

Poetic Form 2: The Sonnet

Sonnet

The sonnet is a lyric poem with 14 lines and a strict rhyme scheme. It originated in Sicily in the thirteenth century and takes its name from an Italian word, *sonetto*, meaning ‘little song’. There are four basic models of sonnets: the Petrarchan, the Shakespearean (or English), the Miltonic and the Spenserian, all named after poets who either developed them or made them most popular. Sonnets were usually love poems, but they might also look at religious subjects. In most of the variations, the discussion of the theme over the 14 lines splits naturally into an **octave** (8 lines) followed by a **sestet** (6 lines). The sonnet was introduced into English by Sir Thomas Wyatt in the early sixteenth century and soon became a very popular form amongst Elizabethan poets, such as Shakespeare, Spenser and Sir Philip Sidney. Apart from the sonnets of John Milton in the seventeenth century the form dropped out of fashion in England until the nineteenth century when it enjoyed a great revival. The Romantic poets, Wordsworth, Shelley and Keats all wrote wonderful and memorable sonnets, as did later Victorians such as Elizabeth Barrett Browning and Gerard Manley Hopkins. British poets have continued to experiment with the sonnet, both with its form and range of subject matter.

The Petrarchan Sonnet

- 14 lines, divided into two parts: **octave** (8 lines) and **sestet** (6 lines)
- The **octave** introduces the theme of the poem, often presenting a longing, a doubt or a problem and the **sestet** resolves it
- Lines are written in **iambic pentameter** (di-dum, di-dum, di-dum, di-dum, di-dum)
- There are only 5 rhyming sounds at the ends of lines and the rhyme scheme is as follows: a b b a a b b a c d e c d e
- The sestet may also rhyme c d c d c d, thus creating a sonnet of only 4 rhyming sounds

The Shakespearean Sonnet

- It has 14 lines written in **iambic pentameter** with subtle variations of rhythm as long as the five foot line is retained
- A natural break in meaning usually occurs between the first 8 lines (the **octave**) and the next 6 lines (the **sestet**)
- Other smaller shifts in meaning occur after every four lines (each **quatrain**) and the poem finishes with a rhyming **couplet**
- The rhyme scheme is as follows: a b a b c d c d e f e f g g

The Spenserian Sonnet

- It has 14 lines written in **iambic pentameter** with subtle variations of rhythm as long as the five foot line is retained
- It has an interlocking rhyme scheme: a b a b b c b c c d c d e e

The Miltonic Sonnet

- As per the Petrarchan sonnet except the only difference is that there is no natural break, or turning point, in meaning between the octave and the sestet. The rhyme scheme is the same, although it may vary more in the sestet.

SONNET 73

by William Shakespeare

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.