

From Present to Past: Contextualizing the Sonnet

Abstract:

Students will learn the components of a Shakespearean sonnet by looking at the intentions and figurative language of modern music and tracing it back to Spenser's blazon "Sonnet XV" and Shakespeare's response in "Sonnet 130". This lesson allows multiple entry points into the language, content and form of Shakespeare's sonnets. This lesson can be used at the beginning of a unit on Shakespeare, Renaissance poetry, or sonnets.

Common Core Standards:

- W.11-12.1. Write arguments to support claims in an analysis of substantive topics or texts, using valid reasoning and relevant and sufficient evidence.
- W.11-12.2. Write informative/explanatory texts to examine and convey complex ideas, concepts, and information clearly and accurately through the effective selection, organization, and analysis of content.
- W.11-12.4. Produce clear and coherent writing in which the development, organization, and style are appropriate to task, purpose, and audience. (Grade-specific expectations for writing types are defined in standards 1–3 above.)
- W.11-12.5. Develop and strengthen writing as needed by planning, revising, editing, rewriting, or trying a new approach, focusing on addressing what is most significant for a specific purpose and audience.
- W.11-12.9. Draw evidence from literary or informational texts to support analysis, reflection, and research.
- RL.11-12.4. Determine the meaning of words and phrases as they are used in the text, including figurative and connotative meanings; analyze the impact of specific word choices on meaning and tone, including words with multiple meanings or language that is particularly fresh, engaging, or beautiful. (Include Shakespeare as well as other authors.)
- RL.11-12.5. Analyze how an author's choices concerning how to structure specific parts of a text (e.g., the choice of where to begin or end a story, the choice to provide a comedic or tragic resolution) contribute to its overall structure and meaning as well as its aesthetic impact.
- RL.11-12.6. Analyze a case in which grasping a point of view requires distinguishing what is directly stated in a text from what is really meant (e.g., satire, sarcasm, irony, or understatement).
- RL.11-12.1. Cite strong and thorough textual evidence to support analysis of what the text says explicitly as well as inferences drawn from the text, including determining where the text leaves matters uncertain.

- SL.11-12.1. Initiate and participate effectively in a range of collaborative discussions (one-on-one, in groups, and teacher-led) with diverse partners on grades 11–12 topics, texts, and issues, building on others’ ideas and expressing their own clearly and persuasively.
- SL.11-12.3. Evaluate a speaker’s point of view, reasoning, and use of evidence and rhetoric, assessing the stance, premises, links among ideas, word choice, points of emphasis, and tone used.

Procedure:

1. Begin class by showing Bruno Mars’ video “Just the Way You Are.”
While viewing, students should consider:
 - a. What is he saying?
 - b. What is the purpose of the song?
 - c. What figurative language is he employing?
2. The students will notice that he is using hyperbole, ask them to pick out a few examples, such as:
 - a. “Her eyes make the stars look like they’re not shining”
 - b. “Her hair falls perfectly without her trying”
 - c. “And when you smile, the whole world stops and stares for a while.”
3. Briefly, brainstorm with students other songs that use figurative language to profess love. (They will have a lot to contribute).
4. Ask to students where this comes from? Have they read any poetry that does this? If so, what?
5. Put up Sir Edmund Spenser’s “Sonnet XV” “YE tradefull Merchants that with weary toil”.
Ask a student to read it out loud. Students should consider:
 - a. What is he saying?
 - b. What is the purpose of the poem?
 - c. What figurative language is he employing?
6. After the class has worked through the content of Spenser’s sonnet, lead a brief discussion in which you tie the purpose and use of figurative language back to Mars’ song.
7. Provide some background information for Sir Edmund Spenser:
 - “Sonnet XV” came from *Amoretti*, a sonnet cycle (89 poems) describing his courtship and marriage to Elizabeth Boyle.
 - Published in 1595

- Petrarchan (Italian sonnet) - this might not mean much to them yet... but it is important to point out.
 - Define the term blazon (and put it on the board): a love poem that uses hyperbolic comparisons to profess love. This term can be directly applied to the sonnet as students have already picked out the hyperboles and tied them back to Mars' song.
8. Put up Shakespeare's "Sonnet 130" and provide a brief background:
 - Published in 1609
 - 154 sonnets
 - Shakespeare's sonnets were arranged in order after his death. There are recurring themes and developments within the sonnet cycle.
 - "Sonnet 130" is written as a reaction to and criticism of blazons
 9. Ask a student to read "130" out loud, students should consider:
 - a. What is he saying?
 - b. What is the purpose of the poem?
 - c. What figurative language is he employing?
 - d. How do we know it is a sonnet? What do we notice about the form?
 10. Using "Sonnet 130" deconstruct and discuss the conventions of a sonnet, specifically:
 - a. Number of lines
 - b. Syllables
 - c. Meter (feet and Iambus)
 - d. Rhyme scheme
 - e. 3 quatrains, 1 couplet
 - f. Volta

Next Steps:

1. Students will read a collection of Shakespeare's sonnets for homework. Recommended sonnets are: 18, 73, 90, 129, 141, 138, 116.
2. Students are asked to annotate while they read, looking for:
 - a. What is he saying?
 - b. What is the purpose or theme?
 - c. Does he break from the sonnet form?
 - d. If so, where? What does it do to the content?
 - e. How do the form and content come together to create meaning?
3. In the next class period, go over "Sonnet 18" together. Students will be familiar with this sonnet, so it is a good entry point.
4. Split the class into 6 groups, assign each group to look more closely at one of their prepared sonnets (73,90,129,141,138,116) just as you did with "Sonnet 18"

as a whole class. Students should work together to paraphrase each line of the poem, look at how the sonnet form has been used and perhaps broken, be able to explain how form and content create meaning.

5. Groups will lead the class through an understanding of their sonnet. As the class has read each of the sonnets, they will be able to ask questions about and contribute to the conversation about each group's interpretation.
6. Ultimately, students will put their skills, knowledge and understandings to work as they complete the Modern Muse assignment. (Please see the attached sheet).