

# SLAYING THE DRAGON:

a Guide to Conquering Your Fear of Sonnets

a workshop for my NMSPS friends

presented by Shirley Blackwell

## Building blocks of sonnets--by the numbers

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ONE: **Volta:** a turn of thought, answer to a question, solution to the problem presented in the first 8 lines of the poem.

TWO: **Couplet:** Two successive lines that rhyme and act as a unit of thought.

THREE: **Triplet or tercet:** Any stanza consisting of 3 lines.

FOUR: **Quatrain:** Any stanza or poem form of 4 lines; (quatro= four).

FIVE: **Pentameter:** five metrical feet in a row

**Metrical foot:** a rhythm pattern created by arranging accented and unaccented syllables.

**Iamb:** a metrical foot that contains one unaccented syllable plus an accented syllable (tah-DAH). An iamb is the metrical foot traditionally used in sonnets. Here is a memory aid:



tah -- DAH !!!!

Iambs are just one kind of *metrical foot*. The 4 primary rhythm patterns and an example of each are:

- ^ Iamb: imPART (unaccented/accented)
- ^ Trochee: TIPsy TROkee (accented/unaccented)
- ^ Anapest: interVENE (unaccented/unaccented/accented)
- ^ Dactyl: DAINTiLy (accented/unaccented/unaccented)

**Pentameter:** five metrical feet in a row; so **iambic pentameter** is 5 iambs in a row:



**Volta or Turn:** A shift in direction or thought. Often, the rhyme pattern will also change at the volta.

**Couplet:** Two successive lines that rhyme and act as a unit of thought.

**Heroic couplet:** A couplet written in iambic pentameter.

**Triplet or tercet:** Any stanza consisting of 3 lines.

When you double a tercet (3 lines), you get a **sestet** (6 lines).

An **Italian sestet** rhymes *cde cde*.

A **Sicilian sestet** rhymes *cd cd cd*

**Quatrain:** Any stanza or poem form of 4 lines; (quatro= four). Can be any line length. Doesn't have to rhyme to be a quatrain, but quatrains have to rhyme to make a sonnet.

The **envelope quatrain** rhymes *abba, cddc*, etc.

The **Italian quatrain** is a heroic (in iambic pentameter) envelope quatrain.

To get an **Italian octave**, combine 2 Italian quatrains and allow only two rhymes (*abbaabba*).

The **Sicilian quatrain** rhymes *abab, cdcd*, etc. It is also a heroic (iambic pentameter) form.

To get a **Sicilian octave**, double a Sicilian quatrain and allow only two rhymes (*abababab*).

### A quick history of sonnet writing

Sonnets first became popular in Italy, and the foremost Italian sonnet writer was Francesco Petrarch (1304-74). The form was introduced to England by Thomas Wyatt (1503-1542), who translated Petrarch and wrote 32 of his own in the same style. Wyatt's associate Henry Howard, Earl of Surrey (1516-1547) helped introduce the form and started modifying it somewhat.

The Italian language is derived from Latin, which has lots of words with similar endings, so it is fairly easy to find rhymes to fit Italian sonnet rhyme patterns. However, English is derived from Germanic languages, which emphasize strong, accented vowel sounds. Because of this, forcing English words into Italian forms can make sonnets boring, sing-song, and rigid. One way to fix this is to vary the rhyme patterns, and that is how English writers responded; they also started using "slant" or "imperfect" rhymes (not quite exact) or "eye" rhymes (look alike but sound different, like the words *through* and *enough*) to vary the poetry and fit it into English speech.

No matter which form it takes, a sonnet will contain 14 lines. They can be arranged in numerous patterns. There are about a dozen forms recognized as traditional sonnet patterns, and even more forms considered untraditional or even "controversial." But there are **two basic forms** the poet should know:

The **Italian** (also known as **Petrarchan**) sonnet, after the 14th Century Italian poet Petrarch, who popularized it in Europe.

