So... What’s the Big Deal About Sonnets?
The AP Exam in English Literature and Composition

• Multiple Choice
  – 2004 “Then Hate me When Thou Wilt,” Shakespeare

• Free Response Questions 1988-2014 10 Sonnets
  – 2004: “Acquainted with the Night,” Frost
  – 2008 Form B: “Golden Retrievals,” Doty
  – 2011 Form B: “An Echo Sonnet,” Park
  – 2012: “Thou Blind Man’s Mark,” Sidney
  – 2014: “For That He Looked Not upon Her,” Gascoigne
Oliver, Nims, Arp, Mason, Booth, on The Sonnet

“requires a design—a sense of orderliness. Part of our pleasure in the poem is that it is a well-made thing…”

“One of the oldest and most enduring forms… it dominated English poetry.”

“Most Famous”

“Most Notorious”

“Concentration of figurative language”

“Demanding”

“Contained”

“One of the oldest and most enduring forms…”

“Compact”

“ingeniously organized”

“serious treatment of love”

“surprisingly resilient,…continues to attract a variety of poets.”

“Best suited to intensity of feeling”

“Part of its appeal is in its brevity”

“one of the most persistent verse forms….it dominated English poetry.”
Sonnet is A Great Place to Start

Sonnet

All we need is fourteen lines, well, thirteen now, and after this one just a dozen to launch a little ship on love's storm-tossed seas, then only ten more left like rows of beans. How easily it goes unless you get Elizabethan and insist the iambic bongos must be played and rhymes positioned at the ends of lines, one for every station of the cross. But hang on here while we make the turn into the final six where all will be resolved, where longing and heartache will find an end, where Laura will tell Petrarch to put down his pen, take off those crazy medieval tights, blowout the lights, and come at last to bed.

Collins 2002
UPSTAIRS

There’s a family of wrens who live upstairs,
Upstairs, upstairs, upstairs,
Inside my hat, all cozy in
My hair, my hair, my hair.
I’ve moved a dozen times and still
They’re there, they’re there, they’re there.
I’d like to get away from them,
But where, but where, but where?
This hat just isn’t big enough
To share, to share, to share.
But now I see you’re bored and you
Don’t care, don’t care, don’t care
‘Bout the wrens who live inside
My hair, my hair, my hair.
How it all started

• **Sonnet**: a fourteen line poem written in *iambic pentameter* (each line contains 10 syllables, five of which are usually stressed). Comes from the Italian word *sonetto* which means 'little sound' or 'little song' and originated in Italy in the thirteenth century.

• *note—I have also worked extensively with rhythm and meter

• In the Fourteenth Century Petrarch produced what was to become the most important group of sonnets in European literature.

• He wrote 317 sonnets.

• The Italian sonnet was introduced to English poetry by Sir Thomas Wyatt.

• During the Elizabethan period the sonnet became very popular.

• It started a vogue, producing a *sonnet cycle* was considered fashionable for an aspiring writer.

• The central theme of these sonnet cycles was the love of the poet for a beautiful but unattainable woman.
Sonnet

- Introduction
- Thesis
- Antithesis
- Couplet
- Short ironic conclusion

Italy
- ABAB ABAB CDE CDE
  - Jacopo da Lentini

- ABBA ABBA CDE CDE
  - Guittone d'Arezzo
  - Petrarca
  - Dante

England
- ABAB CDDC EFEF GG
  - Differences
  - Used by:
    - Surrey
    - Shakespeare
    - Spenser
    - Shakespearean sonnet

- ABAB BCBC CDCD EF
  - Used by:
    - Sidney
  - More discursive

- ABBA ABBA CDCD EE
  - Donnie used the sonnet for religious themes
  - Before only love themes
1. Count the lines  2. Check the Rhyme Scheme

**Italian Sonnet**

Also known as the "Petrachan" sonnet.

- **Octave**
  - 8 lines

- **Sestet**
  - 6 lines

**English Sonnet**

Also known as the "Shakespearean" sonnet.

