

# Edgar Allan Poe and the Sonnet Form

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# *Sonnet Form*

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## **Historical Overview**

- evolved over centuries; endured for over 700 years
- originally devised as a lyric, developed in southern France, northern Italy
- creation and traditionally attributed to Francesco Petrarch,  
(July 20, 1304 – July 19, 1374) the Father of Humanism—

## **Sonnet Defined**

- a poem composed with a recognized rhyme formula and meter
- is concerned with a single thought or theme, and should have a secondary theme.

# Sonnet Form

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## Types of Sonnets

Because of its popularity, the poem has transformed over time, retaining important categorizing elements, yet metamorphosing some components.

### Common forms:

- Italian sonnet > or Petrarchan sonnet
- English sonnet > or Shakesperian sonnet
- Spenserian sonnet

### Basic Characteristics of Traditional Sonnet

- fourteen lines with chosen rhyme formula and strategic meter
- a turn or shift in theme (referred to as the *volta*)

# Sonnet Form

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## Important Terms

- octave            eight lines    || For sonnets the first eight lines carry a theme.
- sestet            six lines        || The remaining six lines can twist the theme.
  
- tercet            three lines
- quatrain        four lines
- couplet         two lines
  
- Both the octave and the sestet contain parallel themes, or two related stories.
- Typically the octave presents a situation, event, image, or generalization and the sestet presents a reflection or meditation on the previous section, a reaction, or a result.

# Charles Simic || *History*

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On a gray evening  
Of a gray century,  
I ate an apple  
While no one was looking.

A small, sour apple  
The color of woodfire,  
Which I first wiped  
On my sleeve.

8



**octave:**  
*in this case composed of two quatrains*

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Then I stretched my legs  
As far as they'd go,  
Said to myself  
Why not close my eyes now  
  
Before the Late  
World News and Weather.

14



**sestet:**  
*in this case composed of a quatrain and  
a couplet*

Simic, Charles. "History." *The Making of a Sonnet: A Norton Anthology*.  
Edward Hirsch and Eavan Boland, eds. New York: W. W. Norton. 2008. Print.

# Sonnet Form

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## The Italian Rhyme Scheme || *Variations*

A  
B  
B  
A  
  
A  
B  
B  
A  
  
C  
D  
E  
  
C  
D  
E

A  
B  
A  
B  
  
A  
B  
A  
B  
  
C  
D  
C  
  
C  
D  
C



**octave:**  
*in this case composed of two quatrains*



**sestet:**  
*in this case composed of two tercets*

# Sonnet Form

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**Henry Howard** (1517 – 19 January 1547)

*Complaint of the Lover Disdained*

In Cyprus springs, whereas Dame Venus dwelt,  
A well so hot, that whoso tastes the same,  
Were he of stone, as thawed ice should melt,  
And kindled find his breast with fixed flame;  
Whose moist poison dissolved hath my hate.  
This creeping fire my cold limbs so opprest,  
That in the heart that harbour'd freedom, late:  
Endless despair long thraldom hath imprest.  
Another so cold in frozen ice is found,  
Whose chilling venom of repugnant kind,  
The fervent heat doth quench of Cupid's wound,  
And with the spot of change infects the mind;  
    Whereof my dear hath tasted to my pain:  
    My service thus is grown into disdain.

*Rhyme scheme || Meter*

<b>A</b>	<b>5</b>	}	<b>octave</b>
<b>B</b>	<b>5</b>		
<b>A</b>	<b>4.5</b>		
<b>B</b>	<b>4.5</b>		
<b>C</b>	<b>4.5</b>		
<b>D</b>	<b>5</b>		
<b>C</b>	<b>5</b>		
<b>D</b>	<b>5</b>		
<b>E</b>	<b>5.5</b>	}	<b>sestet</b>
<b>F</b>	<b>5</b>		
<b>E</b>	<b>5</b>		
<b>F</b>	<b>5</b>		
<b>G</b>	<b>5</b>		
<b>G</b>	<b>5</b>		

Surrey, Henry Howard, Earl of. *The Poetical Works of Henry Howard, Earl of Surrey*.  
Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1854. Print.

# Sonnet Form

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**William Shakespeare** (1564 – 1616)

**130**

*thesis:  
problem  
established  
and  
discussed  
in octave*

My mist/ress' eyes / are noth/ing like / the sun;  
Coral / is far / more red / than her / lips' red;  
If snow / be white, / why then / her breasts / are dun;  
If hairs / be wires, / black wires / grow on / her head.  
I have / seen ros/es da/mask, red / and white,  
But no such roses see I in her cheeks;  
And in some perfumes is there more delight  
Than in the breath that from my mistress reeks.

*sestet  
shifts  
in tone,  
slightly*

I love to hear her speak, yet well I know  
That music hath a far more pleasing sound;  
I grant I never saw a goddess go;  
My mistress, when she walks, treads on the ground:

*problem  
resolved  
in couplet*

And yet, / by heav/en, I / think my / love as /rare  
As an/y she /belied / with false / compare.

*Rhyme scheme* || *Meter*

<b>A</b>	<b>5</b>
<b>B</b>	<b>5</b>
<b>A</b>	<b>5</b>
<b>B</b>	<b>5</b>
<b>C</b>	<b>5</b>
<b>D</b>	<b>5</b>
<b>C</b>	<b>5</b>
<b>D</b>	<b>5</b>
<b>E</b>	<b>5</b>
<b>F</b>	<b>5</b>
<b>E</b>	<b>5</b>
<b>F</b>	<b>5</b>
<b>G</b>	<b>5•5</b>
<b>G</b>	<b>5</b>

*The Sonnets and Narrative Poems: The Complete Non-Dramatic Poetry.* Sylvan Barnet, ed.  
Signet Classic, Penquin Books, New York, 1989. Print.



