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'll* 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* | 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