

A Sonnet Primer

For Readers of *Thanks for Noticing: The Interpretation of Desire* by Vern Barnet

WHAT IS A SONNET?

Often about the experience of love, a sonnet ("little sound") is usually a 14-line poem, in iambic pentameter rhythm — da **DUM** da **DUM** da **DUM** da **DUM** da **DUM**.

The line end-rime scheme of a Shakespearean sonnet is *abab-cdcd : efef-gg*. Often a *volta*, a turn of thought, occurs after the 8th line; details in third column.

A poem is not the way we ordinarily speak. W H Auden calls it a "verbal contraption": —"A poem is a rite; hence its formal and ritualistic character. Its use of language is deliberately and ostentatiously different from talk." Just as a dancer may beautifully and skillfully move across a space in ways beyond the usual gait, so the poet often employs words in strange ways.

The pleasure of poetry is, in part, seeing how the structure and the theme of the poem create each other — as I say explaining the cover of my book:

The poetic form does not merely contain a sentiment as a glass contains water. Rather speak of the grail containing wine; the meaning of each is intensified by the other. In poetry the form and the sentiment are as intimately related as the body and the soul.

Even within its fixed form, each sonnet has its own rules, and discovering how each contraption works within its 700-year tradition can be thrilling.

But you don't have to know about sonata allegro form to be moved by a Beethoven symphony, you don't have to know how to score a gymnast to thrill when you see something amazing, you don't have to be a horticulturist to appreciate a garden's appeal, you don't have to be able to paint to be awed by Velásquez, and you don't have to be a master chef to enjoy a delicious meal. Still, knowing a little about an art form can greatly enhance one's pleasure. The devices of a sonnet can, in 14 lines, compress and reveal a world of meaning.

Art is the body language of the soul.

The Hebrew Scripture presents God through sounds rather than images (which were forbidden in the Decalogue). God *spoke*, not *wrote*, to create the world. God's voice may be heard many ways, including "a still small voice" (1 Kings 19:12).

The word *sonnet* derives from "little-sound," so *unspoken* words on a page do not make a sonnet, which begins with sounds, even the groans through which the Spirit may plead for us (Romans 8:26-8). A sonnet is to be *heard*, not seen, just as a musical score is not realized until it is performed. (A particular example in my book is 13 "Cowboy Krishna Plays his Flute.")

Something happens. It is like describing someone and then speaking directly to him or her; or it may be like a shift, as when Jesus, in the final crisis, said, "May this cup be taken from me. Yet not as I will, but as you will" (Matthew 26:39).

HOW TO READ A SONNET

- There is no right way to read a poem, only different ways. But consider:
 - How is the sonnet set in print? — Indentations and stanza breaks may be cues for the voice.
 - Which lines end with a complete unit of meaning (often one breath)? Capitalization and punctuation can also suggest how to breathe.
 - Read the sonnet aloud**, perhaps several times, as you continue the next steps. A sonnet is a lyric, but read it dramatically. Vary your volume, speed, and pauses as the theme develops.
 - Relish the sound-play — repetition and contrasts in rhythm, phrasing, alliteration (consonant sounds), assonance (vowel sounds), words, internal rimes (but don't overlap end rimes).
 - Do you find paronomasia — punning and word-play? (Because of pronunciation changes since Elizabethan English, we sometimes fail to spot them in Shakespeare, but many of mine are pretty obvious; for example, my 23 "Examination.")
 - Are images and conceits (far-fetched comparisons) fresh and effective? How do they structure the poem?
 - Does the thought, speaker, situation, metaphor, or story-line change direction?
 - What theme or "thoughts of the heart" arise?
 - Where is theme's center? Let the voice transform any information into the theme.
 - Is this sonnet a universe of meaning in a nutshell? How can that be displayed and conveyed through the voice?

In brief: How does one read a sonnet? The answer in one word:

ALoud.

THE SCAFFOLDING OF A SONNET

The "English" or "Shakespearean" sonnet consists of 14 lines, each of which one can easily speak in one breath if the sense is complete with the line. Each set of four lines is a **quatrain** and the last two lines are called a **couplet**. The first two quatrains make the **octave**; the last six lines is the **sestet**.

A regular line is in iambic pentameter. An **iamb** is a set of two syllables, the first unstressed, the second stressed. **Pentameter** is a line of five "feet" of iambs. (A unit of rhythm in poetry is called a foot from poetry's early association with dance.)

To avoid monotony and to support the meaning, most sonnets vary the rhythm. A line may have a natural pause within it called a **caesura**, in which case the rhythm might be indicated by a vertical slash (/) in scansion as this example (Shakespeare's Sonnet 129:13):

All this the world well knows; yet none knows well

A line with a complete unit of meaning or grammatical boundary is **end-stopped**. If it continues to the next line, it is **enjambéd**.

THE INTERNAL PATTERN OF MEANING

Within the external scaffolding, Shakespeare employs various ways by which his meaning unfolds. I represent three of them graphically.

Often Shakespeare adapts the Italian sonnet's *volta*, turn, to look at the matter of the octave from a different perspective in the sestet; but sometimes the *volta* isn't made until the couplet.

1. The same idea is presented in three quatrains, each with a different metaphor, followed by a couplet, as in Sh 73 and my 30.



2. The octave presents a theme, the third quatrain summarizes it, and the couplet condenses it once again, as in Sh 55 and my 15.



3. The most typical internal structure Shakespeare uses presents an issue in the octave; and with a *volta*, he presents a changed stance in the sestet, as in Sh 29, my 14, often beginning with *Yet* or *But* or *While*.



4. Some sonnets simply meander within the external Shakespearean form.

Experiments — even a 15- or 18-line sonnet — can work well within the 700-year tradition of this beloved asymmetrically balanced form of poetry.

Five Suggestions for Commenting

1. If you want to comment about the book or about a particular sonnet, please know that I am grateful for whatever you might say — positive, hostile, questioning, arguing, reframing. By whatever you say, you will help draw attention to the revised book and draw others to "notice" it. Length is entirely up to you, from a sentence to a long-form essay.

If you don't want to comment, please know that I am grateful for whatever attention you care to give to the book, and I hope you find some interest and maybe pleasure from it.

2. Comments from those who write without the chance to review the whole book will be prefaced with a note saying so, shielding anyone cautious about the more scandalous-blasphemous-profane sonnets. In the Contents, pages 6-7, they are marked with a dash on either side of the page number: these sonnets might be considered problematical:

GLORIA — 25, 43, 55,
CONFITEOR — 90, 101
SANCTUS ET BENEDICTUS —
113-115, 118-125, 127-135
AGNUS DEI — 139, 143, 146, 148.

3. You can write about a particular sonnet, or a pair, or group of them, or about any part of the book, or the book as a whole. If you want a suggestion from me, I'll probably have one, if I haven't already offered an idea or two!

4. Here are some possibilities for other themes and approaches —

- the arrangement of the 154 sonnets by parts of the Mass
- comparisons with Shakespeare (and/or other sonnet writers)

- sexuality and/or spirituality
- use of world religions or a particular tradition such as Buddhism, Christianity, Hinduism, Islam, Judaism, etc.
- musical references (or even just opera references)
- the sonnets' musicality as a technical achievement or failure
- use of, and variations in, the sonnet form
- a tangent or story or experience the sonnet suggests to you
- aids included in the book, such as the Foreword, the Introduction, the Collect for Purity, the notes about Shakespeare and world religions, and other features and appendices.

5. Please contact me if you have questions. For example, if you want me to identify all the sonnets that employ carpentry metaphors, or all referring to T S Eliot, or all the sonnets in Petrarchan form, just let me know.