

Hello students, I'm Roxana and let us together explore the **form** of a **sonnet**. In the next few minutes we will get acquainted with the history and types of sonnets written in English, and also the structure of the sonnet. You will by the end of this presentation be able to identify the types of sonnets presented to you, understand what we mean by the iambic pentameter, workout the rhyme scheme of a sonnet, and maybe even try your hand at writing a sonnet or two? Why not?

The word sonnet comes from an Italian word for a 'little song' - '**sonetto**'. It is a 14 line poem and it was most popular in 14th century Italy, where the most prolific writer of sonnets was Francesco Petrarch - who in the 14th century popularised this form, basically to write love poems. He wrote so many of them, 317 in fact, that he lends his name to a form of sonnet called the Italian or the Petrarchan sonnet.

This Italian form traveled from Tuscany in **Italy to England** in the 16th century. During the period of the English Renaissance, when everything Italian was in fashion, two noblemen, Sir Thomas Wyatt and Henry Howard, Earl of Surrey, courtiers in the court of Henry VIII, are credited with popularising the sonnet form in England. While Thomas Wyatt satisfied himself with translating Petrarch's sonnets, Henry Howard made a few changes to Petrarch's form. He invented what we now know as the **English sonnet**.

The original **Petrarchan Sonnet** is divided into 2 parts. **An octave and a sestet** - 8 lines and 6 lines equal to 14. Well, what the Earl of Surrey did, he brought in a new form. He transformed this into 3 quatrains and a couplet. Of course it was a little later that this prodigious talent we know as William Shakespeare who popularised the sonnet by bringing in something new, something that only Shakespeare can carry off with aplomb - the **epigrammatic couplet**. His couplets were witty, funny, succinct, wise, pithy sayings and brilliantly written, unforgettable, most memorable - the way only Shakespeare can wing it!

So the kind of sonnets Shakespeare wrote followed the same form that Henry Howard started. The three quatrains ending in a couplet. Shakespeare's was an epigrammatic couplet, and this became the fashion for writing love poetry. In fact the form traveled from England to other parts of Europe as well. So let us now look at these forms.

We have by now established the following : The sonnet is made up of 14 lines. It has a certain structure and it has a rhyme scheme. We say that it has **14 decasyllabic lines**. What do you mean by decasyllabic? It means 10 syllables in one line. It has a particular meter called the **iambic meter**. Stay with me - in the next few seconds I will explain what I mean by the iambic meter.

So a sonnet has either an octave and sestet or three quatrains and a couplet. All of these are different words for different kinds of stanzas in poetry, so it has a particular **stanza form**, and it has a **rhyme scheme**. Let us go back and look at the two major forms in which the English sonnet is written. It is written in the original Italian/Petrarchan form, which is made up of the octave and sestet, or it is written in the form of **three quatrains and a couplet**. (**Shakespearean/Elizabethan or English Sonnet**) A quatrain is a stanza with four lines, so that's 12 lines - three quatrains - and a concluding couplet, which in Shakespeare's case, becomes an **epigrammatic couplet**.

OK so I told you, I will explain what we mean by iambic pentameter . For what I am about to explain, if you've to understand that we need to know what a syllable is? Alright. For example - for a very quick background to the iambic pentameter. When you take a word like communication. It is made up of five syllables. **Comm/ u/ ni/ ca/ tion**. When you take a word like advertisement. It is made up of 4 syllables. **Ad/ ver/ tise/ ment**. You will see that in any word we generally stress one syllable while the other syllables remain unstressed. communication, in advertisement, right? So this is the way in which a word is divided into syllables.

Just as a matter of interest - to do with syllables. For example, the word **/called/**. We don't say call - ed right so it's just one syllable, or the word Drawer - the drawer of a table. it is not draw -er. Its - /draw/, so that's only one syllable and some gibberish. (on the Ppt) You see, that there on your screen is not really any elvish or a language from Star Wars. It is actually the phonetic script, what we call the International Phonetic Script. (IPA). You don't really have to bother about it - unless you're doing spelling Bees. Then it becomes important. So basically, meter has to do with the pattern of stressed and unstressed syllables.

OK. let's look at a line of poetry. Syllables are arranged into groups of two or three called feet, and the iambic foot - the iambic meter is made up of an unstressed syllable followed by a stressed syllable. The **ta tum**, **ta tum**, **ta tum** - short- long, short- long, short- long where the x is short and you can see on your screen a small forward slash over the alphabets - it is above a stressed syllable. Let's do an example of this. Shakespeare, sonnet 130. Alright, let's look at the first line.

'My mistress' eyes are nothing like the sun,'

OK, let me exaggerate it a bit of it so that you can make out the pattern of stressed and unstressed syllables.

' My mistress' eyes are nothing like the sun'..... OK, so you got that **pattern of unstressed syllables followed by stressed syllables**.

Look at the next line. In the next line you will see forward slashes - they are where I have divided the syllables into **feet**. (a 'foot' in poetry - pattern of stressed and unstressed syllables put together).

