

EVOLUTION OF THE SONNET IN ENGLISH

LEARNING OUTCOMES:

- The student will get an idea about the conventions of a classical sonnet as practiced in Italy by Petrarch
- The development of the English sonnet form from the classical model will also be explained.
- The role of Sonnet cycles in popularizing Secular love poetry will also be addressed
- Finally the student will learn about the role of Shakespeare in creating the English sonnet as a genre distinct from the Petrarchan model.

The sonnet as a poetic genre was imported into England from Italy. It went on to become the most popular form of poetry in Elizabethan England. The sonnet form was pioneered by Francesco Petrarch a fourteenth century Italian poet. It is commonly characterized as a fourteen line poem addressed to a person, written on the theme of love.

Petrarch's poems addressed to his beloved Laura portrays the latter as a lady of virtue and grace. The poet-lover's attitude to his beloved is one of worshipful adoration. The idealization of the poet's mistress adds a dimension of spirituality to the relationship between the lovers. Although there were other earlier exponents of this form in Italy: namely Dante, whose *La Vita Nuova* is a sonnet sequence linked by prose commentary it is Petrarch who combines the tropes of secular love poetry with the theme of spiritual quest to give the genre a distinct convention which was to be used as a model by European love poets in the next three hundred or more years.

The Petrarchan sonnet documented the courtship between the poet and Laura where the former was constantly troubled by his lack of self-worth when he compares himself to the deified Laura. Laura symbolizes a perfection which goes against the base, carnal desire of his love. Sometimes he retreats into nature to find solace from the agonies of an unrequited relationship. The Petrarchan convention thus provided the English sonneteers with a rich corpus of themes to work upon and the flexibility of the tradition allowed incorporation of new ideas. In terms of structure the Petrarchan model used an octave (first eight lines) rhyming *abba abba*

,followed by a 'volta' and the sestet rhyming freely, except they never concluded with a couplet.

The English sonneteers freely experimented with the sonnet form in terms of the structure and treatment of love. Sir Thomas Wyatt was the first translator of the Petrarchan Sonnet and some of his early works were published in Tottel's Miscellany. Wyatt also wrote sonnets of his own where he experimented with the rhyme scheme of the sestet. Wyatt's contemporary Surrey also published a number of Petrarchan translations to encourage the popularity of the sonnet.

After Wyatt and Surrey the sonnet form started to be practiced more widely in England. The sonnet cycles or sonnet sequences came to be practiced more frequently. Notable among them were Sidney's *Astrophel and Stella* which dramatizes his courtship with Penelope Devereaux. The sonnet cycles were clusters of sonnets written by a single poet often depicting the various trials and tribulations of the poet's courtship with his beloved. The English sonnet cycles, thus, enriched the Petrarchan tradition by documenting various nuances of secular love. Spenser's *Amoretti*, is a sonnet cycle which celebrates his courtship with Elizabeth Boyle, whom he later married. Shakespeare's Sonnets portray an unconventional love and sometimes deliberately contests the Petrarchan conventions by characterizing the beloved as a person who is inconstant and far from perfect.

Shakespearean Sonnet transfigured the conventional Italian sonnet, not only thematically but structurally as well. The Shakespeare sonnets generally have three quatrains (four line stanzas) rhyming abab, cdcd, efef, gg. The final couplet rounds off the sonnet giving it a clinching effect. The rhymed couplet therefore becomes the hallmark of the English sonnet.

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