

Sonnet Notes

Sonnet – a 14-line lyric poem with a single theme, originated during the Italian Renaissance and later spread throughout Europe. Usually written in iambic pentameter. Most common themes are romantic love and religion.

There are three formats: Italian (called “Petrarchan”), Spenserian, and English (called “Shakespearean”). The most common are Petrarchan and Shakespearean; Edmund Spenser is the only poet to use the format that bears his name.

Petrarchan – named for Italian poet Francesco Petrarca (also “Petrarch”)

Organization: octave (1st 8 lines) & sestet (last 6 lines); the two parts must work together!

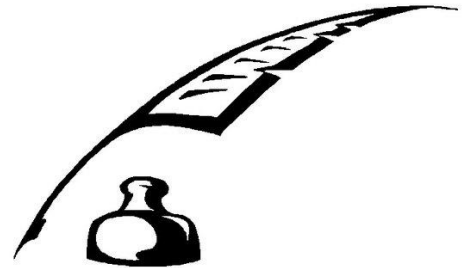
Rhyme Scheme: typically abbaabba cdecde, but can be abbaabba cdcdee

*Octave function –

1. Raise a question
2. State a problem
3. Present a brief narrative

*Sestet function –

1. Answer the question
2. Solve the problem
3. Comment on the narrative



Spenserian – named for Edmund Spenser

Organization: followed Petrarch’s formula (octave/sestet) and function

Rhyme Scheme: ababbcb cdcdee

Note: Spenser was an English poet (not Italian) who chose to create his own version of the sonnet. Therefore, no other Renaissance poets use this style.

Shakespearean – really the English version, but named for Shakespeare because he was its greatest master. The English version was introduced by Sir Thomas Wyatt.

Organization: 3 quatrains (4-line groupings) and a rhyming (or “heroic”) couplet at end

Rhyme Scheme: abab cdcd efef gg

Quatrain function: each quatrain explores a different variation of the main theme

Couplet function: present a summarizing or concluding statement (provide “closure”)

These sonnets are numbered instead of having names because they were included in sonnet sequences. A sonnet sequence is a series or group of sonnets written to one person or on one theme (can also be combined to tell a story). Each sonnet can also stand alone, but the sequence allows the poet to trace the development of a relationship or examine different aspects of a single subject.

Famous examples of sonnet sequences are:

Astrophel and Stella by Sir Philip Sidney

Amoretti by Edmund Spenser

Sonnets to Laura by Francesco Petrarca