

**:: STRUCTURE ::****7.0 Objectives****7.1 Introduction: Sonnet****7.2 Critical Assessment****7.2.1 Characteristics of sonnet****7.2.2 Origin of Sonnet form and its development****7.2.3 Types of sonnet****7.3 Lets sum up****7.4 Key Word****7.5 Check Your Progress****7.6 Suggested Reading**

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**7.0 OBJECTIVES**

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The objectives of this unit are to:

- Critically examine and trace the history of the sonnet form
- Critically study the different types of sonnets written by several poets writing in English

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**7.1 INTRODUCTION: SONNET**

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The word sonnet is derived from the Italian word “sonetto” which means “little song”. Sonnet is a form of poetry written in fourteen lines in iambic pentameter. The sonnet employs one of the several rhyme schemes and has structured thematic pattern.

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**7.2 CRITICAL ASSESSMENT**

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**7.2.1 Characteristics**

All the sonnets have few characteristics in common. Firstly, they are written in fourteen lines. Secondly, they have regular rhyme scheme and

follow strict metrical pattern. Most of the sonnets follow iambic pentameter where each line has ten syllables in five pairs where stress comes on the second syllable in a word.

### **7.2.2 Origin of Sonnet form and its development**

The origin of the sonnet form dates back to thirteenth century in Italy. It was Francesco Petrarca famously known as Petrarch who raised the sonnet form to a greatest level of perfection through the poems he wrote admiring a woman known as Laura. However the sonnet form was introduced in England by Thomas Wyatt along with Surrey. Thomas Wyatt translated the petrarchan sonnets in English and brought the form in England. But as time passed, the sonneteers of England made changes in the Italian whereas Wyatt did not follow this pattern and rather brought changes in the sonnet form where he took first twelve lines as a complete poem and emphasised the concept in concluding couplet. Thus the ending a sonnet with a couplet became one of the special feature of Elizabethan sonnet. This pattern was followed even by William Shakespeare. William Shakespeare wrote around 154 sonnets which were collected and published posthumously in 1609. William Shakespeare wrote sonnets on the theme of friendship, love, Greek mythology etc. Some of his sonnets are addressed to a young man with whom Shakespeare had deep friendship while some are addressed to a mysterious woman.

Henry Howard, a contemporary of Wyatt introduced another variation in the sonnet form where he divided the first twelve lines into three quatrains and ending the sonnet with a couplet. Henry Howard through his precision, handling of theme, perfection of meter and clarity of thought become a famous poet known especially for his sonnets. This format and division of lines into quatrain was retained by Shakespeare and other Elizabethan sonneteers and poets. George Gascoigne defined Elizabethan sonnet as “Sonnets are fourteen lines, every line containing ten syllables. The first twelve to rhyme in stanza of four lines by cross metre, and the last two rhyming together do conclude the whole” (Cuddon, 644). There were many poets who started writing sonnets during Elizabethan age and famous among them were William Shakespeare, Edmund Spenser, Henry Constable, Thomas Lodge and Sir Philip Sidney.

Sir Philip Sidney's *Astrophel and Stella* (published in 1591) is considered to be one of the greatest sonnets where Astrophel pines for Stella. After the Elizabethan age the love for writing sonnets faded away. Poets of Jacobean and Caroline age did not feel inclined towards writing the sonnets. However, in 1600s, John Donne, the metaphysical poet started

exploring the theme of faith and doubt in his collection titled *Holy Sonnets*. He wrote many sonnets which were part of his collection called *Songs and Sonnets*. He brought variations in the form where he wrote sonnets using eighteen lines. Later the poets in the Romantic age continued writing the sonnets. William Wordsworth wrote sonnets 'The Virgin' and 'Nuns Fret Not at Their Convent's Narrow Room'. He wrote several other sonnets on the English church. It is asserted that William Wordsworth wrote around 523 sonnets.

William Wordsworth wrote many sonnets on the history of the English church. Shelley wrote sonnets on politics and the frailty of pride. Yeats wrote the sonnet Leda and the Swan where he presents the impregnation of Leda by the swan where the swan represents the Zeus. In 20<sup>th</sup> century, Robert Frost mastered the sonnet form and wrote many sonnets like 'Acquainted with the Night', 'Design' etc.

### 7.2.3 Types of sonnet

There are six types of sonnets namely:

- Petrarchan/ Italian Sonnet
- Shakespearean sonnet
- Spenserian sonnet
- Miltonic Sonnet
- Terza Rima Sonnet
- Curtal sonnet

**Petrarchan sonnet:** Petrarchan sonnet is considered to be the first type of sonnet, a form of poetry that was invented and popularized by the Italian poet Petrarch. It was Petrarch, an Italian poet who invented this sonnet form and made it popular.

The Petrarchan or the Italian sonnet is divided into two stanzas i.e. an octave and the sestet. The octave consists of eight lines and the sestet consists of six lines. The Petrarchan sonnet strictly follows the rhyme scheme abba, abba, cdecde or cdcdcd. Petrarchan has also used a volta (meaning: turn) that occurs between the eighth and ninth line. This is done with the intention of making a shift from an argument in the octave to counterargument or clarification in the sestet. Petrarch has written sonnets like 'If no love is, O God, what fele so I?', 'I'd Sing of Love in Such a Novel Fashion', 'Ways apt and new to sing of love I'd find'.

