

Introduction to Sonnets and Select Sonnets from Edmund Spenser's Amoretti

A Brief Overview of Sonnets:

A sonnet is a one-stanza, 14-line poem, written in iambic pentameter. The sonnet, which derived from the Italian word sonetto.

What is sonnet?

A sonnet (pronounced son-it) is a fourteen line poem with a fixed rhyme scheme. Often, sonnets use iambic pentameter: five sets of unstressed syllables followed by stressed syllables for a ten-syllable line. Sonnets were invented by the Italian poet Giacomo da Lentini during the 1200s. English poets borrowed the sonnet form from the Italian poet Francesco Petrarch. Traditionally, it has fourteen lines of iambic pentameter linked by an intricate rhyme scheme. Iambic pentameter refers to its rhythm; basically, each line of the poem has ten syllables, and every other syllable is stressed.

The Main Types of Sonnet: the Petrarchan, the Shakespearean, and the Spenserian. All of these maintain the features outlined above - fourteen lines, a volta, iambic pentameter - and they all three are written in sequences.

A sonnet cycle or sonnet sequence is a group of sonnets, arranged to address a particular person or theme, and designed to be read both as a collection of fully realized individual poems and as a single poetic work comprising all the individual sonnets.

The characteristics of a sonnet are its rhyme scheme, its metric structure, its common topics, and its specific cultural conventions. This type of poem traditionally has a strict number of lines with ending words that must rhyme according to a certain formula. **Sonnets require only minimal punctuation**

These sonnets are sometimes referred to as Elizabethan sonnets or English sonnets. They have 14 lines divided into 4 subgroups: 3 quatrains and a couplet. Each line is typically ten syllables, phrased in iambic pentameter.

Types of Sonnets

The Petrarchan sonnet, perfected by the Italian poet Petrarch, divides the **14 lines into** two sections: an eight-line stanza (octave) rhyming ABBAABBA, and a six-line stanza (sestet) rhyming CDCDCD or CDECDE. ... The octave's rhyme scheme is preserved, but the sestet rhymes CDDCEE.

The Petrarchan sonnet is characterized by the following core elements:

- It contains fourteen lines of poetry.
- The lines are divided into an eight-line subsection (called an octave) followed by a six-line subsection (called a sestet).

- The octave follows a rhyme scheme of ABBA ABBA.

The easiest way to identify a Petrarchan sonnet is **by its length** -- all sonnets are 14 lines long. In a Petrarchan sonnet, the lines are divided into three parts: two quatrains and a sestet. The two quatrains, or four-line units, comprise the first eight lines. Collectively, these lines are known as the octave.

The primary difference between a Shakespearean sonnet and a Petrarchan sonnet is the way the poem's 14 lines are grouped. Rather than employ quatrains, the Petrarchan sonnet combines an octave (eight lines) with a sestet (six lines). ... Sometimes, the ending sestet follows a CDC CDC rhyme scheme.

The Shakespearean sonnet

In terms of structure, a Shakespearean sonnet has **14 lines** and is written in iambic pentameter. This means that it has 3 quatrains (4 line sections) and one heroic couplet. The rhyme scheme, therefore, is abab (quatrain 1), cdcd (quatrain 2), efef (quatrain 3), and gg (heroic couplet).

The rhyme scheme is ABAB CDCD EFEF GG. Sonnets using this scheme are known as Shakespearean sonnets, or English sonnets, or Elizabethan sonnets. Often, at the end of the third quatrain occurs the volta ("turn"), where the mood of the poem shifts, and the poet expresses a turn of thought.

The Spenserian sonnet

The Spenserian sonnet is a **sonnet form named for the poet Edmund Spenser in 16th century**. A Spenserian sonnet comprises three interlocked quatrains and a final couplet, with the rhyme scheme ABAB BCBC CDCD EE. The Spenserian sonnet cribbs its structure from the Shakespearean—three quatrains and a couplet—but employs a series of "couplet links" between quatrains, as revealed in the rhyme scheme: abab, bcbc, cdcd, ee.

The features of the Spenserian Sonnet are: **a quatorzain made up of 3 Sicilian quatrains (4 lines alternating rhyme) and ending in a rhyming couplet. metric, primarily iambic pentameter.** rhymed, rhyme scheme ababbcbccdcdee.

