

Reading Guide: The Sonnet

For a general overview, and for **sonnet sequences**, see M. H. Abrams.

Form. *Sonnet* is from the Italian, *sonetto*, meaning "little song." In form, it is 14 lines long. Italian sonnets scan in hendecasyllables, French in alexandrines, and English in iambic pentameter.

The Italian (or Petrarchian, after the poet Petrarch) divides into an **octave** rhyming *abbaabba* and a **sestet** rhyming *cdecde* or *cdcdcd*. Between the octave and the sestet is the **volta**, or turn, which is a semantic division describing a "turn of thought."

The English (or Shakespearean) divides into three **quatrains**, rhyming *abab cdcd efef*, and a **couplet** rhyming *gg*. The volta sits between the third quatrain and the couplet. A variation is the Spenserian sonnet, which rhymes *abab bcbc cdcd ee*. There are a number of modern variations, including the alternating, the linked, and the double sonnets.

History. The sonnet originated in Italy, possibly with Giacomo da Lentini (early 13th century). His rhyme scheme, popular with his contemporaries, was *abababab cdecde*. Guittone d'Arezzo (1230-1294) is said to have invented the *abbaabba* octave. This octave was used by Dante and by Petrarch in their famous sonnet sequences.

By the 15th and 16th centuries, the sonnet had made its way into Europe. The Marquis de Santillana (1398-1458) brought the form to Spain, where it was popularized in the late 1400's. The form was also introduced into France, where its first major use was in the cycles of Joachim du Bellay (1522-60), *L'Olive* and *Les Regrets* and *Les Antiquités de Rome*. Spenser translated these last as *The Ruins of Rome*, which became an important source for Shakespeare. The introduction of the form to England is usually attributed to Sir Thomas Wyatt (1503-1542), who served as a diplomat under Henry VIII, and traveled to Italy in 1527, where he may have been inspired to translate the sonnets of Petrarch. The sonnet he imported—one which we see Milton using—was modified by Henry Howard, Earl of Surrey (c.1517-1547). It was Surrey who introduced the rhyme scheme *abab cdcd efef gg*.

Questions to consider.

1. Of what aesthetic effect are the structural divisions of the sonnet?
2. How does the poet use or vary the form to control the sense?

For more information, see Margaret Drabble, ed., *The Oxford Companion to English Literature* (Oxford UP, 1985); and Alex Preminger and T.V.F. Brogan, eds., *The New Princeton Encyclopedia of Poetry and Poetics* (Princeton UP, 1993).