

**The Decline of the Popularity of
the Sonnet after the Elizabethan
Age; A Literary Survey**

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Abstract

The present article aims at examining a number of Elizabethan sonnets to elaborate on their nature and the reason behind their gradual decline. The paper starts by shedding light on the origin of the sonnet and its flourish in England during the 16th century. The paper also selects certain sonnets to discuss their construction and themes used by poets to express their thoughts and feelings. Light is also shed on the later revival of the sonnet on the hand of Milton, although it was not as popular as before. The sonnet can be traced through the following centuries right to the 20th century, when certain poets still used this form to express themselves. Special mention is given to the Romantic revival of the sonnet. Nonetheless, it could not outlive in the modern times because poets preferred more experimental forms to use in their poetry. In the Modern age, the sonnet adapted to 20th Century themes and diction, but lacked the popularity of the previous ages, due to the preference of the modern poets to use experimental forms and structure to express their ideas. So, it is very much expected that it would not be a modern favorite.

Keywords

16th century - Elizabethan age – Milton – Petrarch – Shakespeare -
Spencer
– sonnet

تراجع شعبية السوناتة بعد العصر الإليزابيثي؛ مسح أدبي

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المخلص

تهدف هذه المقالة إلى فحص عدد من السوناتات الإليزابيثية لتوضيح طبيعتها والسبب وراء تدهورها التدريجي. تبدأ الورقة بإلقاء الضوء على أصل السوناتة وازدهارها في إنجلترا خلال القرن السادس عشر. كما تختار الورقة سوناتات معينة لمناقشة بنائها والمواضيع التي يستخدمها الشعراء للتعبير عن أفكارهم ومشاعرهم. تم تسليط الضوء أيضًا على إحياء السوناتة في وقت لاحق على يد ميلتون، على الرغم من أنها لم تكن شائعة كما كانت من قبل. يمكن تتبع السوناتة خلال القرون التالية حتى القرن العشرين، عندما كان بعض الشعراء لا يزالون يستخدمون هذا الشكل للتعبير عن أنفسهم. ومع ذلك، لم تستطع السوناتة أن تتعايش مع العصر الحديث لأن الشعراء فضلوا المزيد من الأشكال التجريبية لاستخدامها في شعرهم. في العصر الحديث، تكيفت السوناتة مع موضوعات القرن العشرين وألفاظه، لكنها افتقرت إلى شعبية العصور السابقة، بسبب

تفضيل الشعراء المعاصرين استخدام الأشكال والبنية التجريبية للتعبير عن أفكارهم. لذلك، من المتوقع جدًا ألا يكون مفضلًا حديثًا. وهذا ما يفسر تراجع السوناتة في القرن العشرين.

1. Introduction

The sonnet is one of the most famous types of lyrical poetry. Its name is derived from the Italian word meaning "little sound" and it consists of fourteen lines that follow a specific rhyming pattern. It was first written by a Sicilian lawyer at the court of Fredrick II, called Giacomo da Lentino, during the early thirteenth century. Afterwards, the form of the Italian sonnet, used by Dante and Petrarch, was established. Petrarch was the most famous of the Italian sonneteers and his sonnet-sequence to his beloved Laura was quite influential on the Elizabethans (Fuller, 1978, p.1). Petrarchan sonnets deal mainly with courtly love, and this theme is carried into the English sonnet that followed Petrarch as a model.

During the sixteenth century, the rise of the European Renaissance tempted a great number of English scholars and artists to travel to Europe, especially Italy, to delve into that sea of knowledge, enlightenment and experiment.

The sonnet was first introduced to England in 1527 by Sir Thomas Wyatt (1503-42). He went to Italy on a diplomatic mission and was greatly influenced by Petrarch and the Italian Renaissance in general. He brought back to England the enthusiasm for the Petrarchan sonnet and also new rhymes: the terza rima and ottava rima (Grierson & Smith, 1962, p.65).

The Petrarchan sonnet which Wyatt brought consisted of fourteen lines divided into two parts: an octave, which fell into two quatrains rhyming abba abba and introduced the main idea or problem of the poem; and a sestet, which consisted of six lines rhyming cde cde, or other variations, and gave the answer or conclusion to the problem. Between the octave and the sestet came the turn or volta (Fuller, 1978, p.2). The sonnet became a favorite type during the era because of its flexibility. It could be narrative or non-narrative; it could evolve round a personal matter to the poet, or it could deal with public matters like religion or politics.

