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## From Sicily with Love: Does the Sonnet make you an offer you can't refuse?

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### Abstract

The sonnet is one of the most popular forms of poetry and it has been around since the Italian renaissance. But what makes a sonnet, a sonnet (as it has changed in the hands of so many different makers)? What are its defining markers apart from it being a verse of fourteen lines? Are there any markers at all which can tell a sonnet apart from other forms of verse? Can we identify a sonnet if we see, and further, read one?

To answer these questions, one must first identify what the sonnet is a part of. This study thus seeks to identify a couple of generic markers of the sonnet and by applying the same through some works through history to illustrate that the notion of genre is dynamic. As far as the markers are concerned, I will be looking into: a) The asymmetric structure and see whether the conventions regarding the fourteen lines or that hold true or not. b) The idea of having a beloved and see how it transforms with time. For convenience, I have limited my sample size to four poems by poets who I consider to be representational: Petrarch, Shakespeare, Milton and Hopkins. It does come from Sicily, and apparently, with 'Love' but does it stay like that? Or, does it make you an offer of change you cannot refuse?

### Keywords

lyric, sonnet, mode, genre

### **From Sicily with Love: Does the Sonnet make you an offer you can't refuse?**

The sonnet is one of the most popular forms of poetry and it has been around since the Italian renaissance. But what makes a sonnet, a sonnet? What are its defining markers apart from it being a verse of fourteen lines? Are there any markers at all which can tell a sonnet apart from other forms of verse? In order to answer these questions, one must first identify what the sonnet is a part of. The sonnet is a part of the broader lyric or the poetic mode. The idea that lyric poetry has always been a very important form of the literary is a much more recent concept than we understand it to be. Goethe divided his idea of the natural forms of poetry into three parts: lyric, epic and drama. This early romantic notion of the lyric is very different from what it used to be. The difference lies in conceptualizing the lyric.

While "lyric" was used as a name for various sorts of poetry before the eighteenth century, toward the end of that century Genette finds that the lyric began to be understood as a representative or imitative genre because literary thinkers decided that "it imitates feelings" and thus could finally be "integrated into classical poetics." (Jackson 12)

According to Genette's idea, to have this integration, this mode thus had to be understood as a fiction or a representation of feeling rather than a feeling in itself. Northrop Frye suggested that the basis of the generic distinctions is the "radical of presentation" (Jackson 12). Frye here is talking about the mode of presentation/performance: acting, speaking or performance. He takes it back to the notion of the genre to the performative mode. The lyric, according to Frye, is "utterance that is overheard" (Jackson 3). By this he means that whenever we read a lyric or a poem we imagine in the back of our heads that someone is reciting it and we are overhearing the same. For example, when Milton was writing the epic, he was imagining an audience! This is a general remark to say that lyric in writing presupposes an imaginary audience. In this line of thought, Culler is of the opinion that it would be wrong to accept the descriptions of the genre on face value. Instead he focuses that literary critics should "reflect on what makes something count as a genre" (Jackson 14).

So, is there any common aspect to this? Can we identify a lyric, and subsequently a sonnet, when we see, and further on reading one? Whether the current idea was born in the eighteenth century, whether it is "utterance overheard" or a representation of our experience, whether it is dependent upon norms across periods and cultures, one needs a certain concept of the lyric to know when they are reading one. Fish points out that any act of reading is essentially-

"...acts of recognition, rather than being triggered by formal characteristics, are their source. It is not that the presence of poetic qualities compels a certain kind of attention but that the paying of a certain kind of attention results in the emergence of poetic qualities." (Jackson 15)

Now that the idea of the identification of the lyric has been made clear, it can be extended to apply for the sonnet as a genre as well. This study thus seeks to identify a couple of generic markers of the sonnet and by applying the same through some works through history to illustrate that the notion of genre is dynamic. As far as the markers are concerned, I will be looking into: a) The symmetric structure and see whether the

conventions regarding fourteen lines hold true or not. b) The idea of the beloved and how it transforms with time. Jauss asserts in 'Literary Theory as a challenge to Literary History' that the history of literature can only be the history of reception. For him, the writer, the reader and the text existed within the same system and they influenced one another via setting certain expectations or the horizon of expectations as he calls it which compels the writer both to conform and innovate. Thus, in order to illustrate the dynamism, it is first crucial to understand the history of the development of the sonnet.

