

The Sonnet Challenge

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Teaching sonnet writing and appreciation on the secondary level can be an exciting experience for both the teacher and the students if it is approached as a form of amusement. Instead of emphasizing art and beauty, I find it more effective to offer the sonnet as a challenge. Tell them they can't do it -- or at least make it look like an intriguing mystery -- and they will work overtime to show you that it can be done. I think there is some psychology in here somewhere.

To really arouse an interest in sonnets, you will have to call upon group participation. I can't think of too many teenagers who would enjoy locking themselves away in a room, struggling with their mental faculties to understand a piece of poetry -- let alone create an original work. I can think of dozens of teens who would welcome the opportunity to band together and express themselves vocally. Have you been to a rally or basketball game recently? Did you notice those group cheers and waves that sweep the stands? This is poetry in motion, and this energy can be tapped in your classroom to enhance the task of teaching sonnets.

My classes create sonnets every year, and they actually enjoy doing it. They are not the greatest sonnets written, in fact some of them, come very near to being just modern interpretations of what a sonnet can be, but in the process of construction, the students gain an understanding of how a sonnet

is made and the struggle the great poets had in creating their sonnets. They learn that the sonnet is more than just an expression "about a bonnet," and they learn one of the concepts sonneteers have been trying to teach for centuries: When the human mind is "forced" into a corner (or works itself into one), persistence and imagination can be called upon to get it out.

I remember reading somewhere that many of the great sonneteers of the past wrote sonnets for the challenge this activity presents. It was an invitation to them. I believe it was Wordsworth who felt that the aspiring poet who would write sonnets must lock himself in with restrictions; and, in spite of these confinements, produce a literary work of art.

Caveats

I must warn you now. The lesson I am going to present you with is not for the faint of heart. It will take a lot of patience, understanding and strength to carry off successfully, and it wouldn't hurt if the teacher were a bit of a ham, too. It will stir some of your students to a state of frenzy. While the class is in session, it will arouse in some a passion for writing that will seem almost overpowering. You, as the teacher, must control and channel this energy it into the sonnet being written. Don't squelch it, because it is this energy that will imbue their sonnet with emotion.

If your school administration and department head are of the type that equate good education with the keep-em-quiet-sit-em-in-a-chair philosophy, you had better not use this method. Likewise, don't plan this lesson when your neighboring teachers are giving a quiet-in-this-room test. If you are over 21 and suffering from what they call "teacher burnout" (or have a weak heart), steer clear of this assignment -- no, I take that back. This might be just what the doctor ordered.

If you are the kind of teacher that likes to perform (or at least would like to have a chance to try), can work with excitement cutting the air, and can control a slew of ideas being generated rapidly, go with this exercise, and I think you and your students will be the better for it.

The lesson works with all kinds of students. For the last twenty years, I have used it on all levels, with the brightest and the dimmest. Every time it works like a charm, because it draws upon what sonnets are all about -- human emotions.

The Lesson

I begin by giving the students information about two popular sonnet forms -- English and Italian. Examples of these abound in literature textbooks, but I usually use a Shakespearean sonnet and one of Elizabeth Barrett Browning's sonnets as models, respectively. If you are rusty on the sonnet, check your literature books for details, and the ever-popular *A Handbook to Literature*, by William Flint Thrall and Addison Hibbard.

After giving my class a period of introduction, I start them on this assignment. Begin by giving your students rules for writing a sonnet. They don't normally like rules when it comes to normal academic life. If you make it a challenge, however, these rules are seen in a different light. Now they have a chance to prove themselves, just as they do in sports, debates, and other competitions. So, using a little drama, I lay down a set of rules that they must live by, if they ever hope to proudly "claim" that they have written a sonnet.

If you play this up (they love it), the students will begin to believe that it is indeed quite an honor to have written a piece of work of this caliber. After all, this is going to tie them in with the big leaguers like Shakespeare,

Browning and Wordsworth -- drop a few names, and encourage them to do the same.