This form was changed by Henry Howard, Earl of Surrey (1517-47) to the form which later came to be known as the English sonnet, or Shakespearean, although he didn't really invent it, but it took after his name due to his fame at that age. Surrey "used a pattern of alternately rhymed quatrains, which encouraged logical exposition right up to this final couplet and postponed the turn." (Fuller, 1978, p.14).

Another form was introduced later by Edmund Spenser (1552-99) which was given his name. The Spenserian sonnet was a variety of the English sonnet with the rhyme of the three quatrains interlocked: abab bcbc cdcd ee. (Fuller, 1978, p.21) He took the Shakespearean sonnet to a different

level by linking the quatrains together, so that the focus would not fall on the final couplet. Hence, the answer to the problem that the sonnet creates will not be in the final couplet, but through the entire sonnet as a whole unit.

The Elizabethans did not restrict themselves to the previous forms but took great liberty in experimenting with variations which suited their purpose. The sonnet tackled various themes and problems, the most famous of which was love. Love sonnets and sonnet sequences were quite of fashion. Almost every major poet wrote sonnet-sequences on the model of Petrarch's to Laura, for example, Sidney's *Astrophel and Stella*, and Spenser's *Amoretti*.

Sidney, Spenser and Shakespeare were the poets who gave the sonnet its greatness. Shakespeare took the sonnet to a new level by composing 154 sonnets giving them numbers instead of names. He wrote about nature, love, and beauty, giving rise to the popularity of this form. Unlike the traditional Petrarchan sonnet, Shakespearean sonnet did not focus only on the beloved image of a specific lady. Several of his sonnets addressed a mysterious young man, which was quite peculiar for its time.

In the Shakespearean sonnet, the problem would be introduced in the first two quatrains and then the third plus the couplet would offer the solution. (*Traditional Shakespearean Sonnets* | *British Literature Wiki*, n.d.)

This is number 94:

They that have power to hurt and will do none,
That do not do the thing they most do show,
Who, moving others, are themselves as stone,
Unmoved, cold, and to temptation slow —
They rightly do inherit Heaven's graces,
And husband Nature's riches from expense;
They are the lords and owners of their faces,
Others but stewards of their excellence.
The summer flow'r is to the summer sweet
Though to itself it only live and die;
But if that flow'r with base infection meet,
The basest weed outbraves his dignity.
For sweetest things turn sourest by their deeds:

Lilies that fester smell far worse than weeds. ((Poetry Foundation, n.d.)

Other poets, like Barnabe Barnes, tried to write imitations of Petrarch but eventually failed. This caused the circulation of bad sonnets which owed nothing to the genre but its fourteen lines and rhyme-scheme. Moreover, the recurrent use of themes, stock phrases, complaint of the pain and sorrow of the lover, the unmatched beauty of the lady, reached the point of exhaustion. People began to be tired of the love-sick poet who wept all

the time. So, "sonneteering fell into disrepute and perished of its own insincerity." (Sampson, 1967, p.152)

Another famous tradition springing from sonnet writing is sonnet sequence. It is about composing several related sonnets that carry the same topic or theme. Famous examples would be John Donne's *La Corona* and Elizabeth Browning's *Sonnets from the Portuguese*.

2. The First Decline

With the coming of the seventeenth century there began a tendency for change. People, and poets, were eager for new forms and styles and started to search for new means of expression. (Barish, 1963)

The primary aim of Elizabethan poetry was not the spontaneous outpouring of emotion, whatever effects of simplicity, sensuousness, and passion may be found in its best products. It was a conscious art, rhetorical in method, concerned above all to impose form and order upon experience, working equally through the senses, the emotions, and the reason, and directed (at least in theory) at the will." (Fuller, 1978, p.47)

The sonnet with its restrictiveness stifled the Jacobean who were seeking freer forms of expression. Thus, the lyric replaced the sonnet in favour. The lyric provided wider scope for expressing new and old feelings and experiences. So, poets scorned the tradition of Petrarch and turned to the classical lyrics of Anacreon, Catullus, and Horace. Moreover, there were two poets who joined together, each in a different way, to curse Petrarch "for redacting verses to sonnets." (Ward & Waller, 1969, p.2) Even when Milton chose the sonnet form in some of his famous poetic pieces, it wasn't for the theme of love but rather to talk about certain personal experience like his own blindness and his religious devotion. The best example would be his sonnet 19:

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 me 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?"