The **English**, or **Shakespearean**, sonnet, named for the famous English bard William Shakespeare (1564-1616) who perfected a new model of the form.

**Italian (Petrarchan)** - Has two divisions. Eight lines (octave) introduce the theme, premise, or question, a volta (turn) occurs as the last 6 lines (sestet) answer or resolve the subject raised in the octave. It is often printed with a blank line between the octave and sestet. When you put together an **octave** with a **sestet**, you have the basic structure of an **Italian** sonnet. The octave is always rhymed *abbaabba*. The sestet can be either Italian (*cde cde*) or Sicilian (*cdcdcd*).

**English (Shakespearean)** - Written in iambic pentameter. Four divisions: 3 quatrains (4-line poems, each with its own rhyme scheme) plus a couplet to wrap it up. The couplet acts as a kind of epigram, summation, or coda. A typical English sonnet might rhyme *abab cdcd efef gg* OR *abba cddc effe gg*.

Form: All sonnets are 14 lines. The Italian (aka "Petrarchan" sonnet) always starts off with 8 lines called an "octave." *oct* relates to *eight* in Italian/Latin (*octopus* = 8 legs).

The octave is followed by a 6-line verse called a "sestet" (in Italian, *ses* relates to *six*) or 6-line poem.

The rhyme scheme for the octave is typically **a b b a a b b a**.

The sestet is more flexible. Petrarch typically used **c d e c d e** or **c d c d c d** for the sestet.

Some other possibilities for the sestet include:

**c d d c d d**, **c d d e e e**, or **c d d c c d** (as in [Wordsworth's](#) "Nuns Fret Not at Their Convent's Narrow Room" poem). This form was used in the earliest English sonnets by Wyatt and others.

In a strict Petrarchan sonnet, the sestet does not end with a couplet (since this would tend to divide the sestet into a quatrain and a couplet). However, in Italian-style sonnets written in English, this rule is not always observed, so **c d d c e e** and **c d c d e e** sestets are sometimes seen.

The octave and sestet have special functions in a Petrarchan sonnet. The octave's purpose is to introduce a problem, express a desire, reflect on reality, or otherwise present a situation that causes doubt or a conflict within the speaker's soul. It usually does this by introducing the problem within its first [quatrain](#) (unified four-line section) and developing it in the second. The beginning of the sestet is where you will find a turn or new direction for the sonnet. This turn is known as the [volta](#). Often, the rhyme scheme changes to amplify a pronounced change in tone for the poem.

The sestet's purpose as a whole is to make a comment on the problem or to apply a solution to it. It is separate from the octave, but the pair are usually used to reinforce a unified argument. The pair are often compared to two strands of thought organically converging into one argument, rather than a mechanical deduction. Moreover, Petrarch's own sonnets almost never had a rhyming [couplet](#) at the end as this would suggest logical deduction instead of the intended rational correlation of the form.

No "proper" Italian sonnet has more than five different rhymes in it; however, poets using the Petrarchan sonnet form often adapt the form to their own ends to create various effects. These poets do not necessarily restrict themselves to the metrical or rhyme schemes of the traditional Petrarchan form; some poets exercising artistic license use [iambic hexameter](#), while others ignore the octave-sestet division created by the traditional rhyme scheme.

Variations of Italian sonnets by two English poets

William Wordsworth's "London, 1802"

Octave - introduces the theme or problem

Milton! thou shouldst be living at this	hour:	- A
England hath need of thee: she is a	fen	- B
Of stagnant waters: altar, sword, and	pen,	- B
Fireside, the heroic wealth of hall and	bower,	- A
Have forfeited their ancient English	dower	- A
Of inward happiness. We are selfish	men;	- B
Oh! raise us up, return to us	again;	- B
And give us manners, virtue, freedom,	power.	- A

