The Sonnet in brief

The word sonnet comes from the Italian sonetto, which means ‘a little sound or song.’ The sonnet is a form of lyric poetry which follows a set structure of fourteen lines with regular rhythm and a set rhyme scheme. As a poetic form it first appeared in Italy in the late 13th century and was given its classical form by the Italian poet, Petrarch.

Petrarch’s sonnets are consistently divided into an octave (a stanza of eight lines), and a sestet (a concluding stanza of six lines), marked by a pause between them in the movement or mood of the poem. His sonnets also limit rhyme variations to a total of five, with the octave rhyming: ABBA ABBA and the sestet as CDE CDE. The common theme running through Petrarch’s sonnets is unrequited love. Each poem is a love poem to an idealised woman who fails to return his love.

The sonnet form was brought into English by Henry Howard, the Earl of Surrey and Sir Thomas Wyatt, then brilliantly developed by William Shakespeare and subsequently used by many poets throughout the ages since.

Shakespeare wrote 154 sonnets centred on the themes of love, beauty, the passage of time and mortality. The first 126 of them are addressed to an unnamed young man; a further 25 are addressed to an unnamed older woman. There has been much speculation as to the identities of the ‘fair youth’ and the ‘dark lady’.

Shakespeare’s sonnets are written as three quatrains (stanzas of four lines each) with a concluding couplet. Their rhyme scheme is ABAB CDCD, EFEF GG. Both Petrarch’s and Shakespeare’s sonnets follow a predominantly iambic pentameter. Iambic rhythms have two syllables, with the accent always on the second syllable as, for example, in the word, compare.