

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 collection, 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.

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 worshipp'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.

Sonnet 18*William Shakespeare*

Shall I compare thee to a summer's day?
 Thou art more lovely and more temperate:
 Rough winds do shake the darling buds of May,
 And summer's lease hath all too short a date:
 Sometime too hot the eye of heaven shines,
 And often is his gold complexion dimmed,
 And every fair from fair sometime declines,
 By chance, or nature's changing course untrimmed:
 But thy eternal summer shall not fade,
 Nor lose possession of that fair thou ow'st,
 Nor shall death brag thou wander'st in his shade,
 When in eternal lines to time thou grow'st,
 So long as men can breathe, or eyes can see,
 So long lives this, and this gives life to thee.

Sonnet 116*William Shakespeare*

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:
 O no! it is an ever-fixed 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.

"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