

Characteristics of the Sonnet

All sonnets are lyrics of 14 lines, iambic (unstressed/stressed syllables – heartbeat), pentameter (five iambs to a line). The two major forms of the sonnet are the Italian, also called the Petrarchan, and the English, also called the Shakespearean.

Like much poetic literature, the sonnet has common figurative language and themes that we call conceits or conventions. Some of the most common ones found in Renaissance sonnets come from the Courtly Love tradition:

1. Love is viewed as torture, slavery, death, war, or a hunt.
2. The lady is treated as a master or queen, a “cruel fair,” a celestial object (star, moon), a doe, a tyrant.
3. The lady is praised for her virtue and her beauty. Commonly, the poet objectifies her body by singling out specific parts to honor and worship, such as her eyes, lips, breasts, and hands.
4. The lady has power in her gaze and can destroy or inspire with a look.
5. The poet will often make puns with his and his lady’s names. (See Petrarch’s sonnet below).
6. The poet will often speak in apostrophe – a poetic device where one talks to an inanimate object, such as the moon or a dead person.
7. The poet will engage in paradox: a statement that seems contradictory or absurd but may be true. This statement draws attention to something the poet thinks is important. (See Spenser’s sonnet about ice and fire – her ice enflames him and his fire freezes her).
8. Hyperbole is used to express the poet’s emotions – exaggeration for effect.

Italian Sonnet:

Most Italian sonnets have two distinct sections. The first eight lines, called the octave, generally follows the rhyme scheme: abba abba. The second is formed by the last six lines, the sestet, usually has more flexibility in rhyme schemes, though the most common ones are: cdcdcd; cddcdc; cdecde; cdecde; or cdcedc. Very rarely does the Italian sonnet end in a couplet (as do English sonnets): ee.

The second half of the Italian sonnet indicates a turn in the sonnet – a change of subject, an expression of enlightenment, etc. We call this a *volta*. The octave often forms a question or presents a problem that the poet is seeking greater insight to. The *volta* is his attempt to answer. This turn is what gives the sonnet form its more philosophical bent. An example of the Italian sonnet is Petrarch’s Sonnet 5 from his *Rima*

Quando io movo i sospiri a chiamar voi,
 e 'l nome che nel cor mi scrisse Amore,
LAUdando s'incomincia udir di fore
 il suon de' primi dolci accenti suoi;
 vostro stato **RE**al, ch'encontro poi,
 raddoppia a l'alta impresa il mio valore;
 ma: **TA**ci, grida il fin, ché farle onore
 è d'altri omeri soma, che da' tuoi.
 Così **LAU**dare e **RE**verire insegna
 la voce stessa, pur ch'altri vi chiami,
 o d'ogni reverenza e d'onor degna:
 se non che forse Apollo si disdegna
 ch'a parlar de' suoi sempre verdi rami
 lingua mor**TAL** presuntuosa vegna.

a When I utter sighs, in calling out to you,
 b with the name that Love wrote on my heart,
 b the sound of its first sweet accents begin
 a to be heard within the word **LAU**dable.
 a Your **RE**gal state, that I next encounter,
 b doubles my power for the high attempt;
 b but: **TA**cit', the ending cries, 'since to do her honour
 a is for other men's shoulders, not for yours'.
 c So, whenever one calls out to you,
 d the voice itself teaches us to **LAU**d, **RE**vere,
 c you, O, lady worthy of all reverence and honour:
 c except perhaps that Apollo is disdainful
 d that mor**TAL** tongue can be so presumptuous
 c as to speak of his eternally green branches.

