SONNETS

The sonnet is an old and popular 14-line poetic form that was invented in Italy in the 1200s. It mutated over time, resulting in sonnets of different lengths and numerous rhyme schemes. Sonnets are often used to tell a story of love, and they argue a point or solve a problem: ***You have to love me because...You cannot leave me because...My cat won't sleep at night because....***

The English or Shakespearean sonnet (named after the expert in the form) consists of three **quatrains** (groups of four lines) and a **couplet** (a group of two lines); the rhyme scheme is *abab, cdcd, efef, gg*. Confusing? Nah. Just check out the sonnet below. We've broken the poem into quatrains and a couplet, and color-coded the rhyme scheme.

quatrain 1	Shall I compare thee to a summer's day?	(a)
	Thou art more lovely and more temperate:	(b)
	Rough winds do shake the darling buds of May,	(a)
	And summer's lease hath all too short a date:	(b)
quatrain 2	Sometime too hot the eye of heaven shines,	(c)
	And often is his gold complexion dimm'd;	(d)
	And every fair from fair sometime declines,	(c)
	By chance or nature's changing course untrimm'd;	(d)
quatrain 3	But thy eternal summer shall not fade,	(e)
	Nor lose possession of that fair thou owest;	(f)
	Nor shall Death brag thou wander'st in his shade,	(e)
	When in eternal lines to time thou growest;	(f)
couplet	So long as men can breathe, or eyes can see,	(g)
	So long lives this, and this gives life to thee.	(g)

Structurally speaking, it's pretty straightforward, right? OK. Another characteristic of the Shakespearean sonnet is the **meter**, or the rhythm of the line. Shakespeare's sonnets are written almost exclusively in **iambic pentameter**. This means that each line of the poem has ten syllables, which form five groups of two. These groups of two are known as **iambs**. In the iamb, the first syllable is unstressed, and the second syllable is stressed. Look at this line, which is broken into iambs (the stressed syllable is in bold):

Shall **I** / com**pare** / thee **to** / a **sum** / mer's **day**?

Now say it out loud. Can you hear how you naturally stress the second syllable of the iamb? Also, listen to the way the language sounds. One of the by-products of writing in iambic pentameter is that the language is heightened, or elevated; it does not sound like everyday speech. Using a specific rhythm forces the poet to utilize words differently, often in a different order than in regular speech. Check out the second line of the second quatrain:

And **of** / ten **is** / his **gold** / com**plex** / ion **dimm'd**

MADE EZ

In everyday speech, you'd say, "And his gold complexion is often dimm'd." (Well, OK, you'd probably never say anything like that, but you get the point.) Look at it broken into syllables:

And **his** / gold **com** / plex**ion** / is **of** / ten **dimm'd**

This, of course, doesn't work, because the stress ends up on the wrong syllables in the word "complexion." See how tough it is to write in iambic pentameter? This is part of what makes Shakespeare such a genius. The sonnet we've just been looking at is written entirely in iambic pentameter; read it aloud and see....

Let's move on to another of the Bard's sonnets, and concentrate on the function of the form, which is to make an argument.

quatrain 1	When, in disgrace with fortune and men's eyes,	(a)
	I all alone beweep my outcast **state,**	(b)
	And trouble deaf heaven with my bootless cries,	(a)
	And look upon myself, and curse my **fate,**	(b)
quatrain 2	Wishing me like to one more rich in **hope,**	(c)
	Featured like him, like him with friends possessed,	(d)
	Desiring this man's art and that man's **scope,**	(c)
	With what I most enjoy contented least;	(?)
quatrain 3	Yet in these thoughts myself almost **despising,**	(e)
	Haply I think on thee—and then my **state,**	(f)
	Like to the lark at break of day **arising**	(e)
	From sullen earth, sings hymns at heaven's gate;	(f)
couplet	For thy sweet love rememb'red such wealth **brings**	(g)
	That then I scorn to change my state with **kings.**	(g)

This form lends itself particularly well to presenting his case for love, with the first quatrain setting the tormented mood, the second giving specific examples of why he's tormented, the third showing how love brings relief from the pain, and the final couplet presenting the conclusion.

