

## Poetic Form: Sonnet

From the Italian sonetto, which means "a little sound or song," the sonnet is a popular classical form that has compelled poets for centuries. Traditionally, the sonnet is a fourteen-line poem written in iambic pentameter, which employ one of several rhyme schemes and adhere to a tightly structured thematic organization. Two sonnet forms provide the models from which all other sonnets are formed: the Petrarchan and the Shakespearean.

### Petrarchan Sonnet

The first and most common sonnet is the Petrarchan, or Italian. Named after one of its greatest practitioners, the Italian poet Petrarch, the Petrarchan sonnet is divided into two stanzas, the octave (the first eight lines) followed by the answering sestet (the final six lines). The tightly woven rhyme scheme, abba, abba, cdecde or cdcdcd, is suited for the rhyme-rich Italian language, though there are many fine examples in English. Since the Petrarchan presents an argument, observation, question, or some other answerable charge in the octave, a turn, or volta, occurs between the eighth and ninth lines. This turn marks a shift in the direction of the foregoing argument or narrative, turning the sestet into the vehicle for the counterargument, clarification, or whatever answer the octave demands.

Sir Thomas Wyatt introduced the Petrarchan sonnet to England in the early sixteenth century. His famed translations of Petrarch's sonnets, as well as his own sonnets, drew fast attention to the form. Henry Howard, Earl of Surrey, a contemporary of Wyatt's, whose own translations of Petrarch are considered more faithful to the original though less fine to the ear, modified the Petrarchan, thus establishing the structure that became known as the Shakespearean sonnet. This structure has been noted to lend itself much better to the comparatively rhyme-poor English language.

### Shakespearean Sonnet

The second major type of sonnet, the Shakespearean, or English sonnet, follows a different set of rules. Here, three quatrains and a couplet follow this rhyme scheme: abab, cdcd, efef, gg. The couplet plays a pivotal role, usually arriving in the form of a conclusion, amplification, or even refutation of the previous three stanzas, often creating an epiphanic quality to the end. In Sonnet 130 of William Shakespeare's epic sonnet cycle, the first twelve lines compare the speaker's mistress unfavorably with nature's beauties. But the concluding couplet swerves in a surprising direction:

*My mistress' eyes are nothing like the sun;  
Coral is far more red than her lips' red;  
If snow be white, why then her breasts are dun;  
If hairs be wires, black wires grow on her head.  
I have seen roses damasked, red and white,*

*But no such roses see I in her cheeks;  
And in some perfumes is there more delight  
Than in the breath that from my mistress reeks.  
I love to hear her speak, yet well I know  
That music hath a far more pleasing sound;  
I grant I never saw a goddess go;  
My mistress when she walks treads on the ground.  
And yet, by heaven, I think my love as rare  
As any she belied with false compare.*

## Sonnet Variations

Though Shakespeare's sonnets were perhaps the finest examples of the English sonnet, John Milton's Italian-patterned sonnets (later known as "Miltonic" sonnets) added several important refinements to the form. Milton freed the sonnet from its typical incarnation in a sequence of sonnets, writing the occasional sonnet that often expressed interior, self-directed concerns. He also took liberties with the turn, allowing the octave to run into the sestet as needed. Both of these qualities can be seen in "When I Consider How my Light is Spent."

The Spenserian sonnet, invented by sixteenth century English poet Edmund Spenser, cribs its structure from the Shakespearean--three quatrains and a couplet--but employs a series of "couplet links" between quatrains, as revealed in the rhyme scheme: abab, bcbc, cdcd, ee. The Spenserian sonnet, through the interweaving of the quatrains, implicitly reorganized the Shakespearean sonnet into couplets, reminiscent of the Petrarchan. One reason was to reduce the often excessive final couplet of the Shakespearean sonnet, putting less pressure on it to resolve the foregoing argument, observation, or question.

## Sonnet Sequences

There are several types of sonnet groupings, including the sonnet sequence, which is a series of linked sonnets dealing with a unified subject. Examples include Elizabeth Barrett Browning's *Sonnets from the Portuguese* and Lady Mary Roth's *The Countess of Montgomery's Urania*, published in 1621, the first sonnet sequence by an English woman.

Within the sonnet sequence, several formal constraints have been employed by various poets, including the corona (crown) and sonnet redoublé. In the corona, the last line of the initial sonnet acts as the first line of the next, and the ultimate sonnet's final line repeats the first line of the initial sonnet. *La Corona* by John Donne is comprised of seven sonnets structured this way. The sonnet redoublé is formed of 15 sonnets, the first 14 forming a perfect corona, followed by the final sonnet, which is comprised of the 14 linking lines in order.

## Modern Sonnets

The sonnet has continued to engage the modern poet, many of whom also took up the sonnet sequence, notably Rainer Maria Rilke, Robert Lowell, and John Berryman. Stretched and teased formally and thematically, today's sonnet can often only be identified by the ghost imprint that haunts it, recognizable by the presence of 14 lines or even by name only. Recent practitioners of this so-called "American" sonnet include Gerald Stern, Wanda Coleman, Ted Berrigan, and Karen Volkman. Hundreds of modern sonnets, as well as those representing the long history of the form, are collected in the recent anthology *The Penguin Book of the Sonnet: 500 Years of a Classic Tradition in English*, edited by Philis Levin.

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