Sestet - solves the problem

Thy soul was like a Star, and dwelt	apart;	- C	"Italian sestet"
Thou hadst a voice whose sound was like the	sea:	- D	
So didst thou travel on life's common	way ,	- E	
In cheerful godliness; and yet thy	heart	- C	
Pure as the naked heavens, majestic,	free,	- D	
The lowliest duties on herself did	lay.	- E	

Sonnet XIV by Elizabeth Barrett Browning

If thou must love me, let it be for	nought	a
Except for love's sake only. Do not	say	b
"I love her for her smile--her look--her	way	b
Of speaking gently,--for a trick of	thought	a
That falls in well with mine, and certes	brought	a
A sense of pleasant ease on such a	day"--	b
For these things in themselves, Beloved,	may	b
Be changed, or change for thee,--and love, so	wrought,	a

May be unwrought so. Neither love me	for	c	(Sicilian sestet)
Thine own dear pity's wiping my cheeks	dry,--	d	
A creature might forget to weep, who	bore	c	(sight or eye rhyme)
Thy comfort long, and lose thy love	thereby!	d	
But love me for love's sake, that	evermore	c	
Thou mayst love on, through love's	eternity.	d	

Example 1                    **Sonnet 29:**  
   - by Wm. Shakespeare

When in disgrace with fortune and men's eyes  
I all alone bewep my outcast state,  
and trouble deaf Heaven with my bootless cries,  
and look upon myself and curse my fate,  
wishing me like to one more rich in hope,  
featured like him, like him with friends possessed,  
desiring this man's art and that man's scope,  
with what I most enjoy contented least--  
yet in these thoughts myself almost despising  
haply I think on thee, and then my state,  
like to the lark at break of day arising  
from sullen earth, sings hymns at Heaven's gate.  
    For thy sweet love remembered such wealth brings  
    That then I scorn to change my fate with kings.

Example 2            **Sonnet 29**

When in disgrace with fortune and men's eyes            a  
I all alone bewep my outcast state,                    b  
And trouble deaf Heaven with my bootless cries,            a  
And look upon myself and curse my fate,                    b  
  
Wishing me like to one more rich in hope,                    c  
Featured like him, like him with friends possessed,            d  
Desiring this man's art and that man's scope,                c  
With what I most enjoy contented least--                    d  
(Volta, or turn of thought)  
Yet in these thoughts myself almost despising                e  
Haply I think on thee, and then my state,                    f  
Like to the lark at break of day arising                        e  
From sullen earth, sings hymns at Heaven's gate.            f  
  
    For thy sweet love remembered such wealth brings            g  
    That then I scorn to change my fate with kings.            g

Example 3 **Sonnet 29**

When in disgrace with fortune and men's	<b>eyes</b>	a
I all alone bewep my outcast	<b>state,</b>	b
And trouble deaf Heaven with my bootless	<b>cries,</b>	a
And look upon myself and curse my	<b>fate,</b>	b
Wishing me like to one more rich in	<b>hope,</b>	c
Featured like him, like him with friends poss	<b>essed,</b>	d
Desiring this man's art and that man's	<b>scope,</b>	c
With what I most enjoy contented	<b>least--</b>	d
Yet in these thoughts myself almost	<b>despising</b>	e (a +g)
Haply I think on thee, and then my	state,	f
Like to the lark at break of day	<b>arising</b>	e (a+g)
From sullen earth, sings hymns at Heaven's	gate.	f
For thy sweet love remembered such wealth	<b>brings</b>	g
That then I scorn to change my fate with	<b>kings.</b>	g

