

Shakespeare's Sisters and Modern Sonnets

Developed by classroom teachers Louisa Newlin & Gigi Bradford

Lesson Overview

The Shakespearean sonnet continues to influence writers today. Over five centuries, women writers and men writing about women have extended and transformed the sonnet to allow their voices to be heard. Students will understand that many different kinds of sonnets are being written today and will read sonnets addressing familiar themes in contemporary language. This lesson draws on several modern sonnets of your choosing. Examples provided here consist of contemporary poems included in the "Shakespeare's Sisters" seminar for high school students taught at the Folger. This ten-week course introduces Petrarchan conventions, Shakespearean, Elizabethan and Renaissance sonnets, and the evolving language and topics of women writers from Shakespeare's time to present.

Time: One 45-minute class period

Materials: Copies of as many of these suggested modern sonnets as you would like to make available to the class:

- Elizabeth Barrett Browning:
 - Sonnet 43: "How do I love thee?"
 - Sonnet 20: "Beloved, my Beloved"
- Billy Collins, "Sonnet" – writing a poem about writing a sonnet—amusing
- Rita Dove, "Hades' Pitch" – Persephone considers dating Hades
- Carol Ann Duffy, "Anne Hathaway" – a funny take on what it's like to be Shakespeare's wife
- Maxine Kumin, "Purgatory" – how would Juliet feel about Romeo if she hadn't died and instead was stuck at home changing diapers?
- Marilyn Nelson, "How I discovered Poetry" – extremely powerful description of racial consciousness and poetry

What To Do

1. Hand out copies of the poems you have selected. Have the class read each poem aloud, with one student reading the octave and the other the sestet, or, depending on the poem, three students each reading a quatrain and a fourth reading the concluding couplet.
2. Ask students to discuss how these poems are different from those written by Shakespearean and Renaissance writers. Ask them to note how diction and concerns change over the centuries. What is the same and what is altered?
3. Ask students to talk about why these poets might have chosen to write a sonnet and not write in free verse?
4. Ask students to identify these poems as Shakespearean or Petrarchan in form?
5. Ask students to comment on how women change Petrarchan conventions. (See our modules on Petrarch and Petrarchan conventions.)
6. Have students identify the continuing influence of Shakespeare today.

Assessment

- Do students understand that sonnets are not just a form but a way of thinking?
- Do they understand the dialectical nature of sonnets and the importance of the volta?
- Can they attempt a sonnet in completely modern language?
- Did they enjoy this teaching module, and do they understand why there is so much fuss about Shakespeare? Can they discuss the advantages and disadvantages of a "fixed form" and free verse?

Suggested Homework: Ask students to write a sonnet on a completely modern topic (iPods, school lunches, the school dance, sports, etc.). They might wish to use the rhyme scheme of one of the sonnets studied to date. This will give them a framework and may seem less daunting than just asking them to give it a go. Or they might jump start their sonnets by "borrowing" a phrase from a published sonnet and using it as a first line. The sonnets can be shared at whatever time in the future seems best. Award style points for the intelligent use of slang and contemporary idiom within a coherent rhyme scheme.

Suggested Sonnet Festival: Designate a day to celebrate the sonnet and have some students read their own sonnets, others perform sonnets, still others recite them as dramatic monologues.
