

Studying the Sonnet: An Introduction to the Importance of Form in Poetry

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Overview

Although this curriculum unit will focus on the sonnet and its history from Petrarch to contemporary times, two core objectives have guided its development. The first objective is to introduce the concept of form in poetry and its importance to the poem's overall impact. The second objective is to create a framework that enables students to experience success in the close reading of poetry. The decision to write this unit stemmed from an awareness that many middle school students lack experience in both of these areas.

I teach eighth graders in an urban middle school, and so had my own students in mind when creating this unit. However, most of what is presented is appropriate for other middle school grades as well as for high school. I teach both an eighth grade regular Communications class (our terminology for language arts) and an eighth grade Creative Writing class. In addition, I plan to start an after school poetry club next year. This unit is appropriate for all three situations. Because my eighth graders have responded so positively to poetry study in the past, and because I believe that the study of poetry provides a strong foundation for the study of other literary forms, I hope to find time for poetry study each week during the school year. This unit will be a part of the year long emphasis on poetry. The unit itself should cover seven one hour class periods, but teachers will find many ways to extend or limit its scope.

Rationale

What is Form and Why Teach It?

Middle school students in my classroom have always responded positively to the study of contemporary free verse poetry and to opportunities for writing this type of poetry. I have found ways to help them develop an understanding and even an intimacy with many poetic elements, especially image, metaphor, tone, and theme. Before writing this unit, I attempted to think through why I and so many teachers at my level avoid the discussion of form in poetry. First of all, the very notion of form sounds restrictive and my students already resist the idea that there is a craft to be learned when writing poetry. I thought that the notion of form might inhibit their poetry writing even more. The very idea of too many "rules" seemed stifling and frustrating. Secondly, I have avoided teaching the importance of form because I lacked an understanding of its relevance to meaning and the overall impact of the poem. Finally, I have avoided dealing with the concept of form, and especially specific structures, because form always seemed out of fashion in the world of contemporary poets, which is essentially the world I am familiar with.

As my own experiences with poetry widened and my understanding of poetry matured, I began to understand that even in the free verse that my students love, form is an extremely important element of the poem. All of the negatives related to teaching about form in the middle school classroom mentioned in the previous paragraph seem now to be less important. I really believe that the concept of form can be presented to students in a non-threatening way, without repression of creativity. Concerning my second anti-form notion, later in this curriculum unit I will discuss more fully the concept of form affecting the overall impact of the poem. Regarding the “out of fashion” argument, I am beginning to hear of many young contemporary poets becoming interested in form, even specific forms from our poetic history. A final reason for placing more emphasis on form in my classroom is that some of my students demonstrate a real affinity for rhyme and form. I have had students who could write with a fair amount of ease a sonnet, a sestina, or beautifully rhymed couplets. I never quite knew what to make of these students and now I feel I have a better respect for their approach to poetry.

So what is form in poetry? The term form in its most general sense means structure. We use the word form to relate to buildings, natural phenomenon, as well as to the shaping of ideas. Our understanding of the word in these contexts is connected to the use of the word in regards to poetry. It is the architecture of the poem. We have all heard of specific structures and historical forms of poetry such as blank verse, couplets, tercets, quatrains, sonnets, villanelles, and sestinas. But the term form is also used to refer to other elements of poetry that exist within poems such as cadence, meter, tropes, play on words, stanza, rhyme, and line.

The idea that writers of free verse employ form is confusing to many students because they are so used to regarding form as a regulated and specific structure. Contemporary scholars of poetry sometimes use the terminology "open form" instead of "free verse," to acknowledge that free verse also has form. Free verse may have freedom from traditional meter or versification, but the line and variations on enjambment are extremely important. Paul H. Fry, in a Yale New Haven Teachers Institute called *Reading Poetry of All Kinds: Pictures, Places and Things, People*, explained that a poet ends a line because a unit of meaning has been created. In free verse the tension between what the line says and what the sentence says is of utmost importance.

Cleanth Brooks and Robert Penn Warren, in *Understanding Poetry*, remind us that “no form-no poem” (1976, p. 560). W.H. Auden said, “In poetry you have a form looking for a subject and a subject looking for a form. When they come together successfully you have a poem.” Frances Mayes, in her book *The Discovery of Poetry*, (2001, p. 302) states that the poem’s form and content are “interactive systems...The form of a good poem occurs simultaneously with the meaning, not as a separate phenomenon.” These three passages could be mounted in the classroom as a reminder to students that form is not an element to be taken lightly.

Given my new understanding of the importance of form to all poetry, why did I decide to use a study of the sonnet to introduce students to this concept? Most importantly, when reading sonnets, it should be fairly easy for students to make inferences about the effect of the structure on the overall poem. But there are other reasons for choosing the sonnet. The sonnet's structure is straightforward and easily grasped. The sonnet has lasted for centuries and examples proliferate. Later in the unit, in the section called The Sonnet's Structure, reasons for this popularity are discussed. There are interesting models throughout history of adaptations made to the sonnet's form. The sonnet is an important poetic form for basic cultural literacy. Plus, studying the sonnet and writing sonnets can be just plain fun for students.

Objectives

The major objectives of this unit have been alluded to in earlier sections of the overview and rationale, but I will attempt to outline them here in more specific and behavioral language. I will also discuss a few other categories of objectives that this curriculum addresses.

The first objective is to introduce the concept of form in poetry and its importance to the poem's overall impact and how it aids in communicating the poem's message. By gaining an understanding of the impact of the sonnet's form, students will be open to and on the lookout for form in other poems.

There are several objectives related to the study of the sonnet specifically. The most basic is that students will learn the rhyme schemes and formal structures of both the Petrarchan and Shakespearean sonnets. Students will be able to distinguish between the two forms when reading sonnets. Students will have some sense of the long history of the sonnet and will place various sonnets and sonnet writers on a timeline. Students will be able to articulate qualities of the sonnet that go beyond structure.

