SONNET

A lyric poem of fourteen lines in iambic pentameter. Poets have experimented with many rhyme variations, but there are two main types: the Italian/Petrarchan sonnet and the English/Shakespearean sonnet.

ITALIAN/PETRARCHAN is divided into two parts: the octave (8 lines) and the sestet (6 lines):

the octave has a first division of eight lines rhyming: abbaabba

and the sestet, or second division, has six lines rhyming: cdece, cdccdc, or cdedce.

In this type of sonnet the poet divides the subject into two topics showing a change (also called the turn) in the second part.

ENGLISH/SHAKESPEAREAN has four divisions:

three quatrains of four lines (each with a rhyme-scheme of its own) and a rhymed couplet at the end. The typical rhyme scheme for the English sonnet is

abab cdcd efef gg.

In this type of sonnet the poet has three topics or views with the couplet at the end marking a conclusion.

The sonnet’s restrictions make it a challenge, but the rhythm and rhyme patterns create truly musical effects. The form keeps the sonnet from becoming too long or too short. The brevity of the form favors concentrated expression of idea or passion. It’s hard work to pull it all together, but if you follow the guidelines, and work hard to make sure the word choice expresses the meaning and not just the rhyme, the results are rewarding!

In Romeo and Juliet, there are three sonnets: Act I Prologue, Act II Prologue, and in I, 5.

Here are two examples, one Shakespearean and one Petrarchan:

“Love Is Not All”
Edna St. Vincent Millay

Love is not all; it is not meat nor drink
Nor slumber nor a roof against the rain,
Nor yet a floating spar to men that sink,
And rise and sink, and rise and sink again;
Love cannot fill the thickened lung with breath,
Nor clean the blood, nor set the fractured bone;
Yet many a man is making friends with death
Even as I speak, for lack of love alone.
It well may be that in a difficult hour,
Pinned down by pain and moaning for release,
Or nagged by want, past resolution's power,
I might be driven to sell your love for peace,
Or trade the memory of this night for food.
It well may be. I do not think I would.

“What Lips My Lips Have Kissed”
John Milton

What lips my lips have kissed, and where, and why,
I have forgotten, and what arms have lain
Under my head till morning; but the rain
Is full of ghosts tonight, that tap and sigh
Upon the glass and listen for reply,
And in my heart there stirs a quiet pain
For unremembered lads that not again
Will turn to me at midnight with a cry.
Thus in winter stands the lonely tree,
Nor knows what birds have vanished one by one,
Yet knows its boughs more silent than before:
I cannot say what loves have come and gone,
I only know that summer sang in me
A little while, that in me sings no more.

Here’s an example of a slightly modified sonnet. It has an Elizabethan rhyme scheme, but uses an altered rhythm with (mostly) 8 syllables for each line.

The Facebook Sonnet
by Sherman Alexie

Welcome to the endless high-school Reunion. Welcome to past friends And lovers, however kind or cruel. Let’s undervalue and unmend The present. Why can’t we pretend Every stage of life is the same? Let’s exhume, resume, and extend Childhood. Let’s play all the games That occupy the young. Let fame And shame intertwine. Let one’s search For God become public domain. Let church.com become our church

Let’s sign up, sign in, and confess Here at the altar of loneliness.

So—when is a sonnet NOT a sonnet? It’s not a riddle; I really want to know what you think. Many people are highly traditional about this. It must be 14 lines with 10 syllables in iambic pentameter, and it must follow one of the two rhyme patterns. Others are ok with any 14 lines as long as each one has 10 syllables, and it has some rhyming in it. There are many different opinions.

Personally, I’m not so worried about what you call it, or how traditional you are as long as it is a good poem.

Conclusion: Everyone should have to sweat over creating one strictly traditional sonnet. Following the pattern successfully 1) is supremely satisfying, and 2) almost always results in an amazing poem. There is something about that form that shapes your words into something gorgeous. Try it. After that one, you can do whatever you want. I welcome any good poems that are inspired by the sonnet format, even if the traditionalists don’t call it a sonnet. No one call me that Sherman Alexie’s “Facebook Sonnet” is not good, just because it has 8 syllables and isn’t strictly in iambic pentameter.

More examples to look at:
Sonnet Central (awesome list): http://www.sonnets.org/
All (154!) Shakespeare’s Sonnets: http://poetry.eserver.org/sonnets/
Sonnet Contributions to Sonnet Central (not all of them are good, and many are untraditional, but worth looking at: http://www.sonnets.org/yoursonnets.htm