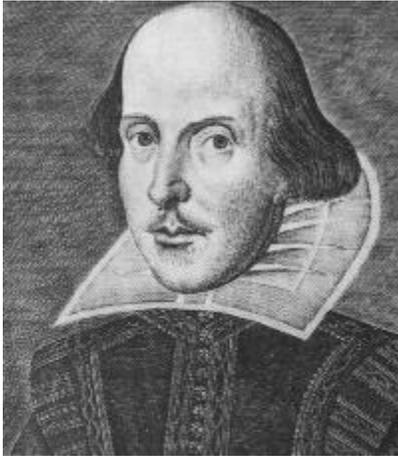


# Shakespeare's Sonnets



William Shakespeare (1564-1616), while most famous for his plays like *Hamlet*, *Macbeth*, and *Romeo and Juliet*, wrote his sonnets during the 1590s when an outbreak of the plague shut down the theaters. They were published as a set of 154 in 1609. Sonnets 1-126 are addressed to an unidentified young man, and Sonnets 127-154 are mostly about an unidentified “dark lady.” An unidentified “rival poet” and a muse appear occasionally as well. Like most sonnets of the time, they deal largely with love, although some are simply observations on themes like time. Thematically, the sonnets follow a pattern: Stanza 1 introduces the main point; Stanzas 2-3 develop the main point; the couplet sums it up.

## The Shakespearean or “English Sonnet”

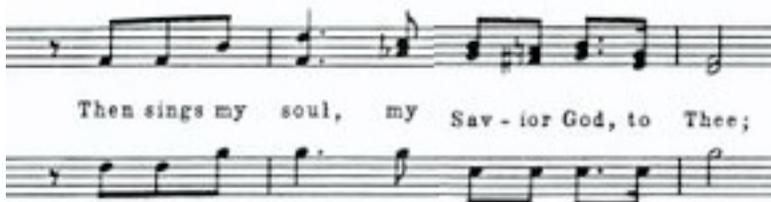
We have already studied Petrarchan Sonnets, but Shakespeare's sonnets follow a different pattern popularized at the time by Sir Philip Sidney's sonnet series *Astrophel and Stella*. It has three quatrains (four-line stanzas) and a couplet at the end (two rhymed lines which are indented). With the exception of Sonnet 145, all of the sonnets are in iambic pentameter. The rhyme scheme is:

First quatrain (four-line stanza): ABAB  
Second quatrain: CDCD  
Third quatrain: EFEF  
Couplet: GG

## Iambic Pentameter

Iambic Pentameter is a type of poetic meter where each line has 10 syllables, or 5 feet (each “foot” is two syllables – the “five feet” aspect is what gives it the name PENTameter). The first syllable is unstressed, the next stressed, and back and forth until the end of the line. That kind of unstressed/stressed pair is called an “iamb” – how we get the other part of the name. Below is an example from “How Great Thou Art” written by Carl Boberg. You can use it to help you remember how iambic pentameter sounds, where the stressed syllables are bolded and the line is divided into iambic feet:

Then **sings** | my **soul** | my **Sav-** | ior **God** | to **thee**



## Example Outline/Rhyme Scheme/Meter Scan for Sonnet 18

Quatrain 1 (four-line stanza)

A Shall I | compare | thee to | a sum | mer's **day**?  
B Thou art | more love | ly and | more temp | **erate**  
A Rough winds | do shake | the dar | ling buds | of **May**  
B And sum | mer's lease | hath all | too short | a **date**

Quatrain 2 (four-line stanza)

C Sometime too hot the eye of heaven **shines**  
D And often is his gold complexion **dim**'d  
C And every fair from fair sometime **declines**  
D By chance or nature's changing course **untrim**'d

Quatrain 3 (four-line stanza)

E But thy eternal summer shall not **fade**  
F Nor lose possession of that fair thou **owest**  
E Nor shall Death brag thou wander'st in his **shade**  
F When in eternal lines to time thou **growest**

Couplet (two rhyming lines)

G So long as men can breathe or eyes can **see**  
G So long lives this and this gives life to **thee**