Another general area of objectives relates to close reading or explication of poetry. Although the overriding theme of this curriculum is form, students will also be asked to interpret the poems generally. Until recently, all of my energies concerning the reading of poetry with middle school aged children focused on making poetry accessible and non-threatening. I did insist that students use textual evidence to support their interpretations and always attempted to use the language of poetry in discussions. Recently, I have tried to incorporate even more vocabulary and formal interpretive models into discussion formats. This is in response to clearer guidelines given by the state of Pennsylvania regarding expectations. It is also a nod to the idea that many of my students will be involved in AP courses in high school and early exposure to the kinds of rigorous poetic interpretations required in those classes can only be beneficial. Two objectives concerning reading and interpreting poetry are: students will build and use a vocabulary of poetic terms and students will use textual evidence to support interpretations of poetry.

A final general area of objectives relates to the writing of poetry. When students write their own sonnets they will gain a more intimate relationship with the form. The writing of original poetry meets many objectives for adolescents related to literacy, aesthetic development, and awareness of self and the world. In the category of literacy, writing poetry helps students in all genres of writing. Through writing poetry students will gain an understanding of the importance of careful and deliberate word choice. Students will learn to play with phrase construction, and learn that lines and sentences need careful attention. By writing poetry students will increase their fluency and develop metaphorical thought processes. When writing poetry young writers will take chances and risks, which will strengthen all of their writing. Adolescent poets will not only polish skills of observation as they examine the external world, but will connect with their inner worlds as well. When writing poetry students access their intellects and emotions at the same time.

Pittsburgh Public Schools Standards

This unit addresses several standards that have been set forth by the Pittsburgh Public Schools in the category of Reading, Writing, Speaking and Listening. All students read and use a variety of methods to make sense of various kinds of complex text. All students respond orally and in writing to information and ideas gained by reading narrative and informational texts and use the information and ideas to make decisions and solve problems. All students write for a variety of purposes, including to narrate, to inform, and to persuade. All students exchange information orally, including asking and answering questions appropriately and promoting effective group communications. All students compose and make oral presentations for each academic area of study.

History and Structure of the Sonnet

History of the Sonnet

Even though we think of the sonnet as the great traditional English form, it originated in Italy. The word sonnet comes from the Italian word, sonnetto, meaning “little song”. There is controversy among historians concerning the actual originator of the sonnet, but once devised, the form became very popular in Italy. Dante and Francesco Petrarch are credited with perfecting the form. Petrarch, a Tuscan, published his *Canzoniere*, which contained 366 sonnets, most of them about an idealized lover named Laura. The form created in Italian is known as the Petrarchan sonnet.

It took several hundred years for the sonnet to take hold in England. Two young poets are credited with bringing the form to England after studying and traveling in Italy in the mid 1500’s: Sir Thomas Wyatt and Henry Howard, Earl of Surrey. They each published very fine sonnets, and the form began to gain popularity. Wyatt’s sonnet, “Whoso list to

hunt,” is often considered to be one of the best. Both Wyatt and Surrey changed the Italian form and the result was what is now called the Shakespearean sonnet.

In the 16th century the sonnet form was widely used by Sir Philip Sidney, Edmund Spenser, William Shakespeare, John Donne, and others. Changes to the sonnet made by Spenser resulted in a third category of sonnet named after him; the Spenserian sonnet. This form never gained the popularity of the Shakespearean and Petrarchan forms. John Milton, writing in the 17th century, followed Spenser, Shakespeare and Donne and was an important figure in the history of the sonnet, although few other poets were writing sonnets during his life. Milton, best known for having written the epic poem *Paradise Lost*, is considered by some to be one of the greatest poets of the English language. After Milton, the form became almost extinct. Historians call our attention only to a single sonnet written by Thomas Gray, “On the Death of Mr. Richard West”.

For a long period the sonnet remained an unpopular form but was revived again in the Romantic period, which is generally considered to span the years of 1789-1832. Several poets are given credit for calling attention to the sonnet during this time period. William Lisle Bowles, a vicar's son, toured northern England in the 1780s, and then wrote an influential collection of sonnets which was admired by Samuel Coleridge, William Wordsworth, and a large public. Charlotte Smith was an influential female sonnet writer during this time. A colorful figure, Helen Maria Williams, also influenced Wordsworth. She was a religious dissenter and a supporter of abolitionism and of the ideals of the French Revolution. She was even imprisoned in Paris during the Reign of Terror. Wordsworth wrote a poem for her in 1787. Although many sonnet writers of his day influenced him, William Wordsworth is credited with bringing the sonnet back to life and restoring its immense popularity during this period. Percy Bysshe Shelley and John Keats also led the list of sonnet writers during this time period.

A brother and sister, Dante Gabriel and Christina Rossetti, helped to maintain the sonnet's presence in the 19th century. The Rossetti family read widely in Italian literature and used the sonnet as a literary exercise. Two other poets of this time period, Elizabeth Barrett Browning and George Meredith, wrote sonnet sequences (series of related sonnets) about romantic relationships. Browning's *Sonnets from the Portuguese* express passionate desire and Meredith's *Modern Love* charts a disintegrating relationship between a man and wife. During the 18th and 19th centuries, sonnet writers used both the Shakespearean and Petrarchan forms, and it may be that the Petrarchan form was used more. Gerard Manley Hopkins was also an important figure in the 19th century and may have been the most original sonneteer of this time period. He was not widely known during his life. Because his work became recognized during the 20th century, his innovations to the sonnet are thought to have influenced modern poets. (White, 1972, pp. 1-3 and Strand, 2000, pp. 56-57)

I've included here a timeline of influential sonnet writers.

Francesco Petrarch	1304-1374
Sir Thomas Wyatt	1503-1542
Henry Howard, Earl of Surrey	1517-1547
Edmund Spenser	1552-1599
Sir Philip Sidney	1554-1586
Michael Drayton	1563-1631
William Shakespeare	1564-1616
John Donne	1572-1631
John Milton	1608-1674
Thomas Gray	1716-1771
Charlotte Smith	1749-1806
Helen Maria Williams	1762-1827
William Lisle Bowles	1762-1850
William Wordsworth	1770-1850
Percy Bysshe Shelley	1792-1822
John Keats	1795-1821
Elizabeth Barrett Browning	1806-1861
George Meredith	1828-1909
Dante Gabriel Rossetti	1828-1882
Christina Rossetti	1830-1894
Gerard Manley Hopkins	1844-1889
Robert Frost	1875-1963
Claude McKay	1889-1948
E.E. Cummings	1894-1962
Countee Cullen	1903-1946
John Berryman	1914-1972
Robert Lowell	1917-1977
John Hollander	1929-

The Sonnet's Structure and Important Characteristics

Certainly I hope that my students learn the basic rhyme schemes of the sonnet and its formal aspects. But I want them also to gain some understanding of its other qualities, since one of the underlying objectives of this unit is to develop an appreciation of form as it relates to the overall impact of the poem.

