

## The Sonnet Form

How do you convey love for a person? For centuries, people have searched for just the right words to express how much they love someone, how long they have loved someone, or how uniquely they love someone. For many, poetry has been the vehicle for conveying love. Every form of poetry has been used to this end, but none more so than the sonnet.

### COMMON CORE

Included in this workshop:  
**RL 4** Determine the meaning of words and phrases as they are used in the text; analyze the impact of specific word choices on meaning and tone. **RL 5** Analyze how an author's choices concerning how to structure specific parts of a text contribute to its overall structure and meaning as well as its aesthetic impact. **RL 9** Demonstrate knowledge of foundational works of literature, including how two or more texts from the same period treat similar themes or topics.

### Origins of the Sonnet

In 13th-century Italy, poets introduced a poetic form called the sonnet, an Italian word meaning “little song.” The **sonnet** is a 14-line lyric poem with a complicated rhyme scheme and a defined structure. Because of the technical skill required to write a sonnet, the form has challenged poets for centuries. The great Italian poet Francesco Petrarch (1304–1374) perfected the **Italian sonnet**, which is often called the **Petrarchan sonnet** in his honor. Petrarch felt that the sonnet, with its brevity and musical rhymes, was a perfect medium for the expression of emotion, especially love. Although Italian sonneteers did not restrict themselves to love as a subject, Petrarch wrote over 300 sonnets detailing his devotion to a beautiful but unobtainable woman whom he called Laura.



Henry Percy, 9th Earl of Northumberland (1595),  
Nicholas Hilliard.

### The English Sonnet

The English sonnet began with another lovelorn poet, Sir Thomas Wyatt (1503–1542). In the 1530s, Wyatt translated some of Petrarch's love sonnets and wrote a few of his own in a slight modification of the Italian form. Another English poet who deserves credit for popularizing the sonnet in England is Henry Howard, Earl of Surrey (1517–1547). Building on Wyatt's modifications to the form, Surrey changed the rhyme scheme of the sonnet to make it more suitable to the English language. Surrey's innovations distinguished the English sonnet from the Italian sonnet, and eventually became known as the **Shakespearean sonnet** because of Shakespeare's mastery of the form.

Edmund Spenser also introduced a variation on Wyatt's form based around an interlocking rhyme scheme (*abab bcbc cdcd ee*). Surrey's rhyme scheme allowed Shakespeare more freedom in his versification, and he used this freedom to expand on the typical sonnet subject matter. Instead of limiting himself to the subject of love, he introduced deep philosophical issues and perplexing ironies.

## CHARACTERISTICS OF A SONNET

**Length:** 14 lines

**Meter:** iambic pentameter—  
lines containing five metrical  
units, each consisting of an  
unstressed syllable followed  
by a stressed syllable  
(*~ / ~ / ~ / ~ / ~*)

**Structure and rhyme scheme:**  
a strict pattern; the three  
most common known as  
Petrarchan, Shakespearean,  
or Spenserian.

**Subject:** a focus on personal  
feelings and thoughts that  
are lyrical in nature

## Sonnet Structure

The **Petrarchan form** has a two-part structure.

- The **octave** (the first 8 lines), usually rhyming *abbaabba*, establishes the speaker's situation.
- The **sestet** (the last 6 lines), usually with the rhyme scheme *cdcdcd* or *cdecde*, resolves, draws conclusions about, or expresses a reaction to the speaker's situation.

The Petrarchan sonnet has been called organic in its unity because the octave and sestet fit together naturally. Unity is also produced by the rhyme scheme, which involves only four or five different rhyming sounds.

The **Shakespearean form** also has 14 lines but is structured differently.

- Three **quatrains** (stanzas of 4 lines) are followed by a rhyming **couplet** (2 lines).
- The rhyme scheme is *abab cdcd efef gg*.
- The first quatrain introduces a situation, which is explored in the next two quatrains. The third quatrain (or sometimes the final couplet) usually includes a turn, or shift in thought. The couplet resolves the situation.