The solitary sonneteer follows certain rules dictated by literary history. I use some of these rules to link our work with the real sonnets. To make this a class assignment, in which all of the students can "play" together, I modify or force some of these rules. Since you might like to give them to your students beforehand, here they are:

- Rule #1: The sonnet must be completed in one class period. In my school, this is about 45 - 50 minutes.
- Rule #2: Everyone must try to make a contribution to the sonnet we will write.
- Rule #3: The sonnet must be 14 lines long.
- Rule #4: The sonnet must have no more and no less than 10 syllables per line. (This is an offshoot of the Petrarchan sonnet form.)
- Rule #5: The sonnet must be of either the English or Italian forms. Since much of our town population is Italian and there is a strong sense of loyalty, we often end up with this form.
- Rule #6: The sonnet must deal with the subject of love. Over the years I have found this can mean many things to novice poets.
- Rule #7: If the sonnet is going to be in the English form, the logical progression of thought should be as follows: the first 12 lines develop the main idea, and the last 2 lines (a rhymed couplet) give the conclusion. If the students select the Italian form, the pattern should be thus: The first 8 lines develop the main idea, and the last 6 lines give the conclusion.
- Rule #8: Once something has been written on the board, it cannot be changed (except for spelling). It

becomes engraved in stone.

Once an introduction to the sonnet has been made and these rules have been laid down, you are ready for action. At the beginning of class, ask the students which sonnet type they would like to use. This will be your first encounter with controversy. Be democratic and take an eyeball poll -- of course, you won't be able to please everyone.

Give each student a sheet of paper and tell them all that we are going to write a sonnet. Not Joe, not Mary, but WE are going to write this sonnet together. You will write it on the blackboard, and they will copy it on their papers. They are to copy exactly what you write on the board. In the end this will give them a copy of the sonnet that they may keep. I like to have one student make two copies, that way I will have one for my records when the task is completed.

On the blackboard, write the alphabetical letters (that will represent the rhyme scheme) for the sonnet type selected. Leave yourself enough room to the left of the letters to write the complete lines of poetry as they are generated. Tell your students to copy this list of symbols down the right hand side of their papers. Let's see how they follow instructions.

If you use the English form, the rhyme scheme would be abab cdcd efef gg. This is a good time to explain to the class about rhyme schemes and how the sounds of words are symbolically tracked with the letters of the alphabet.

Putting this example on the board might help:

----- light (a)

----- sweet (b)

----- might (a)

----- meet. (b)

(etc. for 10 more lines)

The Italian form is a little more liberal with the last six lines, as far as rhyme is concerned; so we use the following pattern: abba abba cddc dc. Variation on the latter lines is allowed. I like to keep things simple at the start, so I force the class to select only one-syllable words for the last word of each line.

Just which word will be used for the last word in each line is up to the class. Asking the students to suggest possibilities generates a tremendous amount of interest and excitement. (Somebody want to close the door to the hall, please?)

I have often been surprised by the suggestions of the wallflowers, and you will of course get the class clowns who will suggest the unusual as well as the off-color words -- depending on your class's class. Some will try to put some prurient meaning in this poem, even if it's only in the last word of each line. The alert teacher can grab a more acceptable word from the class and quickly write it on the board before anyone knows what happened.

Remember, no changes once something has been written on the board. Don't worry about getting suggestions. Many ideas will be vehemently thrown at you, and you will finally have to be the judge as to which will be used. I often discreetly close my ears to words that might be questionable or might lead the poem into the gutter. (Who screamed censorship?)

You might have to remind the "poets" that inconsiderate word choices could lead them into traps. We only have, for example, a limited number of

rhymes in English. An incorrect choice at the start could force the line along an unwanted path, later. We want to set up a challenge we can overcome in a short period of time. We also want to select words and phrases that will complement the theme of love.

Some of my classes, usually after we have finished studying the folk ballad, unintentionally make the sonnet into a narrative. It should be made clear from the start that there is not enough room in the sonnet to develop a complete story. The fourteen lines should be used judiciously to express one's feelings of love. If a story seems to be developing, try to keep it to a minimum.