**Sonnet 55**

Not marble, nor the gilded monu	<b>ments</b>	a
Of princes, shall outlive this powerful	<b>rhyme,</b>	b
But you shall shine more bright in these	<b>contents</b>	a
Than unswept stone, besmeared with sluttish	<b>time.</b>	b
When wasteful war shall statues	over <b>turn,</b>	c
And broils root out the works of	mas <b>onry,</b>	d
Nor Mars his sword nor war's quick fire shall	<b>burn</b>	c
The living record of your	mem <b>ory.</b>	d (near, slant, or imperfect)
'Gainst death and all-oblivious	en <b>mity</b>	e
Shall you pace forth. Your praise shall still find	<b>room</b>	f
Even in the eyes of all	poster <b>ity</b>	e
That wear this world out to the ending	<b>doom.</b>	f
So, till the judgment that yourself	<b>arise,</b>	g
You live in this, and dwell in lovers'	<b>eyes.</b>	g

## Terza Rima Sonnet -

Terza (derives from Italian for "three"). A "tercet" is a 3-line verse

Example 1 **Acquainted with the Night**  
- by Robert Frost

I have been one acquainted with the night.  
I have walked out in rain--and back in rain.  
I have outwalked the furthest city light.

I have looked down the saddest city lane.  
I have passed by the watchman on his beat  
And dropped my eyes, unwilling to explain.

I have stood still and stopped the sound of feet  
When far away and interrupted cry  
Came over houses from another street.

But not to call me back or say good-by;  
And further still at an unearthly height,  
One luminary clock against the sky

Proclaimed the time was neither wrong nor right.  
I have been one acquainted with the night.

Example 2

I have been one acquainted with the	night.	A
I have walked out in rain--and back in	rain.	B
I have outwalked the furthest city	light.	A

I have looked down the saddest city	lane.	B
I have passed by the watchman on his	beat	C
And dropped my eyes, unwilling to	explain.	B

I have stood still and stopped the sound of	feet	C
When far away and interrupted	cry	D
Came over houses from another	street.	C

But not to call me back or say good-	by;	D
And further still at an unearthly	height,	A or E
One luminary clock against the	sky	D

Proclaimed the time was neither wrong nor	right.	A or E
I have been one acquainted with the	night.	A or E



## Other kinds of sonnets:

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Elizabeth Barrett Browning's are *almost* Petrarchan. Most of her poems keep the rhyme scheme *abba abba cdcdcd*, but there is **no volta**. Indeed, sometimes the 8th line flows over onto what would be the first line of the sestet.

**Spenserian** (named for Sir Edmund Spenser) has 3 **interlocking** Sicilian quatrains *abab bcbc cdcd* plus **a volta** and a heroic couplet *ee*. Note the interlocking 2nd line.

**Sicilian sonnet** combines a Sicilian octave and a Sicilian or Italian sestet; the rhyme changes at the volta; *abababab (volta) cdecde* or *cdcdcd*.

**Terza Rima** has interlocking Sicilian triplet (*aba*) stanzas, **a volta**, and a heroic couplet that rhymes with the middle line of the last tercet like this: *aba bcb cdc ded ee*. Robert Frost's "Acquainted with the Night" ties the couplet back to the first line: *aba bcb cdc dad aa*.

**Sonetto Rispetto** combines an iambic pentameter **ottava rima** (*abab abcc*) with either an Italian *defdef* or Sicilian *dedede* sestet.

**Blues sonnet** is 14 lines consisting of 4 **blues stanzas** (a triplet in which line 2 incrementally repeats line 1 of the triplet, and line 3 provides a climactic parallel) written in iambic pentameter, plus a heroic couplet. There is a volta before the couplet. The pattern is AAa BBb CCc DDd ee.

**American sonnet**. Read Havlick's workshop outline on "The American Sonnet" that follows in this packet to see how U.S. poets are adapting the forms listed above.

**Don't let "established" meter or rhyme schemes keep you from experimenting.** Change which line interlocks with the next stanza; try mirrored rhymes (*abc cba*); try interlocking couplets; explore sonnet sequences, crown sonnets, nonce sonnets!!! Make up a whole new form.

## Famous sonnet writers

In **Italy** - Dante Aligheri, Petrarch (14th Century) Dante was a friend of Petrarch's father.