The time of year thou mayst in me behold  
When yellow leaves, or none, or few, do hang  
Upon those boughs which shake against the cold,  
Bare ruined choirs, where late the sweet birds sang.  
In me thou see'st the twilight of such day  
As after sunset fadeth in the west;  
Which by and by black night doth take away,  
Death's second self, that seals up all in rest.  
In me thou see'st the glowing of such fire,  
That on the ashes of his youth doth lie,  
As the deathbed whereon it must expire,  
Consumed with that which it was nourished by.

This thou perceiv'st, which makes thy love more strong,  
To love that well which thou must leave ere long.

—William Shakespeare, "Sonnet 73"

Notice that each quatrain elaborates on a particular image: autumn in the first quatrain, twilight in the second, and the embers of a fire in the third. The final couplet is a concise statement that pulls the sonnet together. Think of the closing couplet in a Shakespearean sonnet as a "punch line" that gives meaning to the whole.

### Close Read

Explain the situation developed and explored in the three quatrains. How is it resolved in the couplet?

COMMON CORE

**RL 4** Analyze the impact of specific word choices on meaning, including words with multiple meanings or language that is fresh, engaging, or beautiful. **RL 5** Analyze how an author's choices concerning how to structure specific parts of a text contribute to its overall structure and meaning as well as its aesthetic impact.

DID YOU KNOW?

William Shakespeare ...

- never attended a university.
- was denounced early in his career by a jealous writer who called him an “upstart crow.”

Church in Stratford-upon-Avon

Selected Poetry  
by William Shakespeare

VIDEO TRAILER



KEYWORD: HML12-324A

Meet the Author

William Shakespeare 1564–1616

Shakespeare is the most influential writer in the English language. Four centuries after his death, he continues to occupy a central place in literary studies and in our culture at large. His plays are regularly performed around the world and have been made into numerous films.

**Humble Beginnings** Most of what is known about Shakespeare's life comes from court and church records. He was born in Stratford-upon-Avon, a small town in central England. His father was a successful businessman and town official, and his mother inherited farmland from her father. Shakespeare's family was initially prosperous but began having financial difficulties in the 1570s. Shakespeare probably attended Stratford's excellent grammar school, where he would have studied Latin and read classical authors.

No one knows what Shakespeare did immediately after he left school. In 1582, when he was 18 years old, he married Anne Hathaway, who was 26 years old. Six months later, they had a daughter. In 1585, they had twins, a boy and a girl. Shakespeare's son died at age 11.

**Early Success as Actor and Playwright**  
Sometime around

1590, Shakespeare moved to London and began working as an actor and playwright. He went on to become the most successful playwright of his time, earning enough to buy a large house in Stratford, where his wife and children lived. Although he retired to Stratford around 1612, he continued writing until his death at age 52.

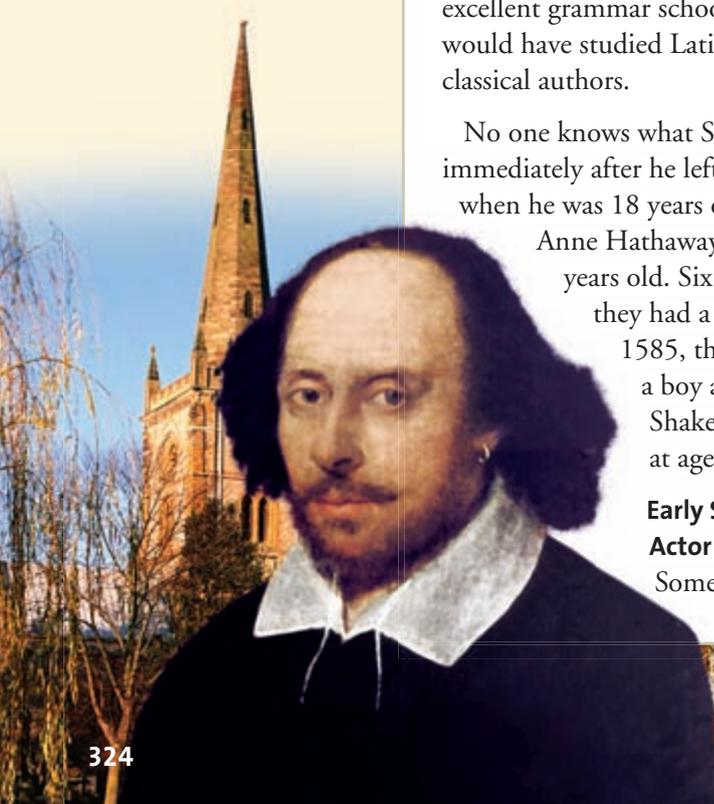
**Shakespeare the Poet** In addition to his 37 plays, Shakespeare wrote an innovative collection of sonnets and two long narrative poems. In the 1590s, many English poets wrote sonnet sequences, which were usually addressed to an unattainable, idealized woman. Shakespeare expanded the conventions of the sonnet, making the form thematically more complex and less predictable. For example, the object of affection in some of his sonnets is not a divinely beautiful woman but a “dark lady” with all-too-human defects. He also wrote sonnets to an unidentified young man as well as to a rival poet. And while most sonnet writers focused primarily on love and beauty, Shakespeare addressed themes such as time, change, and death.