There exists instances of the invention of the sonnet to be attributed to Pier delle Vigne, the Secretary of State to Frederick II of Sicily; this piece of information is particularly important as it shows how power and status played its role in the inception of the genre. It is true that the sonnet had an official courtly birth via Giacomo de Lentino in 1224 but, as the influences show, a lot of the temperament is owed to the liberal and inventive rule of Frederick II. His quest for secularism and independence from Rome was not easy and led to his eventual excommunication and it was in this atmosphere of supposed change that the sonnet was born. Paul Oppenheimer comments on the origin of the sonnet that

...in writing the earliest sonnets Giacomo did not borrow from the troubadours' eight-line canzone for the octave of this poems, or indeed from Provençal literature at all, but from the eight-line strambotto, familiar as a song form among thirteenth-century Sicilian peasants-so that we must today, if we wish to be accurate about the matter, regard the sonnet as Italian, and even Sicilian, in origin. In his 1915 essay, Wilkins speculates that the sestet of Giacomo's sonnets may have derived from the Arab zajal, a rhyming stanza popular with the Arabs living in Sicily in Giacomo's time. Wilkins abandons this idea as "negligible," however, in a subsequent essay, in which he argues that the sestet came to Giacomo in a burst of sheer inspiration. (Oppenheimer 171)

M.R.G Spiller however thinks that

The six-line sirma was common in canzoni, and it was his genius to see that six added to eight preserves in words the principle of difference between the two parts of binary structure which was originally the melodic requirement of the Provençal canso. (Spiller 16)

Phillis Levin, in her seminal work on the Sonnets comments on the two-part structure that the court members of Frederick II were probably familiar with either Plato's *Timaeus* or Fibonacci's *Liber Abaci*. The importance of being acquainted with both has to do with the understanding of ratio and disproportionality. Levin's idea of the ratio makes it easier to understand why the structure of this poetic form came into being in the first place. Also, another crucial aspect of the sonnet is the aspect of longing, which is generally for the beloved, which is often seen as a Petrarchan convention. However, it is also to be remembered that Petrarch also wrote sonnets which were political in nature but they are not dealt with all that much. Petrarch's model of the sonnet had a two-part division and a conclusion with a title. He called them 'fragmenta rime verse' (scattered verses). But the central theme revolved around his personal life and his deep love for Laura. The model or following of it definitely helped it survive but it also made it rigid to a certain extent.

While most of the English writers wrote about love, it was Shakespeare who made the most radical change of all by adding a sense of subversion of the dominant themes. Spenser turned the attention towards his wife and not any woman thus trying to give it a moral spin. Donne and Milton used it religion while the latter extended to use sonnets talk of politics, and disability as well and Hopkins used it for his spiritual experiences.

The first work that I have chosen for analysis is that of Petrarch. In this poem one can identify his use of the form and the metaphors he uses to describe his sense of longing. It is important to note the structure and the metaphors that he uses because it becomes a kind of standard for years to come. That is to say that many poets who have come after him might have experimented in their own right but they have followed suit when it comes to the aspect of descriptions. It was only Shakespeare who turned the conventions of the genre upside down.

Da'più belli occhi, et dal più chiaro viso  
 che mai splendesse, et da' più bei capelli  
 che facean l'oro e'l sol parer men belli,  
 dal più dolce parlare et dolce riso,  
 da le man, da le braccia che conquiso  
 senza moversi avrian quai più rebelli  
 fur d'Amor mai, da' più bei piedi snelli,  
 da la persona fatta in paradiso,  
 prendean vita i miei spirti; or n'è diletto  
 il Re celeste, i suoi alati corrieri,  
 ed io son qui rimasto ignudo et cieco.  
 Sol un conforto al le mie pene aspetto:  
 ch'ella che vede tutt' i miei pensieri  
 m'impetre grazia ch'i' possa esser seco. (348)

[From those fairest eyes, and from the brightest face that ever shone, and from the most lovely hair, that made gold and the sun seem less fair, from the sweetest speech and the sweetest smile, from the hands, from the arms that without stirring would have conquered those most rebellious against Love, from the fair light feet, from the form fashioned in Paradise, my spirits once took life: now in them delights the King of Heaven, and his winged messengers, and I am left here, naked and blind.

