

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



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Sonnet 75
by Edmund Spenser

(1) One day I wrote her name upon the strand, (2) But came the waves and washéd it away: (3) Again I write it with a second hand, (4) But came the tide, and made my pains his prey.	}	quatrain
(5) Vain man, said she, that dost in vain assay, (6) A mortal thing so to immortalize, (7) For I myself shall like to this decay, (8) And eke my name be wipéd out likewise.		
(9) Not so, (quod I) let baser things devise (10) To die in dust, but you shall live by fame: (11) My verse, your virtues rare shall eternize, (12) And in the heavens write your glorious name.		
(13) Where whenas death shall all the world subdue, (14) Our love shall live, and later life renew.		couplet

Here is an example of a Spenserian sonnet.

"Sonnet 75" by Edmund Spenser

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But came the waves and washéd it away:
Again I write it with a second hand,
But came the tide, and made my pains his prey.
Vain man, said she, that dost in vain assay,
A mortal thing so to immortalize,
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To die in dust, but you shall live by fame:
My verse, your virtues rare shall eternize,
And in the heavens write your glorious name.
Where whenas death shall all the world subdue,
Our love shall live, and later life renew.

The Spenserian sonnet is made up of fourteen lines of iambic pentameter, meaning that there are five units of unstressed and stressed syllables in each line. Its structure consists of three four-line stanzas called quatrains, followed by a rhyming couplet of two lines.

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- | | | |
|------|--|---|
| (1) | One day I wrote her name upon the strand, | a |
| (2) | But came the waves and washed it away: | b |
| (3) | Again I write it with a second hand, | a |
| (4) | But came the tide, and made my pains his prey. | b |
| (5) | Vain man, said she, that dost in vain assay, | b |
| (6) | A mortal thing so to immortalize, | c |
| (7) | For I myself shall like to this decay, | b |
| (8) | And eke my name be wiped out likewise. | c |
| (9) | Not so, (quod I) let baser things devise | c |
| (10) | To die in dust, but you shall live by fame: | d |
| (11) | My verse, your virtues rare shall eternize, | c |
| (12) | And in the heavens write your glorious name. | d |
| (13) | Where whenas death shall all the world subdue, | e |
| (14) | Our love shall live, and later life renew. | 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 the first quatrain, "strand" would be identified with the letter *a*. The next word is "away," which does not rhyme with "strand" and would therefore be identified with the letter *b*. The next word is "hand," which rhymes with "strand" and should thus be marked with the letter *a*. Any line that does not rhyme with a preceding line would be marked with the next letter of the alphabet. The general rhyme scheme for a Spenserian sonnet is abab, bcbc, cdcd, ee.

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- (1) One day I wrote her name upon the strand,
- (2) But came the waves and washed it away:
- (3) Again I write it with a second hand,
- (4) But came the tide, and made my pains his prey. **b**
- (5) Vain man, said she, that dost in vain assay, **b**
- (6) A mortal thing so to immortalize,
- (7) For I myself shall like to this decay,
- (8) And eke my name be wiped out likewise. **c**
- (9) Not so, (quod I) let baser things devise **c**
- (10) To die in dust, but you shall live by fame:
- (11) My verse, your virtues rare shall eternize,
- (12) And in the heavens write your glorious name.
- (13) Where whenas death shall all the world subdue,
- (14) Our love shall live, and later life renew.

The Spenserian sonnet uses its unique rhyme scheme to connect the three quatrains. The final couplet usually offers a new take on the ideas presented in the preceding quatrains. Usually Spenserian sonnets deal with the theme of love. In fact, Edmund Spenser, who developed the Spenserian sonnet, wrote a series of them about his new love interest. This collection is called *Amoretti*, which means "little love poems."

In Sonnet 75, the first quatrain opens with the speaker writing the name of his love in the sand. When a wave washes her name away, the speaker tries to write her name again, but the tide washes it away once more. In the second quatrain, the speaker's love tells him that it is useless to try to immortalize her because, like all things, one day she will die and be forgotten, just like her written name in the sand. The third quatrain begins with a turn, also called a *volta*, that signals a new idea is coming. In the volta, the speaker disputes his love's claim that nothing can live forever. He explains to her that some lesser beings may die, but she will live on forever in the verses of his poetry. In the final couplet, the speaker concludes by declaring that after death, their love will live on.