Because of his mastery of the sonnet's form and his broadening of its content, Shakespeare remains the undisputed master of the English sonnet. Today, the English sonnet is often referred to as the Shakespearean sonnet.

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## ● POETIC FORM: SHAKESPEAREAN SONNET

Shakespeare wrote very complex and sophisticated sonnets, moving beyond the traditional themes of love and beauty. The **Shakespearean sonnet** form, also known as the English sonnet, has the following characteristics:

- The sonnet contains three **quatrains** and a **couplet**.
- The **rhyme scheme** is *abab cdcd efef gg*.
- There is often a **turn**, or shift in thought, which occurs in the third quatrain or the couplet.

As you read these four sonnets, notice the way Shakespeare sets up his subjects in the early quatrains and employs the turn near the end.

## ● READING SKILL: ANALYZE IMAGERY

Among the many tools of poets, few are as important as **imagery**—words and phrases that re-create sensory experiences for the reader. Although Shakespeare often addresses philosophical themes in his sonnets, he breathes life into his ideas by evoking sights, sounds, smells, and textures. For example, in “Sonnet 116” Shakespeare uses the image “rosy lips and cheeks” to convey the idea of mortal flesh.

As you read the following sonnets, look for language that appeals to your senses. Use a chart like the one shown to identify ideas or emotions that are conveyed through this imagery.

<i>Sonnet</i>	<i>Imagery</i>	<i>Idea or Emotion Conveyed</i>
18	<i>rough winds</i>	<i>Summer weather can be harsh.</i>

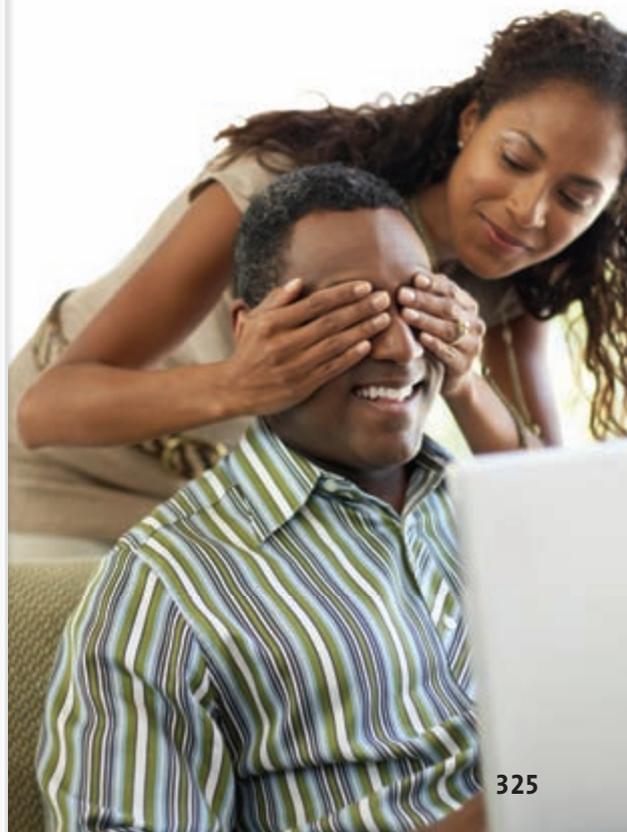


Complete the activities in your **Reader/Writer Notebook**.

