

Discovering Traditional Sonnet Forms – Sonnet 18

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Grade Band

9-12

Estimated Lesson Time

Three 50-minute sessions

Overview



In this lesson, students read and analyze sonnets to discover their traditional forms. Students chart the characteristics of the poems then review the details for similarities, deducing traditional sonnet forms that the poems have in common. After this introduction, students write original sonnets, using one of the poems they have analyzed as a model.

From Theory to Practice

Albert Somers, author of *Teaching Poetry in High School*, asserts that the “business of structure seems to be the poetry teacher’s greatest bugaboo” (145). We find ourselves searching for a balance between “analyzing poetry to death” and “voices [that] clamor for the teaching of culture and art and the way art—including poetry—works” (145). Teachers are left trying to find the instructional technique that reaches that balance. Somers explains:

The most prevailing approach is deductive: define the terms, give examples, and have the students find them in poems. In some ways, the method is logical and efficient. Yet year after year, most of our students barely tolerate our efforts. Few recall it with affection, and fewer reflect upon it later as a source of insight and inspiration. (146)

Somers suggests that teachers use the opposite strategy: “Instead of definitions, begin with generalizations. Actually begin with specifics (poems) that lead to generalizations—inductive teaching” (146). This lesson adopts just such an inductive strategy, providing students with examples of the sonnet form and asking them to find the similar characteristics that unite the poems. In the process, students determine the form of traditional sonnets.

Further Reading

Somers, Albert B. [*Teaching Poetry in High School*](#). Urbana, IL: NCTE, 1999.

Probst, Robert E. “Reader-Response Theory and the English Curriculum.” *English Journal* 83.3 (March 1994): 37-44.

Student Objectives

Students will

- discover the forms of traditional sonnets through analysis.
- learn terms describing the elements of sonnets.
- compose an original sonnet based on their discovered format.

Resources

- [Shakespearean Sonnet Checklist](#)
- [Traditional Sonnets for Analysis](#)
- [Sonnet Characteristics Chart](#) or [Interactive Sonnet Characteristics Chart](#)

Instructional Plan

Resources

- [Sonnet Characteristics Chart](#) or [Interactive Sonnet Characteristics Chart](#)
- [Shakespearean Sonnet Checklist](#)
 - "[My mistress' eyes are nothing like the sun](#)" (Sonnet 130) by William Shakespeare
 - "[Shall I compare thee to a summer's day?](#)" (Sonnet 18) by William Shakespeare

Preparation

- Arrange for online access to read the traditional sonnets listed above. Otherwise, make copies of the sonnets listed above or identify sonnets in your class texts that students can use for this project.
- Decide how to distribute the poems to your students. There are enough poems for five groups of students to each analyze three poems. Ideally, assign groups sonnets from a range of time periods (e.g., assigning a group a poem by Shakespeare, Frost, and Shelley rather than only sonnets by Frost or only sonnets by Shakespeare). Remember that the Gwendolyn Brooks' poem "[the sonnet-ballad](#)" is used for the class demonstration, so it does not need to be assigned to a group.
- Test the [Interactive Sonnet Characteristics Chart](#) on your computers to familiarize yourself with the tool and ensure that you have the Flash plug-in installed. You can download the plug-in from the [technical support page](#).
- (optional) If computer access is limited, make copies of the [Sonnet Characteristics Chart](#) for students, in lieu of the interactive version.

Instruction and Activities

Session One

1. Read "[the sonnet-ballad](#)" by Gwendolyn Brooks, or another that you have chosen, aloud to the class.
2. Begin discussion of the poem by asking students what stands out to them about the poem. Ask them what they remember, feel, question, and see when they read and hear the poem. Stress that there are no wrong answers.
3. Ask students to share personal experiences, emotions, and beliefs that influenced their reaction. Ask students if the poem recalls memories and how it connects to their own attitudes or perceptions.
4. Ask students to point to specific words and lines in the poem that triggered their reactions. Work to shift students' attention to the details and features of the poem by asking them what word, phrase, image, or idea were important to their reactions.
5. If students have not mentioned any of the craft elements of the poem as they have responded, turn their attention to these features now. Ask students to point out the poetic features that they notice. Students who have had exposure to the forms before will likely notice the poem's title. Allow students to share any details they recall about the sonnet form, but do not push them to recall the characteristics.
6. Explain that the poem is, in fact, a kind of sonnet, and that during the remainder of the class, students will explore other sonnets in order to determine what makes a sonnet a sonnet.