Before starting construction of the poem, inform the students, in case they didn't notice, that they have already used up one syllable in each line -- the last word. Now they will be allowed only nine more for each line. Also make it clear to them that the last word in the line does not have to be the last word in the sentence. They should be encouraged to use connective or transitional words at the beginning of some of the lines or within the lines to avoid choppy construction.

Also bring to their attention that they may carry an idea over several lines. Sentences may terminate in the middle of the line as well as at the end. Although there is nothing wrong with ending a sentence at the end of a line, the more interesting sonnets carry ideas over several lines. The rhyme should not dictate the movement of the poem -- the thought should.

Ask for a first line.

For a long moment, you might find the class and you silently staring at each other. Who will make the first move? It might be likened to that same feeling the soldier gets the instant before battle begins. If you look closely,

you will see the "wheels" turning in their eyes. Who will generate that first word, phrase or line (perhaps a complete thought) to get the poem rolling?

Then they start coming at you. Hands go up, words start to fly. You are the teacher, you hold the chalk, you are in control of the board. You must write what the poets want. And you will be given much. Remember to use the discreet ear to guide the progress of the sonnet. Try to have a consensus from the class before putting anything on the board -- engraved in stone. One student will give a suggestion, another will add to it, still another will modify it, so that it fits the measure of the line. At times a mixture of good and bad words will be fired at you. There are the "shining star" poets who will try to dominate the flow of ideas. If they are hand-raisers, their arms will be gyrating in the air. If they are interrupters, they will be stepping all over everyone's ideas. This doesn't have to be treated negatively. Use these ideas to prod (dare I say agitate) the quieter students into adding to or changing these ideas.

Sometimes the quiet student will actually be working on an idea that doesn't come to mind very quickly. I love to scan the room looking for this kid, while a dozen others are shouting their suggestions. (What, has the man gone deaf?) Check for this, and play the field of ideas. You are as much a participant as a spectator. Don't be afraid to show some dissatisfaction with the ideas flying by, often this will inspire a new flurry of ideas and spur the slower student to offer his thoughts.

Sometimes you should snap up the "loud" ideas, immediately. Put words, phrases, lines on the board quickly, before too many ideas are floating around. All of the great ideas don't have to go in one line. These will propagate more ideas, and the sonnet will quickly take shape.

This is exhausting work -- prodding, balancing, writing, organizing -- but it's a lot of fun, too. At some point in the process, you and the class might be plagued with that psychological setback known as "writer's block." The single writer might be stopped by this. He or she might not be able to produce a reasonable idea for days. Here is where the advantage of group participation pays off. Fortunately you have many minds working strenuously and simultaneously on this project. Writer's block will only last a few moments, at most. Someone is bound to break the ice with a startling new line. And once again, to paraphrase Sherlock Holmes, "the game will be afoot."

Keep checking the clock; let the students know that this sonnet will be finished before the bell rings. The tension will increase as the clock nears the end of the period.

If you come upon a real mental barrier, you can get the activity rolling again by forcing a line in the poem. Put down a single connecting word, like "but" or "and." This will sometimes be enough to start a train of thought that will whisk the class through several lines in no time at all.

When you and your class reach that last word in the poem, there will be a great feeling of exhilaration. You might even hear a loud cheer. They will have created something of their very own. No one person is credited; the entire class has achieved a literary victory. I like to pit classes against one another. Each, of course, feels that it has created the best sonnet. Some will even want to try again, in hopes that they can outdo themselves. I also keep the sonnets from year to year and read them to subsequent classes, after they have finished their own. It is amazing how they relate to the ideas being

expressed and the work that goes into a sonnet. They know what these "poor" students of the past have gone through to manifest this little fourteen line poem. They see in these poems from the past, some images that probably reflected the feelings of those students -- feeling that they themselves have experienced. Some of my students have even expressed how "awesome" it is to think that those kids were writing in the same room, under the same exciting conditions as they were. They too had created a little masterpiece for future generations to enjoy. This is what the "real" poets were probably thinking too, and this is the kind of thinking that makes a poet and a lover of poetry.

