The sonnets of Shakespeare

are the most popular works, and a few of them, such as [Sonnet 18](http://www.shakespeare-online.com/sonnets/18.html) (*Shall I compare thee to a summer's day*), [Sonnet 116](http://www.shakespeare-online.com/sonnets/116.html) (*Let me not to the marriage of true minds*), and [Sonnet 73](http://www.shakespeare-online.com/sonnets/73.html) (*That time of year thou mayst in me behold*), have become the most widely-read poems in all of English literature.

A **sonnet** 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. The word **sonnet means** “little song.”

**Composition Date of the Sonnets**  
  
Shakespeare wrote 154 sonnets, likely composed over an extended period from 1592 to 1598,

In 1609 Thomas Thorpe published Shakespeare's sonnets, no doubt without the author's permission along with Shakespeare's long poem, *The Passionate Pilgrim*. The sonnets were dedicated to a W. H., whose identity remains a mystery.

**Narrative of the Sonnets**  
  
The majority of the sonnets (1-126) are addressed to a young man, with whom the poet has an intense romantic relationship. The poet spends the first seventeen sonnets trying to convince the young man to marry and have children; beautiful children that will look just like their father, ensuring his immortality.   
The final sonnets (127-154) are addressed to a promiscuous and scheming woman known to modern readers as the *dark lady*. Both the poet and his young man have become obsessed with the raven-haired temptress in these sonnets, and the poet's whole being is at odds with his insatiable "sickly appetite" (147.4). The tone is distressing, with language of sensual feasting, uncontrollable urges, and sinful consumption.

The question remains whether the poet is expressing Shakespeare's personal feelings. Since we know next to nothing about Shakespeare's personal life, we have little reason or right not to read the collected sonnets as a work of fiction, just as we would read his plays or long poems.