Petrarchan sonnet greatly influenced Sir Thomas Wyatt. Sir Thomas Wyatt introduced Petrarchan sonnet to England in 16<sup>th</sup> century. He

translated many sonnets by Petrarch in English language and he himself wrote many sonnets that drew the attention of many poets in England.

**Shakespearean sonnet:** In the age of Renaissance, Shakespearean sonnets were written by William Shakespeare. Shakespearean sonnet also known as the English sonnet follows the rhyme scheme of ababdcdefef gg. The fourteen lines are divided into three quatrains followed by a couplet. The couplet brings out a sudden revelation towards the end of the sonnet. William Shakespeare wrote sonnets that were preoccupied with the theme of love, change, faithfulness, aging etc. It is asserted that sonnets from sonnet no 1 to 126 are addressed to a young man while sonnets from sonnet no 127 to 152 are addressed to a dark lady who caused great pain to the poet. One of the famous sonnet by William Shakespeare is sonnet no 116.

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

The sonnet talks about the purest form of love that remains constant in spite of several barriers on its way. He defines true love as something that never changes or is shaken by the adverse storms in life. True love is not the victim of time and change. Rather it remains constant till the edge of the doom. In the concluding lines he asserts that if whatever he has said about love is wrong than his writing is futile nor any man has loved truly on this earth.

**Spenserian sonnet:** Spenserian sonnets were named after the 16<sup>th</sup> century poet, Edmund Spenser. Following the technique of Wyatt and Earl of Surrey, Spenser wrote his sonnets in three quatrains followed by a couplet. He used Sicilian quatrains ( four line stanza of iambic pentameter abab) where he developed an idea or a conflict and concluded with a couplet that resolved the conflict. Following iambic pentameter,

Spenserian sonnets had abab bcbc cdcd ee rhyme scheme. Amoretti LXXV: One Day I Wrote her Name is a beautiful sonnet written by Spenser for his beloved. In the sonnet he expresses his love for the beloved and try to eternalize her through the verse. The poet believes that by eternalizing her through the verse, their love will remain immortal not only for the ages to come but till the end of the earth.

One day I wrote her name upon the strand,  
But came the waves and washed it away:  
Again I write it with a second hand,  
But came the tide, and made my pains his prey.  
Vain man, said she, that doest in vain assay,  
A mortal thing so to immortalize,  
For I myself shall like to this decay,  
And eek my name be wiped out likewise.  
Not so, (quod I) let baser things devise  
To die in dust, but you shall live by fame:  
My verse, your virtues rare shall eternize,  
And in the heavens write your glorious name.  
Where when as death shall all the world subdue,  
Our love shall live, and later life renew.

**Miltonic Sonnet:** In the 17<sup>th</sup> century, John Milton wrote sonnets where he changed the traditional Petrarchan sonnet form by introducing an enjambment in the sonnet. Enjambment means the continuation of a sentence without a pause. In other words in a verse it a phrase or thought that does not come to an end at the line break, rather moves over to the next continuing line in the stanza. Milton rather than writing on the theme of love, wrote about political issues and social concerns prevailing in the society. The sonnet ‘On His Blindness’ is considered to be one of the best sonnets written by Milton.

#### **On His Blindness**

When I consider how my light is spent,  
ere half my days, in this dark world and wide,  
And that one talent which is death to hide  
Lodged with the useless, though my soul more bent  
to serve therewith my Maker, and present  
My true account, lest he returning chide,  
Doth God exact day-labour, light denied?  
I fondly ask, but Patience, to prevent  
That murmur, soon replies: God doth not need

Either man's works or his own gifts: who best  
Bear his mild yolk, they serve him best. His state  
Is kingly: thousands at his bidding speed  
And post o'er land and ocean without rest;  
They also serve who only stand and wait.

In the sonnet the poet, John Milton through the poem talks about his blindness. He expresses his anguish as his blindness has made him incapable of writing. Milton wished to serve the almighty by writing something for the God, but he feels paralysed in fulfilling his task. He questions God as to why God has placed him in such a condition where he cannot utilize his talent of writing. He further questions that does God still expect him to write in spite of his blindness. But towards the end of the sonnet, Milton gets the answer to the questions he has for God. He realises that God serves those who patiently surrender to the will of God without complaining. God serves the best to those who endure all hardships of life. Thus, the poet concludes the sonnet with a revelation that irrespective of any hardship, man has to remain loyal to the god and trusting the almighty is also a kind of service to him.

Terza Rima: Dante Alighieri is credited with the invention of Terza Rima sonnet form in the late 13<sup>th</sup> century. He used this form in his famous epic The Divine Comedy. Terza Rima consists of a stanza of three lines also known as tercets. These tercets are written usually in the iambic pentameter. . Thus it follows the rhyme scheme of aba bcb cdc ded... Terza rima as a form of sonnets was adopted by many poets like Byron, Shelley, Milton, W.H Auden, William Carlos William, T.S Eliot and many others. Robert Frost's poem 'Acquainted With the Night' is written in Terza Rima form.

