***Focus On Literary Forms***

**Sonnet**

**Defining the Sonnet**

A **sonnet** is a fourteen-line lyric poem that is written in rhymed iambic pentameter. This form of poetry developed in fourteenth-century Italy and emerged in English literature in the mid-sixteenth century. By the end of that century, the sonnet had become the leading form of love poetry.

Scorn not the sonnet; critic you have frowned/mindless of its just honors — William Wordsworth

**Types of Sonnet**

There are two major types of sonnet. The principal differences between these types involve rhyme scheme and structure.

* The **Italian,** or **Petrarchan, sonnet** —named for the fourteenth-century Italian poet Petrarch—consists of an *octave* (eight-line stanza) and a*sestet* (six-line stanza). The octave usually has the rhyme scheme *abba abba,* and the sestet has the rhyme scheme *cdecde* or *cdcdcd.* The octave states a theme or asks a question that the sestet then answers or resolves.
* The **English,** or **Shakespearean, sonnet** consists of three *quatrains*(four-line stanzas) and a final *couplet* (two lines), with the rhyme scheme*abab cdcd efef gg.* Each of the three quatrains explores a different aspect of the poem’s subject, and the couplet presents a concluding comment.

**The Rhythm of Sonnets**

Most sonnets use a rhythmic meter called an *iamb,* a two-part rhythm comprised of one unstressed (˘) and one stressed (/) syllable. One iamb (˘/) is called a *foot.*

The length of a sonnet line is a pentameter, or five iambic feet.

**Characteristics of Sonnets**

Most sonnets use the same kinds of poetic conventions as other lyric poems.

**Common Themes**

Love, lost love, and the admiration of a fair-haired beauty are a few of the more common themes in early sonnets. Over the centuries, however, sonnet themes have covered a wide and imaginative array of topics.

***Example:*** “Love is in all the water, earth, and air, / And love possesses every living thing.” —*from*

“Spring” by Petrarch

**Literary Devices**

As in other forms of lyric poems, literary devices appear in sonnets through the centuries. The following are a few key literary devices.

**Conceits**

Many sonnets include *Petrarchan conceits.* A conceit is a startling and often elaborate comparison between two apparently different things. Often, this extended metaphor forms the controlling idea of an entire sonnet.

***Example:*** “For her who carried in her little hand/ my heart’s key to her heavenly sojourn . . .”

—*from* “Spring” by Petrarch

**Sonnet Sequences**

In Elizabethan England, poets wrote **sonnet sequences,** or series of sonnets that allow the poet to trace the development of a relationship or examine different aspects of a single theme. Petrarch wrote a series of sonnets to a lifelong love named Laura. Shakespeare’s 154 sonnets are the most famous sonnet sequences in the English language.

**Strategies for Reading Sonnets**

Use these strategies as you read sonnets.

* **Focus on the Speaker**Sonnets typically record the intensely personal feelings and thoughts of the speaker. As you read a sonnet, stay alert to clues to the speaker’s identity, personality, and perspective.
* **Respond to Imagery and Figurative Language**Sonnets are a highly compressed form in which sensory images and figurative language play a major role. Read slowly and imaginatively, noticing the poet’s word choice and technique so that you can appreciate these features of the form.

 

**Build Skills**

**Poems**

Laura • The White Doe • Spring • To Hélène • Roses

**Comparing Literary Works**

Petrarch

**(1304–1374)**

Francesco Petrarca, whom the English called Petrarch , was the greatest Italian poet of the fourteenth century. His talent set a pattern for lyric poetry over the next three centuries. Born in 1304, Petrarch traveled extensively throughout his life. While studying law, he began reading classical works and writing poetry. In 1327, in Avignon, France, he first saw the Laura whom he celebrates in his love poetry.

**Literary Inspiration**

Little is known about the Laura who inspired Petrarch to write some of the world’s greatest love poetry. She may have been Laura de Noyes, the wife of Hugues de Sade. Petrarch himself creates a picture of her as golden-haired, beautiful, and rich. Whoever she was, Petrarch loved her hopelessly for twenty years, and her beauty inspired the *Canzoniere*, a vast collection of hundreds of love lyrics that Petrarch wrote and revised until the end of his life.