Only one comfort do I look for in my suffering: that she who sees all my thoughts will win grace for me, that I may be with her.] (Spiller p. 78-79)

In the translation however, Spiller deliberately avoids maintaining the structure. The reason might be that he wants the reader to get a sense of the structure only via reading the original. According to Spiller, in this poem, Petrarch uses “one of the simplest forms of organisation-the list” (Spiller 79). He uses very simple words of praise to eulogise his beloved Laura. The praises which have been described in the octave cover all the parts of the body that can be seen in, what Spiller calls, a “a normally dressed woman” (Spiller 79). The praise comes to a sudden halt in the first line of the sestet, as if the poet could not stop praising his beloved; and it then takes a rather grim turn which shows the sense

of longing. In the last six lines he talks about how he lies 'naked and blind' and that the 'Only one comfort do I look for in my suffering'. This grim turn shows how he longs to be united with his beloved and thus ends it in an almost desperate note of optimism which perhaps will never arrive: 'that I may be with her'. The first thing that is to be noted here is the structure. The poem follows the basic 8+6 octave and sestet mode, and looking at the Italian original it seems to perfectly follow the intended rhyme scheme as well. The octave, as discussed earlier, mainly contains the praises whereas the sestet takes a rather sombre turn. Here, the influence and the residual nature of the native strambotto and how it influences the nature of the octave can be directly seen. Also, the comments that Levine makes about proportionality can also be perfectly illustrated here as well. Therefore, this poem is perhaps one of the perfect illustrations of what the Petrarchan sonnet can be like. The consecutive sonneteers, specially the English ones, borrowed these stock praises 'fairest eyes' and 'brightest face' to follow the Petrarchan convention. Petrarch's style thus, it can be said, becomes dominant in the course of the time as he creates a horizon of expectations. Shakespeare's *Sonnet 130* perhaps can be used as a perfect counter to this where he uses the same stock expressions and totally subverts it. Shakespeare extends the horizon of the sonnet and brings an element of sarcastic beauty to the same as well where the existence of the beloved is not so much heavenly but more grounded in reality.

Before proceeding to Shakespeare, it is imperative to understand why the sonnet form was not adapted by the English in its entirety. When the sonnet crossed over to England with Wyatt and Surrey, it underwent some changes in the realm of structure. The conventional octave and sestet gave rise to the double quartets and a sestet (also read as two tercets) which Shakespeare later changes into three quartets and a couplet. Frank Kermode, in a discussion in BBC 4's *In Our Time*<sup>1</sup> points out that the Italian language had an abundance of rhyming words which was not the case in the English language. He further adds that the English sonneteers wanted something more "snappy" at the end which suited the nature of the language better. Shakespeare writes the sonnets in a time when the act is already a very established one. He inherits texts like that of Wyatt, Surrey, Sidney and Spenser. While all of them experimented in their own right, Shakespeare made the sonnet more dramatic. His structure of the triple quartet followed by a crucial couplet is rather interesting. He takes the ten lines to build or cave into the dominant mode of epithets and conventions and uses the last two lines, or the volta, to subvert the notions.

My mistress' eyes are nothing like the sun;  
Coral is far more red than her lips' red;  
If snow be white, why then her breasts are dun;  
If hairs be wires, black wires grow on her head.  
I have seen roses damasked, red and white,  
But no such roses see I in her cheeks;  
And in some perfumes is there more delight  
Than in the breath that from my mistress reeks.  
I love to hear her speak, yet well I know

<sup>1</sup> "BBC Radio 4 - In Our Time, The Sonnet". BBC, 2001, <https://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/p00547gy>.

That music hath a far more pleasing sound;  
 I grant I never saw a goddess go;  
 My mistress, when she walks, treads on the ground.  
     And yet, by heaven, I think my love as rare  
     As any she belied with false compare.<sup>2</sup>

Shakespeare's *Sonnet 130* stands in direct opposition to the Petrarchan mode. It is evident how he uses the same comparisons with suns and roses and the ideas of 'brightest' and 'fairest' only to negate all the notions. He says that his mistress does not have any of the idealistic qualifiers. One might think that he is ridiculing his mistress but with the turn in the last couplet he makes it clear that he loves his mistress as she is and does not want her to be 'belied with false compare'. The sense of realism also has a radical side to it because this is a part of his Dark Lady sonnets; Shakespeare addressed his sonnets to two people: the fair youth and the dark lady. The homoerotic and the cross-racial affection are indeed ahead of its time. So, he not only challenges the structure of the Petrarchan mode but he also questions the unrealistic white notions of beauty as a whole. It is also to be noted that, in poems of Petrarch or other sonneteers, the objects of desire or the names of the beloved are very clearly mentioned but Shakespeare mentions neither the name of the youth nor the lady. His notion of longing therefore can be read to be not fixed on one person in the text. As far as the structure is concerned, the residual presence of the strambotto was still very much visible in Petrarch but it is nowhere to be seen in Shakespeare as it is totally subverted.