- **Quatrain** 4 lines
- **Quatrain** 4 lines
- **Quatrain** 4 lines
- **Couplet** 2 lines

Pfeifer 2014
Italian Sonnet

1. **Rhyme scheme** of the poem is organized into two groups which divides the poem into an **octave** (the first 8 lines) and a **sestet** (the last six lines).

2. The **rhyme scheme** of the octave is **ABBA ABBA**. The rhyme scheme of the sestet may rhyme in various ways: **CDECDE; CDCCDC; CDCDCD**.

3. The **shift** from **octave** to **sestet** is often a point of **dramatic change** sometimes called the "**volta**" or turn--often occurring lines 8 to 9.

4. The **subject** of the poem, the **narrative**; the **proposition**, or the **question** is often presented in the **octave**, and the **significance of the subject**, an **abstract comment** or the **solution** to the problem in the **sestet**.

Pfeifer 2014
Wyatt 1503-1542

Whoso List to Hunt

Whoso list* to hunt, I know where is an hind*,
But as for me, alas, I may no more.
The vain travail hath wearied me so sore,
I am of them that farthest cometh behind.
Yet may I by no means my wearied mind
Draw from the deer, but as she fleeth afore
Fainting I follow. I leave off therefore,
Sithens* in a net I seek to hold the wind.
Who list her hunt, I put him out of doubt,
As well as I may spend his time in vain.
And graven with diamonds in letters plain
There is written, her fair neck round about:
“Noli me tangere*, for Caesar's I am,
And wild for to hold, though I seem tame.”

*list: should desire
*hind: Deer
*Sithens: since
*Noli me tangere: Touch me not

Wyatt: Poet and courtier active in the service of Henry VIII. Through his adaptations of Petrarch he introduced the sonnet form to England in the 1530’s. His love poems, which center on the ill-treatment of a lover by his mistress, may have been influenced by Anne Boleyn thought to have bee Wyatt’s mistress before she married Henry VIII.

Octave: Proposition--Speaker is pursuing a beloved (doe or deer often symbol of a woman) who is gentle yet elusive. The speaker is wearied, almost exhausted. And decides to abandon the pursuit because the lover is not attainable.

Volta/Turn: Line 9 begins significance of the proposition above

Sestet: Advises why and explains to other suitors not to try for this woman—She is unattainable because she is the property of a powerful man. Last line—she is more wild and unattainable for being the pet of someone important.
English Sonnet

1. The lines are organized into three groups of alternating rhymes plus a final couplet. The four line groups are called “quatrains”

2. The rhyme scheme is usually ABAB CDCD EFEF GG.

3. The turn in the English sonnet often occurs between lines 9 and 12.

4. The couplet at the end is usually a commentary on the forgoing quatrains.
In Sonnet 73 by William Shakespeare, the speaker is emphasizing to his beloved the difference in their ages and the need to affirm and increase their love before the speaker dies.

That time of year thou mayst in me behold
When yellow leaves, or none, or few, do hang
Upon those 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 perceiv’st, which makes thy love more strong
To love that well which thou must leave ere long.

*Note—you might substitute or include Sidney’s, “Thou Blind man’s Mark” (2012 ) as English sample.

Shakespeare’s sequence (152)of sonnets is usually placed between 1592-1598.
Sequence is unique: Poems are addressed not to one beloved but to two, one a fair youth (#’s 1-126), the other a dark lady (#’s 127-152) of exceptional musical gifts.
Each Quatrain is a complete thought or sentence.

Q1: the speaker compares himself to late autumn or early winter. He emphasizes his own impending death by describing the image of bare trees in winter, the shiver of the cold wind of late autumn and the sweet sound of the birds, now silent, who have already migrated south.

Q2: The next sentence compares the speaker with the end of a day. He explains that just as the sun sets and the bright day fades into dark night, so will the speaker begin to fade and finally die.

Q3: In the final comparison and the third sentence, the speaker compares his life to that of a fire minutes from extinction. The “ashes” or speaker’s youth will also serve as his “deathbed.” Literally a fire will expire as it consumes the wood which feeds it. So, like the fire the speaker’s life is beginning to die out as it consumes itself.