## *Can* **LOVERS** *see clearly?*

According to an old saying, “Love is blind,” but to what extent is this true? The thrill of falling in love can cloud one’s perceptions of a lover, but usually those clouds drift away over time. Is it possible to see a person’s faults clearly and still love him or her?

**PRESENT** Working with a partner, list several fictional lovers from books, movies, or plays. For each couple, answer the question “Did they see each other clearly?” Discuss the reasons for your answers. What conclusions can you draw about the way love is portrayed in fiction? Present your conclusions to the class.



# Sonnet 18

*William Shakespeare*

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

## **A** ANALYZE IMAGERY

What images does Shakespeare use in lines 1–6 to illustrate why summer is less temperate, or moderate, than the subject of the poem?

7–8 *fair from . . . untrimmed*: beauty eventually fades, due to misfortune or natural aging.

10 *thou owest*: you own; you possess.

12 *when . . . growest*: when in immortal poetry you become a part of time.

## **Analyze Visuals** ►

Compare this painting with the one on page 331. What can you discern about each subject?

## Text Analysis

1. **Interpret** Reread lines 13–14 of “Sonnet 18.” According to the speaker, what will allow the subject of the poem to become immortal?
2. **Make Inferences** Summer is the favorite time of year for many people. Why might Shakespeare have chosen to focus on the ways in which his subject is different from summer instead of describing how they are similar? Explain.

# Sonnet 130

*William Shakespeare*

My mistress' eyes are nothing like the sun;  
Coral is far more red than her lips' red;  
If snow be white, why then her breasts are dun;  
If hairs be wires, black wires grow on her head.  
5 I have seen roses damask'd, red and white,  
But no such roses see I in her cheeks,  
And in some perfumes is there more delight  
Than in the breath that from my mistress reeks.  
I love to hear her speak, yet well I know  
10 That music hath a far more pleasing sound;  
I grant I never saw a goddess go,  
My mistress when she walks treads on the ground.  
And yet, by heaven, I think my love as rare  
As any she belied with false compare. ©

3 **dun**: grayish brown.

5 **damask'd**: mottled; spotted or streaked with different colors.

8 **reeks**: is exhaled (used here without the word's present reference to offensive odors).

11 **go**: walk.

14 **as any . . . compare**: as any woman misrepresented by exaggerated comparisons.

## COMMON CORE RL.4

© **FIGURATIVE LANGUAGE**  
Shakespeare's sonnets are highly complex. While he does write about the traditional themes of love and beauty, he often uses new patterns of imagery, conceits, and allusions to reveal those themes. A **conceit** is an extended metaphor that compares two dissimilar things on several points. What are the elements of the conceit in this poem? What is being compared? How does the conceit reveal the theme of the poem?

# Sonnet 116

*William Shakespeare*

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.  
5 O no, it is an ever-fixed mark  
That looks on tempests and is never shaken;  
It is the star to every wand'ring bark,  
Whose worth's unknown, although his height be taken.  
Love's not Time's fool, though rosy lips and cheeks  
10 Within his bending sickle's compass come,  
Love alters not with his brief hours and weeks,  
But bears it out even to the edge of doom.  
    If this be error and upon me proved,  
    I never writ, nor no man ever loved.

**2 impediments:** obstacles.

**5 mark:** a landmark seen from the sea and used by sailors as a guide in navigation.

**7–8 the star . . . taken:** the star—usually the North Star—whose altitude sailors measure in order to help guide their ships. A **bark** is a sailing ship.

**10 within . . . come:** come within range of Time's curving sickle.

**12 bears . . . doom:** endures even to Judgment Day, the time when, Christian teachings predict, the world will end and God will make his final judgment of all people.

## Text Analysis

- 1. Paraphrase** What does the speaker say about love in lines 9–12 of “Sonnet 116”?
- 2. Analyze Metaphors** What metaphors does Shakespeare use in lines 5–8 to describe love? What do they suggest about the nature of love?
- 3. Make Inferences** What view of love does the speaker react against in the poem?