You'll notice that there's one line in the middle of the poem that doesn't seem to fit into the rhyme scheme. It's the last line before the poet's mood changes, and the lack of rhyme is intended to alert the reader to a shift that often occurs at this point in a sonnet. In the first half, the poet discusses his misery, his wish that he were someone else. In the second

part, he writes of how the mere thought of his love makes him so rich that he would not trade places with a king.

Is your head spinning yet? Hang on—here comes some more fun. The next sonnet is also Shakespearean (though not written by Shakespeare), but its subject and its intention are very different from the other two sonnets. This one makes a case for the opposite of love. Beware—it's extremely clever and, depending on how you interpret it, surprisingly harsh, but to tell you the truth, that's kind of why we like it....

If I should learn, in some quite casual way,

That you were gone, not to return again—

Read from the back-page of a paper, say,

Held by a neighbor in a subway train,

How at the corner of this avenue

And such a street (so are the papers filled)

A hurrying man—who happened to be you—

At noon today had happened to be killed,

I should not cry aloud—I could not cry

Aloud, or wring my hands in such a place—

I should but watch the station lights rush by

With a more careful interest on my face,

Or raise my eyes and read with greater care

Where to store furs and how to treat the hair.

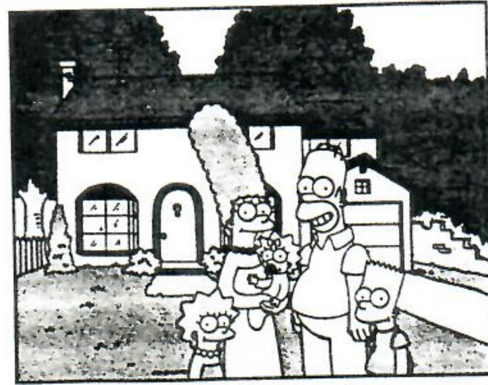
—Edna St. Vincent Millay

(1892-1950)

Well **don't** / just **sit** / there—**write** / a **son** / net **now**! A sonnet of love, a sonnet of loss, a sonnet of ludicrousness—make your case and send it to:

Sonnets
Literary Cavalcade
555 Broadway
New York, NY 10012

SHAKESPEARE RULES... TV



The Simpsons

When you think Shakespeare, you probably don't think *The Simpsons*, but maybe you should. Believe it or not, the writers of this show are incredibly well-read, and part of their fun is doing what writers have done for centuries—including in their own work *allusions* to other people's works. For the viewer, part of the fun of watching the show is finding these allusions. Here are just a few times Shakespeare showed up in Springfield.

In "Radioactive Man," Bart finds out that a movie about his favorite comic-book hero is going to be shot in Springfield. He auditions for the role of the superhero's sidekick with a quote from Shakespeare's *Richard III*: "Now is the winter of our discontent."

In the episode "Homer the Great," Homer becomes the god of a select group called the Stonecutters. When he becomes delirious with his own power, Lisa quotes the warning given in *Julius Caesar* just before Caesar is killed: "Beware the ides of March."

In "Principal Charming," alluding to Horatio's line in *Hamlet*, "Good night, sweet Prince," Bart says to Principal Skinner, "Good night, sweet Prince-ipal."

Much Ado About Muffins, a shop in "My Sister, My Sitter" gets its name from the play *Much Ado About Nothing*, and its slogan "To eat or not to eat" from *Hamlet*'s "To be or not to be" speech.

And in the episode "Much Apu About Nothing" (another allusion to *Much Ado*), Apu, the Indian convenience-store owner, has to contend with the narrow-mindedness of Springfield—until Lisa saves the day.

Get the point? The more Shakespeare you know, the funnier *The Simpsons* gets.