Sonnet

ⓘ DEFINITION

What is a sonnet? Here's a quick and simple definition:

> A sonnet is a type of fourteen-line poem. Traditionally, the fourteen lines of a sonnet consist of an octave (or two quatrains making up a stanza of 8 lines) and a sestet (a stanza of six lines). Sonnets generally use a meter of iambic pentameter, and follow a set rhyme scheme. Within these general guidelines for what makes a sonnet, there are a wide variety of variations. The two most common sonnet variations are the Italian sonnet (also called a Petrarchan sonnet), and the English sonnet (also called a Shakespearean sonnet). The main difference between the Italian and English sonnet is in the rhyme schemes they use.

Some additional key details about sonnets:

- For hundreds of years, the sonnet form was reserved for poems about unrequited love, but since the 17th century sonnets have been written about a wide variety of subjects.
- Sonnets have become so popular, and are written in so many places, that over time many, many variations of the sonnet form have evolved.
- Sonnets are sometimes written in groups, where each individual sonnet can stand alone but are also linked with the others in the group.

How to Pronounce Sonnet

Here's how to pronounce sonnet: **sahn**-it

Sonnets, Meter, and Rhyme Scheme

Many (but not all) sonnets have a strict meter and a defined rhyme scheme. For that reason, it's helpful to have a strong grasp of what meter and rhyme scheme are. We provide more details about these terms on their own pages, but here's a quick primer:

- **Meter:** A pattern of stressed and unstressed syllables that creates the rhythm of lines of poetry. The units of meter are called feet. Feet have different stress patterns. For instance, an iamb is a foot with an unstressed syllable followed by a stressed syllable (de-**fine**), while a trochee has the opposite: a stressed syllable followed by an unstressed syllable (**Po**-et). Poetic meters are defined by both the *type* and *number* of feet they contain. For example, *iambic pentameter* is a type of meter used in many sonnets that contains five iambs per line (thus the prefix "penta," which means five).

- **Rhyme scheme**: Poems such as sonnets that make use of end rhymes (rhymes at the end of each line), often do so according to a repeating, predetermined pattern. That pattern is called a rhyme scheme. Rhyme schemes are described using letters of the alphabet, so that each line of verse that corresponds to a specific type of rhyme used in the poem is assigned a letter, beginning with the letter A. For example, a four-line poem in which the first line rhymes with the third, and the second line rhymes with the fourth has the rhyme scheme ABAB.

Types of Sonnet

Sonnets have been written all over the world and in many different languages: French, Italian, Spanish, Polish, Czech, Russian, Urdu, and German poets have all made significant contributions to the evolution of the form. Since the sonnet's invention in Italy in the 13th century, new variations on the traditional form have been regularly born. Below is a summary of the different types of sonnets, with brief explanations of their particular forms and how each of them arose.

The Italian Sonnet

Although the form of the sonnet is said to have been invented by Giacomo da Lentini in the 13th century, it was popularized by a poet from Tuscany named Francesco Petrarch, who used the form to write poems expressing his unrequited love for a woman named Laura. The original form of the Italian sonnet is therefore known as the Petrarchan sonnet. Consisting of fourteen lines total, the poem begins with two quatrains (stanzas of four lines) that make up a unit called an octave, and the poem ends with two tercets (stanzas of three lines) that make up a single six-line stanza called a sestet. The standard rhyme scheme for the octave is ABBA ABBA while the rhyme scheme for the sestet is either CDEDCE or CDCDCD.

The typical structure of the Italian sonnet is for the octave to contain what's called a "proposition," which establishes a problem (such as unrequited love) or a question (such as, "does she love me?"). The sestet is concerned with resolving the problem or question, and it almost always contains a "turn," which signals a shift in the poem's focus from problem to resolution. The turn is sometimes also called a "volta" (the Italian word for turn), and it usually comes at the very beginning of the sestet, in the sonnet's ninth line.