Many scholars who have written about the sonnet claim that the qualities of a good sonnet are found “not in its conformity to some external pattern, but in its unity of design, condensation of thought, exactitude of language and image, and – even at its most meditative and abstract – its essentially dramatic nature.” (White, pp. 2-3) Commentaries on the beauty of the sonnet form are almost as plentiful as sonnets themselves. This is what C.F. Johnson wrote in 1904 in *Forms of English Poetry*.

Sonnet beauty depends on symmetry and asymmetry both, for the parts are unequal in length and different in form and melody. In this it resembles things of organic beauty as opposed to things of geometric beauty. It involves the principle of balanced yet dissimilar masses, of formality and freedom, like a tree which has developed under the rigorous law of its growth and yet is shaped by the chance of wind and sunshine into something individual. The sonnet form could not have endured the test of time for so many years did it not embody some of the underlying principles of beauty. . .(Johnson, 1904)

The sonnet's length requires the poet to be concise. Paul Fry suggests that "The sonnet is a maximum thought unit. In other words, when a thought or train of thought gets any longer (e. g., in a stanzaic poem), it starts to seem linear and needs to be reconstructed one step at a time, whereas one can keep the whole thought of a sonnet in mind at once without it's being as simple as an aphorism or epigram." (Fry, July 25, 2005) This may help to account for the sonnet's immense popularity for so many years. The sonnet has also attracted poets because its exacting structure challenges them to solve an intellectual puzzle.

A question of categorizing the sonnet as a lyric poem or as a dramatic poem arises as one investigates scholarly writing on the sonnet. Many textbook definitions call the sonnet a lyric poem, and it does fit the definition of being a fairly short poem that expresses the personal mood, feeling or thoughts of a single speaker. But the drama of the sonnet comes with the change of thought that often occurs. White and Rosen state that, "It is far more logical in structure, more precise in thought, more concise and unified in both substance and design than the ordinary lyric." (White, p. 3)

Jennifer Ann Wagner, in her book *A Moment's Monument: Revisionary Poetics and the Nineteenth-Century English Sonnet*, explains how William Wordsworth viewed the sonnet not as a form that limits the poet, but instead spoke of "the way the infinite can be contained in the finite; the way large ambition can be contained in a small form; and the way in which the constraints of this form force a poet to reflect on the nature of poetic form generally..." She goes on to explain Wordsworth's view of the sonnet as synecdoche, a reference to a part in place of the whole. (Wagner, 1996 p. 15)

For the purposes of our study here, there are two major forms of the sonnet and one minor form. They all contain 14 lines. Traditionally, sonnets are written in iambic pentameter. Iambic pentameter is a rhythmical pattern and is the template or pattern for a sonnet's poetic line. The "iambic" part means that the rhythm goes from an unstressed syllable to a stressed one, as happens in words like divine, caress, bizarre, and delight. It sounds sort of like a heartbeat: daDUM, daDUM, daDUM. The "pentameter" part means that this iambic rhythm, which is a "foot," is repeated five times. A fun exercise for teaching iambic pentameter to children can be found at the Folger Shakespeare Library

website, which is listed in the bibliography of this unit. Suggestions are provided for encouraging students to stomp out the pattern as well as speak in the pattern.

The Petrarchan, or Italian sonnet, consists of an octave of eight lines or two quatrains and a sestet of six lines or two tercets. The rhyme scheme of the octave is *ababcdcd* and the rhyme scheme of the sestet varies in many ways. A chart that identifies 18 of them with examples for each can be found in an article written by William Sharpe on the Sonnet Central website.

This distinct break between the two parts of the Petrarchan sonnet, sometimes called the turn, encourages the poet to present a subject in the octave and reflect on it in the sestet. In some sonnets these two parts take on the qualities of a proposal and a response or a problem and a resolution. Frances Mayes says that the sestet “resolves or consolidates or reflects on the concerns of the octave.” (Mayes, p. 313) The subject of the poem must lend itself to this kind of resolution in order for the form to fit.

The Shakespearean sonnet has no octave/sestet structure. It consists of three quatrains and an ending rhyming couplet. The rhyme scheme is *ababcdcdefefgg*. Mark Strand and Eavan Boland explain that the Shakespearean sonnet, “with its three quatrains and final couplet, allows a fairly free association of images to develop lyrically toward a conclusion.” (Strand, p. 57) An easier way for eighth graders to view the progression in the Shakespearean sonnet is to think of the first quatrain as introducing the subject. The second and third quatrains can further develop the subject or introduce a conflict. In the final couplet the poet can resolve the conflict or offer a comment or summary statement. Others have talked about the three quatrains as being three points to an argument. No matter how one looks at the three quatrains, the ending couplet demands a strong conclusion and the subject matter should fit.

Although it may be more difficult to use the Petrarchan sonnet’s rhyme scheme because the writer uses only four different rhymes instead of the six of the Shakespearean sonnet, in other ways the Petrarchan form offers more freedom for the poet. The Petrarchan form fits more with a certain contemporary view of poetry that allows for an open-endedness. There is no option of this in the Shakespearean sonnet because of its ending couplet.

The less popular Spenserian sonnet consists of a rhyme scheme of interlocking rhyme: *abab,bcbc,cdcd,ee*.

Strategies

When to Teach Students About Form

As mentioned earlier, I have had great success in dealing with contemporary poetry in the classroom. Therefore, I hate to risk losing this positive edge and will continue to start off

my school year with the successful lessons I have developed. I think that it is easier for the teacher to emphasize the development of metaphorical thought and creating strong images when dealing with free verse. I have always called attention to line breaks and enjambment in free verse, but will now place more emphasis on talking about the line as form. After I am assured that students have developed a “love of poetry,” I will present this sonnet unit, with even more emphasis on form.