When all is said and done (and written down for posterity -- or future lesson plans), much has been learned. The students know how and what a sonnet is. They have experienced the anguish a poet goes through in order to draw an image other people can relate to. They have experienced the search for the right word or phrase. They have learned that with some fortitude and imagination they can come up with some pretty darn good ideas, even with the odds against them. They have learned to cooperate and play off each other's ideas. My students of years past remember his encounter with poetry -- maybe not the specifics, but they learned that poetry is not just for stuffy old fogies. It can be fun for all.

Finally, I must caution all teachers: Don't be too critical of the sonnets produced by your classes. Sometimes as educators we become, or are forced to become, bogged down with the importance of grades as indicators of how much the student has learned. Every once in awhile we should take the time to give our classes something that does not have a grade attached to it. Don't give these sonnets grades or -- if you must grade -- give them all

good grades. Try this assignment for fun or as a lead-in to the poetry unit. Read the faces of the students and the excitement generated in your classroom, and let these be your reasons for studying poetry.

When you have finished writing the poems, you will find it is kind of fun to analyze them with the class. In our examinations, we found that the students of the past had used some topical references in their works, showed an awareness of the effects of adjectives, and implemented an assortment of rhetorical and figurative devices. Unconsciously, so did the new poets. Here are a few examples from the sonnets I have included at the end of this article.

- Topical: "two tickets to the Who."
- Repetition: "So long as I live I'll remember this
So long as I dream, I'll dream of your kiss."
- Personification: "love is running out the door"
- Simile: "Our love had run down just like our old car."
"She looks like bacon"
- Hyperbole: "My love for you is as high as the sky"
- Imagery: "crushed heart"
"times of passion"
"You in the meadow"
- Simulated Archaic Language:
"the fight would becometh very wild"
- Contraction:
"will ne'er be dead"
"I shan't say no."
- Iambic Pentameter Line:

"You have the nice and pretty female look."
"Your love for me is running out the door."

A search for features like these can be made into a related assignment to complete the sonnet challenge. Until you build up a bank of sonnets of your own, use the examples I have included with this article to send your students on a poetic treasure hunt that will familiarize them with the mechanics of poetry and the sonnet specifically (or use real sonnets).

These poems may not be great works of literature -- at times they reek of melodrama, at times they brazenly display clichés, they are often humorous to an absurd degree -- but they make great practice poetry for the budding students of literature. They give your students a chance to write, think about, and appreciate this very unique form of writing.

Student Generated Sonnets

The Almost Sonnet

Your eyes are soft and your touch is tender
Your hair is like fire and so is your kiss.
Our times of passion are ended in bliss,
But when I am away from you, splendor
Is absent. My love I will surrender

To you. While your love I now will miss
And every time I cry I make a wish
With all my heart that you were as slender
As a twig. The more I see you the more
Memories I have to make me smile.
And I promise that I will love you for
As long as the water flows in the Nile.
When I'm with you I'm walking on a cloud.
Being with you makes me feel very proud.

-- 10th Grade English 1970

The Sea of Love

Today I saw that girl upon the rock.
At the time I was in my little boat,
When I realized that it could not float.
I tried to take off my red and white sock,
But then I saw the girl swim to the dock.
I want to give her the poem I wrote,
But it was eaten today by the goat.
He looked at my sock, and ran in the flock.
In the night we danced under the bright star,
That brought me and my love under a tree,

And all Mary did was talk about me.
Our love did carry us so very far,
That I walked right into the cold water,
And steam came out of the hole in my heart.

-- 10th Grade English May 31, 1973

Lost Love

The everlasting love we had is gone,
And we thought our love would never grow old.
For now we must be very brave and bold,
And face everyday from dusk to dawn.
While being as innocent as a fawn
We keep our memories in mind like gold.
Even though our love now is very cold
Our jealousy is as green as the lawn.
Now in our paradise we shall not sit,
Looking yonder to that far northern star.