This sonnet by Petrarch is a perfect example of the form and subject matter of the typical Italian sonnet. In the "proposition" of the octave, the poem establishes its dilemma and subject: the vanity of the poet's passion for his beloved. This sonnet has an obvious "turn" in the ninth line (the phrase "but now I clearly see"). This sonnet gives a strong example of how a turn works; it doesn't need to be dramatic, but it subtly marks a shift in the tone or mood of the poem. The "resolution" in the sestet is that the world's joy is "but a flitting

dream." The sonnet employs the Petrarchan rhyme scheme of ABBA ABBA CDEDCE.

> Ye who in rhymes dispersed the echoes hear
> Of those sad sighs with which my heart I fed
> When early youth my mazy wanderings led,
> Fondly different from what I now appear,
>
> Fluttering 'twixt frantic hope and frantic fear,
> from those by whom my various style is read,
> I hope, if e'er their hearts for love have bled ,
> Not only pardon, but perhaps a tear.
>
> But now I clearly see that of mankind
> Long time I was the tale: whence bitter thought
> And self-reproach with frequent blushes teem;
>
> While of my frenzy, shame the fruit I find,
> And sad repentance, and the proof, dear-bought,
> That the world's joy is but a flitting dream.

The English Sonnet

The English poet Thomas Wyatt introduced the sonnet to the English language in the 16th century by translating the works of Petrarch from Italian. Wyatt's contemporary, The Earl of Surrey, then made innovations to the form by introducing a new structure and rhyme scheme, which became the defining characteristics of the English sonnet: the fourteen lines are all written in iambic pentameter and are taken up by three quatrains of four lines followed by a two-line couplet. The lines follow the rhyme scheme ABAB CDCD EFEF GG.

In the English sonnet, the turn typically occurs in the third quatrain, but William Shakespeare broke from this rule by frequently situating the turn in the final couplet of his sonnets. In fact, Shakespeare quickly became the English sonnet's most venerated practitioner, and the English sonnet is often referred to as the Shakespearean sonnet as a result. The English sonnet is sometimes also referred to as the Elizabethan sonnet. This famous example by Shakespeare follows the typical rhyme scheme of the English sonnet, ABAB CDCD EFEF GG. In this case, Shakespeare places the turn in the usual location, in the sonnet's ninth line: "But thy eternal summer shall not fade."

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

Modern Sonnet

In the 20th century, poets like Edna St. Vincent Millay, Robert Lowell, and W.H. Auden continued to use and evolve the form of the sonnet by creating their own variations. These modern variations are more extreme than the difference between Italian and English sonnets. Modern poets have written unrhymed sonnets, "inverted" sonnets in which the sestet precedes the octave, and sonnets with unusual rhyme schemes.

Although today when people refer to sonnets they usually mean the original form of the English or Petrarchan sonnet, and some modern poets still write traditional sonnets, modern sonnets can be *any* poem of 14 lines, with or without a rhyme scheme.

Other Types of Sonnets

Other variations of the sonnet have arisen throughout history, but these variations are always derived from one of the three forms described above. Here are some of those other types of sonnet, including their definitions and a bit of background on each:

- **Occitan sonnets:** Occitan is a somewhat obscure Romance language that was spoken in parts of Italy, France, and Spain. Many sonnets were written in Occitan during the 13th and 14th centuries, and these sonnets had their own form, which differs from Italian sonnets in that the sestet of an Occitan sonnet has a CDCDCD rhyme scheme.
- **Spenserian sonnets:** The 16th century English poet Edmund Spenser created his own variation of the English sonnet, using a rhyme scheme of ABAB BCBC CDCD EE.
- **Caudate sonnets:** The Italian poet Francesco Berni is credited with the invention of this variation on the standard sonnet form, in which a 14-line sonnet is followed by a brief concluding stanza of a few lines, known as a coda. This variation is typically used for satirical poems, such as John Milton's "On the New Forcers of Conscience under the Long Parliament."
- **Curtal sonnets:** The English poet Gerard Manley Hopkins wanted to "shrink" the traditional English sonnet to precisely 3/4 its usual size, reducing the octave to a six-line stanza and the sestet to a four and a half-line stanza. The resulting ten-and-a-half-line poem is known as a "curtal sonnet."
- **Word sonnets:** This modern and more extreme variation on the sonnet's form came out of a poetic movement of the late 20th century known as "New Formalism." These 14-word poems contain just one word per line. The very existence of this form testifies to the drastic expansion of the definition of the sonnet that took place over the course of the 20th century.