# Sonnet 29

*William Shakespeare*

When in disgrace with Fortune and men's eyes  
I all alone beweepe my outcast state,  
And trouble deaf heaven with my bootless cries,  
And look upon myself and curse my fate,  
5 Wishing me like to one more rich in hope,  
Featur'd like him, like him with friends possess'd,  
Desiring this man's art, and that man's scope,  
With what I most enjoy contented least;  
Yet in these thoughts myself almost despising,  
10 Haply 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 thy sweet love rememb'ed such wealth brings,  
That then I scorn to change my state with kings. **B**

**3 bootless:** futile; useless.

**6 featur'd like him:** with his handsome features.

**7 this man's art . . . scope:** this man's skill and that man's intelligence.

**10 haply:** by chance.

**11 lark:** the English skylark, noted for its beautiful singing while soaring in flight.

**B SHAKESPEAREAN SONNET**  
Reread lines 13–14. In what way is this **couplet** related to the poem's second **quatrain**?

## Text Analysis

- 1. Summarize** What emotions does the speaker describe in the first two quatrains of “Sonnet 29”? What circumstances stir up these feelings?
- 2. Analyze Tone** How does the speaker’s tone change over the course of the poem?

## Text Analysis

### SHAKESPEAREAN SONNET

A **Shakespearean sonnet** consists of three **quatrains**, followed by a rhymed **couplet**. A turn, or shift, in thought often occurs in the third quatrain or the couplet. The rhyme scheme is *abab cdcd efef gg*.

**Directions:** For each sonnet listed, tell whether the turn, or shift in thought, occurs in the third quatrain or in the rhymed couplet. Then explain the nature of the turn. An example has been done for you.

Sonnet	Location of the Turn	Speaker Changes Thought
18	third quatrain	from: summer doesn't last to: you will last forever
29		from: to:
130		from: to:

## Reading Skill

### ANALYZE IMAGERY

**Imagery** consists of words and phrases that a writer uses to re-create sensory experiences for the reader. Such language may appeal to the sense of sight, hearing, touch, taste, or smell.

**Directions:** As you read the sonnets, record examples of language that appeals to the senses. Explain the idea or emotion that is conveyed through this imagery.

Sonnet	Imagery	Idea or Emotion Conveyed
18	rough winds	Summer weather can be harsh.

## COMMON CORE

**RL.2** Determine two or more central ideas of a text and analyze their development over the course of the text, including how they interact and build on one another to produce a complex account; provide an objective summary of the text. **RL.5** Analyze how an author's choices concerning how to structure specific parts of a text contribute to its overall structure and meaning as well as its aesthetic impact.

## DID YOU KNOW?

Edmund Spenser . . .

- worked as a servant to pay for his room and board at college.
- wrote a satire that was censored because it insulted Queen Elizabeth I and other English notables.

## Sonnet 30

## Sonnet 75

Poetry by Edmund Spenser

### Meet the Author

## Edmund Spenser 1552?–1599

Although Edmund Spenser was born in London and educated in England, he spent most of his life in Ireland. It was there that he wrote one of the greatest epic romances in English literature, *The Faerie Queene*. The poem tells the stories of six knights, each representing a particular moral virtue. Spenser was innovative in devising a new verse form, in mixing features of the Italian romance and the classical epic, and in using archaic English words.

**Move to Ireland** In 1576, Spenser earned a master's degree from Pembroke College at Cambridge University. Three years later, he published his first important work of poetry, *The Shepheardes Calender*, which was immediately popular. It consisted of 12 pastoral poems, one for each month of the year. In 1580, Spenser became secretary to the lord deputy of Ireland, who was charged with defending English settlers from native Irish opposed to England's colonization of Ireland. Spenser wrote the rest of his major poetry in Ireland, and that country's landscape and people greatly influenced his writing.

Spenser held various civil service posts during his years in Ireland. In 1589, he was granted a large estate surrounding Kilcolman Castle, which had

been taken from an Irish rebel. Spenser's friend Sir Walter Raleigh owned a neighboring estate.

