

The Sonnet:

The word sonnet means a little song. It had its origin in Italy during the thirteenth century. The great Italian poet Petrarch (1304-1343) was the first to make this verse form popular, hence the name Petrarchan or Italian is given to one of the two chief classes of English sonnets. The second class is known as the English or the Shakespearean sonnet.

In the early part of the sixteenth century, Sir Thomas Wyatt (1503-42), who had come in contact with Italian poetry while on a mission to Italy, introduced the sonnet to England, varying the Italian form by ending his sonnets with a couplet, a practice not found in Italian poetry. His friend, Henry Howard, Earl of Surrey (1515-1547), made further changes and produced what is called the English form of the sonnet. Most Elizabethan sonneteers followed this form.

The sonnet has a fixed pattern, a certain discipline not found in other forms. It is a short poem of fourteen lines and a rhyme scheme restricted by a variety of principles. To write a good sonnet was not only a severe test of skill, but also a mark of distinction. It is perhaps for this reason that most poets, from Shakespeare onwards have tried their hand at the sonnet. During the Elizabethan era, a gentleman was expected to be able to turn out a sonnet, even if not an excellent one, as one of his accomplishments.

Sonnets are sometimes written in a sequence. A sonnet-sequence is a group of sonnets having a common theme or addressed to an

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There are different types of sonnets: the petrarchan, the Shakespearean, the Spenserian, the Miltonic and the more contemporary type, but, strictly speaking, sonnets may be divided into three general types: The Petrarchan (or Italian), the Shakespearean and the Miltonic.

The Italian sonnet is divided into two parts: the first part is composed of eight lines and is called the octave. The second part is composed of the last six lines and is called the sestet. At the end of the octave there is a pause known as the 'turn' or 'volta'. The octave states the main idea or problem or theme of the poem; the sestet provides an answer or resolution and bring the matter to a conclusion.

The octave rhymes abba,abba and may be composed of eight run-on lines or two quatrains. The sestet rhymes in any of these patterns: cde,cde,cde,cde... Here is an example of Italian sonnet as used by John Keats(1795-1621);

On first looking Into Chapman's Homer

| | |
|--|---|
| Much have I travell'd in the realms of gold, | a |
| And manly goodly states and kingdoms seen; | b |
| Round many western islands have I been | b |
| Which bards in fealty to Apollo hold | a |

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The Sonnet:

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The Shakespearean or English sonnet consists of three quatrains and a couplet, rhyming abab.cdcd.efef. In this form the idea is developed throughout the three quatrains and completed with a final couplet that often comes in the form of an epigram, as in the following Shakespearean sonnet (no. 18)

| | |
|--|---|
| Shall I compare thee to a summer's day? | a |
| Thou art more lovely and more temperate | b |
| Rough winds do shake the darling buds of May | a |
| And Summer's lease hath all too short a date: | b |
| Sometime too hot the eye of heaven shines, | c |
| And often is his gold complexion dimm'd; | d |
| And every fair from fair sometime declines, | c |
| By chance, or nature's changing course untrim'd; | d |
| But thy eternal Summer shall not fade, | e |
| Nor lose possession of that fair thou owest, | f |
| Nor shall death brag thou wand'st in his shade, | e |
| When in eternal lines to time thou grow'st, | f |
| So long as men can breathe or eyes can see, | g |
| So long lives this, and this gives life to thee. | g |



That murmur, soon replies, "doth not need c
Eiether man's work of His own gifts; who best d
Bear His mild yoke, they serve Him best. His state e
Is kingly; thousands at his bidding speed, c
And post o'er land and ocean without rest; d
They also serve who only stand and wait". e

Another type of sonnet, an adaptation of the English form, is the Spenserian sonnet It rhymes abab, bcbc, cdcd, ee, as in the following example from Spenser's the Amoretti (LXXV):

One day, I wrote her upon the strand a
But came the waves and washed it away b
Agayne I wrote it with a second hand, a
But came the tyde, and made my paynes his pray b
Vayne man, sayed she, that doest in vaine assay, b
A mortal! thing so to immortalize. c
For I my selve shall lyke to this decay. b
And eek my name bee wyped out lykewise. c
Not so, (quod I) let baser things devize c
To dy in dust, but you shall live by fame d
My name your vertue eere shall eternalize c