Learning Poetic Terms

Throughout their study of poetry, which will essentially last the entire year, students will keep a special section in their notebook for poetic terminology. Work on this list, composed of 40 terms, will be a year long project. Students can only add a definition to the list when they feel comfortable enough with the word to write the definition in their own words. In addition, they will have to include a poem that illustrates the term. I will give them a choice of including a poem they have written or a published poem they have found. To keep them progressing on this task, I will require that ten terms must be completed at the end of each report period.

Techniques for Presenting the Poems and Encouraging Close Reading

A popular question debated among middle school teachers is, Just how much can we ask of our students when it comes to close reading or explication of poetry? Many teachers feel that insistence on close reading will turn kids off and bore them. To a certain extent this may be true, but my own experience with students at this age is that they actually love an intellectual challenge; sometime boredom in the classroom results from low expectations and mind numbing activities. Middle school is often an intellectual holding ground; much of what goes on in our classrooms consists of simple review of what students have already learned. I think if the challenge of explication is presented as a puzzle and not as the teacher lecturing and providing the right answers, students will experience satisfaction when successful in the task. My own students balk and groan each week when I assign a close reading and written response to a selected poem. However, I notice a real sense of accomplishment when those close readings result in insightful analyses and connections. In reality, they enjoy the intellectual work.

Frances Mayes states, “Some people fear that analysis takes away from enjoyment; ‘explain it, drain it,’ they say. Protracted analysis can wear you out, but good critical consideration is creative and rewarding.” (Mayes, p. 10) A technical way of explaining close reading involves two steps. The first is observing facts and details about the text. Many of the questions provided later in the unit help the student make these observations and guide them in the observational process. The second step involves interpreting the observations. This is an inductive process, moving from details to interpretation based on the observed details. A more eloquent definition of close reading is provided by Sven Birkerts in *The Electric Life*. “To close read a poem is, in part, to create a receptivity, a

silence, in yourself so that the work can leave an impression. Each reading represents a deepening involvement with the work in question. The only talent required is a talent for focus and deceleration. To read poetry as it is meant to be read, you must push your way through the shallow-field perceptual mode that modern life makes habitual.” (Birkerts, 1989, p.91)

How does this translate to a classroom of rambunctious adolescents who have trouble focusing on more than a sound bite? Determining the appropriate level of rigor for close readings is a challenge for teachers, as is creating a stimulating and nurturing environment where students can take intellectual risks. Much patience is needed from the teacher and she must respect all responses as she guides students to disciplined, close adherence to the text. Responses that are way off should be dignified and the student’s thought process gently moved in a different direction. I present methods for large group discussion, small group discussion and presentation, and guidelines for individual close readings. Much of the focus and discussion of the poems presented in this unit will relate to their membership in the sonnet classification, but I still want students to deal with other aspects of the poems. Although the sonnetness of the poem may be the first thing noticed and discussed, students will also be asked to focus on interpretation, craft, and other elements they have studied previously.

A Simple Approach That Forces Involvement

I use several techniques for making poetry accessible for this age group. The first method forces the involvement of every student, but is also completely non-threatening. It is a simple approach that can be done with an entire class, even when students haven’t read the poem prior to class. First, I encourage at least three oral readings of the poem. The first reading can be done by the teacher, especially if the poem contains unfamiliar vocabulary. If the teacher is lucky enough to have recordings of poets reading their own work, this of course can take the place of a teacher reading. Second and third readings can include student volunteers reading the poem in its entirety, or dividing the poem into stanzas or lines, and "reading around". After the final reading, students are asked to identify three things in the poem. First, they must place a * by the line or phrase that they like the most, for any reason. It may be because of the meaning, the unique word choice, the metaphorical language, or simply because of its originality. Second, they must underline the line or phrase that is the most important to them in the poem. The third response is placing a ? next to a line or phrase they don’t understand.

After students spend a few minutes privately responding to the poem, the class discussion can begin in several ways. Often I ask students what they want to start with, the *’s or the ?’s. Or, I may simply say that everyone is to first share his or her *ed phrase or line. Whatever the approach, this method usually assures that all students have been able to "grab onto" something in the poem. The discussion usually blossoms. As the teacher directs this discussion, care can be taken to encourage students to use textual

evidence to support interpretations. Middle school children, like all readers, tend to find a single phrase or image in a poem that “hits home” and then take their interpretation on a path clearly not intended by the poet. Insisting on a close adherence to the words on the page is excellent training for all close reading that they will need to do in their high school and college careers. During discussion the teacher must also remind students to use poetic terminology in their discussion and model this practice themselves

After the group has developed some level of comfort with the sonnet, the teacher can move the discussion in the direction of examining the form and its interplay with meaning. In Classroom Activity #2, presented later in the curriculum unit, questions are suggested that the teacher can use to guide students toward an understanding of how poets make use of the sonnet’s form.

Small Group Presentation of a Poem

A second method involves dividing the class into small groups of 3 or 4 students. Each group is assigned a poem and a criteria sheet for how the poem must be presented to the class. If this method is used for discussing sonnets, the criteria list should include such items as: identify type of sonnet, discuss diversions from sonnet form that might be present in the poem, point out what effect the sonnet form has on the overall effect of the poem, discuss why the sonnet form is or is not appropriate to the subject of this poem, offer an interpretive analysis of the poem, support interpretations with textual evidence, present the poem in a clear and creative manner, and use at least five poetic terms from our list when presenting the poem. Groups are given 30 to 60 minutes to prepare and then present the poem to the class. Again, after the group presentation, the entire class should participate in a discussion. The teacher can make use of the questions presented in Activity #2.

Reader Response Questions to Aid Independent Reading of Poetry

Finally, when I want students to spend a longer amount of time exploring a poem individually, I use a reader response guide. This list of questions works well when a poem is assigned for homework, in preparation for a discussion the following day. All of the students read the poem independently and give written responses to the following questions: In addition to the criteria listed in the previous group work section, the following questions encourage the student to be thoughtful and attentive to the poem, but fall short of demanding a formal interpretation. What do you notice about the poem? What words, lines, images stand out? What do you like immediately? What don’t you like? What is puzzling? What is surprising? What words and allusions need to be clarified? What does the poem make you feel? What does the poem make you think of? What does the image allow you to imagine or fantasize? What assumptions have you made about the poet, about who’s speaking, and about what’s happening? What is the tone of the voice of the speaker? What questions do you have for the poem?

