

## The 3 Most Common Sonnet Forms

### 1. The Italian (or Petrarchan) Sonnet:

The Italian sonnet is divided into two sections by two different groups of rhyming sounds. The first 8 lines is called the *octave* and rhymes:

a b b a a b b a

The remaining 6 lines is called the *sestet* and can have either two or three rhyming sounds, arranged in a variety of ways:

c d c d c d

c d d c d c

c d e c d e

c d e c e d

c d c e d c

For example, in *On His Blindness*, by Milton:

When I consider how my light is spent (a)  
Ere half my days, in this dark world and wide, (b)  
And that one talent which is death to hide, (b)  
Lodged with me useless, though my soul more bent (a)  
To serve therewith my Maker, and present (a)  
My true account, lest he returning chide; (b)  
"Doth God exact day-labor, light denied?" (b)  
I fondly ask; but Patience to prevent (a)  
That murmur, soon replies, "God doth not need (c)  
Either man's work or his own gifts; who best (d)  
Bear his mild yoke, they serve him best. His state (e)  
Is Kingly. Thousands at his bidding speed (c)  
And post o'er land and ocean without rest; (d)  
They also serve who only stand and wait." (e)

### II. The English (or Shakespearian) Sonnet:

The English sonnet has the simplest and most flexible pattern of all sonnets, consisting of 3 quatrains of alternating rhyme and a couplet:

a b a b

c d c d

e f e f

g g

This example, Shakespeare's *Sonnet 116*, illustrates the form (with some typical variances one may expect when reading an Elizabethan-age sonnet with modern eyes):

Let me not to the marriage of true minds (a)  
Admit impediments, love is not love (b)\*  
Which alters when it alteration finds, (a)  
Or bends with the remover to remove. (b)\*  
O no, it is an ever fixed mark (c)\*\*  
That looks on tempests and is never shaken; (d)\*\*\*  
It is the star to every wand'ring bark, (c)\*\*  
Whose worth's unknown although his height be taken. (d)\*\*\*  
Love's not time's fool, though rosy lips and cheeks (e)  
Within his bending sickle's compass come, (f)\*  
Love alters not with his brief hours and weeks, (e)  
But bears it out even to the edge of doom: (f)\*  
If this be error and upon me proved, (g)\*  
I never writ, nor no man ever loved. (g)\*

**III. The Spenserian Sonnet:** A variant on the English/Shakespearian form is the Spenserian sonnet, named after Edmund Spenser (c.1552–1599) in which the rhyme scheme is, *abab, bcbc, cdcd, ee*. A Spenserian sonnet does not appear to require that the initial octave set up a problem that the closing sestet answers, as with a Petrarchan sonnet. Instead, the form is treated as three quatrains connected by the interlocking rhyme scheme and followed by a couplet. The linked rhymes of his quatrains suggest the linked rhymes of such Italian forms as *terza rima*. Spenser wrote *The Faerie Queene* in this sonnet format.

This example is taken from Spenser's *Amoretti*.

Happy ye leaves! whenas those lily hands, (a)  
Which hold my life in their dead doing might, (b)  
Shall handle you, and hold in love's soft bands, (a)  
Like captives trembling at the victor's sight. (b)  
And happy lines on which, with starry light, (b)  
Those lamping eyes will deign sometimes to look, (c)  
And read the sorrows of my dying sprite, (b)  
Written with tears in heart's close bleeding book. (c)  
And happy rhymes! bathed in the sacred brook (c)  
Of Helicon, whence she derived is, (d)  
When ye behold that angel's blessed look, (c)  
My soul's long lacked food, my heaven's bliss. (d)  
Leaves, lines, and rhymes seek her to please alone, (e)  
Whom if ye please, I care for other none. (e)