

NYC College of Technology
ENG 2003: Introduction to Poetry
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Features of a Sonnet

History of the sonnet

- this kind of poem originated in 13th century Italy
- the word sonnet comes from the Italian *sonnetto*, which means little song

Typical features of the sonnet

- a lyric poem of 14 lines
- follows 1 of the 2 major sonnet forms, either Shakespearean or Italian (Petrarchan)
- uses iambic pentameter (the most common form of meter in English)
- follows a specific rhyme scheme:
 - Petrarchan rhyme scheme: ABBA ABBA CDECDE or ABBA ABBA CDCDCD
 - Shakespearean rhyme scheme: ABAB CDCD EFEF GG
- In a Petrarchan sonnet, the sections of the poem are broken up into an *octet* (first eight lines) and a *sestet* (final six lines).
- In the Shakespearean sonnet, there are three *quatrains* (four-line stanzas or sections) and then a *couplet*. In both types, a *volta* (turn) marks the transition to the final section.
- Either type of sonnet starts by posing a problem, and then turns towards a resolution or change in perspective later in the poem.

Shakespearean sonnet

First quatrain	a
	b
	a
	b
Second quatrain	c
	d
	c
	d
Third quatrain	e
	f
	e
	f
(turn)	
Rhyming Couplet	g
	g

Petrarchan (Italian) sonnet

	a
Octet	b
(statement/problem)	b
	a
	a
	b
	b
	a
Sestet	c
(volta/turn)	d
	e
	c
	d
	e