The sonnet , definition and types

## What Is a Sonnet?

A sonnet is **a type of poem that traditionally has 14 lines that are written in iambic pentameter**.

## Sonnet Form and Theme

The formal and structural elements of sonnets became standardized as the sonnet became popular. But over time, new poets found their own ways to write sonnets.

In other words, as poets have experimented with the form and structure of the sonnet, those new approaches to writing sonnets have created new "types" of sonnets, like the early Italian and the English sonnet.

Thematically, you can typically sniff out a traditional sonnet if it deals with one main thing: love. However, like with the form and structure of sonnets themselves, **the themes portrayed in sonnets have also expanded to include topics like politics, nature, religion and spirituality, and social issues.**

## What Are the Differences Between Sonnet Forms?

While there are differences between the types of sonnets that have been developed over time, they can be pretty tough to pick out if analyzing sonnets is a new thing for you. To help you identify each type of sonnet all on your own, **we're going to discuss every major sonnet type you need to know.**

One quick note: while our list is comprehensive, it definitely doesn't contain every type of sonnet known to man! We're just trying to cover the types of sonnets you're most likely to read. To learn about the

obscure sonnet types that didn't make the cut, check out the Poetry Foundation.

## Italian or Petrarchan Sonnets

We'll start with the Italian or Petrarchan sonnet because it was the first type of sonnet to become popular! The Petrarchan sonnet was popularized by the Italian poet Francesco Petrarch in the 1300s, which is why it's interchangeably called an Italian sonnet *or* Petrarchan sonnet. You'll be safe using either name to refer to this type of poem.

Petrarchan sonnets have 14 lines—divided into an *octave* and a *sestet*—that follow the rhyme scheme ABBA ABBA CDCCDC or ABBA ABBA CDECDE. (Not sure what rhyme scheme is? We'll talk about it more later, or you can check out this in-depth guide.)

Petrarchan poems are divided into two sections so the poet can ask questions and reach an answer. **Thematically, the *octave*, or first eight lines, often makes a proposition**, which asks a question or describes a problem. T**hen the *sestet*, or final six lines, proposes a resolution or solution**.

It's common for the transition from the description of the question/problem to the resolution to happen around the ninth line in Petrarchan sonnets. **This shift from problem to resolution is called the "turn," or *volta*.** So you can think of a Petrarchan sonnet as a fancy Q&A session or a mini-argument!

Finally, Italian sonnets are almost always written in iambic pentameter. (We'll talk more about iambic pentameter later!). But now, let's take a look at a Petrarchan sonnet.

## An Italian Sonnet/Petrarchan Sonnet Example: "The Sheaves" by Edwin Arlington Robinson

Where long the shadows of the wind had rolled,
Green wheat was yielding to the change assigned;
And as by some vast magic undivined
The world was turning slowly into gold.
Like nothing that was ever bought or sold
It waited there, the body and the mind;
And with a mighty meaning of a kind
That tells the more the more it is not told.

So in a land where all days are not fair,
Fair days went on till on another day
A thousand golden sheaves were lying there,
Shining and still, but not for long to stay –
As if a thousand girls with golden hair
Might rise from where they slept and go away.

Despite being written in the twentieth century, Robinson uses a Petrarchan form and structure in "The Sheaves." **In this sonnet, Robinson ponders the significance and beauty of a field of wheat.**

**The <u>imagery</u> Robinson uses in this sonnet creates a romantic feeling**: the field of wheat is compared to gold and is described as lending a "vast magic" that's unexplainable. In fact, the beauty of the world, embodied by the golden field, is even more precious than *real* gold!

Robinson makes use of a traditional Petrarchan ABBAABBA CDCDCD rhyme scheme. (The matching letters represent similar rhymes.) As is characteristic of Petrarchan sonnets, Robinson structures his sonnet into an *octave* and a *sestet,* and makes use of a *volta* to initiate a turn or shift in the tone of the poem at the beginning of line 9.

**At the *volta,* Robinson admits that, though the wheat field makes the whole world seem beautiful, "all days are not fair"—a realistic observation** compared to the dreamy romanticism of

the *octave.* Robinson knows that the wheat field's beauty is limited, which we realize when the wheat gets cut and bound into sheaves.

Robinson's poem is a good example of a Petrarchan sonnet because it employs the pattern of making a proposition at the beginning in the *octave*—that all the world is beautiful, as exemplified by the wheat field—and providing a resolution to that proposition in the *sestet*—that, like the youth of a thousand girls with golden hair, the beauty of the earth changes over time.

## English or Shakespearean Sonnets

Like the Italian/Petrarchan sonnet, the English sonnet has multiple names as well. **The English sonnet is often called a Shakespearean sonnet** since the poet William Shakespeare was the most prolific (and famous!) English sonnet-writer during the sixteenth century. **You might even hear this type of poem called an Elizabethan sonnet**, since Queen Elizabeth I loved them!

English sonnets have 14 lines of verse, but **this type of sonnet has three quatrains and one couplet** instead of an *octave* and a *sestet*. Also, these sonnets follow an ABAB CDCD EFEF GG rhyme scheme. A single quatrain is made up of four lines of verse, and a couplet is made up of two lines.

Like Petrarchan sonnets, English sonnets are usually in a Q&A format. **But the different structure and rhyme scheme affects how English sonnets communicate their themes.** In an English sonnet, the *volta* happens right before the couplet instead of in the middle of the poem. This means that the three quatrains give the poet more space to ask their question and build tension, but the single couplet at the end gives the poet only two lines to find an answer.