**Second Marriage** Spenser's courtship of his second wife, Elizabeth Boyle, inspired him to write a sonnet sequence (a series of related sonnets) called *Amoretti*, which means "little love poems." The details and emotions presented in the sonnets are thought to be partly autobiographical. "Sonnet 30" and "Sonnet 75" are part of this sonnet sequence. To celebrate his marriage to Boyle in 1594, Spenser wrote the lyric poem *Epithalamion*.

In 1598, just four years after Spenser's marriage, Irish rebels overran his estate and burned his home. Spenser and his family had to flee through an underground tunnel. They escaped to Cork, and a few months later, Spenser traveled to London to deliver documents reporting on the problems in Ireland. He died shortly after his arrival in London.

In honor of his great literary achievements, Spenser was buried near Geoffrey Chaucer—one of his favorite poets and a major influence—in what is now called the Poets' Corner of Westminster Abbey. An inscription on Spenser's monument calls him "the Prince of Poets in his time."

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## ● POETIC FORM: SPENSERIAN SONNET

The **Spenserian sonnet** is a variation on the English sonnet, which was introduced in Britain by Sir Thomas Wyatt in the 1530s. Like the English (or Shakespearean) sonnet, the Spenserian sonnet consists of three four-line units, called **quatrains**, followed by two rhymed lines, called a **couplet**. Each quatrain addresses the poem's central idea, thought, or question, and the couplet provides an answer or summation. What is unique to the Spenserian sonnet is the interlocking **rhyme scheme** (*abab bcbc cdcd ee*) that links the three quatrains.

As you read the following Spenserian sonnets, notice the rhymes that connect one quatrain to the next, and the way in which the sonnet's main idea is developed and resolved.

## ● READING SKILL: SUMMARIZE CENTRAL IDEAS IN POETRY

When you **summarize** a poem, you briefly restate the central ideas or themes in your own words. Summarizing a sonnet's central ideas can help you understand and remember what you read, especially when the text or language is particularly complicated or difficult to understand. You can break down each quatrain and the couplet and use your own words to summarize the meaning of each part.

For each Spenser sonnet, use a chart like the one shown to help you summarize the central ideas in each part of the poem.

<i>"Sonnet 75"</i>	
<i>Part of Poem</i>	<i>Central Idea</i>
<i>1st quatrain</i>	<i>Whenever I write my beloved's name in the sand, the waves wash it away.</i>
<i>2nd quatrain</i>	
<i>3rd quatrain</i>	
<i>couplet</i>	

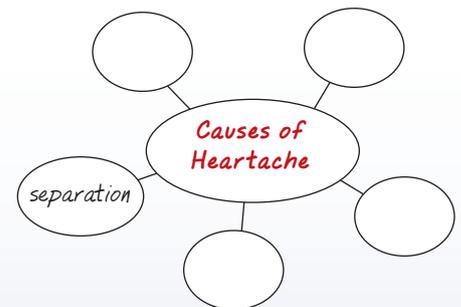


Complete the activities in your **Reader/Writer Notebook**.

## *What makes your* **HEART** *ache?*

Love can bring great joy—and great sorrow. Poets and songwriters probably lament the heartache of love as much as they extol its pleasures. Anyone who falls in love knows, or soon finds out, that the ride can be bumpy.

**DISCUSS** Think about all the things that can cause heartache in a loving relationship. Make a web of your ideas. Then share your web with a partner and compare your ideas.



# SONNET 75

Edmund Spenser

One day I wrote her name upon the strand,  
But came the waves and washéd it away:  
Again I wrote it with a second hand,  
But came the tide, and made my pains his prey.  
5 “Vain man,” said she, “that dost in vain assay,  
A mortal thing so to immortalize,  
For I myself shall like to this decay,  
And eke my name be wipéd out likewise.”  
“Not so,” quod I, “let baser things devise  
10 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.” **B**

1 strand: beach.

5 assay: try.

8 eke: also.

9 quod: said.

## **B** SPENSERIAN SONNET

Note the words Spenser uses in his end rhymes. In what ways are they related to the central ideas in this sonnet?