

**Module 4: Examining Love, Friendship, and Power**  
**Topic 2 Content: The Italian Sonnet**



The Italian Sonnet

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### Topic 2 Content: The Italian Sonnet

#### When I Consider How My Light Is Spent by John Milton

(1) When I consider how my light is spent  
(2) Ere half my days, in this dark world and wide,  
(3) And that one talent which is death to hide  
(4) Lodged with me useless, though my soul more bent  
(5) To serve therewith my Maker, and present  
(6) My true account, lest he returning chide;  
(7) "Doth God exact day-labor, light denied?"  
(8) I fondly ask; but Patience to prevent

octave

(9) That murmur, soon replies, "God doth not need  
(10) Either man's work or his own gifts; who best  
(11) Bear his mild yoke, they serve him best. His state  
(12) Is kingly. Thousands at his bidding speed  
(13) And post o'er land and ocean without rest:  
(14) They also serve who only stand and wait."

sestet

Here is an example of an Italian sonnet, also called a Petrarchan sonnet.

"When I Consider How My Light Is Spent" by John Milton

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And that one talent which is death to hide  
Lodged with me useless, though my soul more bent  
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The Italian sonnet is made up of fourteen lines of iambic pentameter, meaning that there are five units of unstressed and stressed syllables in each line. In addition, the Italian sonnet is divided into two sections. The first eight lines, or octave, make up the first section. The last six lines, or sestet, make up the final section.

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- |      |  |   |
|------|--|---|
| (1)  | When I consider how my light is spent              | a |
| (2)  | Ere half my days, in this dark world and wide,     | b |
| (3)  | And that one talent which is death to hide         | b |
| (4)  | Lodged with me useless, though my soul more bent   | a |
| (5)  | To serve therewith my Maker, and present           | a |
| (6)  | My true account, lest he returning chide;          | b |
| (7)  | "Doth God exact day-labor, light denied?"          | b |
| (8)  | I fondly ask; but Patience to prevent              | a |
| (9)  | That murmur, soon replies, "God doth not need      | c |
| (10) | Either man's work or his own gifts; who best       | d |
| (11) | Bear his mild yoke, they serve him best. His state | e |
| (12) | Is kingly. Thousands at his bidding speed          | c |
| (13) | And post o'er land and ocean without rest:         | d |
| (14) | They also serve who only stand and wait."          | e |

To determine the rhyme scheme, look at the last word of each line. The lines that rhyme are identified using the same letter. For this octave, "spent" would be identified with the letter *a*. The next word is "wide," which does not rhyme with "spent" and would therefore be identified with the letter *b*. The next word is "hide," which rhymes with "wide" and should thus also be marked with the letter *b*. Any line that does not rhyme with a preceding line would be marked with the next letter of the alphabet. Thus, the rhyme scheme for the octave of an Italian sonnet is *abbaabba*. However, the rhyme scheme of the sestet may vary. In this example, the rhyme scheme of the sestet is *cdecde*.

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- (2) Ere half my days, in this dark world and wide,
- (3) And that one talent which is death to hide
- (4) Lodged with me useless, though my soul more bent **problem**
- (5) To serve therewith my Maker, and present
- (6) My true account, lest he returning chide;
- (7) "Doth God exact day-labor, light denied?"
- (8) I fondly ask; but Patience to prevent
- (9) That murmur, soon replies, "God doth not need **volta**
- (10) Either man's work or his own gifts; who best **solution**
- (11) Bear his mild yoke, they serve him best. His state
- (12) Is kingly. Thousands at his bidding speed
- (13) And post o'er land and ocean without rest:
- (14) They also serve who only stand and wait."

The division of the sonnet into two sections indicates that two distinct ideas are presented. Often there is a problem described in the octave, and the sestet provides a solution. In line nine of this poem, there is a turn, also called a *volta*, that further signals that the new idea or solution is coming.

In the octave, the speaker describes feeling burdened and useless due to his blindness. He desires to serve God, but he worries that God still expects the same labor from him even though he has a disability. This fear is expressed when the speaker mentions the "one talent which is death to hide." This talent is a Biblical allusion referring to a passage in Matthew 25 about a lord and his three servants. To each servant, the lord gave a certain amount of money, measured in the currency of talents. Two of the servants invested their talents and doubled the lord's money, but the third servant was lazy and hid his talent away by burying it. When he returned the same amount of money to his lord, he was spurned and cast away into "outer darkness." The speaker of the poem asks himself if he is also hiding away his talent to one day face God's punishment despite the fact that he very much wants to use his talent.

In the *volta*, the speaker concludes that God has a plan for every person and that He is content because there are already "thousands" of believers who carry out His will. Further, the speaker recognizes that even those who cannot do much but "wait" and remain faithful are in their own way also serving God.