From Shakespeare, the notion of sonnet further takes a turn with the arrival of John Milton. Milton shifted the notion of the sonnet radically. He turned the form from a very personal to a public one as a medium to address political needs of his party, and more importantly, Oliver Cromwell. As far as the structure is concerned, he takes no pause while writing the sonnet and constructs it into a full whole where the sentences run across the so-called turn. Most likely he took the sense of the political sonnet from the satirical works done by the Italian poets in the fifteenth century. Milton's most famous sonnet is the one where he talks about his developing blindness but I am not using that here. 'On his Blindness' is a much more meditative and personal poem. Here, I want to show how he used the mode of the sonnet in a public way.

Cromwell, our cheif of men, who through a cloud  
 Not of warr onely, but detractions rude,  
 Guided by faith & matchless Fortitude,  
 To peace & truth thy glorious way hast plough'd,

And on the neck of crowned Fortune proud  
 Hast reard Gods Trophies & his work pursu'd,  
 While Darwen stream with blood of Scotts imbru'd,  
 And Dunbarr feild, resounds thy praises loud,

<sup>2</sup> Shakespeare, William. "Sonnet 130: My Mistress' Eyes Are Nothing Like... | Poetry Foundation". Poetry Foundation, <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/45108/sonnet-130-my-mistress-eyes-are-nothing-like-the-sun>.

And Worcesters laureat wreath; yet much remains  
 To conquer still; peace hath her victories  
 No less renown'd than warr, new foes arise

Threatning to bind our souls with secular chaines:  
 Helpe us to save free Conscience from the paw  
 Of hireling wolves whose Gospell is their maw.<sup>3</sup>

The very first word in *Sonnet 16* makes it clear how it is different from the other works that we have dealt with so far. While in other poems we have seen how the affection is directed towards a beloved, here we see that change towards campaigning for the leader Oliver Cromwell with 'matchless Fortitude'. The stock epithets are replaced by political rhetoric which refers to the contemporary events of the day. The Dartmouth College's *The John Milton Reading Room* provides a fascinating peep into the-then political rhetoric. The 'peace and truth' refers to the aim of The Solemn League and Covenant made between Cromwell and the Scots. Cromwell called his victory against Charles II at the battle of Worcester as a "crowning mercy"; in the poem Milton reflects that with 'crowned Fortune'. The references to Darwen and Dunbar also talk about the battles that were fought by Cromwell and his men near Lancashire and Dunbar. The 'secular chaines' refer to the petitions introduced in parliament in 1652 to conform to the state controlled Protestant Church. The 'hireling wolves' is the reference to the taxation system that was brought where the clergy would be paid and hired by the state. Milton stood in strong opposition to this and saw it as hindering religious liberty. Therefore, it is clear via the references and the overall theme in general, as how he changes the notion of the sonnet into a public mode of poetry to support his political and religious ideologies. As far as the structure is concerned, however, Milton weaves the whole of the sonnet into a singularity and does not create a binary distinction. He maintains a rhyme scheme, but there the impact of the turn is nowhere near to that of Shakespeare or Petrarch etc. Like Shakespeare, Milton is also trying to extend the horizon of expectations by using the sonnet in a particular way how it had never been used before. Shakespeare changes the structure and the approach while keeping the element of desire intact whereas Milton totally removes the personal element of desire and moulds the structure in his own way.

After Milton, the sonnet never really remained the same and paved way for a lot more experimentations. It is obviously not possible to cover all of them but there is one more particular poet, whose work I think becomes important when you consider the structural aspect of the sonnet. When I think about the sonnet, the first thing that comes to my mind is that it has been fourteen lines. But, what if it didn't? Would it still be considered a sonnet? This question never came to mind until I read *Pied Beauty* by Gerald Manley Hopkins. Some consider Hopkins to be the greatest precursor to English modernist verse and others consider him to be a religious writer. Here I am interested to see how his poetic prowess gets manifested in the sonnet form.