7. Project the [Interactive Sonnet Characteristics Chart](#) so that you can demonstrate the tool, or pass out copies of the [Sonnet Characteristics Chart](#).
8. Model the process of recording characteristics for a sonnet, using the Brooks' poem.
9. Arrange students into five groups, and assign each group three sonnets to read and record data for. Ideally, assign each group sonnets from more than one time period.
10. As students work, move from group to group to check on their progress, offering feedback and support as appropriate.
11. If groups have not completed their work by the end of the session, extend research time into the next session.
12. When students have completed their analysis of the sonnets they were assigned, ask them to look over their charts and draw some preliminary conclusions about what the poems have in common based on their observations.

Session Two

1. If groups did not completed their work by the end of the previous session, give them a few minutes at the beginning of the session to complete their observations and draw some conclusions about the sonnets' similarities.
2. Compile all the observations that students have found on a class chart, using chart paper or writing on the board.
3. Read through the collected observations and ask students to suggest what the poems have in common and how they differ.
4. Work toward a class description that fits all the poems; then find two more detailed definitions, based on the differences you noticed.
5. Provide the formal names for the sonnet forms:

Sonnet Form

Italian or Petrarchan

Spenserian

English or Shakespearean

Rhyme Scheme

abbaabba cde cde
abbaabba cc dd ee
abbaabba cdcd ee

abab bcbc cdcd ee

abab cdcd efef gg

- 6.
7. With the poetic forms identified, read [Shall I compare thee to a summer's day](#) by William Shakespeare to the class.
8. Return to the observation chart to confirm the kind sonnet the poem is.
9. With the form of the poem confirmed, turn to the poem's message by asking students what stands out to them about the poem. Ask them what they remember, feel, question, and see when they read and hear the poem. Stress that there are no wrong answers.
10. Ask students to share personal experiences, emotions, and beliefs that influenced their reaction. Ask students if the poem recalls memories and how it connects to their own attitudes or perceptions.
11. Ask students to point to specific words and lines in the poem that triggered their reactions. Work to shift students' attention to the details and features of the poem by asking them what word, phrase, image, or idea were important to their reactions.
12. Be sure that students notice the contrast and opposition that are important to the poem's meaning. If students need a focused exploration of the ideas, ask them to go through the poem and create a shared list of things that the speaker describes that the described lady's features are and are not.
13. Turn to the meter of the lines. If students are familiar with iambic pentameter, review Shakespeare's use of the meter in the sonnet. If not, simply move to the next step.
14. Ask students to look at Shakespeare's sonnet as a model for their own writing. Write the the first

line of the poem on the board or on chart paper: "Sonnet 18."

15. On a separate sheet of chart paper or area of the board, rewrite the first line of the poem with some of the words removed and with the number of beats written below:
16. Ask students to brainstorm nouns or noun phrases that can fill in the first blank. As students share ideas, list the alternatives on the board or chart paper. To get students started, you can share some options of your own such as "My mother's pies," "The football game," "McDonald's fries," and "My P. E. class." The options do NOT need to rhyme with the original. The goal is to match the rhythm.
17. Compare the brainstormed items to the original phrase, removing any items from the list that do not match the rhythm. Use this process to discuss the metrical differences between phrases that match and those that don't.
18. Explain that students can change the verb to match the meaning of their poem. If desired, brainstorm a list of options (e.g., is, are, was, were).
19. Next, move to options for the second blank in the line. Return to the earlier discussion of the poem's meaning. Ask students to suggest how the noun phrase that fills in the last blank compares to the image or idea in the first blank—what kind of comparison is the poet making?
20. Again, ask students to brainstorm a list of words, this time for the second blank. Get started by sharing some possible answers such as "a ham," "my chair," "the tape," and "her cake."
21. Focus students' attention on brainstorming based on the meter, without worrying about how the noun phrases match up to the items that they have brainstormed for the first blank.
22. At this point, students will have a list of words and ideas to start their own poems. Create a sample replacement line, using options that students have brainstormed (e.g., "My mother's pies are nothing like her cake").
23. Once you're sure that students understand the activity, give them the rest of the session to work on their own sonnets, imitating "Shall I compare thee to a summer's day." Remind students that in addition to matching the rhythm of the original poem, their work should also match the rhyme scheme.
24. It may be useful for students to begin their own poems by choosing a topic, and then brainstorming a list of comparison words, ideas, and images that describe things that their topic is and is not. They can then turn to this list as they work on their own poem. This process will allow students to focus first on the meaning of their poems, and then shift to matching ideas to the rhythm (rather than asking them to do both at once).
25. Circulate among students as they work, providing support and feedback.
26. Ask students to continue work on their sonnets for homework and to come to the next session with a finished draft that they are ready to share. The draft will be shared and revised, so it need not be a polished, finished piece.