Sonnet Cycles and Crowns

Sonnets are often written as parts of larger groups of sonnets. In such groupings, each poem can stand alone, but the collection of sonnets is meant to be greater than the sum of its parts. There are two

different types of sonnet groupings, and here is a quick definition of each:

- **Cycles and sequences:** A cycle or sequence of sonnets is a group of sonnets that are united by a single theme. The terms "cycle" and "sequence" are used interchangeably to refer to a suite or series of sonnets that work as stand-alone poems but that deal with the same theme or are addressed to the same person. Inspired by the sonnets of Petrarch, sonnet cycles usually take unrequited love as their subject or are otherwise addressed to lovers. William Shakespeare wrote a sequence of 154 sonnets, becoming the sonnet's most famous practitioner as a result.

- **Sonnet crowns:** A crown is a sequence of sonnets in which the first line of each sonnet is carried over from the last line of the previous sonnet, and the first line of the first sonnet is repeated as the last line of the final sonnet. A "heroic crown" is a specific kind of crown that follows the same rules as a typical crown of sonnets, but the final sonnet is composed of the first lines of all the preceding sonnets in sequence. John Donne's sequence entitled "Corona" follows the form of a heroic crown. Marilyn Nelson's book *A Wreath for Emmett Till* is another, more recent example of a heroic crown of sonnets.

Subject Matter in Sonnets

With few exceptions, Italian sonnets and early English sonnets are about unrequited love. Then, in the 17th century, John Donne began writing religious sonnets, and shortly thereafter John Milton began using the form for everything from satirical poems to more serious poems of soul-searching and reflection. In the 19th century, the sonnet's popularity among poets around the globe soared, such that by the end of the century so many variations had been made to the form that it was seen as well-suited to *any* subject matter. Today, as a result, sonnets don't have to take any particular subject as their focus.

A Note on Stanzas in Sonnets

Many sonnets consist of 14 lines that aren't broken up into distinct stanzas. However, it is common to use the terms "octave" and "sestet" to refer to the different sections of the sonnet, even if there are no line breaks in the poem to differentiate the first eight lines from the last six lines. This is because the octave and the sestet—along with the "proposition" and "resolution" that traditionally belong to each—are so important to the form that the terms are even used to analyze sonnets that don't have distinct stanzas. Often sonnets such as these will use indentation, periods, or other forms of punctuation to create pauses and natural breaks in the place of an actual stanza break.

✳ EXAMPLES

Sonnet in Shakespeare's "Romeo and Juliet"

The prologue to Shakespeare's famous verse drama Romeo and Juliet is written in the style of an English or "Shakespearean" sonnet, in iambic pentameter and with a rhyme scheme of ABAB CDCD EFEF GG.

> 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.

Milton's "When I Consider How My Light is Spent"

Milton wrote sonnets that were not about unrequited love, breaking with the Petrarchan and Shakespearean traditions. Rather, Milton's sonnets were often meditations on life and death. This sonnet follows the traditional Petrarchan rhyme scheme of ABBA ABBA CDECDE.