' Coral is far more red than her lips red'

You see the slashes? You see five groups of short- long, short-long, short-long, short- long, short-long in the second line and that is what we call feet - 5 feet make up the **iambic Pentameter**. 5 is penta; iambic pentameter - 5 iambs. So, the line is divided into 5 iambs - this is the basic line structure of any sonnet.

Alright, so that's what we've done till now (on the screen)

We've established that sonnet has 14 lines, it has a certain meter called the iambic pentameter. Now let's look at the stanzas.

The Italian or the Petrarchan sonnet, as I said earlier, is divided into an octave and a sestet. The octave presents a problem that has to be solved. It expresses a desire, a doubt or conflict within the speakers, heart, mind and soul, and as almost 90% of sonnets are love poems, so this generally is unrequited love. It is about the transience of youth and beauty, a sense of hopelessness, of romantic longing and desire for an unattainable lover who is generally an aristocratic married lady who the poor, broken hearted poet - speaker knows, will never be his.

So once the problem is presented, then suddenly then there's something called the '**volta**', a change. Alright, so all of this is presented. Let's come to that.

So let's tackle this octave for now. The problem is introduced in the first 4 lines. Then it is developed in the next quatrain. And then, we come to the 9th line, so the 8 lines are done; the problem has been presented. Now the poet works towards a resolution of this problem, the tone changes completely and so does the rhyme scheme. The purpose of the sestet is to make a wise comment, to assess reality and come to terms with our human limitations. So that is the function of the sestet in an Italian or Petrarchan Sonnet.

Right, so what have we done until now? We talked about meter. We talked about stanzas. Now Shakespeare is the 'enfant terrible' of poetic rules; So in a Shakespearean or Elizabethan sonnet the '**volta**' comes at the beginning of the ninth line, the 3rd quatrain; or it could even happen at the beginning of the couplet - very typically with Shakespeare. Shakespeare writes both kinds of sonnets. Sonnets where the '**volta**' occurs in the third quatrain, or it occurs at the end of the 13th line. Let us look at this with a practical example in front of us. This is sonnet 130 by Shakespeare. You will see - I have colour coded the rhyme scheme. So if you see there are alternate lines rhyming - sun-dun; red - head; white - delight; cheeks-reeks..... OK, these are the first 8 lines. The rhyme scheme is **abab cdcd**. There's a problem there. He's talking about how you know his mistress is not good looking. Her lips are not red. She doesn't have rosy cheeks. Her breasts look like cow dung. She has wires instead of, you know, flaxen golden hair on her head. When she walks by, there is no waft of perfume - that wouldn't be right during Elizabethan times now would it? People generally had a bath once a year at the beginning of June, and you know, generally stank! That's why weddings and marriages were held in June. Every girl wanted to be a 'June Bride'. (just a bit of a trivia). But yeah, so the problem you know - Shakespeare talks about how his lover, the woman whom he has lost his heart to, has none of the standards of ideal beauty. He says I like to hear speak but when she speaks her voice is not musical at all and when she walks he doesn't see a goddess float on air - But - YET, he says, **YET**and that **volta**, that change, that thing, that, that magic that only Shakespeare can do in the **13th line**, when you think the sonnet is ending ! Now all the lines are over. Where is the time for him to come to a resolution? Where is the time? The space? 11 lines are over ! And there he does it !

' And yet by heaven I think my love as rare/ As any she belied with false compare.'

He says - I don't need false comparisons to validate my love, my passion. So that is an example of a volta that occurs only in the 13th line.

Let's look at what we have done. We have done Italian and Petrarchan sonnets. We have done Elizabethan or Shakespearean sonnets. There are variations to these. For example Spenser, Edmund Spenser, who came before Shakespeare, also changed the rhyme scheme a bit and his sonnet sequences use what is called the 'Spenserian Stanza'. You will do them in Semester 3. And of course, when it comes to modern poetry, anything and everything goes! A lot of sonnets are written even now in modern poetry. Many are written in free verse, 'vers libre'. So with modern forms - they are all over the place. Example on your screen. That's an example of a sonnet by an American poet called e. e. cummings. You will see the lines are all haywire. There are run on lines, there is nothing which is as strict as what we see in the earlier times.

To conclude. Sonnets were very popular in the 16th and 17th centuries, especially in the hands of Shakespeare and then Donne and Milton. Generally it became a convention that when love sonnets were written, they were written in the Shakespearean mode or the Elizabethan mode. But when it came to more stylised sonnets like serious ones, on serious subjects, '**Holy Sonnets**', poets chose the Italian or the Petrarchan form. After the 17th century, the popularity of writing sonnets died out. They were not very popular. But they were revived after the French Revolution at the hands of the Romantics, and Wordsworth, in fact wrote, you know, many sonnets - approximately 520/523. All the Romantic poets loved writing sonnets. And even today sonnets are written on any and every topic.

So there you have it. We have just seen Friendship Day go by - and you don't need a special day or month or year. Try your hand at writing a sonnet! It could be to a friend. It could be to somebody you admire. It could be to an 'ideal' or an 'idol'. It could be to one of your family members. Old love ? new love? Current love? Why don't you try? It would be a fun activity.

The last slide has the references.

Thank you students.