After students have made personal responses to the poem, the entire class discusses the poem, using the same questions as starting points. Following the class discussions, students should return to their original responses and write further on the questions: Why did you find yourself paying attention to these elements? What made you react that way? What sense might this make now? Why did you respond that way? What (in the poem or in what you brought to it) evoked these thoughts? Forcing the students to write after class discussion ensures that they have clarified and expanded their original responses to the poem.

The informal journaling that results from the reader response approach is sufficient in and of itself; however, these student jottings can also serve as a great pre-writing step to a more formal response paper or analytical essay.

Sonnets to Read

Sonnets will be presented to the students in three groupings. The first grouping will consist of sonnets chosen simply for their adherence to the strictly defined meter, rhyme, and line length patterns of the Petrarchan and Shakespearean forms. These will be used in activities designed to reinforce these basic form elements. The second group of sonnets will be used for more in depth readings and explications, with the goal of helping students understand the more subtle ways that form adds to the overall meanings of the sonnets. The third group of sonnets represents variations on sonnets that poets have made. Again, these variations will be examined in light of how the variations are related to meaning and effect. Almost all of the sonnets mentioned below are found easily on the internet. Web addresses for Sonnet Central and the American Academy of Poets are listed in the bibliography.

Sonnet Group #1 – Introducing Basic Form Constraints

Middle school children respond favorably to exercises that feature inductive reasoning. The problem solving nature of this type of exercise is fun and promotes active learning. An inductive method of introducing the rhyme schemes for the two major types of sonnet should be effective. I intend to present three examples of both Petrarchan and Shakespearean sonnet and let the students state the rules concerning rhyming patterns and syllable counts.

Petrarchan sonnets that would work well for this exercise because they don't vary from the prescribed format are "Composed Upon Westminster Bridge," by William Wordsworth; "From the Dark Tower," by Countee Cullen, and "How Do I Love Thee," by Elizabeth Barrett Browning. Shakespearean sonnets to use are "Putting in the Seed," by Robert Frost; "To Sleep," by Charlotte Smith, and "Dawn in New York," by Claude McKay. A part of the exercise will be asking students to articulate the differences between the two forms. If students don't come up with it on their own, the teacher may

have to pose questions to point out the rhyming couplet in the Shakespearean sonnet and the octave/sestet split in the Petrarchan.

Sonnet Group #2 – Encouraging Further Explication and Analysis of the Form’s Significance

Instead of beginning with sonnets from the early years of the sonnet timeline, this unit will present 20th century sonnets first and then work backwards in a chronological sequence. This strategy results from my often stated fear that I don’t want to overwhelm my eighth graders. My thought is that the obstacle of difficult language is more likely to be absent from more recent sonnets than from sonnets written in earlier centuries. I have chosen only ten sonnets to offer to students for directed, close reading, in keeping with the timeline of a seven day unit. However, additional sonnet titles are provided to supplement and extend the teaching. The teacher can decide the best methods for presenting these poems. I have discussed large group, small group, and individual methods earlier in the unit. I think that eighth graders are capable of reading a few sonnets and making generalizations about how the form can aid the overall meaning of poems. All of the questions put forth in Activity #2 later in the unit will help students examine these poems. Some of the questions are referred to as I present the poems.

Presenting Countee Cullen’s “From the Dark Tower” as the first sonnet to discuss indicates to students that the sonnet is not a dead form and that poets from many cultural backgrounds have found the form suitable to their themes. The sonnet follows the Petrarchan form we are familiar with in the opening octave. The sestet’s rhyme pattern is *ccddee*, a variation from the two most common rhyme patterns and so offers students an opportunity to notice an interesting variation. This poem reflects many of the themes that poets explored during the Harlem Renaissance. The symbolic connections are strong but not too elusive for middle school aged children. They will be capable of figuring out that the “buds that cannot bloom at all/ in light” refers to a unique situation of Black Americans during the 1920’s. The pride in Negritude that was blossoming during this time period is revealed in Cullen’s lines “the night whose sable breast relieves the stark/white stars is no less lovely being dark.” The sonnet form allows Cullen to put forth his concerns about the present state of American Blacks and assertions that things won’t always be that way. In the sestet he reflects on the concerns of the octave. Cullen chooses to end this Petrarchan sonnet with a very strong and disturbing Shakespearean couplet. It serves as an amplification of the concerns of the sonnet; black hearts bleed and wait.

“Putting in the Seed,” by Robert Frost features very accessible language for eighth graders. It strictly follows the Shakespearean pattern of rhyming quatrains and an ending couplet and demonstrates how imagery works well in a sonnet, although the rhyme pattern varies slightly: *abababab* instead of *ababcdcd*. Frost’s three quatrains seem to build on each other as he develops the images of spring, his passion for the earth, and the

connections between these springtime activities of nature and human love. This poem is also a good example of how the sonnet can begin with an image drawn from the external world and then compare it with a state of mind or emotion. The metaphorical ending couplet “the sturdy seedling with arched body comes/ shouldering its way and shedding the earth crumbs” presents a good example of a strong closure.

Moving backwards to the 19th century, it seems appropriate to include one of the best known sonnets, especially because it also represents the overly emotional tone of many sonnets from this time period. “How Do I Love Thee?” (#43) from *Sonnets From The Portuguese* by Elizabeth Barrett Browning is a straightforward and old fashioned love poem, and I think for those reasons my middle school female students might love it. Students may have a preconceived notion that the theme of all sonnets is love, but hopefully through exposure to the sonnets in this unit, they will come to understand that poets have dealt with all kinds of subjects in their sonnets. When students attempt to understand the importance of the sonnet form to this poem, they may not observe any complex form/meaning connections, for the poem is almost like a list poem. However, I do think that Browning achieves a wholeness and uses a logical thought pattern that concludes with the poet thinking about her deepening love even after death. Although it is difficult to explain the change of course after the octave, I think students can sense the reflective tone of the sestet.

