THE SONNET TRADITION

Tradition cannot be inherited, and if you want it you must obtain it by great labour…

T. S. Eliot, 'Tradition and the Individual Talent' (1919)

Carl Tighe

The sonnet is a traditional poetic form that most poets try at least once in their life, and many cut their poetic teeth on it. The sonnet is a fourteen line lyric poem, usually with lines of 10 syllables and a set rhyme scheme. The name of the form derives from the Italian word *sonetto*, meaning little song, which in turn is derived from the Latin word *sonus* meaning sound.

The sonnet is said to have been developed and the rules set by Guittone D'Arezzo (d1294). It was used extensively by Francesco Petrarca, usually known in English as Petrarch (1304-74), its major and most famous practitioner. A Petrarchan sonnet was structured as a group of eight lines (octave) in which a proposition or problem is stated, followed by a major break and then six lines (sestet) in which a solution is proposed: abba, abba, cde, cde. That is, a quartet, a quartet, and two triplets. However, after Petrarch there are many variations of this structural arrangement. It was found that in English it was hard to follow Petrarch's original rhyme scheme because there are said to be fewer rhyming words than in Italian. What emerged over time is often referred to as 'the English Sonnet', where the standard rhyme scheme is: abab, cdcd, efef, gg (three quartets and a couplet.

Sonnet writing is one of the great traditions of English literature. Sequences of sonnets were particularly popular in England in the 15th and 16th centuries with imitators of Petrarch like Sir Thomas Wyatt, and later Samuel Daniel, Sir Phillip Sidney and Edmund Spenser. A little later Shakespeare's 'sugar'd sonnets' appeared, and although they were probably never intended for publication and just the latest sequence in a fashionable trend, his poems made some important changes to the form.

Later still there were John Donne, John Milton, William Wordsworth and more recently W. H. Auden and Seamus Heaney. Poets who wrote sonnets were always interested in and influenced by what other writers of sonnets had produced. Knowing something about the form and its history allows you to access some of the history of English poetry, but also the developing history and tradition of this particular poetic form.

There are a great many anthologies and collections of sonnets and numerous books about the sonnet form, but one of the best and most informative remains is still: Patrick Cruttwell, *The English Sonnet* (The British Council / Longmans, Green & Co: London, 1966)

William Shakespeare (1564-1616):

Let me not to the marriage of true minds	a 10
Admit impediments, love is not love	b 10
Which alters when it alteration finds,	a 10
Or bends with the remover to remove.	b 10
O no, it is an ever fixèd mark	c 10
That looks on tempests and is never shaken;	d 11
It is the star to every wand'ring bark,	c 10
Whose worth's unknown although his height be taken.	d 11
Love's not time's fool, though rosy lips and cheeks	e 10
Within his bending sickle's compass come,	f 10
Love alters not with his brief hours and weeks,	e 10
But bears it out even to the edge of doom:	f 11
If this be error and upon me proved,	g 10
I never writ, nor no man ever loved.	g 10

Here there is a break at the 4th line, a major break at the 8th and the last two lines are very distinctive in offering a kind of summary. This is a typical Shakespearean sonnet. It occurs throughout Shakespeare's sonnet collection and it occurs frequently - almost hidden - within the dialogue of *Romeo and Juliet*.

The rhyme scheme gives us some clues about Elizabethan pronunciation. Here, for example, *love* rhymes with *remove*, *come* rhymes with *doom* and *proved* rhymes with *loved*.

A Shakespearean sonnet is usually structured: abab, cdcd, efef, gg.

John Milton (1608–74)
'On His Blindness'

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

Here the break comes with the 9th line with words 'God doth not need…'

Milton follows the Latin or Petrarchan model in his rhyme scheme: abba, abba, cde, cde.

William Wordsworth (1770–1850):
'Lines Composed upon Westminster Bridge, Sept. 3 1803'

Earth has not anything to shew more fair:	a
Dull would he be of soul who could pass by	b
A sight so touching in it's majesty:	b
This City now doth like a garment wear	a
The beauty of the morning; silent, bare,	a
Ships, towers, domes, theatres, and temples lie	b
Open unto the fields, and to the sky;	b
All bright and glittering in the smokeless air.	a
Never did sun more beautifully steep	c
In his first splendor valley, rock, or hill;	d
Ne'er saw I, never felt, a calm so deep!	c
The river glideth at his own sweet will:	d
Dear God! the very houses seem asleep;	c
And all that mighty heart is lying still!	d

Wordsworth breaks his poem at the 8th line and, rather in the manner of Shakespeare, also offers a very distinctive closing two lines. The rhyme scheme here is a variation on the Petrarchan sonnet: Abba, abba, cdc, dcd.