After his first trip to Rome in 1337, Petrarch composed two ambitious projects in Latin, leading a new Latin cultural flowering and prompting the city of Rome to crown him poet laureate. After years of travel through France and Italy, he finally completed his two major Italian works: the *Triumphs* and the*Canzoniere.*

Petrarch’s prose—Latin letters, dialogues, and treatises—centers on himself, examining his own thoughts and emotions with extraordinary subtlety and depth, while his poetry exhaustively analyzes his uncertainties about love. It is this self-analysis and self-proclamation that made him a model for subsequent Renaissance writers.

**from Canzionere: Laura**

**from Canzionere: The White Doe**

**from Canzionere: Spring**

Pierre de Ronsard

**(1524–1585)**

Pierre de Ronsard was called the “Prince of Poets” by his contemporaries, and the title suited his range and ambition. He wrote verse of many different kinds—epics, satires, political commentaries, and the odes and sonnets for which he is famous.

**A Poet’s Career**

Ronsard was the youngest son of a noble French family. When illness ended his chances for a life of diplomatic service, he turned to writing. He was slow to publish his work, but in 1550 he released his first four books of odes, modeled on the works of the classical poets Pindar and Horace. In 1552, he published a book of love poetry addressed largely to a woman named Cassandre. From then on, he worked prolifically, writing books of odes, hymns, and love poetry alike. Ronsard saw poetry as a kind of inspired discipline, with the poet acting as a receiver and transmitter of divine energies. At times, this vision could lead to self-importance and heavy-handedness, but it often resulted in exciting and vibrant work. His verse is marked by intensity, energy, and deep feelings for the natural world.

In 1572, he published the first four books of his *Franciade,* a patriotic epic about France that he never completed. His last major sequence of love poems, the *Sonnets pour Hélène,* appeared in 1578. Ronsard’s devotion to his calling made him an untiring reviser of his poetry. During his later years, he revised his collected works over and over, preparing a final edition just before his death in 1585.

**To Hélène**

**Roses**

**Preview**

**Connecting to the Literature**

Today, love is the subject of all genres of popular music, from country to rap to heavy metal. Despite the passage of centuries, the similarities you find between your favorite love songs and these poems may be striking.

**Literary Analysis**

**The Sonnet**

Petrarch established the **sonnet** as the dominant form of lyric poetry during the Italian Renaissance. A sonnet is a fourteen-line poem focused on a single theme. The following characteristics are typical of the highly structured Petrarchan sonnet:

* It is divided into an eight-line *octave* followed by a six-line *sestet.*
* The octave usually has a rhyme scheme of *abba abba.*
* The sestet usually has one of three rhyme patterns: *cdecde, cdcdcd,* or*cdedce.*
* The octave often poses a question or makes a statement that is then brought to closure in the sestet.

Look for these characteristics as you read the poems in this grouping.

**Comparing Literary Works**

All five poems in this grouping are Petrarchan sonnets, and all share the subject of love, but the poets use a variety of images to describe their beloved. **Imagery** is descriptive language that re-creates sensory experiences. For example, Ronsard uses the image of a rose to describe his young beloved. Use a chart like the one shown to compare imagery in the five poems and to determine the overall effect the imagery produces.

**Reading Strategy**

**Reading in Sentences**

**Reading in sentences** will help you understand the meaning of a poem. Although these poems are written in sentences, the end of each sentence does not always coincide with the end of the poetic line. A sentence may extend for several lines or end in the middle of a line. To read in sentences, notice the punctuation. Do not pause or make a full stop at the end of a line unless there is a period, comma, colon, semicolon, or dash.

**Vocabulary Builder**

* sated *v.* completely satisfied
* exults *v.* rejoices greatly
* sojourn *n.* visit
* crone *n.* very old woman
* languishing *v.* becoming weak

* reposes *v.* puts to rest



## Background

Petrarch’s *Canzoniere* features 366 poems dedicated to his beloved Laura. Although Petrarch gives no clue about her real identity, many scholars agree that Laura was a married woman whom he supposedly first saw on April 6, 1327. Even though she apparently gave his affection no encouragement, at least so far as he describes in his poetry, Petrarch loved Laura all his life—even after her death in 1348.

