

ABOUT SONNETS

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Traditional sonnets have 14 lines of iambic pentameter (5 feet per line), and follow one of the rhyme schemes below.

Italian (Petrarchan) Sonnet

This 2-part structure consists of an octave (8 lines) and a sestet (6 lines). The turn occurs between them. While the octave has a fixed rhyme scheme (ABBA ABBA), the sestet has 3 common variations (CDECDE -or- CDCDEE -or- CDCDCD).

Note how this octave presents a problem/dilemma, and how there's an early turn in its final line at the //

When I consider how my light is spent, [A]
Ere half my days, in this dark world and wide, [B]
And that one Talent which is death to hide, [B]
Lodg'd with me useless, though my Soul more bent [A]
To serve therewith my Maker, and present [A]
My true account, lest he returning chide, [B]
Doth God exact day-labour, light denied, [B]
I fondly ask; // But patience to prevent [A]
That murmur, soon replies, God doth not need [C]
Either man's work or 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] ---John Milton

Note how the sestet offers a resolution to the dilemma of blindness, offering compensation. Another common option sonneteers employ is using the octave to elaborate a description, and the sestet to turn toward considering its significance. See Robert Frost's "Design" for an example that adds the strictures of only three end rhymes.

English (Shakespearian) Sonnet

This form has a 4-part structure, consisting of 3 quatrains and a couplet. The structure resembles a classical essay, with each quatrain making one 'point' and the couplet serving as a punchy thesis. In the English sonnet, the turn comes just before the couplet. I've highlighted the beats. (Note that weak words such as articles and prepositions aren't usually accented.)

That *time* | of *year* | thou *may'st* | in *me* | *behold*, [A]
When *ye*| low *leaves*, | or *none*, | or *few* | do *hang* [B]
Upon | those *boughs* | which *shake* | against |the *cold*, [A]
Bare ru | ined *choirs*, | where *late* | the *sweet* | birds *sang*. [B]
In *me* | thou *seest* | the *twi* | light of | such *day*, [C]
As *af*ter *Sun*| set *fad*| eth in | the *West* [D]
Which *by* | and *by* | *black night* | doth *take* | away, [C]
Death's *se-* | cond *self* | that *seals* | up *all* | in *rest*. [D]
In *me* | thou *seest* | the *glow*| ing of | such *fire*, [E]
That *on* | the *ash*| es of | his *youth* | doth *lie*, [F]
As the | *death bed*, | whereon | it *must* | expire, [E]
Consumed | with *that* | which *it* | was *nour*| ished by. [F]
This thou | perceiv'st, | which *makes* | thy *love* | more *strong* [G]
To *love* | that *well*, | which *thou* | must *leave* | ere *long*. [G] ---William Shakespeare