



Included in this workshop:
READING 3 Evaluate the changes in sound, form, figurative language, graphics, and dramatic structure in poetry across literary time periods.

The Sonnet Form

How do you convey love for a person? For centuries, people have searched for just the right words to express how much they love someone, how long they have loved someone, or how uniquely they love someone. For many, poetry has been the vehicle for conveying love. Every form of poetry has been used to this end, but none more so than the sonnet.

Origins of the Sonnet

In 13th-century Italy, poets introduced a poetic form called the sonnet, an Italian word meaning “little song.” The **sonnet** is a 14-line lyric poem with a complicated rhyme scheme and a defined structure. Because of the technical skill required to write a sonnet, the form has challenged poets for centuries. The great Italian poet Francesco Petrarch (1304–1374) perfected the **Italian sonnet**, which is often called the **Petrarchan sonnet** in his honor. Petrarch felt that the sonnet, with its brevity and musical rhymes, was a perfect medium for the expression of emotion, especially love. Although Italian sonneteers did not restrict themselves to love as a subject, Petrarch wrote over 300 sonnets detailing his devotion to a beautiful but unobtainable woman whom he called Laura.



*Henry Percy, 9th Earl of Northumberland (1595),
Nicholas Hilliard.*

The English Sonnet

The English sonnet began with another lovelorn poet, Sir Thomas Wyatt (1503–1542). In the 1530s, Wyatt translated some of Petrarch’s love sonnets and wrote a few of his own in a slight modification of the Italian form. Another English poet who deserves credit for popularizing the sonnet in England is Henry Howard, Earl of Surrey (1517–1547). Building on Wyatt’s modifications to the form, Surrey changed the rhyme scheme of the sonnet to make it more suitable to the English language. Surrey’s innovations distinguished the English sonnet from the Italian sonnet, and eventually became known as the **Shakespearean sonnet** because of Shakespeare’s mastery of the form.

Edmund Spenser also introduced a variation on Wyatt’s form based around an interlocking rhyme scheme (*abab bcbc cdcd ee*). Surrey’s rhyme scheme allowed Shakespeare more freedom in his versification, and he used this freedom to expand on the typical sonnet subject matter. Instead of limiting himself to the subject of love, he introduced deep philosophical issues and perplexing ironies.

CHARACTERISTICS OF A SONNET

Length: 14 lines

Meter: iambic pentameter—
lines containing five metrical
units, each consisting of an
unstressed syllable followed
by a stressed syllable
(~ / ~ / ~ / ~ / ~)

Structure and rhyme scheme:
a strict pattern; the three
most common known as
Petrarchan, Shakespearean,
or Spenserian.

Subject: a focus on personal
feelings and thoughts that
are lyrical in nature

Sonnet Structure

The **Petrarchan form** has a two-part structure.

- The **octave** (the first 8 lines), usually rhyming *abbaabba*, establishes the speaker's situation.
- The **sestet** (the last 6 lines), usually with the rhyme scheme *cdcdcd* or *cdecde*, resolves, draws conclusions about, or expresses a reaction to the speaker's situation.

The Petrarchan sonnet has been called organic in its unity because the octave and sestet fit together naturally. Unity is also produced by the rhyme scheme, which involves only four or five different rhyming sounds.

The **Shakespearean form** also has 14 lines but is structured differently.

- Three **quatrains** (stanzas of 4 lines) are followed by a rhyming **couplet** (2 lines).
- The rhyme scheme is *abab cdcd efef gg*.
- The first quatrain introduces a situation, which is explored in the next two quatrains. The third quatrain (or sometimes the final couplet) usually includes a turn, or shift in thought. The couplet resolves the situation.

The time of year thou mayst in me behold
When yellow leaves, or none, or few, do hang
Upon those boughs which shake against the cold,
Bare ruined choirs, where late the sweet birds sang.
In me thou see'st the twilight of such day
As after sunset fadeth in the west;
Which by and by black night doth take away,
Death's second self, that seals up all in rest.
In me thou see'st the glowing of such fire,
That on the ashes of his youth doth lie,
As the deathbed whereon it must expire,
Consumed with that which it was nourished by.
This thou perceiv'st, which makes thy love more strong,
To love that well which thou must leave ere long.
—William Shakespeare, "Sonnet 73"

Close Read

Explain the situation
developed and explored
in the three quatrains.
How is it resolved in
the couplet?

Notice that each quatrain elaborates on a particular image: autumn in the first quatrain, twilight in the second, and the embers of a fire in the third. The final couplet is a concise statement that pulls the sonnet together. Think of the closing couplet in a Shakespearean sonnet as a "punch line" that gives meaning to the whole.