The *Canzoniere* is divided into two parts—those poems to Laura “in life” and those to her “in death.” Her importance in the sequence of poems lies in her effect on the poet, whose desire for her is never fulfilled. This “Petrarchan” scenario, in which the lovers’ relationship is never fully realized, would become a standard model for generations to come.



 She used to let her golden hair fly free

 For the wind to toy and tangle and molest;

 Her eyes were brighter than the radiant west.

 (Seldom they shine so now.) I used to see

5Pity look out of those deep eyes on me.

 (“It was false pity,” you would now protest.)

 I had love’s tinder**1**heaped within my breast;

 What wonder that the flame burned furiously?

 She did not walk in any mortal way,

10But with angelic progress; when she spoke,

 Unearthly voices sang in unison.

 She seemed divine among the dreary folk

 Of earth. You say she is not so today?

 Well, though the bow’s unbent,**2**the wound bleeds on.





 A pure-white doe in an emerald glade

 Appeared to me, with two antlers of gold,

 Between two streams, under a laurel’s shade,

 At sunrise, in the season’s bitter cold.



5Her sight was so suavely**1**merciless

 That I left work to follow her at leisure,

 Like the miser who looking for his treasure

 Sweetens with that delight his bitterness.



 Around her lovely neck “Do not touch me”

10Was written with topaz**2**and diamond stone,

 “My Caesar’s will has been to make me free.”

 Already toward noon had climbed the sun,

 My weary eyes were not **sated** to see,

 When I fell in the stream and she was gone.

 



 Zephyr**1**returns, and scatters everywhere

 New flowers and grass, and company does bring,

 Procne and Philomel, **2**in sweet despair,

 And all the tender colors of the Spring.

5Never were fields so glad, nor skies so fair;

 And Jove **exults** in Venus’**3**prospering.

 Love is in all the water, earth, and air,

 And love possesses every living thing.

 But to me only heavy sighs return

10For her who carried in her little hand

 My heart’s key to her heavenly **sojourn** .

 The birds sing loud above the flowering land;

 Ladies are gracious now.—Where deserts burn

 The beasts still prowl on the ungreening sand.



## Critical Reading

**1. Respond:**What do you imagine Petrarch’s Laura was like?

**2. (a) Recall:**List four details about Laura that the speaker recalls in “Laura.”**(b) Analyze:**What are the common qualities of the details that he remembers about her?

**3. (a) Recall:**In “The White Doe,” which details of time does the speaker mention?**(b) Interpret:**What do you think these references to time mean? Explain.

**4. Interpret:**In “Spring,” in what ways is the speaker’s “heart’s key” responsible for these contrasting images he sees?

**5. Relate:**Do you think the feelings or situations Petrarch describes in his poems are still relevant today? Why or why not?

**Quick Review**

A **sonnet** is a fourteen-line poem focused on a single theme. A sonnet has two parts and a structured rhyme scheme.

**Imagery** is descriptive language that re-creates sensory experiences.

To **read in sentences,** note the punctuation in a poem, and stop at the end of a line only if there is a period, comma, semicolon, colon, or dash.

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### Literary Analysis

**The Sonnet**

**1.**In what way does the two-part structure of the **sonnet** “Laura” reflect the speaker’s recollections of Laura?

**2. (a)**What is the rhyme scheme of “The White Doe”?**(b)**In what ways does the pattern vary from that of a typical sonnet?

**3.**How do the poems “The White Doe” and “Roses” reflect the popular Petrarchan scenario in which the lovers’ relationship will never be fully realized?

### Comparing Literary Works

**4. (a)**List three **images** describing the doe in “The White Doe” that relate to images of Laura in “Laura.” (b) Why might the speaker choose to associate Laura with a white doe?

**5. (a)**What is the condition of the speaker in “To Hélēne”?**(b)**In what ways do the speaker and the object of his desire differ from those in the other poems in this grouping?

