

The Sonnet

A sonnet, or in the Italian *Sonetto* (little song), is a fourteen line poem popularized in the 1300's by the Italian poet Francesco Petrarch. The subject matter of traditional sonnets varies widely; however, common themes include love, longing, nature, and the questions of mortality.

A traditional sonnet is fourteen lines of rhymed *iambic pentameter*.

An iamb is a unit of *meter* (metric foot) that consists of an unstressed syllable followed by a stressed syllable.

Meter: The measured arrangement of words in a poem (rhythm)

' - denotes a stressed syllable ˇ - denotes an unstressed syllable

 ˇ + ' = one iambic foot

Pentameter = penta (five) + meter = five metric feet.

 ˇ , ' , ˇ , ' , ˇ , ' , ˇ , ' ← one line of iambic pentameter
 My love is like to ice, and I to fire (five iambs per line)

There are three distinct types of sonnet: the Petrarchan (Italian), the Shakespearean (English), and the Spenserian (English – modified)

Petrarchan	Shakespearean	Spenserian
Consists of an octave (eight line grouping) followed by a sestet (six line grouping) The octave presents the problem The sestet offers the resolution	Consists of three quatrains (four line grouping) followed by a couplet (two line grouping) The first three quatrains develop the problem more fully than the Petrarchan but must be resolved rather quickly in only two lines.	Almost exactly like the Shakespearean sonnets, however, with an interlocking rhyme scheme.
A typical Petrarchan rhyme scheme: Octave: <i>abbaabba</i> Sestet: <i>cdecde</i> or <i>cdcdcd</i>	A typical Shakespearean rhyme scheme: <i>abab cdcd efef gg</i>	A typical Spenserian rhyme scheme <i>abab bcbc cdcd ee</i>

Petrarchan (Italian) Sonnet

When I consider how my light is spent,	A			
Ere half my days, in this dark world and wide,	B			
And that one Talent which is death to hide	B			
Lodged with me useless, though my Soul more bent	A			
To serve therewith my Maker, and present	A			
My true account, lest he returning chide;	B			
“Doth God exact day-labour, light denied?”	B			
I fondly ask. But patience, to prevent	A			
That murmur, soon replies, “God doth not need	C	C	C	C
Either man’s work or his own gifts; who best	D	D	D	D
Bear his mild yoke, they serve him best. His state	E	C	D	C
Is Kingly. Thousands at his bidding speed	C	C	C	D
And post o’er Land and Ocean without rest:	D	D	D	C
They also serve who only stand and wait.”	E	C	D	D

Spenserian Sonnet

One day I wrote her name upon the strand,	A
But came the waves and washed it away:	B
Again I wrote it with a second hand,	A
But came the tide and made my pains his prey.	B
Vain man (said she), that dost in vain assay	B
A mortal thing so to immortalise;	C
For I myself shall like to this decay,	B
And eke my name be wiped out likewise.	C
Not so (quod I); let baser things devise	C
To die in dust, but you shall live by fame;	D
My verse your virtues rare shall eternise,	C
And in the heavens write your glorious name:	D
Where, whenas death shall all the world subdue,	E
Our love shall live, and later life renew.	E

Shakespearean Sonnet

Like as the waves make towards the pebbled shore,	A
So do our minutes hasten to their end;	B
Each changing place with that which goes before,	A
In sequent toil all forwards do contend.	B
Nativity, once in the main of light,	C
Crawls to maturity, wherewith being crown’d,	D
Crooked elipses ’gainst his glory fight,	C
And Time that gave doth now his gift confound.	D
Time doth transfix the flourish set on youth	E
And delves the parallels in beauty’s brow,	F
Feeds on the rarities of nature’s truth,	E
And nothing stands but for his scythe to mow:	F
And yet to times in hope my verse shall stand,	G
Praising thy worth, despite his cruel hand.	G