In **England** - Shakespeare, Milton, Wordsworth, D. G. Rossetti, E. Barrett Browning

In **America** - Longfellow, Jones Very, G.H. Boker, and E.A. Robinson. US poets in 20th Century who did distinguished work in sonnets and sonnet sequences are Wm. Ellery Leonard, Elinor Wylie, Edna St. Vincent Millay, and W.H. Auden.

Sonnet sequences (series) - Shakespeare (154 in the group), Sidney's *Astrophel and Stella*, Spenser's *Amoretti*, Rossetti's *House of Life*, and E.B. Browning's *Sonnets from the Portuguese* (44 in the series)

1. The American sonnet has recently emerged with a slightly less restricted format than the traditional sonnet form derived from renaissance Italy (14th-century Petrarch) and Elizabethan England (16th-century Spenser and Shakespeare) that still continue to challenge, and intimidate, serious writers and readers of poetry all over the world.
2. Every dynamic culture with a living language, however, in literature if not in every other human activity, continually accommodates itself to the respected traditions it inherits by tailoring them to its own unique, intrinsic norms and customs.
3. The Renaissance Italian and Elizabethan English writers experienced dramatic new creative freedom working inside the newly developed rigid sonnet rhyming schemes and mandatory rhythmic boundaries to every line, and many writers today continue to honor and preserve that tradition of what some have called, "liberating structure."
4. Americans, however, have over time developed their own traditions of breaking free from many kinds of traditional restrictions on personal and social well-being, which inevitably show up in our literature.
5. Americans more naturally use heroic couplets for exalted statements, with each of the two lines ending in words of the same rhyme, and with some flexibility in the length of lines.
6. They more likely stray from the more complex four- or six- or eight-line rhyming patterns of the traditional sonnet with each line restricted to only five iambic feet.
7. Americans have much less patience with overly complex organizational schemes, and much more to say, or so they apparently think, within any given thought or sentence.
8. The sonnet's subject matter also continues to undergo subtle changes in each new culture. Petrarch was a brilliant, multi-talented scholar, but he wrote his influential 317 sonnets to his beloved, idealized, and inaccessible Laura (from Avignon) in a southern European culture that made women dramatically less visible to men than they are today in America, which has, by contrast, developed the most remarkably open society in human history for both men and women.
9. Every conceivable aspect of human life has today become accessible, available, and even plainly visible on any computer with an Internet connection to anyone with average curiosity and a third-grade education.
10. We can scarcely any longer understand the late medieval and early-modern styles that effectively used obscure images to describe, dissect, or whine about, their unfulfilled and unfulfillable romantic loves.
11. Many Americans, on the other hand, sense a profound need, perhaps more pressingly now than ever before, to find, nurture, understand, and even to promote, hopefully for its positive effect, every detectable aspect of human interaction and connection.
12. I am one person who believes that the many diversely practiced frameworks of our poetry can help define and ennoble American culture, just as it has always helped other cultures in the past.

13. Perhaps a newly liberated American sonnet style, in its own small way, can join this effort to inspire, articulate, and enrich with positive direction our own new era of far-reaching cultural transition.

**A Man Without a Happy Wife He Loves  
An American Sonnet**

A man without a happy wife he loves, respects,  
and honors all the way has several defects:  
he only dimly sees the sun rise up each day  
because his troubles rise instead to block his way.  
He seldom senses sacred music as it skitters by,  
because his brain's bogged down in brittle back-streets begging, "Why?!"  
The autumn leaves fall to the ground each year and slowly disappear,  
but he must fall aground himself to realize them here and near.  
So you should straighten up yourself when she comes in the room  
and step aside respectfully when she picks up her broom,  
engage in two-way conversation with her when it's time,  
and favor her with flowers every year, and words that rhyme.  
Yes, you there! You might be the man that I am talking to,  
or you know someone else somewhere who needs a talking-to!

- Max Havlick

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