Understanding Shakespeare – Sonnets 116 and 130
Grade Ten

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Materials and Resources
- “Sonnet 116” by William Shakespeare
- “Sonnet 130” by William Shakespeare

Lesson Introduction
Even younger students puzzle out much of the meaning of a Shakespearean sonnet and enjoy listening for rhythm and rhyme patterns. This kind of activity helps students become aware of the sound devices an author uses to lend music to a text and to connect meaningful words and phrases through the use of sound.

In order to do the first two activities, students will need instruction about what a sonnet is and how it is structured. This information can be provided by the teacher or inferred from a group study of several sonnets and their structure.

Iambic pentameter is a meter that consists of repeated patterns of unstressed and stressed syllables. An iamb consists of two syllables, the first unstressed, the second stressed. A pattern of five iambics to a line is called iambic pentameter; for example:

/When in/ disgrace/ with for/tune and/ men’s eyes/
I all/ alone/ beweep/ my out/cast state..../
In these two lines, every second syllable has a heavier stress than that which precedes it. Each of the iambs is called an iambic foot; five iambic feet make the pattern of the line pentameter.

Shakespearean sonnets have a certain pattern of end rhyme that characterizes the form. To find a rhyme pattern, or rhyme scheme, look at the word at the end of the line. Assign it a letter, starting with “A.” If the word at the end of the next line rhymes with the word at the end of the first line, assign it the same letter. If it differs, label it “B.” Continue to label the end word of each line until you perceive the pattern of rhyme.

Example:
There was a crooked man (A)
And he walked a crooked mile, (B)
He found a crooked sixpence (C)
Upon a crooked stile (B)

He bought a crooked cat (D)
Who caught a crooked mouse (E)
and they all lived together (F)
In a little crooked house. (E)

The rhyme scheme here is ABCB DEFE.

The rhyme scheme of a Shakespearean sonnet is ABABCDCD EFEFGG

All sonnets have fourteen lines and are written in iambic pentameter.

The octet, or first eight lines, creates the argument or sets up the problem; the sestet, or last six lines, resolves the argument or gives the solution. The sonnet has three quatrains (four line units) and a couplet (two consecutive rhyming lines of iambic pentameter).
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1. Describe the form and content of a Shakespearean sonnet.

2. Define iambic pentameter.

Read the following poems and complete the activities.

Sonnet 116
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.
Oh 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
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.

*impediments – obstacles
*mark – a landmark that sailors can see from the water and that is used as a navigational guide.
bark – boat
*compass – range
*edge of doom – end of the world
Close Reading Activities
1. Summarize the poem in the space to the right of the poem. (Quatrain by quatrain and then the couplet)

2. Study the definition for iambic pentameter. Scan (or mark) the strongly stressed and weakly stressed syllables in Sonnet 116. Then use vertical lines to divide the lines into feet.

3. What two points does the speaker make about the nature of true love?

4. What metaphor does the speaker use to describe love in the second quatrain?

5. How does the comparison help reveal the speaker’s message?

6. What does the final couplet add to the speaker’s message?

Sonnet 130
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.  
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  
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.
Close Reading Activities
1. Mark the rhyme scheme of the poem.

2. Define the following words in context
   a. dun (3)
   
   b. damask’d (5)
   
   c. go (11)

3. How and why does Shakespeare use irony in this sonnet?

4. How does the final couplet change the meaning of the poem?

5. What sort of poetry does this sonnet mock or criticize?

6. What message about love is implied with this criticism?