

Study material for second semester students

CC- IV (section- A)

Sonnet

Definition:

To define in a very generalised manner, a sonnet is a lyric poem that usually consists of fourteen iambic pentameter lines interlinked by various formal rhyme schemes.

Origin:

Etymologically the term 'sonnet' comes from Italian word *sonetto* which implies a 'little sound' or 'song'. This poetic form was originated in 13th century Italy. Arguably poet Giacomo da Lentini of the Sicilian School was the inventor of the form though eminent Italian lyric poets like Dante Alighieri, Cavalcanti, Petrarch along with others have played a significant role in popularizing the poetic form. In England, Sir Thomas Wyatt and Henry Howard, the Earl of Surrey imported this poetic form from Italy in the early 16th century. During the final decade of 16th century this poetic form became widely popular in England.

Types:

In English literature there are three dominant sonnet forms.

- A. The Italian/ Petrarchan sonnet.
- B. The English / Shakespearean sonnet.
- C. The Spenserian sonnet.

The Italian/ Petrarchan sonnet : Named after famous 14th century Italian poet Petrarch, this type of sonnet can be divided into two parts – an octave and a sestet. In a Petrarchan sonnet, the first eight lines of the sonnet that shows the development of a particular thought is called an **octave**. **Sestet** comprises the final six lines of the sonnet and brings the thought into completion. In between octave and sestet, there is a 'turn' or *volta* that signifies a change or turn into the thought process.

Rhyme scheme: abbaabba cdecde or ccdccdc.

The English / Shakespearean sonnet : Named after its greatest practitioner, William Shakespeare, a Shakespearean sonnet is usually divided into three *quatrains* and a concluding *couplet*.

Rhyme scheme: abab cdcd efef gg.

The Spenserian sonnet: Named after Edmund Spenser, the Spenserian sonnet consists of three quatrains and a couplet but unlike a Shakespearean sonnet the quatrains are interlinked with a continuous rhyme scheme.

Rhyme scheme: abab bcbc cdcd ee.

Sonnet sequence/ cycle: A sonnet cycle implies a series of sonnets that centre around a particular theme or a particular person. In such sequences the poets often explore in details the various aspects of the theme and varied mood and development of his rumination. Such sonnet cycles accommodate a wide range of themes though love is the commonest of them all.

Examples:

Sonnet sequences: Shakespeare's sonnet sequence, *Astrophel and Stella* by Sir Philip Sidney, *Delia* by Samuel Daniel, *Amoretti* by Edmund Spenser, *Holy sonnets* by John Donne, *Sonnets from Portuguese* by Elizabeth Barrett Browning, *Altarwise by Owl-light* by Dylan Thomas etc.

Sonnets: "On His Blindness" by Milton, "Composed Upon Westminster Bridge" by Wordsworth, "On First Looking into Chapman's Homer", "Bright Star" by Keats, "Ozymandias" by Shelley, "Leda and the Swan" by Yeats etc.