Another representative sonnet from the 19th century fits into a popular category of sonnets, that of sonnets about sonnets. The Sonnet Central website has a large collection of these sonnets if students are interested in reading more. “A Sonnet is a Moment’s Monument,” by Dante Gabriel Rossetti, presents a phrase that is often quoted by scholars of the sonnet. Students will enjoy the oxymoron of a moment’s monument and can meet the challenge of explaining Rossetti’s particular definition of a sonnet as well as his second comparison, “A sonnet is a coin.” A second oxymoron later in the poem, “dead, deathless hour,” also provides a challenge for interpretation. Some other qualities that students might observe include the use of alliteration, which one critic suggests is “typical of Rossetti’s effort to imitate the prolongation of the moment.” (Wagner, p. 131) This is perhaps the most difficult of the ten sonnets presented in this group, and although the language is a bit dense, students may be able to discuss the relationship of the sestet to the octave. Is it a response to it? Does it confirm the point made or contradict it?

Middle school children often have a fascination with death, so “Rest,” by Christina Rossetti, may appeal to them. This Petrarchan form contains another variation in the sestet, a *cdceed* rhyme scheme. Lines like “darkness more clear than noonday holdeth her” and “silence more musical than any song” present interesting riddles that will intrigue this age group. The octave/sestet split does lend itself to Rossetti’s treatment of the subject. In the first eight lines she paints an image of death and then comments on Eternity in the sestet.

The Romantic period is when sonnets were reborn, thanks to William Wordsworth. Early in his writing life Wordsworth disdained the sonnet, but later began to view it as a form that didn't have to be sentimental. Although he wrote over 500 sonnets, only a few were in the Shakespearean form. "Composed Upon Westminster Bridge" is one of the most often anthologized Wordsworth sonnets. In this poem Wordsworth describes the city in the early morning, when it is most like nature. The octave consists of a suggestion that the city is human-like, wearing a garment of nature, and then moves to a list of urban images. In the sestet he reemphasizes and expresses awe at the possibility that the city can be as beautiful and calming as nature. Paul Fry suggests that there is an actual change of thought at the end of the poem, when "Wordsworth seems to stumble on a paradox at the end: When the houses seem to sleep (rather than to be awake) we realize for the first time that they're alive, and the inanimate city itself suddenly discloses a 'mighty heart.'" (Fry, July 25, 2005)

A second Wordsworth poem that students will enjoy belongs to the previously mentioned category of sonnets on sonnets. "Nuns Fret Not..." is probably one of the most easily understood of all of Wordsworth's sonnets. The metaphorical connections between the sonnet and prison and the sonnet's form to a scanty plot of ground will be easily deciphered and enjoyed. The change at the octave/sestet is most evident in this poem. The first eight lines catalogue various lives that are confined in some way, then Wordsworth switches to his comments on the confines of the sonnet and how they can provide "brief solace." The last thought, "Pleased if some Souls (for such there needs must be)/ Who have felt the weight of too much liberty,/ Should find brief solace there, as I have found," can provoke a lively discussion. Even though students of this age don't think of their lives as having "too much liberty," they should be able to reflect on the comfort that can come from structure.

Although John Keats wrote relatively few sonnets, some of them are considered to be close to perfection. "When I Have Fears" will appeal to middle school students because it speaks of the poet's desires, longings and goals and his fear that he may not live long enough to fulfill them. The story of this young poet's early death will endear him to this age group. Questions like "What is happening in each of the three quatrains?" and "Do the poet's thoughts shift or grow?" will help students see that the three quatrains are separate identities that build on the theme. In the first quatrain Keats laments that he may not get to write everything that is in his mind or read all there is to read. Next he frets over the possibility of missing out on romantic possibilities. In the third quatrain he speaks to a particular person he will miss. The powerful language of the ending couplet, "Till Love and Fame to nothingness do sink," provides an example of the strength of the Shakespearean ending.

A third poem from the Romantic period was written by Charlotte Smith. Many of her poems are quite appropriate for middle school students. I chose "To the Moon" because I have often had students who love to use moon, star, and sky images in their poetry. The

first quatrain speaks to the moon appreciatively, mentioning her delight in watching its movement. In the second quatrain the speaker raises the thought that the moon might provide comfort for the wretched, introducing a related, but more intense reflection. Elaboration on this idea fills the third quatrain, and the poem ends with a concluding, strong wish of the speaker. Students will be able to see the usefulness of the Shakespearean sonnet's structure to Charlotte Smith's subject matter.

No curriculum unit on the sonnet can be put forth without including at least one sonnet written by Shakespeare. Shakespeare's 154 sonnets, taken together, are frequently described as a sequence, and this is generally divided into two sections. Sonnets 1-126 focus on a young man and the speaker's friendship with him, and Sonnets 127-52 focus on the speaker's relationship with a woman. However, in only a few of the poems in the first group is it clear that the person being addressed is a male. And most of the poems in the sequence as a whole are not direct addresses to another person. Again bending to popular cultural literacy, the inclusion of Sonnet #18, "Shall I Compare Thee to a Summer's Day?" seems appropriate for middle school. Students should recognize that the first line is a question, and then understand that the speaker realizes that no, the young man is far superior to a summer day, the comparison is not enough. The speaker then goes on to elaborate on why the young man is finer than a summer's day. His youth will not fade, nor will his beauty. The ending couplet wraps up the speaker's adoration by declaring that the poem will give him immortality.

Sonnet Group #3 – Variations on Sonnet Form

Variations on strict rhyme schemes, meter, and number of lines are numerous and these departures do not come only from contemporary poets, but from early practitioners of the form as well. Presenting sonnets from this category to students will add to their understanding of form's integral importance to a poem.

A sonnet written in the early 1600's by Ben Jonson provides a clear example of changes in form that enhance the poem's statement. "On My First Son" was written by Jonson about a son who died when he was only seven years old. The sonnet is only 12 lines long, a truncated sonnet. Students should easily be able to grasp the poet's desire to cut the sonnet short, just as his son's life was cut short. Jonson also varied the traditional rhyme scheme and uses an *aabbccddeeff* scheme. This deviation from the traditional sonnet form might not be as easy for students to grasp, but they may sense that it is more of a nursery rhyme or childlike rhyme pattern. The meter in this poem also illustrates a deviation. The first two lines are strict iambic pentameter, then the meter becomes irregular. Could this be a structural reference to the confusion and wrenching apart of Jonson's emotional being?