Session Three

1. Give students a few minutes to make any last-minute changes to their drafts.
2. Arrange students in small groups and pass out copies of the [Shakespearean Sonnet Checklist](#).
3. In groups, have students exchange sonnets so that every group member has a sonnet other than their own.
4. Students read through the sonnets silently, to prepare to read the poems aloud, and to fill out the [checklist](#) with preliminary comments.
5. Once all group members are ready, have students read the sonnets aloud to the group, listening specifically for the rhythm.
6. If students are unsure whether a line uses the right rhythm, have one group member read the line from Shakespeare's poem while another member reads the corresponding line from the original poem. Any places where the rhythm is off should become clear from this test. Group members can help one another by making suggestions to fit the rhythm of the model.
7. Once students have worked through the sonnets of all group members, have them work on revisions and creating a final draft of the poems. Encourage group members to share changes and ask questions as they work.
8. With 5–10 minutes left in class, ask student volunteers to share their sonnets with the whole class.
9. Collect the sonnets for evaluation based on [checklist](#). Alternately, if students need additional time to create their polished sonnets, allow them to work on their poems for homework and prepare a

draft to submit at the beginning of the next class.

Extensions

- Now that students have created their own poems modeled on Shakespeare's sonnet, move to a more sophisticated exploration of the rhythm of sonnets, by completing the EDSITEment lesson plan, [Listening to Poetry: Sounds of the Sonnet](#). Since students have internalized the rhythm of iambic pentameter, the formal analysis and labeling of the structure is a natural extension.
- For a more detailed exploration of Emma Lazarus' sonnet, "The New Colossus," follow this lesson with the EDSITEment lesson, [The Statue of Liberty: Bringing the 'New Colossus' to America](#).

Web Resources

[William Shakespeare, from the Academy of American Poets](#)

<http://www.poets.org/poet.php/prmPID/122>

Read additional sonnets by William Shakespeare, as well biographical information about the bard.

[September 26: Sonnet](#)

<http://www.poets.org/viewmedia.php/prmMID/5791>

A calendar entry dealing with types of sonnets, attributes, and variations.

["I am a pirate with a wooden leg": Stomping Iambic Pentameter](#)

<http://www.folger.edu/eduLesPlanDtl.cfm?lpid=692>

This lesson plan from the Folger Shakespeare Library outlines the process of having students use body movement to learn the rhythm of iambic pentameter.

Student Assessment/Reflections

As students discuss traditional sonnets and their own poems, listen for comments that indicate that students understand the characteristics of the traditional sonnet forms. Provide supportive feedback for observations that show students are making connections between the forms and their own writing.

Informal feedback from student groups, as they read one another's sonnets, provides students with the reactions of a audience of readers. For formal assessment, use the [Shakespearean Sonnet Checklist](#) which is tied to the key characteristics of the form.

[NCTE/IRA Standards](#)

1 - Students read a wide range of print and nonprint texts to build an understanding of texts, of themselves, and of the cultures of the United States and the world; to acquire new information; to respond to the needs and demands of society and the workplace; and for personal fulfillment. Among these texts are fiction and nonfiction, classic and contemporary works.

3 - Students apply a wide range of strategies to comprehend, interpret, evaluate, and appreciate texts. They draw on their prior experience, their interactions with other readers and writers, their knowledge of word meaning and of other texts, their word identification strategies, and their understanding of textual features (e.g., sound-letter correspondence, sentence structure, context, graphics).

6 - Students apply knowledge of language structure, language conventions (e.g., spelling and punctuation), media techniques, figurative language, and genre to create, critique, and discuss

print and nonprint texts.