Punctuate the following passage.

I met a traveller from an antique land who said two vast and trunkless legs of stone stand in the desert near them on the sand half sunk a shattered visage lies whose frown and wrinkled lip and sneer of cold command tell that its sculptor well those passions read which yet survive stamped on these lifeless things the hand that mocked them and the heart that fed and on the pedestal these words appear my name is ozymandias king of kings look on my works ye mighty and despair nothing beside remains round the decay of that colossal wreck boundless and bare the lone and level sands stretch far away

Now rearrange these lines to create a 14 line sonnet:

In fact this is one of the most famous sonnets in the English language. Compare what you have created with the original. You may find Shelley's punctuation is very different to your own.

P. B. Shelley (1792 – 1822)
'Ozymandias'

I met a traveller from an antique land
Who said: Two vast and trunkless legs of stone
Stand in the desert... Near them, on the sand,
Half sunk, a shattered visage lies, whose frown,
And wrinkled lip, and sneer of cold command,
Tell that its sculptor well those passions read
Which yet survive, stamped on these lifeless things,
The hand that mocked them, and the heart that fed;
And on the pedestal these words appear;
'My name is Ozymandias, king of kings:
Look on my works, ye Mighty, and despair!'
Nothing beside remains. Round the decay
Of that colossal wreck, boundless and bare
The lone and level sands stretch far away.

Now let's see how this sonnet works…

I / met / a / trave/ller / from / an / an/tique / land	10 a
Who / said: / Two / vast / and / trunk/less / legs / of / stone	10 b
Stand / in / the / des/ ert. / Near / them, / on / the / sand,	10 a
Half / sunk, / a / shatt/ered vis/age / lies, / whose / frown,	10 b
And wrinkled lip, and sneer of cold command,	10 a
Tell that its sculptor well those passions read	10 c
Which yet survive, stamped on these lifeless things,	10 d
The hand that mocked them, and the heart that fed;	10 c
And on the pedestal these words appear;	10 e
'My name is Ozymandias, king of kings:	10 d
Look on my works, ye Mighty, and despair!'	10 e
// Nothing beside remains. // Round the decay	10 f
Of that colossal wreck, boundless and bare	10 e
The lone and level sands stretch far away.	10 f

Shelley uses a very regular 10 syllable line. This poem has an unusual rhyme scheme: ababa, cdce, defef. Shelley offers a break at the 8th line, but there also seems to be a distinctive break at the start and middle in the middle of the 12th line.

The poem was first published on 11 January 1818 in *The Examiner*, but written some time earlier, possibly inspired by the imminent arrival of a colossal statue of the third Egyptian Pharaoh, Ramesses II, (Ozymandias is his Greek name) acquired for the British Museum by the Italian adventurer Giovanni Belzoni in 1816 and shipped to London in 1821.

The ancient Greek chronicler, Diodorus Siculus (Diodorus of Sicily, who lived in the first century BC) quotes an inscription found at the base of a sculpture of Ozymandias:

King of Kings am I, Ozymandias. If anyone would know how great I am and where I lie, let him surpass one of my works.

Even though archeologists found Rameses II's tomb (number KV5 – the largest and most impressive of all the tombs in the Valley of Kings) they have not found his body.

There are several modern practitioners of the sonnet too, Seamus Heaney (1939-2013) among them:

Seamus Heaney
'Bogland'

What made the knock so clumsily evoke	a
your trappings - still unfinished in this dark alloy	b
of dawn, where clouds and men fight to poke	a
and mesh you in their plots? To me, a boy,	b
you look petite yet grand in radiance - even as	c
you lie on shadowed ground where they are ants.	d
Embroiled in human sweat each tiny fist has	c
charm enough - so near extinction - to enhance	d
the site before you stand to propel the ground	e
into oblivion and walk with me beside	f
the lake, our home, where giant dreams	g
inhale and spout. Oh I am dumbfound	e
in the glare and shrewd device where we collide -	f
while time and you abandon, in extremes.	g

Heaney offers very little punctuation, and there seems to be no break in the development at the 8th line, but rather unconventionally there is a kind of break on the 6th and in the middle of the 12th lines.

The rhyme scheme here is: abab, cdcd, efg, efg