as big as a mound but wasn't simply fat.
She glistened and shouted—she was having great fun
With all the other Indians—each one great
With child in a way to make that bulb a sun.

All fancy with no men around they played.
Hey, let me in is what I think I said.
I meant of course to ask where are your men
And what of pageantry and life and death?

Her break and a brown arm closed down
A show I would have stayed a season with.

James Whitehead
caudate sonnet (tailed sonnet)

The Only Comfort Always There

No one to hold brings tears to downcast eyes;
I know there is no one to see them through
the lonely nights when I am one, not two.
No mental tricks or voiced words could disguise
the pain brought to light by all past goodbyes.
I need a way to sleep and not feel blue,
when I can't find true peace by holding you.
As a child would, I turn to face the skies.

Sad thoughts make it so hard to sleep at night,
as so much turmoil lives in my worn mind.
I can't sleep with the pain of each heartbeat.
Now I go out and look to see night's light,
the stars and moon; a friend to always find
when I need a friend who's free of deceit.

One Bliss that does repeat.

The only comfort that is always there,
to brightly shine down and make me aware;
they'll free me of despair.

At night it's worst but I can bare my scars,
with shining light from the eternal stars.

Stephen J. Napolitano

further variations

Double Mock Sonnet
(excerpted second half)

A moment ago this stage was perfect, bare,
Inspiring like Hardy heath, despair
The catchword of the landscape's monologue
(Soliloquy, I mean). Now there's a dog.
Though almost thin and low and nondescript
Enough to fit my fine pet of a script,
He's making too much noise. His barks assail
The silence, lake trees, seagulls, his own tail,
Whatever. Single-voiced, he's nearly raised
An echo from the mist that hangs amazed.
However, he affronts my counterfeit
Drama, he gets my thanks for making it
(Amid this wind-swept, sullen antonym)
Unnecessary to imagine him.

Charles O. Hartman

Air-Raid Warning

Though
Night
Fright
Grow
No
Bright
Light
Show!

This
Law
Is
For
YOU
TOO!

Noel Petty
Some of the Literary Terms with Which We've Worked

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>alliteration</th>
<th>elision</th>
<th>metaphor</th>
<th>scansion</th>
<th>foot</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>allusion</td>
<td>enjambment</td>
<td>meter</td>
<td>sestet</td>
<td>iambic</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ambiguity</td>
<td>heroic couplet</td>
<td>metonymy</td>
<td>sigmatism</td>
<td>spondaic</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>anastrophe</td>
<td>hyperbole</td>
<td>octave</td>
<td>simile</td>
<td>trochaic</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>hyperbaton</td>
<td>imagery</td>
<td>oxymoron</td>
<td>sprung rhythm</td>
<td>pyrrhic</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>inversion</td>
<td>visual</td>
<td>paradox</td>
<td>synæsthesia</td>
<td>anapestic</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>apostrophe</td>
<td>auditory</td>
<td>personification</td>
<td>synecdoche</td>
<td>dactylic</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>assonance</td>
<td>tactile</td>
<td>quatrain</td>
<td>tenor and vehicle</td>
<td>metrics</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>consonance</td>
<td>olfactory</td>
<td>reification</td>
<td>tone</td>
<td>pentameter</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>couplet</td>
<td>gustatory</td>
<td>rhyme scheme</td>
<td>volta</td>
<td>tetrameter</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>diction</td>
<td>melopoeia</td>
<td>run-on line</td>
<td>zeugma</td>
<td>trimeter</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

A Far-from-Exhaustive Bibliography


