

# Sonnets

## Fourteen Lines

# What Is a Sonnet?

A sonnet is a fourteen-line lyric poem, usually written in iambic pentameter, that has one of several rhyme schemes.

- The two most common types of sonnets are
  - Petrarchan, or Italian, sonnets
  - Shakespearean, or English, sonnets
- A less common type of sonnet is the Spenserian sonnet.

# Petrarchan Sonnets

The Petrarchan, or Italian, sonnet is named after the fourteenth-century Italian poet Petrarca (known as Petrarch in English). Petrarch

- popularized and perfected the form
- wrote more than three hundred sonnets addressed to a woman identified only as Laura
- used **Petrarchan conceits**—ingenious and fanciful comparisons of two apparently very different things
  - Example: Love is a baited hook.

# Petrarchan Sonnets: Form

- Two parts
  - an eight-line section, called the octave
  - a six-line section, called the sestet
- Rhyme scheme
  - *abbaabba* for the octave
  - *cdecde*, *cdcdcd*, or *cdedce* for the sestet

# Petrarchan Sonnets: Form

- Organization
  - The octave presents a problem, question, or idea.
  - The sestet resolves the problem, answers the question, or emphasizes the idea.
  - The turn—a shift in focus or thought—usually occurs between the octave and sestet (often in line 9) and acts as the transition between the two sections.

## “Composed upon Westminster Bridge” by William Wordsworth

	Earth has not anything to show more fair:	<i>a</i>
	Dull would he be of soul who could pass by	<i>b</i>
	A sight so touching in its majesty:	<i>b</i>
	This City now doth, like a garment, wear	<i>a</i>
5	The beauty of the morning; silent, bare,	<i>a</i>
	Ships, towers, domes, theaters, and temples lie	<i>b</i>
	Open unto the fields, and to the sky;	<i>b</i>
	All bright and glittering in the smokeless air.	<i>a</i>
	Never did sun more beautifully steep	<i>c</i>
10	In his first splendor, valley, rock, or hill;	<i>d</i>
	Ne'er saw I, never felt, a calm so deep!	<i>c</i>
	The river glideth at his own sweet will:	<i>d</i>
	Dear God! the very houses seem asleep;	<i>c</i>
	And all that mighty heart is lying still!	<i>d</i>

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The octave  
states an idea.

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The sestet  
emphasizes  
the idea.

# Shakespearean Sonnets

The Shakespearean, or English, sonnet is named after William Shakespeare.

- Shakespeare wrote more than one hundred fifty sonnets.
  - All of his sonnets have a male speaker.
  - Many deal with the subject of love.

# Shakespearean Sonnets: Form

- Four parts
  - three 4-line stanzas, called quatrains
  - one 2-line section, called a couplet
- Rhyme scheme
  - *abab* for the first quatrain
  - *cdcd* for the second quatrain
  - *efef* for the third quatrain
  - *gg* for the couplet

# Shakespearean Sonnets: Form

- Organization
  - The three quatrains express related ideas and examples or present a question and tentative answers.
  - The couplet sums up the speaker's conclusion or message.
  - The turn—a shift in focus or thought—usually occurs in the third quatrain. A second turn often occurs in the couplet.

## Sonnet 130

### by William Shakespeare

	My mistress' eyes are nothing like the sun,	<i>a</i>
	Coral is far more red than her lips' red.	<i>b</i>
	If snow be white, why then her breasts are dun,	<i>a</i>
	If hairs be wires, black wires grow on her head.	<i>b</i>
5	I have seen roses damasked, red and white,	<i>c</i>
	But no such roses see I in her cheeks.	<i>d</i>
	And in some perfumes is there more delight	<i>c</i>
	Than in the breath that from my mistress reeks,	<i>d</i>
	I love to hear her speak, yet well I know	<i>e</i>
10	That music hath a far more pleasing sound.	<i>f</i>
	I grant I never saw a goddess go,	<i>e</i>
	My mistress, when she walks, treads on the ground.	<i>f</i>
	And yet, by Heaven, I think my love as rare	<i>g</i>
	As any she belied with false compare.	<i>g</i>

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The couplet  
comments on  
the situation.

# Spenserian Sonnets

The Spenserian sonnet is named after the Renaissance poet Edmund Spenser.

- Spenser's *Amoretti* is a sequence of eighty-nine sonnets, which record a man's two-year courtship of a woman named Elizabeth.
- Spenser kept the division and organization of the standard Shakespearean, or English, sonnet but varied the rhyme scheme.
  - *abab* for the first quatrain
  - *cdcd* for the third quatrain
  - *bcbc* for the second quatrain
  - *ee* for the couplet

## Sonnet 75

### by Edmund Spenser

	One day I wrote her name upon the strand,	<i>a</i>
	But came the waves and washèd it away;	<i>b</i>
	Again I wrote it with a second hand,	<i>a</i>
	But came the tide, and made my pains his prey.	<i>b</i>
5	“Vain man,” said she, “that doest in vain assay, A mortal thing so to immortalize, For I myself shall like to this decay, And eke my name be wipèd out likewise.”	<i>b</i> <i>c</i> <i>b</i> <i>c</i>
10	“Not so,” quod I, “let baser things devise To die in dust, but you shall live by fame: My verse your virtues rare shall eternize, And in the heavens write your glorious name. Where whenas death shall all the world subdue, Our love shall live, and later life renew.”	<i>c</i> <i>d</i> <i>c</i> <i>d</i> <i>e</i> <i>e</i>

## What Have You Learned?

1. A sonnet has \_\_\_\_\_ lines.  
a. twelve                      b. thirteen                      **c. fourteen**
2. \_\_\_\_\_ sonnets are also known as Italian sonnets.  
a. Spenserian                      **b. Petrarchan**                      c. Shakespearean
3. Sonnets are written in iambic \_\_\_\_\_ .  
**a. pentameter**                      b. hexameter                      c. trimeter
4. A Petrarchan conceit is a comparison of two like items.  
a. true                      **b. false**

**The End**