



## **Prose and poetry techniques: Sonnet**

### **Form**

Sonnets are short rhyming poems, normally of 14 iambic pentameter (ten-syllable) lines.

### **Characteristics**

There have been many variations on the basic sonnet form. Here we are going to introduce the two commonest:

#### **(1) Italian/Petrarchan sonnet**

- is traditionally divided into octet (first eight lines) and sestet (last six lines)
- contains just five rhymes
- the octet rhymes abbaabba
- there is more than one possible rhyme scheme for the sestet: cdecde, cdcdcd, cdccdc, cdedce, etc
- unlike the English sonnet, it never ends with a couplet

Traditionally:

- the octet contains a statement or description of a problem, situation or event
- the sestet provides a response or resolution

#### **(2) English/Shakespearean sonnet**

- contains seven rhymes in the following scheme: abab cd cdefef gg
- is traditionally divided into three quatrains (sets of four rhyming lines) with a couplet at the end

The presence of the couplet at the end has a marked effect on sonnets that follow this pattern.

- the ending is usually emphatic
- there is nearly always a break in the structure between the third quatrain and the couplet
- the couplet itself quite often has a crisp, pithy quality: summing up what has been said already, or offering an ironic new reflection

The English sonnet sometimes follows the pattern of statement in the octave [first two quatrains] followed by a response. However, it often does not.

In the past, poets have often written sequences of sonnets. A sonnet sequence combines the intensity of the short poem with scope for developing a narrative or a wider exploration of a theme.

## Examples

Petrarchan sonnets are harder to write than Shakespearean sonnets and are much less common. The following example, by the poet and artist Dante Gabriel Rossetti, is about one of his own paintings, 'The Day Dream', which is now in the collections of the V&A (Museum no. CAI.3)

### The Day Dream

The thronged boughs of the shadowy sycamore  
Still bear young leaflets half the summer through;  
From when the robin 'gainst the unhidden blue  
Perched dark, till now, deep in the leafy core,  
The embowered throstle's urgent wood-notes soar  
Through summer silence. Still the leaves come new;  
Yet never rosy-sheathed as those which drew  
Their spiral tongues from spring-buds heretofore.

Within the branching shade of Reverie  
Dreams even may spring till autumn; yet none be  
Like woman's budding day-dream spirit-fann'd.  
Lo! tow'rd deep skies, not deeper than her look,  
She dreams; till now on her forgotten book  
Drops the forgotten blossom from her hand.

The Gallery of Poems contains two examples of Shakespearean sonnets inspired by objects in the British Galleries:

- Michael Donaghy 'Upon a Claude Glass'
- Antony Dunn, 'Antimony'

## History

The sonnet originated in 14<sup>th</sup> century Italy. The Italian form was perfected by the poet Petrarch, who gave his name to it. It arrived in England in the mid-16<sup>th</sup> century and is still much used by poets writing in English.