2.1 John Donne

The first poet to challenge and break away from the Petrarchan tradition was John Donne (1572-1631). He did write a number of sonnets but used completely different methods, rhythms, tones, and imagery in which we could trace no Petrarch. Donne began a new tradition of love poetry, i.e., the metaphysical love lyric. (Ward & Waller, 1966, p.179)

Donne's love poetry is a very complex phenomenon. The two dominant strains in it are these: the strain of dialectic, subtle play of argument and wit, erudite and fantastic; and the strain of vivid

realism, the record of a passion which is not ideal nor traditional...
(Gardner, 1962, p.23)

The Elizabethan love poems rest on Petrarch's idea of love between a man and a woman. The lover sees his beloved as a goddess, the symbol of all virtues from which his own virtue comes. He dotes on her night and day and spends all his life worshipping her. Then, he realizes that loving his lady turns him away from the real direction of his affection, the love of God. This influence is very evident in the sonnet-sequences of Sidney and Spenser. For example, in Spenser's *Amoretti*, he turns from earthly to heavenly love and repents his previous waste of time:

Many lewd days (Ah! woe is me the more)
In praise of that mad fit, which fools call love,
I have in the heat of youth mad here to fore;
That in light wits affection loose did move,

But all these follies now I do reprove. (qtd. in Gardner, 1962, p.25)

For Donne there is no such thing. His lady is not a goddess; she is an ordinary human being with virtues as well as sins. He describes her in realistic terms using colloquial language, even sometimes satirizing women and human follies through his subtle and ironic depiction of his mistress. He breaks away from the Elizabethan literary artifice and refinement that sometimes reaches the point of absurdity. Donne writes in a witty, compressed and intellectual language with clever conceits that colour his lyrics with fantastic hues. Most of his poems "involve the love and sexual life of two people. There is intellectual vigor and knowledge in the speech. "Natures lay I deot, I thought thee to love / And in that sophistrie, Oh, thou dost prove / Too subtle: Fool, thou didst not understand / The mystique language of the eye nor hand." (qtd. in King, 1967, p.42)

2.2 Ben Jonson

With Ben Jonson (1572-1637) the influence was of a different kind. "... Donne, in the audacity of heady youthfulness, was a law unto himself, in all that pertained to lyric art, Jonson ... deliberately set about to imitate the best models of the classical muse." (Ward & Waller, 1969, p.2) His influence was a conscious one; not arbitrary, and he was reputed as the reformer of the English lyric. (King, 1967, p.42)

Jonson's poetry was characterized by a plain style, clearness, and the classicism of Catullus and Horace. It was a reaction against the artificiality and floweriness of the Petrarchan tradition which the Elizabethans followed. Jonson was trying to write a poetry in which the meaning was not shadowed by the excessive use of rhetoric. He avoided poetic diction to arrive at a language more like current speech (King, 1967, p.51). He modeled himself on the classical writers of ancient Greece and Rome. His method was to learn from those writers and to add his own experience and style; not to rest solely on them. He condemned the Elizabethans for their

blind copying from Petrarch and other writers. A writer not using his own style and experience, he believed, would write no language. (Kenner, 1964) This combination of respect for tradition and a sturdy independence is what gives Ben Jonson's its variety and flexibility. He can range from the most formal classical style to the racy idiomatic utterance befitting... the leading spirit of the meetings at the Mermaid. (Ford, 1968, pp.133-4)

He attracted many young writers of the times, mostly Cavaliers, who circled around him and called themselves the 'sons' or 'Tribe of Ben'. Those 'sons' were the chief carriers of his methods and tradition, on whose poetry his influence was most evident. (King, 1967, p.50) The tradition of those two great poets helped to reduce the popularity of the already declining genre, i.e., the sonnet, along with other influences of Petrarch.

3. The Revival

3.1. John Milton

The sonnet was later revived at the hands of the puritan poet John Milton (1608-74). Through him the sonnet gained another dimension and theme, not the love of a lady, but the love of God. He introduced another form of the sonnet, which was a variation of the Petrarchan, named after his name; the Miltonic sonnet. The Miltonic sonnet has the same arrangement in the octave as the Petrarchan sonnet does, but no division is marked between the octave and sestet, the sense running from the eighth into the ninth line. Again, after Milton, there was a decline in the sonnet's popularity in England until the romantic poets revived it in the Nineteenth Century. (*Guide to Literary Terms Sonnet - ENotes.Com*, n.p.)