This structure makes the poem more dramatic, and it often means the poet's "answer" is more ambiguous!

**An English Sonnet Example: "Prologue," From *Romeo and Juliet* by William Shakespeare**

Two households, both alike in dignity,
In fair Verona, where we lay our scene,
From ancient grudge break to new mutiny,
Where civil blood makes civil hands unclean.
From forth the fatal loins of these two foes
A pair of star-cross'd lovers take their life;
Whose misadventured piteous overthrows
Do with their death bury their parents' strife.
The fearful passage of their death-mark'd love,
And the continuance of their parents' rage,
Which, but their children's end, nought could remove,
Is now the two hours' traffic of our stage;
The which if you with patient ears attend,
What here shall miss, our toil shall strive to mend.

The Prologue to Shakespeare's play, *Romeo and Juliet,* is actually an example of an English sonnet. **Shakespeare uses a sonnet to show that romantic love and tragic conflict are going to be two main themes of the play**. This creative choice shows just how common it was for people to associate sonnets with themes of love and tragedy during the Elizabethan Era.

First, you can tell this is a sonnet because it uses the classic structure of three quatrains and a concluding couplet with the rhyme scheme ABAB CDCD EFEF GG.

More importantly, **this sonnet sets the stage for the conflict that plays out in the play, telling a tale of two well-respected, Italian families who have bad blood between them.** For instance, in the second quatrain, the speaker in the poem tells the audience that the conflict between the two families worsens when their children fall in love and, ultimately, decide to take their own lives.

The sonnet concludes with a couplet—another key feature of the English sonnet. **The couplet here makes a shift from the first**

**twelve lines by speaking directly to the play's audience,**encouraging them to listen patiently and pay attention to the story that the Prologue introduced. In other words, it answers the implied question about what happens next. (Answer: just watch!)

Shakespeare's approach to the sonnet embodies all the characteristics that the English sonnet is known for today: the structure, rhyme scheme, presentation of a theme and a problem in the three quatrains, and the use of a *volta* at the couplet to explain how the problem will be resolved. Most of all, The Prologue to *Romeo and Juliet* embraces the major theme of English sonnets: love.

*An engraving of the poet Edmund Spenser*

## Spenserian Sonnets

Spenserian sonnets are slightly different and less common than other forms. Spenserian sonnets are named after the English poet who popularized them, Edmund Spenser. These sonnets **use the same structure as English sonnets (three quatrains and a couplet), but rely on a more complicated rhyme scheme: ABAB BCBC CDCD EE.** So in order to tell Shakespearean and Spencerian sonnets apart, you have to look closely at the rhyming pattern.

What makes the rhyme scheme of a Spenserian sonnet more complicated is that it repeats the same end rhyme several times over. Trying to think of more repeated rhymes that fit naturally into the sonnet can be more difficult for the poet!

Furthermore, **Spenser uses each quatrain to develop a metaphor, question, idea, or conflict in a logical way**. At the end of his sonnets, he **uses the couplet to make a bold statement that resolves the themes** presented in the quatrains. Spenser also often included an early *volta*around line 9 of his sonnets, but the

first *volta* in his sonnets is a red herring—the true resolution doesn't come until the couplet at the end!

**A Spenserian Sonnet: XXVI from *Amoretti* by Edmund Spenser**

Sweet is the rose, but grows upon a briar;
Sweet in the Juniper, but sharp his bough;
Sweet is the Eglantine, but pricketh near;
Sweet is the firbloom, but his branches rough.
Sweet is the Cypress, but his rind is tough,
Sweet is the nut, but bitter is his pill;
Sweet is the broom-flower, but yet sour enough;
And sweet is Moly, but his root is ill.
So every sweet with sour is tempered still
That maketh it be coveted the more:
For easy things that may be got at will,
Most sorts of men do set but little store.
    Why then should I account of little pain,
    That endless pleasure shall unto me gain.

It's pretty easy to tell that this is a Spenserian sonnet...since it was written by the poet Edmund Spenser! At first glance, this Spenserian sonnet might seem like an English sonnet, but this poem uses the more complicated rhyme scheme that Spenserian sonnets are known for: ABAB BCBC CDCD EE. **By paying close attention to the rhyme scheme, you can tell that this is a Spenserian sonnet** that ponders the ideas of love and pleasure.

In this sonnet, **Spenser makes use of repetition to reinforce both a theme and a problem in the three quatrains.** By repeating the same phrase over and over ("Sweet is the...") and using the same sentence structure in each line, Spenser makes it clear that "every sweet with sour is tempered still." In other words, the good and the bad often go together. To reinforce this idea, the first two quatrains name several things that are sweet, like roses and the broom-flower,

then point out that these sweet things all grow on sharp, prickly, or sour trees and bushes.

In the third quatrain, Spenser explains why it's significant that the sweetest things are often accompanied by things that cause pain: because people like a challenge! Spencer says that people don't really value things they can get easily. Things that are hard to get prove more satisfying in the end.

Because of the false *volta* at the beginning of line 9, signaled by Spenser's use of the word "so," it may seem like the problem of sweet but prickly things is resolved in the third quatrain. **But there's still the couplet to come, and that's where the problem is ultimately resolved.** Spenser concludes that because good things and bad things often go together, we shouldn't worry about enduring a little pain when the sweet thing will reward us with pleasure. That reward, Spenser claims, more than makes up for the trouble.

.