

The Art of the Sonnet

What is a sonnet?

I. A form originating in medieval Italy, imported into England/English language

A. 13th Century: Italy

1. Fra Guittone of Arezzo
2. inventor/popularizer of sonnet form
3. (we don't really know who wrote the first one)

B. 14th Century: Italy

1. Francesco Petrarca, or Petrarch
2. SUPER-popularizer of the sonnet form
3. Sonnet as vehicle for unrequited/courtly love for Laura

C. 16th Century: Sonnet Goes to England

1. Sir Thomas Wyatt

- a. Diplomat in court of Henry VIII
- b. Encounters sonnets of Petrarch on a diplomatic trip to Italy
- c. Translates Petrarch into English
- d. Begins writing his own sonnets

2. Henry Howard, Earl of Surrey

- a. Friend of Wyatt
- b. Also becomes sonnet enthusiast
- c. Develops particular sonnet style known as English or Shakespearean sonnet
- d. He didn't live long enough to know how not-fair this was

3. Various other Tudor-era sonnet-writing poets (under Elizabeth)

- a. Edmund Spenser
- b. Sir Philip Sidney

4. Shakespeare

- a. Most famous practitioner of the sonnet that bears his name
- b. Wrote other things, too

II. A form with strict rules

A. 14 lines

B. Rhyme Scheme varies

1. Italian or Petrarchan sonnet

- a. Structure: octet (8 lines) + sestet (6 lines)
- b. Rhyme scheme: abbaabba cdecde (or variations thereon, in the sestet)
- c. Builds problem, argument, or situation through the octet, resolves in the sestet

2. English or Shakespearean sonnet

- a. Structure: three quatrains and a rhyming couplet
- b. Rhyme scheme: abab cdcd efef gg.
- c. Builds problem, argument, or situation through lines 1-12, resolves in lines 13-14

Petrarchan sonnet:

He who with foresight boundless and divine
Showed in His office proof of wondrous art,
Who shaped our globe, its each and every part,
Formed fearsome Mars and made a Jove benign;
Coming on earth, His promise to define,
Which ancient prophets darkly did impart,
Called Peter, caused John from his nets to part,
And set them in His heaven crystalline.
A-borning He shed not on Rome His grace,
But on poor Judah, for His purpose high
Is e'er to raise the lowly of this earth.
Whence such a sun shines on our humble place
As to call blessings on its happy sky
Whereunder my fair lady came to birth.

Shakespearean sonnet:

That time of year thou mayest in me behold
When yellow leaves, or none, or few, do hang
Upon those boughs which shake against the cold,
Bare ruined choirs where late the sweet birds sang.
In me thou see'st 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 all up in rest.
In me thou see'st the glowing of such fire
That on the ashes of his youth doth lie,
As the deathbed whereon it must expire,
Consumed by that which it was nourished by.
This thou perceiv'st, which makes thy love more strong,
To love that well which thou must leave ere long.

