



FRANCESCO PETRARCH

Best known for the Lyric poetry of his *Canzoniere*, Petrarch is considered one of the greatest loved poets of world literature. A scholar of classical antiquity, he was the founder of humanism which soon sprouted the foothills of the Renaissance. Petrarch didn't create the sonnet, it was created by Dante Alighieri (1265-1321), but Petrarch perfected it. Most of the entries in *Il Canzoniere* are sonnets. In doing so, he perfected the sonnet form that was adopted as an ideal model by later poets such as Shakespeare and Chaucer.

Petrarch was a great classical scholar and the first modern poet. He wrote hundreds of love poems, sonnets, to Laura — an unidentified and beautiful, but married, lady — describing her as a real woman, far from the medieval literary conventions that focused only on women's spiritual qualities. Falling madly in love with a woman he may have never even talked to, Petrarch would go on to write hundreds of poems to her; which in years to come would get transported around the world and translated into just about every known language.

Petrarch was born in 1304 and though his family sent him to be a lawyer, he quickly found his passion in the texts of antiquity. He continually strived to collect the works of Cicero and others believing that they contained knowledge and insights into the human condition which would take an eternity to recreate. He studied at Montpellier (1319-23) and moved to Bologna, where he studied law in 1323-25. Petrarch was primarily interested in writing and Latin literature, sharing this passion with his friend Giovanni Boccaccio (1313-1375), the writer of *Decameron*. In Avignon Petrarch composed numerous sonnets which acquired popularity. In search for old Latin classics and manuscripts, he traveled through France, Germany, Italy, and Spain.

Petrarch soon grew famous, and in 1341 he was crowned as a poet laureate in Rome. He is crowned by Orso dell'Anguillara, a roman noble. In Petrarch's speech, he calls on a rebirth of classical wisdom and poetry. He develops the idea of the laurel being the symbol for poetic and literary immortality.



He was subsequently charged with various diplomatic missions. The latter part of his life he spent wandering from city to city in northern Italy as an international celebrity. Petrarch settled about 1367 in Padua, where he passed his remaining years in religious exercises. He died in Arquà in the Euganean Hills on July 18, 1374. Petrarch was an Italian scholar, poet, and humanist; a major force in the development of the Renaissance, the end of the dark ages, and the start of Humanism.

The Renaissance English poet Thomas Wyatt introduced the sonnet form into English, both translating Petrarch's sonnets into English and composing sonnets of his own in a style similar to Petrarch's. By Shakespeare's time, the style of Petrarchan love sonnets had become familiar enough for Shakespeare to parody or joke about. Shakespeare wrote the most famous series of sonnets in English, but he and other Elizabethan poets modified the nature of the poem, changing the Italian form to make it easier to compose a sonnet in English. Later English poets have used the sonnet to write about whatever was on their minds--from religious experiences to political affairs. Even though poetic styles have changed greatly since the Renaissance, the sonnet is still popular at the end of the Twentieth Century, five hundred years after it came into our language.

History and biography adapted from <http://petrarch.petersadlon.com>

SONNETS

- A **sonnet**, in general, is a fourteen-line lyric poem.
- “**Lyric**” means the poem expresses a person’s emotions, as opposed to, say, telling a story.
- **Historically**, the sonnet began in Italy when Petrarch used the form to write a famous series of poems about his love for a woman named Laura. Since Laura was married to someone else, Petrarch used the sonnets as a way to express his secret feelings. They were elaborate and extravagant describing Laura’s beauty and his own despair at loving someone who could not return his love.
- There are two main types of sonnets in English, the **Italian** (Petrarchan) and the **English** (Shakespearean). There are differences in the rhyme scheme, the meter, and the subject matter.

CHARACTERISTICS OF THE PETRARCH SONNET

- **Two-parts**: one 8-line part (the octave) and one 6-line part (the sestet)
- The first 8 lines rhyme like this: **abbaabba**. (This is harder in English than in Italian, because English has fewer words that rhyme with each other.)
- The second 6 lines rhyme like this: **cdecde** (not always – it varies)
- The first 8 lines develop the **main idea**, and the last 6 lines give the **conclusion**.
- Most sonnets use lines made up of five groups of syllables, known as “**feet**.” The foot commonly used is the “**iamb**”, which consists of one weak syllable followed by one strong syllable. Since there are five iambs in a line, the meter is called “**iambic pentameter**.” Iambic pentameter gives a long enough line so that the poem doesn’t sound sing-song, yet is not so long that we lose track of the rhymes. Sometimes sonnets have some irregularities in the meter - a variation from the established meter can lend importance to a particular line.

EXAMPLE: John Milton (1631)

How soon hath Time, the subtle thief of youth, A
Stol’n on his wing my three and twentieth year! B
My hasting days fly on with full career, B
But my late spring no bud or blossom show’th. A
Perhaps my semblance might deceive the truth, A
That I to manhood am arriv’d so near, B
And inward ripeness doth much less appear, B
That some more timely-happy spirits endu’th. A
Yet be it less or more, or soon or slow, C
It shall be still in strictest measure ev’n D
To that same lot, however mean or high, E
Toward which Time leads me, and the will of Heav’n; D
All is, if I have grace to use it so, C
As ever in my great task-Master’s eye. E

The entire octave is devoted to **posing a problem**: Milton says he really hasn’t accomplished much for his age, and despite his grown-up appearance, he isn’t as mature as some other people (the timely-happy spirits) at the age of twenty-three. This is how the octave in an Italian sonnet is supposed to work: the octave sets up a problem of some sort, which the sestet then resolves.

Milton **solves the problem** by concluding that being a late bloomer is no problem; the passage of time is not important to God, who controls Milton’s destiny, since all time is eternity (“as ever”) to God, Milton’s great task-Master. The rhyme scheme in the sestet is not as strict as that in the octave, and varies greatly from poem to poem.

BUILD YOUR OWN SONNET

USING THE CHARACTERISTICS FROM A PETRARCHAN SONNET TO CREATE YOUR OWN SONNET: You have one class period to complete!

STEPS:

1. **IDEA (TOPIC):** It has to do with **love** somehow, the sonnet form itself can help you develop that idea into an octave and sestet, Remember, most lyric poems work by developing feelings about your idea commenting on the images or feelings you have evoked in the first part of your poem.

Write down your idea here _____

2. **FORM:** The sonnet must be 14 lines long, have no more and no less than 10 syllables per line, and have a rhyme scheme of abba, abba, cde, cde
3. **CONTENT:** first 8 lines develop the main idea, and the last 6 lines give the conclusion.
What are your first 8 lines going to explain? _____
What are your last 6 lines going to explain? _____

Here is a template to work with: Fill in the **end** of the each line **first** with **rhyming words** that you think you will use to describe the topic you chose (this is an easy way to make sure you follow the rhyme scheme). Next, fill in the rest of the lines.

_____	_____ love _____	(a)
_____	_____	(b)
_____	_____	(b)
_____	_____ dove _____	(a)
_____	_____	(a)
_____	_____	(b)
_____	_____	(b)
_____	_____	(a)
_____	_____	
_____	_____	(c)
_____	_____	(d)
_____	_____	(e)
_____	_____	(c)
_____	_____	(d)
_____	_____	(e)