Definitions of Poetic Terms for Sonnet Readers

"The sonnet is a little poem with a big heart." Diana E. Henderson[1]

A **sonnet** is a 14-line poem, traditionally concerning love. The word "sonnet" itself stems from the Italian word "sonetto," which itself derives from the Latin "suono," meaning "a sound." The commonly credited originator of the sonnet is Giacomo da Lentini, who composed poetry in the literary Sicilian dialect in the thirteenth century.

- **The Petrarchan Sonnet** is named after the Italian poet Francesco Petrarch, a lyrical poet of fourteenth-century Italy. Its 14 lines are divided into two subgroups: an **octave (8-line stanza)** and a **sestet (6-line stanza)**. The octave traditionally follows a rhyme scheme of ABBA ABBA. The sestet follows one of two rhyme schemes—either CDE CDE scheme (more common) or CDC CDC. Usually, there is a "volta," or "turning" of the subject matter between the octave and sestet.
- **The Shakespearean Sonnet (also called the English or Elizabethan sonnet)** is a variation on the Italian sonnet tradition. The form evolved in England during and around the time of the Elizabethan era. It has 14 lines divided into 4 subgroups: 3 **quatrains** (stanzas of 4 lines) and a **couplet** (a 2-line stanza). Each line is typically ten syllables, phrased in iambic pentameter. A Shakespearean sonnet traditionally employs the rhyme scheme ABAB CDCD EFEF GG.
- **The *volta***: A key feature of the sonnet is the ***volta***, the turn, which typically falls between the octave and sestet in the Petrarchan sonnet, or before the concluding couplet in the Shakespearean. The *volta* marks a shift in the argument or the tone, a movement from reason to emotion or vice versa. For further discussion of the turn: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Volta_(literature)
- **Sonnet Sequence:** A group of sonnets thematically unified to create a long work (although each sonnet in the sequence can also be read as a separate unit). The subject is usually the speaker's unhappy love for a distant beloved, following the courtly love tradition. An exception is Edmund Spenser's *Amoretti*, where the sequence ends with an *Epithalamion*, a marriage song. Many sonnet sequences are presented as autobiographical, most sonnet sequences are as attempts to create an erotic persona in which wit and originality are at play. (Wikipedia)

    Crown of sonnets or **sonnet corona**: A sequence of sonnets in which *the last line of one sonnet is the first line of the next sonnet in the sequence.* In the final sonnet of the sequence, the first line of the first sonnet is repeated as the final line of the final sonnet, thereby bringing the sequence to a close. (Wikipedia)

    Heroic crown: An advanced form of a crown of sonnets is comprised of fifteen sonnets in which the sonnets are linked as described above, but *the final binding sonnet is made up of all the first lines of the preceding fourteen, in order.* The fifteenth sonnet is called the *Mastersonnet*.

- **Lyric poetry** refers to a short poem, often with songlike qualities, that expresses the speaker’s personal emotions and feelings. Historically intended to be sung and accompany musical instrumentation, lyric now describes a broad category of non-narrative poetry, including elegies, odes, and sonnets. The contemporary poet Hera Naguib explains: “A lyric poem seeks to pause time—worldly, linear, current—to examine and weigh the emotional and intellectual bearing of experience.”

Other useful poetic terms

Lines of poetry: Lines that comprise a complete thought are **end stopped**. Lines that continue the thought into the next line are **run-on** or **enjambed.** Here is an example of enjambment from John Donne’s "The Good-Morrow":

> I wonder, by my troth, what thou and I
> Did, till we loved? Were we not weaned till then?

Enjambment has the effect of encouraging the reader to continue reading from one line to the next. Poets often use enjambment to introduce ambiguity or contradiction into an otherwise straightforward sentence: the incomplete clause might suggest something that the following line(s) reject. This is often true in poetry written since the end of the 18th century.

Foot/Feet: The lines of a poem can be divided into repeated metrical units called feet**;** each unit is called a foot. Each metrical foot contains a combination of one, two or three accented and unaccented syllables. The *da-DUM* of a human heart is an example of a foot with two beats, one unaccented, one accented: *da DUM; da DUM; da DUM,* etc. In poetry, this two-beat pattern is called an **iamb, or an iambic foot.**

Iambic pentameter: A line of poetry with five sets of iambic feet is written in iambic pentameter. Here is an example from Shakespeare: “When I do count the clock that tells the time.” Shakespeare often uses iambic pentameter in his sonnets and in his plays.

Stanza: A unit within a poem with a fixed number of lines of verse.

Quatrain a stanza of four lines

Couplet a stanza consisting of two successive lines of verse

Rhyme: The correspondence of two or more words with similar-sounding final syllables placed so as to echo one another. Rhyme is used by poets to produce sounds appealing to the reader’s senses and to unify and establish a poem’s stanzaic form.

End rhyme (i.e., rhyme used at the end of a line to echo the end of another line) is most common,

Internal, interior, or leonine rhyme is frequently used as an occasional embellishment in a poem—e.g, Shakespeare: “Hark; hark! the lark at heaven’s gate sings.” Here are two lines from Coleridge that show internal rhyme and enjambment. The first line is iambic tetrameter; the second is iambic trimeter (called **ballad meter**).

> “And through the **drifts** the snowy **clifts**
> Did send a dismal sheen.”

Alliteration: The repetition of initial stressed, consonant sounds in a series of words within a phrase or verse line. Alliteration need not reuse all initial consonants; "pizza" and "place" alliterate. Example: "With swift, slow; sweet, sour; adazzle, dim" from Gerard Manley Hopkins's "Pied Beauty."

Three helpful glossaries when reading poetry:
"Figurative Language" from Reed College
"Poetry Glossary" from Shmoop. Aimed at undergrads and HS'ers, but efficient and accurate.
"Glossary of Poetic Terms" from the Poetry Foundation. Comprehensive.

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[1] Henderson, Diana E. "The sonnet, subjectivity and gender." *The Cambridge Companion to the Sonnet.* A. D. Cousins and Peter Howarth, eds. Cambridge UP, 2011, pg. 46.