Edmund Spenser has used his own rhyme scheme for the sonnet. In a Spenserian sonnet, the last line of every quatrain is linked with the first line of the next one, yielding the rhyme scheme ababbcbccdcdee.

Select Sonnets from Edmund Spenser's *Amoretti*

The poet presents the concept of true beauty in the poem. He addresses the sonnets in *Amoretti* to his beloved, Elizabeth Boyle, and presents his courtship. Like all Renaissance men, Edmund Spenser

believed that love is an inexhaustible source of beauty and order. In this Sonnet, the poet expresses his idea of true beauty. The physical beauty will finish after a few days; it is not a permanent beauty. He emphasises beauty of mind and beauty of intellect. He considers his beloved is not simply flesh but is also a spiritual being. The poet opines that he is beloved born of heavenly seed and she is derived from fair spirit. The poet states that because of her clean mind, pure heart and sharp intellect, men call her fair and she deserves it. At the end, the poet praises her spiritual beauty and he worships her because of her Divine Soul.

Amoretti, Sonnet 57 by Edmund Spenser

Sweet warrior! when shall I have peace with you?
 High time it is this warre now ended were,
 Which I no lenger can endure to sue,
 Ne your incessant battry more to beare.
 So weake my powres, so sore my wounds, appear,
 That wonder is how I should live a iot,
 Seeing my hart through-launched every where
 With thousand arrowes which your eies have shot.
 Yet shoot ye sharpely still, and spare me not,
 But glory thinke to make these cruel stoures*.
 Ye cruell one! what glory can be got,
 In slaying him that would live gladly yours?
 Make peace therefore, and graunt me timely grace,
 That al my wounds will heale in little space.

Summary and Analysis

Edmund Spenser's Sonnet 57 "Sweet Warrior" from [Amoretti](#) is a plea of the lover to his beloved to end the war that is going on between them as the lover cannot anymore deal with the refusals from the beloved and asks the beloved to accept him so that he can be at peace with her. The lover calls the beloved "Sweet Warrior" – an oxymoron of a sort, as warriors are usually brave and cruel to their enemies. But the beloved is a "sweet" warrior as she carries on battling the patience of the lover who pursues her all the time and she merely carries on refusing him and his proposals. The imagery of "warrior" is in synchrony with the feudal times when warriors are highly respected in the society and also the fact that the beloved has the masculine quality of being a resolute being who has been constant with her refusals.

The lover feels that he cannot take the refusals anymore and submits to the beloved. His desperation and frustration is very much evident in the sonnet where the poet-lover presents himself to be a tormented soul because he is not able to deal with his heart breaks. He appeals to the beloved to end the war that she has waged against him and to accept his love. His zeal of love had been such that he has become tired of pursuing his beloved. So the poet lover's powers have become "weak" and his wounds are "sore." Like a wounded enemy before a great warrior, the lover is prostrate before the beloved and is looking for her mercy.

In the next part of the poem, the poet lover speaks how from the eyes of the beloved she had shot thousand arrows which have pierced through his heart. It is not that she has stopped

shooting such arrows; she is still continuing to do that. The lover again makes pleas to the beloved to spare him now and to stop doing such ‘sweet violence’ on him as he cannot carry on living like this in pain forever.

Next, the lover calls these acts of the beloved to be very cruel – “Ye cruel one” – as she carries on wounding the lover again and again. The lover further asks the beloved what “glory” she is achieving in wounding the lover in such a fashion. It is usually in wars that the warriors are cruel to their enemies and carry on wounding the enemy till the enemy dies. The lover appeals to the beloved not to think of him as an enemy, but as a lover and further to accept him so that he can live peacefully with the beloved. The lover further questions the beloved what glory would the beloved find in “slaying” the lover who ‘gladly’ wants to live with her. His appeal is that the beloved should not consider him to be his adversary and moreover accept him. If the beloved accepts him that it will be “timely grace” for him and little by little his wounds will heal and they will be able to live the most fruitful lives.

