Sonnet

A sonnet (pronounced son-it) is a fourteen line poem with a fixed rhyme scheme. Often, sonnets use iambic pentameter: five sets of unstressed syllables followed by stressed syllables for a ten-syllable line. Sonnets were invented by the Italian poet Giacomo da Lentini during the 1200s. The word sonnet is derived from the Old Occitan phrase sonet meaning “little song.”

Examples and Types of Sonnets

Over time, the sonnet form has evolved. Here are the two most common types of sonnets written today:

a. Italian (Petrarchan) Sonnet

The Italian sonnet is based on the original sonnet invented by da Lentini. The Petrarchan sonnet consists of an octave (group of eight lines) followed by a sestet (group of six lines). The typical rhyme scheme is as follows: a b b a a b b a for the octave and c d d c d d, c d d e c e, or c d d c c d for the sestet. The octave introduces a problem or conflict, and then the sestet addresses or solves the problem.

Here is an example of an Italian sonnet written by William Wordsworth:

Milton! thou shouldst be living at this hour: (a)

England hath need of thee: she is a fen (b)

Of stagnant waters: altar, sword, and pen, (b)

Fireside, the heroic wealth of hall and bower, (a)

Have forfeited their ancient English dower (a)

Of inward happiness. We are selfish men; (b)

Oh! raise us up, return to us again; (b)

And give us manners, virtue, freedom, power. (a)

Thy soul was like a Star, and dwelt apart; (c)

Thou hadst a voice whose sound was like the sea: (d)

Pure as the naked heavens, majestic, free, (d)

So didst thou travel on life’s common way, (e)

In cheerful godliness; and yet thy heart (c)

The lowliest duties on herself did lay. (e)

“London, 1802” has the rhyme scheme of an Italian sonnet: a b b a a b b a and c d d e c e. In the octave, we learn of a problem: Milton has died and England is in moral decline. In the sestet, we learn of the solution: unlike England, Milton was filled with glory and morality which England must adopt in order to recover.

b. English (Shakespearean) Sonnet

The Shakespearean sonnet is named after Shakespeare not because he invented it but because he is the most famous writer of this type of sonnet. Typically, the English sonnet explores romantic love. Its rhyme scheme is as follows: a b a b c d c d followed by e f e f g g.

Here is an example of an English sonnet by William Shakespeare:

Shall I compare thee to a summer’s day? (a)

Thou art more lovely and more temperate: (b)

Rough winds do shake the darling buds of May, (a)

And summer’s lease hath all too short a date: (b)

Sometime too hot the eye of heaven shines, (c)

And often is his gold complexion dimm’d; (d)

And every fair from fair sometime declines, (c)

By chance or nature’s changing course untrimm’d; (d)

But thy eternal summer shall not fade (e)

Nor lose possession of that fair thou owest; (f)

Nor shall Death brag thou wander’st in his shade, (e)

When in eternal lines to time thou growest: (f)

So long as men can breathe or eyes can see, (g)

So long lives this, and this gives life to thee. (g)

“Sonnet 18” is one of the most famous examples of the Shakespearean sonnet, using the exact rhyme scheme and exploring romantic love for a woman.

Definition of Sonnet

The word sonnet is derived from the Italian word “sonetto,” which means a “little song” or small lyric. In poetry, a sonnet has 14 lines, and is written in iambic pentameter. Each line has 10 syllables. It has a specific rhyme scheme, and a volta, or a specific turn.

Generally, sonnets are divided into different groups based on the rhyme scheme they follow. The rhymes of a sonnet are arranged according to a certain rhyme scheme. The

rhyme scheme in English is usually abab–cdcd–efef–gg, and in Italian abba–abba–cde–cde.

Sonnets can be categorized into six major types:

- Italian Sonnet
- Shakespearean Sonnet
- Spenserian Sonnet
- Miltonic Sonnet
- Terza Rima Sonnet
- Curtal Sonnet

Italian or Petrarchan Sonnet

Italian or Petrarchan sonnet was introduced by 14th century Italian poet Francesco Petrarch.

The rhyme scheme of a Petrarchan sonnet features the first eight lines, called an octet, which rhymes as abba–abba–cdc–dcd. The remaining six lines are called a sestet, and might have a range of rhyme schemes.

Shakespearean Sonnet

A Shakespearean sonnet is generally written in iambic pentameter, in which there are 10 syllables in each line. The rhythm of the lines must be as below:

The rhyme scheme of the Shakespearian sonnet is abab–cdcd–efef–gg, which is difficult to follow. Hence, only Shakespeare is known to have done it.

Spenserian Sonnet

Sir Edmund Spenser was the first poet who modified the Petrarch's form, and introduced a new rhyme scheme as follows:

The rhyme scheme in this sonnet is abab–bcbc–cdcd–ee, which is specific to Spenser, and such types of sonnets are called Spenserian sonnets.

