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SONNETS MADE EASY

A **sonnet** is a poem whose structure and content meet specific standards. Its success relies on exactness and perfection of expression. It is an art form that truly challenges a poet's artistry and skill.

Structure:

In general, a sonnet is a fourteen-line poem where each line is written in a particular musical rhythm called **iambic pentameter**. In addition, these fourteen lines have to conform to a specific rhyme scheme.

Don't be confused or put off by the term **iambic pentameter**. An iamb is simply a two-syllable unit of sound where the first syllable is unaccented and the second is accented. Words like *today*, *forget*, and *garage* are iambs. If you say these words aloud, you will notice that you accent the second syllable more strongly than the first.

Pentameter means *measure* (meter) of *five* (penta). So iambic pentameter simply means five iambs to each line. Check this line out: "Today I will forget to weep for you" Can you identify the five iambs?

On to rhyme scheme: Rhyme scheme simply means the pattern made by the ending sounds of each line.

Consider this:

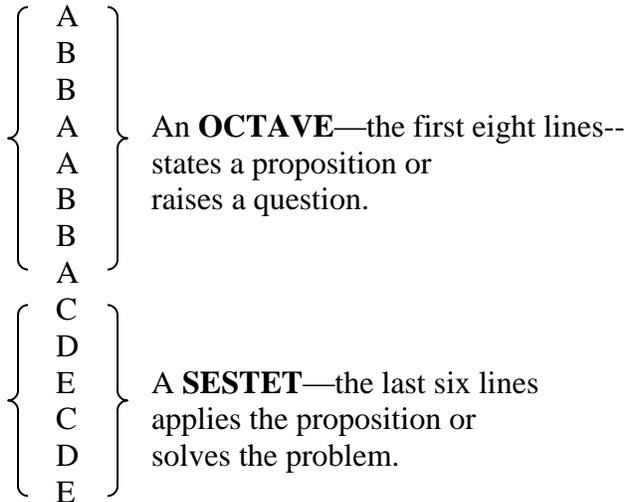
*Please listen to my voice above them all,
So you, my friend, be spared the pain and grief
Of failing, falling hard against that wall
Which makes a time of happiness so brief.*

We mark the rhyme scheme of a poem by using the alphabet. The first line's ending sound is given the letter "A." Any similar ending sounds in that poem also are given the letter "A." The next new end-of-the-line sound is given the letter "B," the next "C," and so on.

The four lines above have the rhyme scheme **A,B,A,B**. See?

Since there are two major types of sonnets—the *Petrarchan* (or *Italian*) and *Shakespearean* (or *English* or *Elizabethan*)—there are two major rhyme schemes.

Though rhyme scheme variations exist (particularly in the last six lines (**the sestet**), the Petrarchan (or Italian) sonnet rhyme scheme usually is

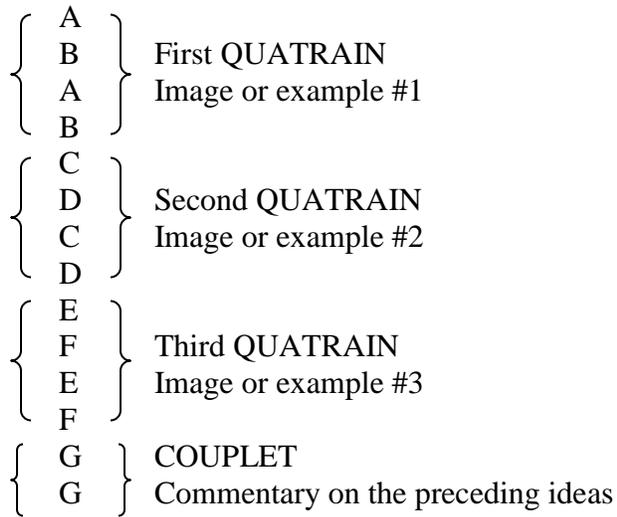


Nature (A Petrarchan Sonnet)

As a fond mother, when the day is o'er,
Leads by the hand her little child to bed,
Half willing, half reluctant to be led,
And leave her broken playthings on the floor,
Still gazing at them through the open door,
Nor wholly reassured and comforted
By promises of others in their stead,
Which, though more splendid, may not please him more;
So Nature deals with us, and takes away
Our playthings one by one, and by the hand
Leads us to rest so gently, that we go
Scare knowing if we wish to go or stay,
Being too full of sleep to understand
How far the unknown transcends the what we know.

--Longfellow

A *Shakespearean* (or English or Elizabethan) sonnet is different:



Now the hard part—a sonnet must have meaning, too. A petrarchan sonnet sets forth a situation or premise in the first eight lines (the octave) and provides some sort of resolution or statement about the situation in the final six lines (the sestet).

The Shakespearean sonnet, in contrast, presents three four-line (a quatrain) examples or premises, with the couplet at the end providing some sort of closure.

That Time of Year (A Shakespearean or Elizabethan Sonnet)

That time of year thou mayst in me behold
When yellow leaves, or none, or few, do hang
Upon these boughs which shake against the cold,
Bare ruined choirs where late the sweet birds sang.
In me thou see'st the twilight of such day
As after sunset fadeth in the west,
Which by and by black night doth take away,
Death's second self, that seals up all in rest.
In me thou see'st the glowing of such fire,
That on the ashes of his youth doth lie
As the deathbed whereon it must expire,
Consumed with that which it was nourished by.
 This thou perceivest, which makes thy love more strong,
 To love that well which thou must leave ere long.

--William Shakespeare