The poem this uses the imagery of war – prevalent in medieval feudal age – to manifest the ways in which the beloved is treating the beloved. The lover seems to be constant in his pursuit of the beloved as even if the beloved carries on hurting him, he carries on living the beloved. Even though the beloved is cruel to him, it appears to be “sweet” to the lover as his love for her has made him accept the beloved the way she is and he is more than happy to get her in his life. Therefore, in spite of continuous refusals, the lover carries on loving her and hopes that she will someday realize his love for her.

Amoretti, Sonnet 67 by Edmund Spenser

Like as a huntsman after weary chase,
 Seeing the game from him escap'd away,
 Sits down to rest him in some shady place,
 With panting hounds beguiled of their prey:
 So after long pursuit and vain assay,
 When I all weary had the chase forsook,
 The gentle deer return'd the self-same way,
 Thinking to quench her thirst at the next brook.
 There she beholding me with milder look,
 Sought not to fly, but fearless still did bide:
 Till I in hand her yet half trembling took,
 And with her own goodwill her firmly tied.
 Strange thing, me seem'd, to see a beast so wild,
 So goodly won, with her own will beguil'd.

Summary

The lover says earlier my condition was like a hunter (chasing his beloved to trap her) who after a weary chase and having ultimately realized that the prey (beloved) has escaped away, sits down to rest in some shady place with hounds tired and panting. So after a long pursuit when I was tired and had given up or forsaken the game, I saw the gentle deer (beloved) returned the same way to quench her thirst at the next brook. There she looked at me with gentle looks, did not fly away, but remained there without any fear till I caught hold of her and firmly tied her with her own goodwill. It seemed quite strange to me that so wild a beast was won over by me so easily; perhaps she was beguiled by her own will (desire).

Analysis

The lover compares himself to huntsman who has been in pursuit of his prey (lady-love) but this chase has completely exhausted him, because his game has escaped. Thus his chase or hunt has been a vain exercise. He describes the 'chase' as 'heavy chase', using a transferred epithet, to mean that the chase has made him heavy, tired and exhausted, because it has proved to be a vain attempt: In a dejected mood, the lover-hunter feels desperate and tired and sits down to relax in a shady place along with his 'hounds who are panting because of their failure to capture the prey. The 'hounds' should not be interpreted literally but understood metaphorically, for they allude to his desires, thoughts and even strategies to ensnare the beloved, for both in thought and action. the poet has been pursuing his suit.

The lover has pursued the lady for a considerable time now, but all his attempt have been futile and of no avail. His beloved is proud and arrogant and she would not surrender to his desires. The lover gives up the chase having realized the futility of his assay. The word 'assay' could also mean that he had attempted to drink and taste rather prematurely and did not realize the fact that hunting and killing the deer were not appropriate measures. It only means that he failed to comprehend the true meaning of lover-beloved relationship, their significance and value. He had acted like a greedy huntsman who tries to capture his beloved by using force. But the use of force turns out to be a vain exercise. The beloved cannot be won by passion, greed and force.

Now that the huntsman (the lover) has realized his folly, sits down. He has decided to forsake the hunt and the prey. No sooner does the realization dawn on the lover-hunter, than a miracle happens. He observes the same gentle deer returning the same way without any fear looking for the next brook where she could quench her thirst, for she could also be equally thirsty. The deer's drinking at the brook is an indication of her longing for God; water is emblematic of godliness and purity. Love implies purity and godliness. The lover had forgotten this when tried to chase his beloved, for which he might have been punished but for the quick and mild response of the deer (beloved). The beloved's mood undergoes a change when the poet realizes his folly. She returns, she is a gentle, forgiving and loving, a Christ-figure. She looks at him gently and mildly without any sign of fear or hatred. The lover holds her trembling hand and she gently yields or surrenders. Alluding to Christ, Spenser's deer submits perhaps like Christ. As Christ forgives his worshipers and yields his selfless love, the deer (beloved) likewise surrenders to the lover. In fact it is the Christian values—self-realization and repentance followed by patience and perseverance which are rewarded. In the surrender of the beloved the Church and Christ are united only when Church becomes an abode of patience. The lover repents his hasty and foolish action, and God (or Beloved) who had forsaken him ultimately forgives him and surrenders.