3.2. The Romantics and After

Romantic poets, notably William Wordsworth, have employed this feature of the 'Miltonic sonnet' while relaxing the rhyme scheme of the octave to *abbaacca*. The Italian pattern has remained the most widely used in English and other languages. All of the major Romantic poets- Wordsworth, Coleridge, Shelley, Keats, Byron, and Blake- wrote sonnets of some sorts, giving the form an extraordinary popularity in the late eighteenth century. "If the sonnet now enjoys seemingly universal popularity and prevalence, it owes the bulk of its current aura of durability to the form's Romantic-period revival." (Raymond, 2007)

In his thesis, Thomas Cherry mentions that Stuart Curran gives two reasons for the Romantic interest in the long-lost form of the sonnet. The first is a sonnet by Thomas Gray "Sonnet on the Death of Mr. Richard West." It follows the traditional love sonnets, but instead of doting on a lover, it laments the loss of a loved person. Gray sought to immortalize his friend through his poetry. "Curran calls this elegiac sonnet the motive force underlying the entire Romantic revival of the sonnet" (1). The second influence is that of Charlotte Smith. "Smith's nine editions of Elegiac

Sonnets is seen as the reignition of the sonnet tradition, moving the form into a more self-aware and introspective style of poem, something that was once unpopular in the tradition.” (Cherry, 2014, p.2)

Those influences set the stage for Wordsworth to utilize the form and pave the way to Shelley and Keats after him. The Romantics gave the sonnet a new spirit. They used their conversational style, imagination and emotional expression which previously did not exist in the form. They freed it from the constraints of traditional poetry and opened the path to experimenting in form and subject matter. (Cherry, 2014, p.3)

William Wordsworth (1770-1850) may be one of the greatest sonneteers after Shakespeare. He wrote more than five hundred sonnets and brought the form back into use and also revived the sonnet sequence. Wordsworth continued the work of Milton in freeing the sonnet's subject matter from the conventional and treated the sonnet as a subjective "verse essay" in which he explored his emotions. (White & Rosen, 1972)

The work of Thomas Gray, Charlotte Smith, and William Wordsworth, set the sonnet on yet another new path. Those poets were more willing to write about matters of the inner-self, allowing their sentiments to influence their writing. They used more conversational and expressive tones that stemmed from their imagination and emotional creativity, which previous generations of sonnet writers did not allow. This poetic expression changed subtly along with the drastic change in the understanding of the form and function of the sonnet itself. “By changing the acceptable subject matter for the sonnet, these poets also questioned the standard formal elements of the sonnet, opening it to experimentation and the formal variations...” (Cherry, 2014, p.3)

Romanticism translates the abject relics of a dead poetic structure into a revitalized poetic space in which natural, spontaneous sentiment and diction could find expression. (Raymond, 2007) They experimented with internal and external variations of the sonnet. They played with the placement of breaks within lines, rhythm, punctuation, or anything that deviated from the traditional iambic pentameter usually employed in sonnets. The structure and rhyme scheme are manipulated to arrive at the desired meaning.

An example of this is the caesura in Keats’s “When I have fears that I may cease to be,” where the halting and overflowing of the poem’s final lines force a reinterpretation of its conclusion. The caesura creates a slowing at key moments and quickening in others, forcing a second look at the ideas in these portion[s] simply by affecting the way the poem is read. This occurs again, but in a slightly different way, in Wordsworth’s “Surprised by joy,” where the internal variation of caesura causes a disjointed feeling of fragmentation that echoes the

feeling of losing a loved one. Again, internal reworking through caesura adds an element of meaning to the poem. (Cherry, 2014, p.4-5) Shelley, on the other hand, experimented with rhyme scheme and structure in his sonnet "England in 1819" where he switched the problem at the beginning (with the list of the king's bad behaviour coming first then the burdens it puts on his subjects) and ended the poem with a couplet describing the terrible end such tyrants face. "This inversion and inclusion of two styles pulls together the fate of the kings and the subjects, a connection that would not be accomplished without the variance of organization." (Cherry, 2014, p.6)

An old, mad, blind, despised, and dying King;
Princes, the dregs of their dull race, who flow
Through public scorn,—mud from a muddy spring;
Rulers who neither see nor feel nor know,
But leechlike to their fainting country cling
Till they drop, blind in blood, without a blow.
A people starved and stabbed in th' untilled field;
An army, whom liberticide and prey
Makes as a two-edged sword to all who wield;
Golden and sanguine laws which tempt and slay;
Religion Christless, Godless—a book sealed;
A senate, Time's worst statute, unrepealed—
Are graves from which a glorious Phantom may
Burst, to illumine our tempestuous day. (Poetry Foundation, 2000)