# Sonnet — Silence

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Edgar Allan Poe created his own experimental form. In this case, he purposely deconstructed the traditional formula to construct his own concept.

- 15 lines
- iambic meter
- heightened theme of duality
- invented a new rhyme scheme to compensate additional line
- plays off the notion that a conventional sonnet has two themes
- convoluted and elusive theme based on multiple types of silence:
  - > basic definition of silence: without sound
  - > silence of isolation and loneliness
  - > silence associated with the loss of a loved one
  - > silence of the body of the deceased; of a grave site over time
- *notice*: just as sonnets have two themes, a person is composed of body & soul

# Sonnet — Silence

	<i>Rhyme scheme</i>    <i>Meter</i>	
There are some qualities — some <span style="border: 1px solid red; padding: 2px;">incorporate things</span>	<b>A</b>	<b>6</b>
That have a double life, which thus is made	<b>B</b>	<b>5</b>
A type of that twin entity which springs	<b>A</b>	<b>5</b>
From matter and light, <span style="border: 1px solid red; padding: 2px;">evinced</span> in solid and shade.	<b>B</b>	<b>6</b>
There is a two-fold Silence — sea and shore —	<b>C</b>	<b>5</b>
Body and soul. One dwells in lonely places,	<b>D</b>	<b>5•5</b>
Newly with grass o’ergrown; some solemn graces,	<b>D</b>	<b>5•5</b>
Some human memories and tearful lore,	<b>C</b>	<b>5</b>
Render him terrorless: his name’s “No More.”	<b>C</b>	<b>5</b>
He is the <span style="border: 1px solid red; padding: 2px;">corporate Silence</span> dread him not!	<b>E</b>	<b>5•5</b>
No power hath he of evil in himself;	<b>F</b>	<b>5•5</b>
But should some urgent fate (untimely lot!)	<b>E</b>	<b>5</b>
Bring thee to meet his shadow (nameless elf,	<b>F</b>	<b>5</b>
That haunteth the lone regions where hath trod	<b>G</b>	<b>5</b>
No foot of man) commend thyself to God!	<b>G</b>	<b>5</b>

**corporate:** united; combined

**evince:** to show clearly

**incorporate:** combined in one body (in this case: body and soul)

# *Sonnet — Silence*

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Dualistic imagery in “Sonnet to Silence”:

- incorporate (l 1)
- double life (l 2)
- twin entity (l 3)
- matter and life / solid and shade (l 4)
- two-fold Silence / Sea and Shore (l 5)
- Body and Soul (l 6)
- grass and graces (l 7)
- memories and lore (l 8)
- corporate Silence (l 10)
- shadow (l 13)

# Sonnet — Silence

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## The opening quatrain establishes the main theme of the poem:

There are some qualities — some incorporate things,  
That have a double life, which thus is made  
A type of that twin entity which springs  
From matter and light, evinced in solid and shade.

- Many forms of duality exist in Nature; these are essential to establish meaning to our existence. To embellish this, Poe uses the following concepts:

<u>Body</u>	<u>Soul</u>
shore	sea
logic	emotion / passion
death	life
matter	light
solid	shade

- Just as humanity's existence remains confusing and contradictory, so are the themes running in the poem.

# Sonnet — Silence

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## The last eight lines (octave) of the sonnet

- refer to an awkwardly named element: “No More”
- this personification is “one (who) dwells in lonely places” — that is a grave.
- this personified-element is not to be feared by a person
  - > with solemn graces
  - > with positive memories (non-animalistic) and education
- usually interpreted as a representation of Death, although some people argue it could be a representation of Isolation or Disconnection from Society, which in itself is another *form of* death.
- The real arguments begin with the remaining symbol of the “his shadow / nameless elf, / That haunteth the lone regions”—
- Some refer to this as a representation of impulses of greed or illicit desires.
- If these factor in the waking self, one should commend oneself to God.

# *Sonnet — Silence*

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In Freudian logic, the “nameless elf” could be a representation for the **libido**, an element in the personality which is sexual in nature and influences the unconscious mind, and in part causes humans to react to circumstances based on desires rather than logic.

Edgar Allan Poe’s collection of work precede and predict the **Psychoanalytic** concepts discovered by Sigmund Freud. Poe’s personas often appear maniacal, or conflicted, without background evidence supplied to the reader. A branch of critics like to use a psychoanalytical approach when examining these poems and stories. In this manner, a detailed criticism can reveal hidden depths of behavioral motivations for irrational figures.

# *Freudian Concepts in Brief*

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**The human mind is divided up into components** – the Ego, Superego, and Id.

- **Ego:** the conscious self, the “I” voice in your head; it defines and interprets reality; is influenced by social forces. It is formed at birth and modifies behavior by controlling impulses that are unacceptable by society.
- **Superego:** the conscious self image which modifies and inhibits instinct. It adopts standards of behavior from surroundings.
- **Id:** the unconscious; reservoir of instinctual desires and hidden motivations. Controlled by the pleasure principle, the gratification of desires.
- **Libido:** the basis for many of Freud’s understanding of hidden symbols in dreams, is an influential portion of the Id. These desires often conflict with what society dictates as “normal,” “polite,” or “correct.” Some believe a healthy libido is important; others say it should always be repressed.