The major deviation in the sonnet "Acquainted With the Night," by Robert Frost is the use of terza rima. This is a rhyme scheme of *aba, bcb, cdc, ded*, etc. and was used by

Dante in the *Divine Comedy*. Frost's fourth stanza is actually *dad* and then he concludes with a rhyming couplet, *aa*. Students can be asked why the three line stanzas were chosen by Frost instead of the traditional quatrains in a sonnet. Was there a reason he returned to the *a* rhyme in the fourth stanza instead of moving to an *e*? Why did he return to the *a* in the concluding couplet and to a repetition of the first line? Is this a poem about loneliness, the problems with city life, or Frost's general encounters with the darker issues of his life?

Many middle school students are already familiar with e.e.cummings and they are intrigued with his wild use of punctuation, capitalization and line breaks. His sonnet "next to of course god America i..." makes use of his characteristic form innovations plus uses a mix of the Shakespearean and Petrarchan sonnet forms. This poem, which is enclosed in quotes (except for the last line) is a satire on speakers who make use of overly patriotic and religious clichés. Ask students why cummings uses a mixture of two sonnet forms. Might the mixing of the two help to show a mix of confused ideology? Why did cummings string together the words "deafanddumb?" Why did he create a line break in the middle of the word beautiful? Another very obvious form deviation is the last line, which is separated from the rest of the poem, uses correct capitalization and punctuation, and is not in quotes. This line also includes an unusual syntax, cummings says "drank rapidly" instead of rapidly drank. Why this inversion? One critic suggests that "this syntactical inversion serves to indicate the similar transformation of the sonnet form which cummings has effected in terms of form and further serves to point to the inverted philosophy of the speaker of lines one through thirteen." (Davis, 1970, p. 15)

A contemporary poet, John Hollander, wrote an entire book of poems entitled *Powers of Thirteen*, in which he writes sonnets of 13 lines each. Each line contains 13 syllables. What fun middle school students will have with these sonnets, posing theories about what Hollander was up to. In the sonnets Hollander speaks to an unknown person. This mysterious figure seems to be a female friend, perhaps an old friend or a rarely seen lover. However, at least one critic claims that the poems are addressed to his imagination, not an actual person. If the entire collection can be shown to students, Hollander's choice to write sonnets of 13 lines will be more powerful, but one poem can work as well. Sonnet #6, "Fancy Pants," is light and characterizes a younger sister, to whom everyone paid attention. This child was a mischief maker and occasionally worked in collusion with the speaker in the poem. If the poems are really written to Hollander's imagination, then what might the little sister represent? The poems in this collection are also good examples of what contemporary sonnet writers do with line breaks and enjambment. This collection is available as a volume, but the entire group is also published in *John Hollander: Selected Poetry*. If students are interested in the 13 line poems of Hollander, they might want to investigate the 18 line sonnets written by another contemporary poet, John Berryman in his *Dream Songs*.

I will present a final sonnet here that deviates from traditional form, written by a contemporary poet who was a participant in the Yale July Intensive Seminar, Mary Carol Moran. She has given permission to include the poem in this unit.

October Song

An ambient pair of broccoli brains, dancing
above a moonlit sidewalk, weaves through
the night in silent crispiness. They glance
past wilting celery, stalking a more fertile bough.
The ocean echoes back with blood-blue words
and tells them tales of a cauliflower perdu,
who once sang summer hymns of waving chords
but now drips peas down a column of roux.
They pause to hurry, wondering what to say.
Could the sea be right? They shiver, fight
the ancient calm that dims their fear. They
must deny, knowing winter will bring blight
despite the promises of spring. If only a welcoming
yellow, an ear of corn, a squash, would light them home.

Although the rhyme sequence of Moran's poem follows a strict Shakespearean form, she uses line breaks to create interesting effects. Earlier sonneteers were much more likely to end stop most or all of their lines, although both Shakespeare and Milton both did a lot of enjambing. Contemporary sonnet writers enjamb almost everything and use end stopping for pointed effect. The two end stopped lines 8 and 9, bracket the turn in the poem (classic sonnet turn). End stopping is a way to say to the reader, "Pay attention now." Moran's poem also introduces to students the craft element used by contemporary sonnet writers of slant rhyme or off rhyme. Many of her rhymes are not full rhymes, for instance dancing and glance and welcoming and home. Through and bough are sight rhymes, words which look alike but aren't pronounced alike. Students should be asked to observe what is happening in each quatrain. Do they build on each other or does each quatrain pronounce a shift in the poet's thought process?

Other Sonnets to Use

Students and teachers might want to examine more sonnets written by African American poets of the early 20th century. Two poets associated with the Harlem Renaissance, Countee Cullen and Claude McKay, wrote often in the sonnet form. An African American poet who preceded that time period and published many sonnets is Paul Laurence Dunbar.

Three witty sonnets were written by John Hollander, the creator of *Powers of Thirteen*, in his book *Rhymes's Reason: A Guide to English Verse*. In this collection, Hollander writes explanatory verse for all major English poetic forms. His three poems on the sonnet explain the Shakespearean and Petrarchan forms, and one expounds on variations. Students will definitely enjoy untangling his explanations.

As mentioned earlier, sonnets written about sonnets proliferate. Some of the more well known in this category are “On the Sonnet” by John Keats, “Scorn Not the Sonnet” by William Wordsworth, “An Enigma” by Edgar Allan Poe, “Sonet” by Edwin Arlington Robinson, and “To Mr. Henry Cary, on the Publication of His Sonnets” by Anna Seward.

Classroom Activities

Lesson #1 – Introducing and Reinforcing the Sonnet Structure in its Most Basic Form

Two activities will be used to introduce the sonnet to students. They are designed to help students determine the basic formulaic “rules” and to reinforce their learning of these rules. The first lesson can be done individually or in small groups. It asks students use inductive reasoning to determine the standard rules for sonnet writing. Six poems are suggested earlier in the section *Sonnet Group #1*. The teacher or students may want to prepare a chart or some other graphic organizer to help students record their findings. Students should notice the following characteristics in each sonnet: number of lines, number of stanzas, number of lines per stanza, rhyme scheme, meter, and other observations. As they attempt to make generalizations based on their observations, they should be warned that the examples provided fall into two types of sonnets. The entire class needs to list the generalizations on the blackboard or on chart paper and compare them with generally accepted rules of the sonnet form.