**6.**Which of Ronsard’s two sonnets is most like Petrarch’s three sonnets in imagery and feeling? Explain.

### Reading Strategy

**Reading in Sentences**

**7. (a)**To analyze how **reading in sentences** affects the meaning in a poem, choose sentences from the poem “Spring” to complete the chart below.**(b)**Then, explain the meaning of each sentence and relate its meaning to the poem.



**8. (a)**How many complete sentences are in “The White Doe”?**(b)**How does the arrangement of complete sentences in the poem reflect the imagery?

### Extend Understanding

**9. Psychology Connection:** Do you think that writing these poems comforted the poets or caused them more suffering? Explain.

***Connections***

**England**

### Love and the Sonnet

The fourteen-line poem called the *sonnet* has traditionally been a poem of love. Petrarch, whose sonnets to Laura set the thematic course of the genre, uses an octave (eight lines) and a sestet (six lines) to give his poems a kind of statement/response structure: The octave often takes a position that the sestet contradicts or modifies. The Petrarchan sonnets in this unit are selected from a sonnet sequence charting the pangs of a speaker’s unfulfilled love for an idealized lady.

## Elizabethan Variations

Shakespeare’s sonnets 29 and 116 have also been selected from a sonnet sequence. Shakespeare uses a variation of Petrarch’s sonnet form: three quatrains (four lines each) and a couplet (two lines), with the couplet often a dramatic statement that resolves, restates, or redefines the central problem of the sonnet. Shakespeare’s speaker and beloved, however, are less ideal and more real than the lovers in Petrarch’s sonnets. Though Petrarch wrote in fourteenth-century Italy and Shakespeare in sixteenth-century England, the joy and despair in their poetry will be familiar to anyone who has ever been in love.

 



 When in disgrace with fortune and men’s eyes,

 I all alone beweep my outcast state,

 And trouble deaf heaven with my bootless**1**cries,

 And look upon myself and curse my fate,

5Wishing me like to one more rich in hope,

 Featured like him, like him with friends possessed

 Desiring this man’s art, and that man’s **scope** ,

 With what I most enjoy contented least.

 Yet in these thoughts myself almost despising,

10Haply**2**I think on thee, and then my state,

 Like to the lark at break of day arising

 From **sullen** earth, sings hymns at heaven’s gate;

 For they sweet love remembered such wealth brings

 That then I scorn to change my state with kings.



 Let me not to the marriage of true minds

 Admit **impediments** . Love is not love

 Which **alters** when it alteration finds,

 Or bends with the remover to remove.

5O, no! It is an ever-fixèd mark

 That looks on tempests and is never shaken;

 It is the star to every wandering bark,**1**

 Whose worth’s unknown, although his height be taken.**2**

 Love’s not Time’s fool, though rosy lips and cheeks

10Within his bending sickle’s compass**3**come;

 Love alters not with his brief hours and weeks,

 But bears it out even to the edge of doom.**4**

 If this be error, and upon me proved,

 I never writ, nor no man ever loved.

## Shakespeare

**(1564–1616)**

William Shakespeare was born in the country town of Stratford-on-Avon, England, and probably attended the town’s free grammar school. Well known as an actor and a playwright, Shakespeare was part owner of a London theater, the Globe, where many of his plays were performed. From 1592 to 1594, London’s theaters were closed because of the plague—this period may have provided an opportunity for Shakespeare to write some of his 154 sonnets.

## Connecting British Literature

**1.**Compare the speaker’s attitude toward his beloved in “Laura” with the speaker’s attitude in “Sonnet 29.” **(a)** Which speaker is more optimistic? **(b)**Is the central figure in each poem the speaker or the beloved? **(c)** Indicate the specific lines that provide the information.

**2. (a)**In what way is the speaker’s perspective on the inevitable changes of time in “Sonnet 116” similar to the perspective of the speaker in “Laura”?**(b)**In what way are the perspectives different?

**3.**Of the three poems by Petrarch and the two by Shakespeare, which one is your favorite? Explain.