One Day I Wrote her Name (Sonnet 75) Summary and Analysis

In Short

- In Spenser's sonnet 75, the speaker writes his beloved's name on the sea-shore. But waves wash it away.
- The lady then calls it a 'vain attempt' as she herself is mortal and will be erased from this world one day.
- The lover then vows to write her in his poem and thus eternalize her.

One Day I Wrote her Name (Sonnet 75) – Explanation

Lines 1–2

One day I wrote her name upon the strand,
But came the waves and washed it away:

As the poem begins with "One day", it seems that the speaker is recalling some past events of his life. That day he wrote her beloved's name upon the sandy shore (strand) of the sea. But the waves came and erased the name he wrote.

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Understandably, our speaker is at the sea-shore, most probably with his mistress. And he wants to get all romantic. He is seen making useless attempt to write her name on the sand. The waves come and wash it all away.

Lines 3–4

Again I wrote it with a second hand,
But came the tide, and made my pains his prey.

As expected, the speaker wrote his girlfriend's name for the second time. The words 'second hand' here imply 'second handwriting'. But the result was just the same. Again, the high tide came and affected it.

The tide is personified. He (the tide) made the speaker's labour (pains) of writing his prey. So, the name of the speaker's ladylove on the sand becomes an object of hunting to the tide. We thus see the hungry tide on one hand and the speaker's efforts to write his beloved's name on the other. In the end, nature wins over man.

Lines 5–8

"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 wiped out likewise."

From this point, the poem turns into the conversational tone. And we were right. The speaker's ladylove is with him on the shore, and she now speaks for the first time. This is actually rare to have a conversation in the middle of a short poem like a sonnet though.

She calls the speaker a proud (vain) man. She tells him that he is making useless attempt (vain assay) to immortalize a mortal thing.

She then emphasizes her mortal nature. One day she will disappear (decay) from this world just as her name was removed from the beach. And, with her death, her name will also (eke) be erased (wiped out) forever from this world. Nobody will remember her name after her decease. So, it is a futile attempt to write her name because she, like the words on the sand, is subject to decay.

Lines 9–10

“Not so,” (quod I) “let baser things devise
To die in dust, but you shall live by fame:

Now, the speaker replies to his ladylove's statement. His answer is negative. He says that such a thing will not happen. According to the lover, inferior (baser) things may plan (devise) to disappear (die in dust), but his beloved will live through fame, i.e., in stories, in people's hearts.

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Here we get the classical *volta* (a turn in the subject or tone). So far, the poem has been all about mortality. We thought nothing can live forever. But now we hear that some things can. Let's see how.

Lines 11–12

My verse your vertues rare shall eternize,
And in the heavens write your glorious name:

The speaker here vows to eternalize his mistress's rare qualities (virtues) in his poetry (verse). He will write such poems in praise of her goodness that she will live in the readers' minds and that will basically immortalize her. According to the speaker, that will be synonymous to writing her glorious name in the heavens.

Lines 13–14

Where whenas death shall all the world subdue,
Our love shall live, and later life renew.”

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The lover will write his beloved's splendid name in the poetic firmament. When death shall gain control over all the world, it will be unable to do any harm to his verse. His verse will live on to remind others of their pure, unparalleled and ideal love. It will later inspire life, inspire all succeeding lovers.

The speaker seems to be overconfident about the prospects of his poetry. But, in reality, we are here reading Spenser's poem now and analysing it. We are thinking about the poet and his beloved. Thus, their love has truly reached the height of immortality through his poetry.

One Day I Wrote her Name – Into Details

Publication

Edmund Spenser (1552-1599), one of the greatest Elizabethan English poets, is well-known for his sonnets. The present sonnet "One day I wrote her name upon the strand" was published in 1595 in his famous sonnet sequence "Amoretti". The present sonnet is sonnet No. 75 in the collection of 88 sonnets. 'Amoretti' is an Italian word meaning 'little loves' which refer to the sonnets so dear to the poet.

Background/Context

All 88 sonnets in Edmund Spenser's sonnet cycle 'Amoretti' are love sonnets. The lady in question was Elizabeth Boyle, a pretty Irish woman, with whom Spenser was in a relationship and they later married. The present sonnet depicts Spenser's courtship of Boyle, which took place over the course of 3 months in the spring of 1594.

