

# Sonnet Form

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.

## Holy Sonnet 10

*John Donne*

Death, be not proud, though some have called thee  
Mighty and dreadful, for, thou art not so,  
For, those, whom thou think'st, thou dost overthrow,  
Die not, poor death, nor yet canst thou kill me.  
From rest and sleep, which but thy pictures be,  
Much pleasure, then from thee, much more must flow,  
And soonest our best men with thee do go,  
Rest of their bones, and souls delivery.  
Thou art slave to Fate, Chance, kings, and desperate men,  
And dost with poison, war, and sickness dwell,  
And poppy, or charms can make us sleep as well,  
And better then thy stroke; why swell'st thou then;  
One short sleep past, we wake eternally,  
And death shall be no more; death, thou shalt die.

### 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.

#### Sonnet 73

That time of year thou mayst in me behold  
When yellow leaves, or none, or few, do hang  
Upon those boughs which shake against the cold,  
Bare ruin'd choirs, where late the sweet birds sang.  
In me thou seest the twilight of such day  
As after sunset fadeth in the west,  
Which by and by black night doth take away,  
Death's second self, that seals up all in rest.  
In me thou see'st the glowing of such fire  
That on the ashes of his youth doth lie,  
As the death-bed whereon it must expire  
Consumed with that which it was nourish'd by.  
This thou perceivest, which makes thy love more strong,  
To love that well which thou must leave ere long.

*William Shakespeare*

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.

Source: <http://www.poets.org/viewmedia.php/prmMID/5791> (with some additions)

## The Silken Tent

*Robert Frost*

She is as in a field a silken tent  
At midday when the sunny summer breeze  
Has dried the dew and all its ropes relent,  
So that in guys it gently sways at ease,  
And its supporting central cedar pole,  
That is its pinnacle to heavenward  
And signifies the sureness of the soul,  
Seems to owe naught to any single cord,  
But strictly held by none, is loosely bound  
By countless silken ties of love and thought  
To every thing on earth the compass round,  
And only by one's going slightly taut  
In the capriciousness of summer air  
Is of the slightest bondage made aware.

## Puritan Sonnet

*Elinor Wylie*

Down to the Puritan marrow of my bones  
There's something in this richness that I hate.  
I love the look, austere, immaculate,  
Of landscapes drawn in pearly monotones.  
There's something in my very blood that owns  
Bare hills, cold silver on a sky of slate,  
A thread of water, churned to milky spate  
Streaming through slanted pastures fenced with stones.  
  
I love those skies, thin blue or snowy gray,  
Those fields sparse-planted, rendering meager sheaves;  
That spring, briefer than apple-blossom's breath,  
Summer, so much too beautiful to stay;  
Swift autumn, like a bonfire of leaves,  
And sleepy winter, like the sleep of death.

## Sonnet 61

*Michael Drayton*

Since there's no help, come let us kiss and part.  
Nay, I have done, you get no more of me;  
And I am glad, yea glad with all my heart,  
That thus so cleanly I myself can free.  
Shake hands for ever, cancel all our vows,  
And when we meet at any time again,  
Be it not seen in either of our brows  
That we one jot of former love retain.  
Now at the last gasp of Love's latest breath,  
When, his pulse failing, Passion speechless lies;  
When Faith is kneeling by his bed of death,  
And Innocence is closing up his eyes--  
Now, if thou wouldst, when all have given him over,  
From death to life thou might'st him yet recover!

## It is a Beauteous Evening, Calm and Free

*William Wordsworth*

It is a beauteous evening, calm and free,  
The holy time is quiet as a Nun  
Breathless with adoration; the broad sun  
Is sinking down in its tranquillity;  
The gentleness of heaven broods o'er the Sea;  
Listen! the mighty Being is awake,  
And doth with his eternal motion make  
A sound like thunder—everlastingly.  
Dear child! dear Girl! that walkest with me here,  
If thou appear untouched by solemn thought,  
Thy nature is not therefore less divine:  
Thou liest in Abraham's bosom all the year;  
And worshipping'st at the Temple's inner shrine,  
God being with thee when we know it not.