Sonnet

poetic form

Sonnet, fixed verse form of Italian origin consisting of 14 lines that are typically five-foot iambics rhyming according to a prescribed scheme.

The sonnet is unique among poetic forms in Western literature in that it has retained its appeal for major poets for five centuries. The form seems to have originated in the 13th century among the Sicilian school of court poets, who were influenced by the love poetry of Provençal troubadours. From there it spread to Tuscany, where it reached its highest expression in the 14th century in the poems of Petrarch. His Canzoniere—a sequence of poems including 317 sonnets, addressed to his idealized beloved, Laura—established and perfected the Petrarchan (or Italian) sonnet, which remains one of the two principal sonnet forms, as well as the one most widely used. The other major form is the English (or Shakespearean) sonnet.

The Petrarchan sonnet characteristically treats its theme in two parts. The first eight lines, the octave, state a problem, ask a question, or express an emotional tension. The last six lines, the sestet, resolve the problem, answer the question, or relieve the tension. The octave is rhymed abbaabba. The rhyme scheme of the sestet varies; it may be cdecde, cdccdc, or cdedce. The Petrarchan sonnet became a major influence on European poetry. It soon

became naturalized in Spain, Portugal, and France and was introduced to Poland, whence it spread to other Slavic literatures. In most cases the form was adapted to the staple metre of the language—e.g., the alexandrine (12-syllable iambic line) in France and iambic pentameter in English.

The sonnet was introduced to England, along with other Italian verse forms, by Sir Thomas Wyatt and Henry Howard, earl of Surrey, in the 16th century. The new forms precipitated the great Elizabethan flowering of lyric poetry, and the period marks the peak of the sonnet’s English popularity. In the course of adapting the Italian form to a language less rich in rhymes, the Elizabethans gradually arrived at the distinctive English sonnet, which is composed of three quatrains, each having an independent rhyme scheme, and is ended with a rhymed couplet.

The rhyme scheme of the English sonnet is abab cdcd efef gg. Its greater number of rhymes makes it a less demanding form than the Petrarchan sonnet, but this is offset by the difficulty presented by the couplet, which

must summarize the impact of the preceding quatrains with the compressed force of a Greek epigram. An example is Shakespeare's Sonnet CXVI:

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:

Oh, no! it is an ever-fixéd 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 typical Elizabethan use of the sonnet was in a sequence of love poems in the manner of Petrarch. Although each sonnet was an independent poem, partly conventional in content and partly self-revelatory, the sequence had the added interest of providing something of a narrative development. Among the notable Elizabethan sequences are Sir Philip Sidney's Astrophel and Stella (1591), Samuel Daniel's Delia (1592), Michael Drayton's Idea's Mirrour (1594), and Edmund Spenser's Amoretti (1591). The last-named work uses a common variant of the sonnet (known as Spenserian) that follows the English quatrain and couplet pattern but resembles the Italian in using a linked rhyme scheme: abab bcbc cdcd ee. Perhaps the greatest of all sonnet sequences is Shakespeare's, addressed to a young man and a "dark lady." In these sonnets the supposed love story is of less interest than the underlying reflections on time and art, growth and decay, and fame and fortune.

In its subsequent development the sonnet was to depart even further from themes of love. By the time John Donne wrote his religious sonnets (c. 1610) and Milton

wrote sonnets on political and religious subjects or on personal themes such as his blindness (i.e., “When I consider how my light is spent”), the sonnet had been extended to embrace nearly all the subjects of poetry.

It is the virtue of this short form that it can range from “light conceits of lovers” to considerations of life, time, death, and eternity, without doing injustice to any of them. Even during the Romantic era, in spite of the emphasis on freedom and spontaneity, the sonnet forms continued to challenge major poets. Many English writers—including William Wordsworth, John Keats, and Elizabeth Barrett Browning—continued to write Petrarchan sonnets. One of the best-known examples of this in English is Wordsworth’s “The World Is Too Much With Us”:

> The world is too much with us; late and soon,
>
> Getting and spending, we lay waste
>
> our powers;
>
> Little we see in Nature that is ours;

We have given our hearts away, a sordid boon!
This Sea that bares her bosom to the moon,
The winds that will be howling at all hours,
And are up-gathered now like sleeping flowers,
For this, for everything, we are out of tune;
It moves us not.—Great God! I'd rather be
A Pagan suckled in a creed outworn;
So might I, standing on this pleasant lea,
Have glimpses that would make me
less forlorn;
Have sight of Proteus rising from the sea;
Or hear old Triton blow his wreathéd horn.

In the later 19th century the love sonnet sequence was revived by Elizabeth Barrett Browning in Sonnets from the Portuguese (1850) and by Dante Gabriel Rossetti in The House of Life (1876). The most distinguished 20th-century work of the kind is Rainer Maria Rilke's Sonnette an Orpheus (1922).