Turn: Line 13—Change in Meter to Spondee “This thou”

Couplet: assumes the speaker’s beloved understands the three comparisons as an illustration of impending death. The speaker explains the intensity of their love and encourages the beloved to accept this and love him while he is alive.
It is characteristic of Spenser to have invented his own sonnet form with **complicated interlocking rhymes**: ABAB BCBC CDCD EE. Spenser combines the Italian and Shakespearean form: **Uses three quatrains and a couplet but employs linking rhymes.**

*Spenser and Wyatt’s sonnets also work well to help students deal with archaic spellings and difficult vocabulary.*

Amoretti XV: Ye tradefull Merchants that with weary toyle

Ye tradefull Merchants that with weary toyle,
Do seeke most pretious things to make your gain:
And both the Indias of their treasures spoile,
What needeth you to seeke so farre in vaine?
For loe my love doth in her selfe containe
All this worlds riches that may farre be found,
If Saphyres, loe hir eies be Saphyres plaine,
If Rubies, loe hir lips be Rubies sound:
If Pearles, hir teeth be pearles both pure and round;
If Yvorie, her forhead yvory weene;
If Gold, her locks are finest gold on ground;
If silver, her faire hands are silver sheene;
But that which fairest is, but few behold,
Her mind adornd with vertues manifold.

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Sonnets

- “Sonnet 1: Loving in Truth, and fain in verse my love to show” Sidney
- “Sonnet XXIX: When, in disgrace with fortune and men’s eyes” Shakespeare
- “Sonnet 19: On His Blindness” Milton
- “Sonnet 130: My Mistress Eyes are nothing like the Sun” Shakespeare
- “Amoretti LXXV: One Day I Wrote her Name” Spenser
- “Holy Sonnets: Batter my heart, three-person’d God” Donne
- “Holy Sonnets: Death, be not proud” Donne
- “The World Is Too Much With Us” Wordsworth
- “Composed upon Westminster Bridge, September 3, 1802” Wordsworth
- “Ozymandias” Shelley
- “Bright Star” Keats
- “Nature” Longfellow
- “Acquainted with The Night” Frost
- “The Silken Tent” Frost
- And...countless others—your own favorites and maybe some new ones!

Pfeifer 2014
Introduction of Assignment:
The sonnet is the most popular, enduring and widely used poetic form in English poetry. Since its introduction in the 1530's, the sonnet has enjoyed almost unabated popularity. Nearly every major British and American poet has made use of the form. To be sure, it has had its critics as well as its defenders, in the past and in the present. In part, the vitality of the form stems from its ability to provoke controversy; but this vitality also stems from the complex and inextricable relationship which the sonnet imposes upon form and content. The sonnet is a conventional form; a full understanding and enjoyment of it begins with recognition of its conventions.

Indeed, it now seems clear that the 20th century may well rival the Renaissance as one of the great ages of the sonnet. The roster of poets in the Twentieth century who have written sonnets is enormous: Robert Frost, Robinson Jeffers, e e cummings, Peyton Houston, Dylan Thomas, Adrienne Rich, and Edna St. Vincent Millay to name a few.
The Great AP Sonnet Assignment (continued)

So, now it's time to take this great tradition forward to the 21st Century! You, the poets of tomorrow, shall compose sonnets.

1. Decide on a subject, theme, problem, or idea, around to craft your sonnet.

2. Choose the form:

   Italian: A two-part poem with an octave and a sestet, with the Volta or Turn occurring at or on lines 8 and 9.
   Rhyme Scheme: ABBA ABBA CDC CDC (or a variation of this)

   English: A poem divided into 3 quatrains with an ending couplet, with the Turn occurring at or on lines 8-9 or 11-13.
   Rhyme Scheme: ABAB CDCD EFEF GG

3. Write the poem using iambic pentameter as basis for rhythm and meter.

4. Title your work.

5. Type up and include analysis as described below.

The second half of this assignment serves as analysis. Write one or two paragraphs analyzing your own poem. Explain title, meaning, figurative language, poetic technique, emphasis and theme. Identify the "turn" and explain its significance and structure.