<sup>3</sup> Milton, John. "Sonnets: 16". Dartmouth.Edu, [https://www.dartmouth.edu/~milton/reading\\_room/sonnets/sonnet\\_16/text.shtml](https://www.dartmouth.edu/~milton/reading_room/sonnets/sonnet_16/text.shtml).

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 áll trádes, 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.<sup>4</sup>

At a first look at the structure of the poem, something seems off and incomplete! It is the size of the poem which is only ten and a half lines. It is three and a half lines shorter than the standard sonnet. Even then, how does it become a sonnet? The standard octave expands to a nine-line triple tercet with a constant rhyme scheme in place. It praises God for creating the world in such a layered way where different aspects of colour or quality are juxtaposed to form a brilliant effect of vibrancy. There is no monotony in nature as it is 'dappled' or variegated as Hopkins puts it. He goes, like Petrarch does for Laura, to present a list of things which he finds admirable in God's nature. The romantic longing for the beloved shifts into a transcendental reverence for the ever-lively Nature. After listing out all the dappled aspects of nature, in the tenth line, Hopkins presents the turn, where he says that that nature might be variegated, developing and has myriad manifestations but the one who created it, God, is constant and 'past change' and that is why we should praise him. More than a turn in the sense of Petrarch, or more so for Shakespeare, the turn here is more of a turning towards completing a full circle where the poem begins with the aspect of praising God and ends in the same note. Even if the structure might seem a little off, it maintains the disproportionate ratio in its own quirky way and that is why, in spite of not being 14 lines it can still be considered a sonnet.

Looking back thus, Sisir Kumar Das's statement about the sonnet sums it all up

The introduction of the sonnet into English literature from the Italian can be taken as another example of literary change. If one looks into the history of its development from a poetic form used by the Provençal troubadour, or its modifications by the Sicilian school of poetry in the 19th century or the way it was practiced by Dante, and its later culmination in Petrarch's *Rima*, it can be called the history of internal change suggesting continuity of poetic tradition. But its introduction in the English language by Wyatt and Surrey belongs to the history of external change. It would have remained a literary curiosity, an 'interesting' event but not a 'significant' one, had it not been taken up by Spencer and Sidney and Shakespeare, and accepted by the English literary community. The

<sup>4</sup> Hopkins, Gerald Manley. "Pied Beauty | Poetry Foundation". Poetry Foundation, 2020, <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/44399/pied-beauty>.

emergence of a new genre, therefore, becomes central in any literary history. (Das 45)

By this study, I wanted to look at, in my brief capacity, this notion of what Das calls to be “external change” by an evaluation of the generic markers of form and the notion of having a beloved as the genre crossed the geographical barriers. In Petrarch we see that the ideal structure and theme of longing is born. Shakespeare subverts the theme while making the ‘turn’ to be more dramatic in his own way. Milton consolidated the form into a single whole eliminating the dramatic aspect of the turn as he made it a vehicle for his political and religious propaganda directed towards their leader Oliver Cromwell; thereby leaving no scope for romance. Hopkins toyed with the idea of the structure and shrunk the sonnet while applying a hop-skip and jump sprung rhythm. He also added an element of devotion. Yes, there are lot of other writers like Wordsworth, Elizabeth Barret Browning, and Seamus Heaney etc. who have also made important contributions to this genre. But, keeping in mind the scope and a realistic timeframe, I had to limit myself. Therefore, for a form of verse or a genre which has been so flexible, it would be unrealistic to expect a purity of form. But if the genre is so flexible with so many varied manifestations then, returning to the question I started with: what do we call a sonnet at all? Spiller provides a short answer which says it all.

...There is by custom a basic or simple sonnet, of which the others are variations: it has proportion, being in eight and six and extension, being in ten-or eleven-syllable lines, and duration, having fourteen of them. Any poem which infringes one of these parameters will remind us of a sonnet quite closely; a poem which infringes two will be more difficult to accommodate, but we will probably try to establish some procedure to account for the formation; and a poem which infringes all three will not be recognizable as a sonnet at all, and we will regard it as something else unless there is contextual pressure... (Spiller 3-4)

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