Also, Spenser belongs to the Elizabethan age. He wrote this during the [English renaissance](#), a time when English poets followed the classical languages and ideals while also playing with new forms and techniques.

Setting

The poem "One Day I Wrote her Name" presents a dramatic setting. The vast sea serves as a background here. There are two lonely lovers who enact their story of love. The absolute loneliness is pierced by the presence of the two human beings. There are high waves tormenting them by washing the name of the ladylove the speaker writes on the sand. They are talking to each other and they are talking of love.

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Title

Spenser did not allot individual titles to each of his sonnets. He finished his job by just allotting mathematical numbers to them. When we mention any of his sonnets, we have to choose either the original number of it or the first line of the poem or invent a suitable title for it.

For the present poem 'Amoretti LXXV', the first line "One day I wrote her name upon the strands" serves as an appropriate title. It refers to the writing of the name of the ladylove which was removed by the waves. The lover then takes resolution to write it at a place where no destructive force such as death would be able to do any harm to it.

Form and Language

As already mentioned, Spenser's "One Day I Wrote her Name" is a sonnet, a 14-lines poem generally written in iambic pentameter and with a particular rhyme scheme.

Spenser was very much influenced by Petrarchan sonnet form and his earlier sonnets came under the influence of Petrarch. Later, he succeeded in breaking himself loose from that influence.

Sonnet 75 takes the form of a Spenserian Sonnet (invented by none other than Edmund Spenser himself) which is a combination of the Italian sonnet (or, Petrarchan sonnet) and the English sonnet (or, Shakespearean sonnet) forms. A typical Spenserian sonnet has three interlocked quatrains and a final couplet with rhyme scheme of ABAB BCBC CDCD EE.

The language of this poem creates a melodious effect in our mind. Spenser uses puns, colloquialism and archaic words like 'vayne', 'eek', 'quod', 'hevens', 'wryte' etc. to enhance the musical effect and establish a link with the tradition. His coinage of words (such as 'eternize' in place of 'eternalize') also adds to the delicate beauty of the poem.

Meter and Rhyme

Amoretti Sonnet 75 is a traditional Spenserian sonnet, a mix of English and Italian sonnet forms.

Outwardly his sonnet can be divided into two sections – the octave (first eight lines) and the sestet (last six lines) like the Italian (Petrarchan) sonnets. In fact, the volta (turn) here comes in line 9. The problem presented in the octave is that the speaker's beloved is mortal, and the sestet tries to find a resolution.

Again, like the English (Shakespearean) sonnets, it can be broken into three quatrains (four-line stanza) followed by a rhymed couplet (two rhyming lines). The quatrains here follow an interwoven pattern. The rhyme scheme is ABAB BCBC CDCD EE.

Sonnets are generally written in iambic pentameter and "One Day I Wrote her Name" is not an exception. An iamb is a two-syllable foot where an unstressed syllable is followed by a stressed one. Follow the patterns used in the following example –

One **day** | I **wrote** | her **name** | up- **on** | the **strand**,
But **came** | the **waves** | and **wash**- | ed **it** | aw- **ay**:

Spenser actually used an accent mark on the word 'washéd' in the original version of the sonnet to indicate that it should be pronounced in two syllables to preserve the pentameter pattern. There are a few spondee (two stressed syllables) though, if the stress pattern is followed strictly.

Themes

Immortalizing Power of Poetry

In the sonnet "One Day I Wrote her Name", Edmund Spenser presents poetry as a means of immortalizing his beloved and her rare virtues.

In the octave, the speaker presents the problem of mortality. As he writes his ladylove's name on the sandy sea-shore, it gets washed away by the tides. Then his mistress stresses on the mortal nature of things. She herself is mortal and will die some day. So, how can her name remain there forever? It is just a futile effort then to write her name there.

In the sestet, the speaker suggests a resolution. He proposes to write a poem glorifying her goodness. Though all other things will fall prey in the hands of death, she will live on in the readers' minds through his verse. Thus, the speaker's beloved can achieve the height of immortality.

My verse your vertues rare shall eternize,
And in the heavens write your glorious name:

So, we see that the entire poem is framed to present this single important idea that poetry can be an effective medium to eternalize a mortal thing.

