

# Analyzing and Writing Renaissance Sonnets

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## ANALYZE A SONNET

The sonnet is a brief, highly structured form of verse that originated in medieval Italy and became the dominant mode of love poetry in the fourteenth century.

The poet Petrarch (1304–74) popularized a specific form of sonnet in which an eight-line octave states a problem, asks a question, or expresses emotional tension that is resolved in a concluding six-line sestet.

Read the sonnet below and complete the worksheet. Notice how the poem's structure helps dramatize its meaning.

## ***Sonnet 307* by Petrarch**

O lovely little bird, I watch you fly,  
And grieving for the past I hear you sing.  
I see the night and winter hastening,  
I see the day and happy summer die.  
If you could hear my heart in answer cry  
Its pain to your sad tune, you'd swiftly wing  
Into my bosom, comfort you would bring  
And we would weep together, you and I.  
'Tis no equality of woe I fear;  
Perhaps she lives whom you bewail; from me  
Have greedy death and heaven snatched my  
dear,  
But the dark autumn evening hour sets free  
The memory of many a banished year  
So let us talk of the past then, tenderly.

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## ANALYZE A SONNET: INSTRUCTOR'S COPY

### **Annotate the sonnet to reveal its structure**

1. Number the fourteen lines of the sonnet. Draw a thick line separating the first eight lines (octave) from the last six lines (sestet).

2. Draw a broken line separating the octave into two sets of four lines (quatrains). The rhyme scheme of the octave follows the pattern abba/abba. Underline the last word in each line and annotate it “a” or “b.”

- What words create the “a” rhyme sound? fly, die, cry, I (long “i” sound)
- What words create the “b” rhyme sound? sing, hastening, wing, bring (“ing” sound)

3. The rhyme scheme of the sestet follows one of three patterns: 1) cddcdd; 2) cdecde; 3) cdcdcd. Underline the last word in each line and label it c, d, or e.

- Which rhyme pattern did you find? cdcdcd
- What words create the “c” rhyme sound? fear, dear, year (“ear” sound)
- What words create the “d” rhyme sound? me, free, tenderly (long “e” sound)

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## ANALYZE A SONNET: INSTRUCTOR'S COPY

### **Analyze the meaning**

Each section of the sonnet has a specific purpose. The first quatrain introduces a situation that causes doubt or conflict for the speaker; the second quatrain develops these issues further.

*You may wish to quote Charles Mills Gayley's summary of the sonnet: "The octave bears the burden; a doubt, a problem, a reflection, a query, a historical statement, a cry of indignation or desire, a vision of the ideal. The sestet eases the load, resolves the problem or doubt, answers the query, solaces the yearning, realizes the vision." [Charles Mills Gayley, Methods and Materials of Literary Criticism: Epic, Lyric, and Allied Forms of Poetry (Boston: Ginn & Co., 1920), 24.]*

1. What situation is set up in the first quatrain? *The poet is grieving for the past. Night and winter are coming; day and summer are departing.*
2. Is this idea developed further in second quatrain? If so, how? *The poet's heart echoes the bird's sad tune. The poet wishes for the comforting companionship of the bird so they can weep together.*
3. The first part of the sestet is known as the volta (turn) and introduces a pronounced change in tone from the octave. Describe the volta in this poem: *The poet suspects that the bird's grief is not actually equal to his and arises from the absence of a lover who is still alive; the poet's lover is dead.*
4. The sestet as a whole comments on the problem or applies a solution. What solution or resolution is offered in the sestet? *The dying day and season (which had seemed depressing in first quatrain) now trigger bittersweet memories and the pleasure of reminiscing.*

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- What words create the “a” rhyme sound? \_\_\_\_\_

- What words create the “b” rhyme sound? \_\_\_\_\_

3. The rhyme scheme of the sestet follows one of three patterns: 1) cddcdd; 2) cdecde; 3) cdcddc. Underline the last word in each line and label it c, d, or e.

- Which rhyme pattern did you find? \_\_\_\_\_

- What words create the “c” rhyme sound? \_\_\_\_\_

- What words create the “d” rhyme sound? \_\_\_\_\_

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Each section of the sonnet has a specific purpose. The first quatrain introduces a situation that causes doubt or conflict for the speaker; the second quatrain develops these issues further.

1. What situation is set up in the first quatrain?
2. Is this idea developed further in second quatrain? If so, how?
3. The first part of the sestet is known as the volta (turn) and introduces a pronounced change in tone from the octave. Describe the volta in this poem:
4. The sestet as a whole comments on the problem or applies a solution. What solution or resolution is offered in the sestet?