## If We Must Die

*Claude McKay*

If we must die, let it not be like hogs  
Hunted and penned in an inglorious spot,  
While round us bark the mad and hungry dogs,  
Making their mock at our accursèd lot.  
If we must die, O let us nobly die,  
So that our precious blood may not be shed  
In vain; then even the monsters we defy  
Shall be constrained to honor us though dead!  
O kinsmen! we must meet the common foe!  
Though far outnumbered let us show us brave,  
And for their thousand blows deal one death-blow!  
What though before us lies the open grave?  
Like men we'll face the murderous, cowardly pack,  
Pressed to the wall, dying, but fighting back!

## Sonnet 29

*William Shakespeare*

When in disgrace with Fortune and men's eyes,  
I all alone beweep my outcast state,  
And trouble deaf heaven with my bootless cries,  
And look upon myself and curse my fate,  
Wishing me like to one more rich in hope,  
Featured like him, like him with friends possessed,  
Desiring this man's art and that man's scope,  
With what I most enjoy contented least,  
Yet in these thoughts myself almost despising,  
Haply I think on thee, and then my state,  
(Like to the lark at break of day arising  
From sullen earth) sings hymns at heaven's gate,  
For thy sweet love remembered such wealth brings,  
That then I scorn to change my state with kings.

**"Ozymandias"**

*Percy Bysshe Shelley*

I met a traveller from an antique land  
Who said: Two vast and trunkless legs of stone  
Stand in the desert . . . Near them, on the sand,  
Half sunk, a shattered visage lies, whose frown,  
And wrinkled lip, and sneer of cold command  
Tell that its sculptor well those passions read  
Which yet survive, (stamped on these lifeless things,  
The hand that mocked them and the heart that fed:  
And on the pedestal these words appear:  
"My name is Ozymandias, king of kings:  
Look on my works, ye Mighty, and despair!"  
Nothing beside remains. Round the decay  
Of that colossal wreck, boundless and bare  
The lone and level sands stretch far away.

## Sonnet

*Louise Bogan*

Since you would claim the sources of my thought  
Recall the meshes whence it sprang unlimed,  
The reedy traps which other hands have times  
To close upon it. Conjure up the hot  
Blaze that it cleared so cleanly, or the snow  
Devised to strike it down. It will be free.  
Whatever nets draw in to prison me  
At length your eyes must turn to watch it go.

My mouth, perhaps, may learn one thing too well,  
My body hear no echo save its own,  
Yet will the desperate mind, maddened and proud,  
Seek out the storm, escape the bitter spell  
That we obey, strain to the wind, be thrown  
Straight to its freedom in the thunderous cloud



## **America**

*Claude McKay*

Although she feeds me bread of bitterness,  
And sinks into my throat her tiger's tooth,  
Stealing my breath of life, I will confess  
I love this cultured hell that tests my youth.  
Her vigor flows like tides into my blood,  
Giving me strength erect against her hate,  
Her bigness sweeps my being like a flood.  
Yet, as a rebel fronts a king in state,  
I stand within her walls with not a shred  
Of terror, malice, not a word of jeer.  
Darkly I gaze into the days ahead,  
And see her might and granite wonders there,  
Beneath the touch of Time's unerring hand,  
Like priceless treasures sinking in the sand.  
(McKay, *Passion* 126)

## **The Lynching**

*Claude McKay*

His Spirit in smoke ascended to high heaven.  
His father, by the cruelest way of pain,  
Had bidden him to his bosom once again;  
The awful sin remained still unforgiven.  
All night a bright and solitary star  
(Perchance the one that ever guided him,  
Yet gave him up at last to Fate's wild whim)  
Hung pitifully o'er the swinging char.  
Day dawned, and soon the mixed crowds came to view

The ghastly body swaying in the sun.

The women thronged to look, but never a one

Showed sorrow in her eyes of steely blue.

And little lads, lynchers that were to be,

Danced round the dreadful thing in fiendish glee.

(McKay, *Passion* 122)