Love

Like all other Amoretti sonnets, the present one is also a love poem. We see the speaker getting romantic in his ladylove's presence and writing her name on the sand. When it is proved to be a vain attempt, he finds a far better idea to immortalize her. He vows to write her in his verse as a means to eternalize her.

Understandably, the speaker and his beloved are in a genuine love relationship. That is why the lover is so much concerned with her mortal nature and so eager to immortalize her. In the last line of the poem, the speaker says –

Our love shall live, and later life renew.

It seems, the lover is not only worried about her beloved but also their love. He wants to eternalize not only his mistress but also their love. Their pure and unparalleled love will live on through his verse. And he also wants their love to inspire others (life renew) in future when there is no love and hope. Thus, the poem sings of love.

Immortality

Immortality is definitely a major theme in Spenser's poem "One Day I Wrote her Name". The mortal nature of human beings and all other things in the world makes the speaker worried. That is why he is in the lookout for a way out to immortalize his mistress and their love.

The lady says that the lover is trying in vain to immortalize a mortal thing when he writes her name on the shore. But the speaker thinks otherwise. According to him, things can be immortal if they remain in people's hearts. So, he decides to write about their love and his mistress in his verse. This way, when death will subdue all other things, their love will remain in the readers' minds and will thus achieve immortality.

Symbols

The Tide/Waves

The waves or tides in the poem “One Day I Wrote her Name” symbolize the passing of time. Just as the waves erase the evidence of the speaker’s writing by washing the shoreline, time also destroys human beings and erases their identity.

The lover writes his beloved’s name on the seashore but the waves wash it away. He writes it again, but in vain. It makes the speaker’s attempt to immortalize his beloved futile. Similarly, death is inevitable. The speaker can’t stop death from approaching. In fact, every object in this world, living or non-living, will be erased with the passing of time.

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The name

The speaker writes his mistress’s name on the shore but the waves wash it away twice. This reminds the lady that she too will be erased from this world like her name getting washed away. The name becomes a symbol for the beloved herself.

Again, we hear the speaker almost say, “Well, I have a better plan. I’m going to write your name in my verse then.”

My verse your virtues rare shall eternize,
And in the heavens write your glorious name

Thus, the word ‘name’ is used repeatedly in the poem as a symbol to mean something more substantial – the beloved and her goodness. It signifies one’s identity.

“One Day I Wrote her Name” – Literary Devices

Assonance

Assonance is the repetition of vowel sounds in nearby words. A few examples from the poem are –

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But came the waves and washed it away:

But came the tide, and made my pains his prey.

“Vain man,” said she, “that dost in vain assay,

Consonance

Consonance is the repetition of consonant sounds in nearby words. Here are some examples from the poem –

But came the **w**aves and **w**ashed it **a**way:
 Again I wrote it with a **s**econd **h**and,
 But **c**ame the tide, and **m**ade **m**y **p**ains his **p**rey.

Alliteration

Alliteration is a sub-category of consonance. It is the repetition of consonant sounds in the beginning (or, stressed syllables) of nearby words. Take some examples –

But came the tide, and **m**ade **m**y **p**ains his **p**rey.

My **v**erse your **v**irtues rare shall eternize,

Our **l**ove shall **l**ive, and **l**ater **l**ife renew.

Simile

A simile is a direct comparison between two different things generally using ‘as’ or ‘like’.

For I myself shall like to this decay,
 And eke my name be wiped out likewise.”

In the above extract, the speaker’s beloved compares herself to her name written on the shore. She will be erased from this world just as the writing is getting washed away. Similarly, her name will be removed from the world altogether with her death. These comparisons are made directly using ‘like’ and ‘likewise’. These are examples of simile in the poem.

Personification

Personification is the attribution of human qualities to non-human things.

But came the tide, and made my pains his prey.

In the above line, tide has been personified. It has been treated as a hungry hunter who is hunting as a ‘prey’ the speaker’s writing on the sand. The poet also uses the pronoun ‘his’ to make the personification clear.

Polyptoton

Polyptoton is a stylistic device where words derived from the same root are repeated in a sentence. For example –

A **m**ortal thing so to **i**mmortalize;

Our love shall **l**ive, and later **l**ife renew.”

Acknowledgement: Notes compiled from different internet sources