> When I consider how my light is spent
> Ere half my days in this dark world and wide,
> And that one talent which is death to hide
> Lodg'd with me useless, though my soul more bent
> To serve therewith my Maker, and present
> My true account, lest he returning chide;
> "Doth God exact day-labour, light denied?"
> I fondly ask. But Patience to prevent
> That murmur, soon replies: "God doth not need
> Either man's work or his own gifts; who best
> Bear his mild yoke, they serve him best. His state
> Is kingly. Thousands at his bidding speed
> And post o'er land and ocean without rest:
> They also serve who only stand and wait."

Milton's "On the New Forcers of Conscience under the Long Parliament"

This 1646 sonnet is an example of the sonnet variation Milton created, known as "caudate sonnet," in which the traditional 14-line sonnet is followed by a brief concluding stanza or stanzas called a "coda." Notice Milton's use of indentation to denote places where the

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traditional sonnet's stanza breaks would occur—accentuating the first, fifth, ninth, and twelfth lines that would traditionally be the first lines of stanzas. The six lines of the coda are indented inversely to the system of indentation Milton uses to define stanzas in the rest of the poem, signifying the coda's difference from the rest of the sonnet. The caudate sonnet was used most often for satirical subjects, as with this political poem.

> BECAUSE you have thrown off your Prelate Lord,
> And with stiff vows renounced his Liturgy,
> To seize the widowed whore Plurality,
> From them whose sin ye envied, not abhorred,
> Dare ye for this adjure the civil sword
> To force our consciences that Christ set free,
> And ride us with a Classic Hierarchy,
> Taught ye by mere A. S. and Rutherford?
> Men whose life, learning, faith, and pure intent,
> Would have been held in high esteem with Paul
> Must now be named and printed heretics
> By shallow Edwards and Scotch What-d'ye-call!
> But we do hope to find out all your tricks,
> Your plots and packing, worse than those of Trent,
> That so the Parliament
> May with their wholesome and preventive shears
> Clip your phylacteries, though baulk your ears,
> And succour our just fears,
> When they shall read this clearly in your charge:
> New *Presbyter* is but old Priest writ large.

Wordsworth's "The World Is Too Much with Us"

This famous sonnet is an example of the Petrarchan form, though it was written in the 19th century in English. William Wordsworth modeled his sonnets after the sonnets of John Milton, likewise following the Petrarchan rhyme scheme of ABBA ABBA CDCDCD.

> The world is too much with us; late and soon,
> Getting and spending, we lay waste our powers;
> Little we see in Nature that is ours;
> We have given our hearts away, a sordid boon!
> This Sea that bares her bosom to the moon,
> The winds that will be howling at all hours,
> And are up-gathered now like sleeping flowers,
> For this, for everything, we are out of tune;
> It moves us not. --Great God! I'd rather be
> A Pagan suckled in a creed outworn;
> So might I, standing on this pleasant lea,
> Have glimpses that would make me less forlorn;
> Have sight of Proteus rising from the sea;
> Or hear old Triton blow his wreathèd horn.

Shelley's "Ozymandias"

Percy Shelley uses an entirely new rhyme scheme for this poem, another departure from the traditional form of the sonnet. This variation's rhyme scheme is ABABACDC EDEFEF.

> I met a traveller from an antique land
> Who said: Two vast and trunkless legs of stone
> Stand in the desert. Near them, on the sand,
> Half sunk, a shattered visage lies, whose frown,
> And wrinkled lip, and sneer of cold command,
> Tell that its sculptor well those passions read
> Which yet survive, stamped on these lifeless things,
> The hand that mocked them and the heart that fed:
> And on the pedestal these words appear:
> 'My name is Ozymandias, king of kings:
> Look on my works, ye Mighty, and despair!'
> Nothing beside remains. Round the decay
> Of that colossal wreck, boundless and bare
> The lone and level sands stretch far away.