We can now see that we were never fit --
I should have known when we met in that bar!
Now you have me falling into a pit.
Our love has run down just like our old car.

-- 10th Grade English 1976

The Divorce

Let me show you how much I will love thee
Forever and a day. The story of
Our deep devotion will have to be love.
You are as cute as a big bumble bee.
Your skin is very soft, as you can see,
And your walk is as graceful as a dove.
We go together like a hand in glove.
And for sure you will always stay with me.
Therefore, my lovely, our love will last for
A lifetime. Since you are the only one

That I ever cared about -- even more
Then I did before -- Now we have a son!
Years have passed and you are the biggest bore.
And that is all because our life is done.

-- 10th Grade English 1976

Sue's Tingling Toes

On a scale from one to ten she is two,
But one of her best features is her lips.
All the guys like to watch her swaying hips.
As she was swaying she lost her left shoe,
But she still got two tickets to the Who.
After the concert she went to the ships.
She was late and received twenty one whips,
And she said that her real name was not Sue.
She learned her lesson as they made her clean
The deck and later it smelled like a rose.

As she stood on the deck and struck a pose,
For Mr. Right had just walked in -- he's mean!
She went outside with her tingling toes
And suddenly they started turning green.

-- 10th Grade English January 27, 1982

Running Love

Your love for me is running out the door
With my best friend. Since we have no more love
For each other, I will love you no more.
The flow of passion once flew like a dove,
When we were lovers; I really felt cool
Then I found the note you wrote, on the bed.
About how I acted like such a fool.
Now I wish that I was totally dead.
I have long been searching for a new mate;
One that I could really and truly know.

Without ever coming to that same fate
That seems to be the everlasting flow.
He hurt me so much it stung like a bee;
It's really too bad that you don't love me.

-- 10th Grade English May 3, 1983

The Brawl of Love

For this, my dear, I give you my sweet love;
The same love that I gave you as a child.
If there was another, push comes to shove,
And the fight would becometh very wild.
I'd reach out to you, no matter how high;
And when I caught you, my job would be done.
My love for you is as high as the sky;
Together there's no limit to the fun.
The love I feel inside will ne'er be dead,
For whatever you ask I shan't say no.

Let me remember of what I have said;
For my love my dear is as pure as snow.
So long as I live I'll remember this
So long as I dream, I'll dream of your kiss.

-- 10th Grade English April 14, 1988

The Twisted Fate of Love

The skies are filled with tiny glowing stars,
When I see you, it shoots me to the moon.
I'd rather see you than work on my cars;
Let's go to the beach and lie on the dune.
I have been waiting so long for a hug,
I feel as if I've fallen from the sky.
The mood you put me in feels like a drug;
The life I've been living is just a lie.
I want to hang you from a red oak tree,
And see you go "splat" -- like a tiny ant.

Won't you please set my crushed heart and soul free.
If you do I will sing a little chant.
Why don't you come over and have a Bud,
And then we can keep rolling in the mud.

-- 10th Grade English 1988

Bacon N' Me

You have the nice and pretty female look,
That everyone thinks about in their dream.
The real key is you and me as a team
Just like a fairy tale, fantasy book.
The howling winds all through the night shook,
As my thoughts of you created a scheme.
She looks like bacon all crispy and lean
I threw out my line for something to hook.
My thoughts floated through the big and white clouds.
We collided in the night like two ships,

As the smile of your love touched my lips.
There are too many people in this crowd,
As I put my hands on her shapely hips
Alone in our love -- covered by our shroud.

-- 10th Grade English May 9, 1989

A Girl in the Meadow

If I could live forever and a day,
We could be together on every night.
We would patiently wait for morning's light,
But where we will meet we will never say.
I will never forget the month of May --
Of you in the meadow flying your kite.
We stayed together that whole day to play;
I asked if she was married. She said, "Um...
I don't know. He left me this afternoon.
But I don't expect to see him too soon."

Her cheeks were as purple as a ripe plum;
Oh! Her husband came back as we were nigh.
He took her away and flew to the sky.

-- 10th Grade English Date Unknown