

### **Shakespearean Sonnets**

A sonnet is a fourteen-line lyric poem, traditionally written in iambic pentameter—that is, in lines ten syllables long, with accents falling on every second syllable, as in: “Shall I compare thee to a summer’s day?” The sonnet form first became popular during the Italian Renaissance, when the poet Petrarch published a sequence of love sonnets addressed to an idealized woman named Laura. Taking firm hold among Italian poets, the sonnet spread throughout Europe to England, where, after its initial Renaissance, “Petrarchan” incarnation faded, the form enjoyed a number of revivals and periods of renewed interest. In Elizabethan England—the era during which Shakespeare’s sonnets were written—the sonnet was the form of choice for lyric poets, particularly lyric poets seeking to engage with traditional themes of love and romance. (In addition to Shakespeare’s monumental sequence, the *Astrophel and Stella* sequence by Sir Philip Sidney stands as one of the most important sonnet sequences of this period.) Sonnets were also written during the height of classical English verse, by Dryden and Pope, among others, and written again during the heyday of English Romanticism, when Wordsworth, Shelley, and particularly John Keats created wonderful sonnets. Today, the sonnet remains the most influential and important verse form in the history of English poetry. Two kinds of sonnets have been most common in English poetry, and they take their names from the greatest poets to utilize them: the Petrarchan sonnet and the Shakespearean sonnet. The Petrarchan sonnet is divided into two main parts, called the octave and the sestet. The octave is eight lines long, and typically follows a rhyme scheme of ABBAABBA, or ABBACDDC. The sestet occupies the remaining six lines of the poem, and typically follows a rhyme scheme of CDCDCD, or CDECDE. The octave and the sestet are usually contrasted in some key way: for example, the octave may ask a question to which the sestet offers an answer. In the following Petrarchan sonnet, John Keats’s “On First Looking into Chapman’s Homer,” the octave describes past events—the speaker’s previous, unsatisfying examinations of the “realms of gold,” Homer’s poems—while the sestet describes the present.

The Shakespearean sonnet, the form of sonnet utilized throughout Shakespeare’s sequence, is divided into four parts. The first three parts are each four lines long, and are known as quatrains, rhymed ABAB; the fourth part is called the couplet, and is rhymed CC. The Shakespearean sonnet is often used to develop a sequence of metaphors or ideas, one in each quatrain, while the couplet offers either a summary or a new take on the preceding images or ideas. In Shakespeare’s Sonnet 147, for instance, the speaker’s love is compared to a disease. In the first quatrain, the speaker characterizes the disease; in the second, he describes the relationship of his love-disease to its “physician,” his reason; in the third, he describes the consequences of his abandonment of reason; and in the couplet, he explains the source of his mad, diseased love—his lover’s betrayal of his faith.

In many ways, Shakespeare’s use of the sonnet form is richer and more complex than this relatively simple division into parts might imply. Not only is his sequence largely occupied with subverting the traditional themes of love sonnets—the traditional love poems in praise of beauty and worth, for instance, are written to a man, while the love poems to a woman are almost all as bitter and negative as Sonnet 147—he also combines formal patterns with daring and

innovation. Many of his sonnets in the sequence, for instance, impose the thematic pattern of a Petrarchan sonnet onto the formal pattern of a Shakespearean sonnet, so that while there are still three quatrains and a couplet, the first two quatrains might ask a single question, which the third quatrain and couplet, the first two quatrains might ask a single question, which the third quatrain and the couplet will answer. As you read through Shakespeare's sequence, think about the ways Shakespeare's themes are affected by and tailored to the sonnet form. Be especially alert to complexities such as the juxtaposition of Petrarchan and Shakespearean patterns