

The Italian (Petrarchan) Sonnet

The sonnet is a type of poem finding its origins in Italy around 1235 AD. While the early sonneteers experimented with patterns, Francesco Petrarch was one of the first to significantly solidify sonnet structure. The **Italian** or **Petrarchan** sonnet consists of two parts; an octave (eight lines) and a sestet (six lines). The octave can be broken down into two quatrains (four lines); likewise, the sestet is made up of two tercets (three lines). The octave (first eight lines) presents an idea to be contrasted by the ending sestet (last six lines). The particular quatrains and tercets are divided by change in rhyme. Petrarch typically used an ABBA ABBA pattern for the octave, followed by either CDE CDE or CDC DCD rhymes in the sestet. The rhyme scheme and structure work together to emphasize the idea of the poem: the first quatrain presents the theme and the second expands on it. The repeated rhyme scheme within the octave strengthens the idea. The sestet, with either two or three different rhymes, uses its first tercet to reflect on the theme and the last to conclude.

In what bright realm, what sphere of radiant thought
Did Nature find the model whence she drew
That delicate dazzling image where we view
Here on this earth what she in heaven wrought?
What fountain-haunting nymph, what dryad, sought
In groves, such golden tresses ever threw
Upon the gust? What heart such virtues knew?—
Though her chief virtue with my death is fraught.
He looks in vain for heavenly beauty, he
Who never looked upon her perfect eyes,
The vivid blue orbs turning brilliantly –
He does not know how Love yields and denies;
He only knows, who knows how sweetly she
Can talk and laugh, the sweetness of her sighs.

While the poem as a whole aims at praising love, the focus shifts at the break between octave and sestet. In the first eight lines, the speaker poses a series of questions in admiration of a beloved; the last six lament the man who has not experienced love.

The English (Shakespearean) Sonnet

William Shakespeare utilized the sonnet in love poetry of his own, employing the sonnet structure conventionalized by English poets Wyatt and Surrey. This structure, known as the English or Shakespearean sonnet, consists of three quatrains (four lines) and a concluding couplet (two rhyming lines). The rhyme scheme is a simple ABAB CDCD EFEF GG format. The effect is “like going for a short drive with a very fast driver: the first lines, even the first quatrain, are in low gear; then the second and third accelerate sharply, and ideas and metaphors flash past; and then there is a sudden throttling-back, and one glides to a stop in the couplet” (Spiller). Like Petrarch, Shakespeare used structure to explore the multiple facets of a theme in a short piece.

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 dimmed;
And every fair from fair sometimes declines,
By chance or nature's changing course untrimmed;
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.

The beloved, whose beauty Shakespeare idolizes here, is given the gift of immortality by the poet; the first two quatrains primarily address different ways in which the physical beauty of the material world inherently dims, fades, and/or falls short of ideal beauty at some point. In the third quatrain the poet presents his beloved with the gift of immortality in his lines of poetry. The changing rhymes emphasize the two-sided nature of beauty (how those things which are beautiful in their prime inevitably grow old, fade, and die), while the alternating pattern provides continuity. The independently rhymed couplet (the last two lines) introduces yet another shift in the poem; the speaker reiterates how his beautiful beloved will be eternally preserved as long as men can breathe and see: as long as the poem exists the beloved does too.