### **Acquainted with the Night**

I have been one acquainted with the night.  
I have walked out in rain—and back in rain.  
I have outwalked the furthest city light.  
I have looked down the saddest city lane.  
I have passed by the watchman on his beat  
And dropped my eyes, unwilling to explain.  
I have stood still and stopped the sound of feet  
When far away an interrupted cry  
Came over houses from another street,  
But not to call me back or say good-bye;  
And further still at an unearthly height,  
One luminary clock against the sky

Proclaimed the time was neither wrong nor right  
I have been one acquainted with the night.

Robert Frost, 1928

**Curtal Sonnet:** A curtal sonnet is a sonnet form that is curtailed or contracted. It is an eleven line sonnet with rhyme scheme *abcabc dcbdc* or *abcabc dbcdc*. It is a poem that consist of ten lines written in iambic pentameter followed by a eleventh line that consist of a spondee. It was Gerard Manley Hopkins in the 19<sup>th</sup> century who used this term to describe a sonnet that was curtailed to eleven lines. “Pied Beauty”, “Peace” and “Ash Boughs” by Gerard Manley Hopkins are examples of curtal sonnet. The poem *Pied Beauty*, a curtal sonnet praises God for his omnipotence. He appreciates the nature and its beauty and declares that the beauty of these natural things comes from the only one-God.

### *Pied Beauty*

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.

Gerard Manley Hopkins, 1877

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## 7.3 LETS SUM UP

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Thus to surmise it can be asserted that sonnet as a form of poetry has flourished over the years. Though, experimented in form by several poets, it enlightens the readers through his ideas and themes. The semantic, syntactic, rhyme and rhythm of the sonnets have always added charm to the reading experiences of the readers.

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## 7.4 KEYWORD

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<b>Meter</b>	A unit of rhythm in poem. It is also known foot where each foot has certain number of syllables. It can also be defined as the basic rhythmic structure of a verse.
<b>Quatrain</b>	A stanza in a poem having four lines
<b>Octave</b>	A stanza in a poem having eight lines
<b>Sestet</b>	A stanza in a poem having six lines

**Iambic pentameter** A line in a verse having five metrical feet where in each feet the first syllable is unstressed followed by the second syllable that is stressed.

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## 7.5 CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

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### ❖ Multiple Choice questions

- 1) An iamb has \_\_\_\_\_ .
  - a) One Stressed syllable followed by one unstressed
  - b) One unstressed syllable followed by one stressed
  - c) Two stressed syllables
  - d) Two unstressed syllables
  
- 2) Pentameter means a line having \_\_\_\_\_ metrical feet.
  - a) Five
  - b) three
  - c) six
  - d) four
  
- 3) A quatrain consist of \_\_\_\_\_ lines
  - a) 12
  - b) 4
  - c) 6
  - d) 8
  
- 4) A sonnet has \_\_\_\_\_ lines.
  - a) 14
  - b) 20
  - c) 21
  - d) 18
  
- 5) 'On his Blindness' is written by \_\_\_\_\_
  - a) John Milton
  - b) William Wordsworth
  - b) P.B Shelley
  - c) T.S Eliot

### ❖ Short Questions

1) What is a sonnet? Explain in detail the characteristics of a sonnet.

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2) What is a Curtal Sonnet?

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3) What is the contribution of Francesco Petrarca to the sonnet form?

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4) Explain the Terza Rima sonnet.

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❖ **Long/ Descriptive Questions**

1) How is petrarchan sonnet different from Shakespearean sonnet?

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2) Explain in detail about Terza Rima and Curtal sonnet.

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3) Critically analyse the sonnet no 116 by William Shakespeare.

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4) How did the sonnet form originate and became popular among the English poets?

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❖ **Short Notes**

- 1) Sonnet as a form of poetry
- 2) Petrarchan sonnet
- 3) Shakespearean sonnet

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## 7.5 SUGGESTED READING

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- 1) *The sonnet over time: a study in the sonnets of Petrarch, Shakespeare, and Baudelaire* by Sandra Bermann University of North Carolina Press, 1988
- 2) *Representative Sonnets by American Poets: With an Essay on the Sonnet, Its nature and history, Including Many Notable sonnet of Other Literature* by Charles Henry Crandall (editor)
- 3) *The Development of the Sonnet: An Introduction* by Michael R. G Spiller
- 4) *The Sonnets of Europe* by Samuel Waddington
- 5) “Glossary of Poetic Terms”, Poetry foundation  
<https://www.poetryfoundation.org/learn/glossary-terms/sonnet>
- 6) “Sonnet” . Literary Devices. Definition And Examples Of Literary Terms. <https://literarydevices.net/sonnet/>
- 7) The Sonnet. <https://www.writing.upenn.edu/~afilreis/88/sonnet.html>

### ❖ Answer

#### Key for Multiple choice questions:

1. B
2. A
3. B
4. A
5. A