

THE SONNET



History of the Sonnet

- comes from the Italian *sonetto*, meaning “a little sound or song”;
- were highly structured 14-line poems to explore such issues as the fleeting nature of love and profound questions of mortality;
- was popularized by the Italian poet Francesco Petrarch during the 1300s;
- poets throughout much of Europe were writing sonnets by the end of the 16th c.

Meter and Rhyme Patterns

- have fourteen lines, each of which is written in iambic pentameter;
- each line has five metric units, or feet, and each foot consists of an unstressed syllable followed by a stressed syllable;
- have set rhyme schemes, determined by the final sounds in the lines.

Meter and Rhyme Patterns

1) M̄y lo_ve iſ li_ke t̄o ic_e, and I_ t̄o fi_re
(Spencer)

2) Come sleep! O sleep, the certain knot of peace,
The baiting place of wit, the balm of woe,
The poor man's wealth, the prisoner's release,
The indifferent judge between the high and low
(P. Sidney)

Sonnet Forms

- *The Italian sonnet*, often called the Petrarchan sonnet after Francesco Petrarch, is about unrequited love, a common topic for sonnets that follow this form.
- *The English sonnet* is also called the Shakespearean sonnet because Shakespeare was the master of this sonnet form.
- *The Spenserian Sonnet* was crafted by Edmund Spenser as his own version.

The Italian Sonnet

- the first eight lines (called an **octave**) present a problem or situation;
- the last six lines (called a **sestet**) provide an answer or resolution to the problem;
- the switch from problem to resolution is called the **turn**;
- the octave of a typical Italian sonnet has the rhyme scheme *abbaabba*, and the sestet follows either *cdecde* or *cdcdcd*.

The Italian Sonnet

If my life finds strength enough to fight
the grievous battle of each passing day,
that I may meet your gaze, years from today,
lady, when your eyes have lost their light,

and when your golden curls have turned to white,
and vanished are your wreaths and green array,
and when your youthful hue has fled away,
whose beauty makes me tremble in its sight,

perhaps then Love will overcome my fears
enough that I may let my secret rise
and tell you what I've suffered all these years;
and if no flame be kindled in your eyes,
at least I may be granted for my tears
the comfort of a few belated sighs.



The Spenserian Sonnet

- has three quatrains and a couplet;
- follows the rhyme scheme *abab bcba cdcd ee*;
- the interlocking rhyme scheme pushes the sonnet toward the final couplet, in which the writer typically makes a key point or comment.

The Spenserian Sonnet

My love is like to ice, and I to fire;
How comes it then that this her cold so great
Is not dissolv'd through my so hot desire,
But harder grows the more I her entreat?

Or how comes it that my exceeding heat
Is not delayed by her heart frozen cold,
But that I burn much more in boiling sweat,
And feel my flames augmented manifold?

What more miraculous thing may be told,
That fire, which all things melts, should harden ice,
And ice, which is congealed with senseless cold,
Should kindle fire by wonderful device?

Such is the power of love in gentle mind,
That it can alter all the course of kind.

The English Sonnet

- is divided into three **quatrains** (groups of four lines, with each containing its own rhyme scheme) and one **couplet** (a group of two lines);
- the rhyme scheme is usually *abab cdcd efef gg*;
- the English form allows for a more detailed development of the question or problem in the first three quatrains, but it demands a quick summary and solution in the couplet.

The English Sonnet

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 damask'd, 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.