Keats also tried his hands at writing sonnets. He aimed at paying tribute to Shakespeare but at the same time avoiding the couplet which he hated so bad. The romantics with their rebellious nature took the sonnet and changed it to fit their purpose and themes giving it a new, albeit different, cladding; a new chance at life. Perhaps they saw it as an outcast, like they were, and sought to give it some glory. Nevertheless, it wasn't enough to restore the popularity it once had during its prime time.

4. Modern age Potential

In the Modern age, the sonnet adapted well to Twentieth Century themes and diction. (Baldick, 2017), but of course lacked the popularity of the previous ages, due to the preference of the modern poets to use experimental forms and structure to express their ideas. So, it is very much expected that the sonnet would not be a modern favorite, leading eventually to its disappearance from modern poets' collections and poetry volumes. It has been replaced by the tendency of modern poets to experiment with forms and techniques. Hence, the decline of the sonnet can be expected in the light of the 20th century writing spirit. Still, we have many modern brilliant examples of the sonnet. For instance, in the twenties of the 20 century American poet

and writer, Edna St. Vincent Millay, published several sonnets that deal with the traditional form's themes of love and life:

Love, though for this you riddle me with darts,
And drag me at your chariot till I die, —
Oh, heavy prince! Oh, panderer of hearts! —
Yet hear me tell how in their throats they lie
Who shout you mighty: thick about my hair,
Day in, day out, your ominous arrows purr,
Who still am free, unto no querulous care
A fool, and in no temple worshiper!
I, that have bared me to your quiver's fire,
Lifted my face into its puny rain,
Do wreathe you Impotent to Evoke Desire
As you are Powerless to Elicit Pain!
(Now will the god, for blasphemy so brave,
Punish me, surely, with the shaft I crave!)

Millay is following the Italian example and is faithful to the traditional spirit of the sonnet. E.E. Cummings, on the other hand, is more experimental when it comes to the modern sonnets he wrote:

the Cambridge ladies who live in furnished souls
are unbeautiful and have comfortable minds
(also, with the church's protestant blessings
daughters, unscented shapeless spirited)
they believe in Christ and Longfellow, both dead,
are invariably interested in so many things—
at the present writing one still finds
delighted fingers knitting for the is it Poles?
perhaps. While permanent faces coyly bandy
scandal of Mrs. N and Professor D
....the Cambridge ladies do not care, above
Cambridge if sometimes in its box of
sky lavender and cornerless, the
moon rattles like a fragment of angry candy

In this sonnet, Cumming is clearly manipulating the sonnet's traditional form to present his own vision of what a modern sonnet should be. His breakup of certain lines, his repetition of certain sound shed light on the modern themes he is expressing like the lack of spatiality.

Despite the two examples above, the sonnet could not outlive modern and postmodern times as mentioned above. Modern and postmodern poets prefer to experiment with new forms and techniques that can express the complexity of thought and the age. Consequently, the sonnet becomes a classic form that is used from time to time for the poet's pure amusement.

5. Conclusion

The sonnet may be the most studied form of poetry in English literature. Its popularity lasted from the 16th century down till the 20th. Most outstanding poets throughout the ages have tried their hands at it. Some excelled at it and gave it new life while others renounced it and deemed it unworthy. The form reached its peak at the hands of the Elizabethan writers and some well-known 17th century poets. But like any traditional form, it witnessed rises and falls in popularity, so as we come closer to the 18th century and above, the form witnessed a noticeable fall from favor. As we reach the 20th century, the form is no more recognized as impressive since modern poets tried their hand at more experimental forms of poetry. Nevertheless, the truth remains that some of the greatest poems written in English literature are sonnets. The phenomenon of the growing fame of a literary tradition or a certain genre and then its growing slowly out of favour is really not unique to the sonnet. If we examine the history of literature throughout the centuries, we see that each and every literary period has its ups first and then its downs. This is due to human nature. When something new is introduced, people feel curious about it and try to practice it, and each one imitates the other until it reaches a point when they are quite fed up with it. So, they renounce the old and look for something new, and then, after some time, go back to the same old one, and so on and so forth. This is true to all aspects of life, not only literature.

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