Gerard Manley Hopkins' "Pied Beauty"

This is one of the few examples of Gerard Manley Hopkins' variation on the sonnet, which is known as the curtal sonnet. Hopkins wanted to "shrink" the sonnet to precisely 3/4 its usual size, reducing the octave to a six-line stanza and the sestet to a four and a half-line stanza. This poem follows a rhyme scheme of ABCABC DBCDC

> Glory be to God for dappled things —
> For skies of couple-colour as a brinded cow;
> For rose-moles all in stipple upon trout that swim;
> Fresh-firecoal chestnut-falls; finches' wings;
> Landscape plotted and pieced — fold, fallow, and plough;
> And áll trádes, their gear and tackle and trim.
>
> All things counter, original, spare, strange;
> Whatever is fickle, freckled (who knows how?)
> With swift, slow; sweet, sour; adazzle, dim;
> He fathers-forth whose beauty is past change:
> Praise him.

Examples of Modern Sonnets (and Sonnet Variations)

- "The Secret Agent," written by W.H. Auden in 1928, shows what an unrhymed sonnet looks like.

- "Sonnet," by Elizabeth Bishop, was one of the final poems Elizabeth Bishop wrote. Published in 1979, this is an unconventional sonnet, which some have called "inverted," since the poem's first complete sentence is six lines (suggesting a sestet by creating a pause with a period instead of a line break) followed by the second complete sentence, which is eight lines (suggesting an octave). In a traditional sonnet, of course, the sestet would follow the octave. This poem also has quite short lines, no regular

meter, and while it uses irregular and internal rhyming it has no strict rhyme scheme.

- "JANUARY" and other 15 word sonnets by Seymour Mayne. Mayne was a part of a poetic movement in the late 20th century known as "New Formalism" that originated a variation on the sonnet known as "word sonnets," 14-word poems containing just one word per line.

- "Sonnet," by Billy Collins. This is a sonnet about writing sonnets by the contemporary poet Billy Collins. It helps to explain the features of the form by making reference to the poem's length, its traditional use of rhymes, and the "turn" in the ninth line—but, ironically, this sonnet does not itself follow the rhyme scheme or meter of a traditional English or Petrarchan sonnet.

🛠 WHY WRITERS USE IT

As an early practitioner of the sonnet, the 13th century Italian poet Francesco Petrarch defined the sonnet's subject matter for centuries to come: until the 17th century, virtually all sonnets that were written in any language were, like Petrarch's sonnets, expressions of unrequited love. The sonnet's structure was well-suited to the subject because the octave's "proposition" and the sestet's "resolution" together comprise a sort of call and response, two pieces of a conversation in miniature. This enables the poet to converse with himself in his lover's absence, thereby offering a temporary release from the pain and frustration of romantic rejection.

John Donne and John Milton's pioneering sonnets of the 17th century took on subjects beyond unrequited love. This expanded the scope of what could be addressed in a sonnet, and since that time poets have used the form to write about every subject imaginable. Poets may choose to write in the form of a traditional sonnet (including meter and rhyme scheme) as a way of making their language more musical (through rhythm and rhyme) and therefore more beautiful. Some people choose to write in fixed forms, such as the sonnet, because they like imposing restrictions on what they write, since many artists of all fields and practices find it helpful to the creative process to work within set guidelines. Others might write sonnets that vary the traditional form in all sorts of ways, because *breaking* guidelines can also aid the creative process and make a statement. In addition, a poet may choose to write a sonnet because of the form's incredibly rich and extensive history as a poetic form, thereby situating their own writing in the tradition of writers, such as Shakespeare and Keats.

🌐 OTHER RESOURCES

- The Wikipedia Page on Sonnet: A somewhat technical explanation, with more details about sonnets in different cultures.

- The dictionary definition of Sonnet: A basic definition that includes a bit on the etymology of sonnet (spoiler: it comes from the Italian word for "little song").

- **Sonnets on Youtube**

  ◦ A quick overview of the sonnet's defining characteristics.

  ◦ A short history and definition of the Petrarchan sonnet

  ◦ Billy Collins reads his poem "Sonnet"

HOW TO CITE

MLA

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