After this initial activity, the basics can be reinforced in a second activity. The teacher should gather more standard sonnets in both the Petrarchan and Shakespearean forms. Some possible sonnets to use are: “Care” by Charlotte Smith, “Africa” by Claude McKay, “The World is too Much with Us” by William Wordsworth, “Lucifer in Starlight” by George Meredith, “Thou Art Not Lovelier Than Lilacs” by Edna St. Vincent Millay, “To Science” by Edgar Allan Poe, “#73, That time of year though mayst in me behold” by William Shakespeare, or any other sonnet that doesn’t deviate from the basic prescription. These sonnets can be blown up to a larger size, and then the teacher should cut the lines apart. Give the lines from a sonnet to a small group and challenge the students to put them in the right order, based on the rhyme and form rules from the previous lesson. This should be fun, and there can even be contests among groups. The teacher can give the same six poems to each group and see who can put them together quickly and correctly. Another twist on this activity would be to let teams challenge each other. Each team would have to find five or more poems, cut them up, then challenge another team to put them back together.

Lesson #2 – Questions Designed to Help Students Discover How the Sonnet’s Form Enhances the Overall Effect of the Poem

This activity gets to the heart of the unit. Students have already ingested the most basic level of understanding the sonnet – learning the mechanics. Now they must attempt to make sense of the deeper importance of the sonnet form. The questions provided can be used in large group discussion, small group work, or individually and hopefully the teacher will have time to do all three. If the teacher follows the suggestions in the Strategies section of the unit for large group, small group, and individual close reading, then each student will be afforded plenty of practice in understanding sonnets. The poems suggested above in *Sonnet Group #2 – Encouraging Further Explication and Analysis of the Form’s Significance* will work well in this lesson.

Before addressing any of the following questions, students should be encouraged to mark up their sonnets, identifying the rhyme scheme, drawing lines between the quatrains, noting the turn between the octave and the sestet.

1. Questions for Shakespearean sonnets:
 - What is happening in each of the three quatrains? Do the poet’s thoughts shift or grow? Do the three quatrains build on each other?
 - What purpose does the ending couplet serve? Is it a conclusion? Does it restate something in the sonnet in stronger terms? Does it refute or contradict a point made in the first 12 lines?
 - Is the ending couplet strong and does it provide finality?
2. Questions for Petrarchan sonnets:
 - What is happening in the octave? Is a proposal or situation presented? Is a question asked?
 - Can you point to the turn or “volta”? What is the poet doing at the turn?
 - What has the poet done in the sestet?
 - In the sestet does the poet resolve, restate, or reflect on the concerns of the octave? Does the sestet release any tension created in the octave?
3. What is the topic of this sonnet? Why is the topic of this sonnet especially suited to such a concise form?
4. Does the sonnet begin with a scene or image drawn from the external world? Does the poet then compare the image with some state of mind or emotion?
5. Is there a tight thematic structure? What is it?
6. Can you identify two related thoughts in the sonnet, either contrasting or parallel?

7. Do the ideas or thoughts expressed in the sonnet seem to move forward in a logical way? Explain.
8. Does the sonnet remind you of the way the human mind works? Does it reflect or mirror an intellectual or emotional process?
9. Has the poet achieved a wholeness within the sonnet? How would you explain that wholeness?
10. How does this poem fit the definition of the sonnet as a coherent, packed, and charged form?

Lesson #3 – Writing Original Sonnets: Two Required Poems

As a part of this unit, students will write at least two sonnets. The first will demonstrate the students' knowledge of the architectural form of the sonnet as well as an understanding of what that structure can do for the poem. This sonnet should be written after the first two groups of sonnets have been presented to students. The second poem assignment will challenge students to write an original sonnet and make some structural change to it. This structural change must be related to the meaning and purpose of the poem. Students will write this sonnet after examining the third group of sonnets, those that illustrate a departure from strict structure.

After spending four or five days reading and discussing sonnets, students should be itching to try their hands at writing some. Many of them will have already done so. The teacher should begin by reviewing not just the meter, rhyme, and line requirements, but also what the form can do for the subject of the poem. The teacher should remind students of the responses and discussions of sonnets that resulted from the questions listed in Activity #2. The class should spend time brainstorming possible subjects that could fit well with the sonnet form. This list should be recorded on a chart and displayed.

To review and reinforce the form, some group poems can be written. Two popular approaches to the writing of group poems were suggested by my seminar colleagues at the Yale New Haven Summer Intensive. The first is a simple method, involving writing on a piece of paper. Depending on the size of the class, several sonnets can be started at one time. Students can be required to add one or two lines, then pass the paper on to the next student. The writer of the third line will be the student who decides if the sonnet should be Shakespearean or Petrarchan. This same "write around" can be accomplished in the computer lab. If there are enough computers for each student, then each student may begin a sonnet. When a bell is rung, all students move to the next computer and add a second line. After these active group writing sessions, students should be somewhat

comfortable with the form requirements and can be challenged to attempt writing a sonnet on their own.

The second sonnet assignment may be more challenging, but at the same time students may have more fun with it. Again the teacher will review the deviations made by the poets studied in the third category of sonnets. Again the teacher should lead a brainstorming session on changes that could be made to the strict form and what those changes could do for the poem.

Revision of Original Sonnets

Because revision is such an important skill for middle school writers, I vary my approach to this process. Often I set up scenarios for formal written peer reviews, providing students with written questions pertaining to the specific genre or assignment. The questions are formed to direct their examination of a peer's work. However, for revision of the sonnet writing, I think small response groups of three or four students would work well, with oral commenting. Although it involves work on the teacher's part, I do make copies of student work for this type of response session, so that each member of the group has a poem to look at and write on. Each member of the group must write on his or her copy and speak directly to the poet. Students should be directed to comment on specific aspects of the sonnets. What form is the sonnet? Have any diversions from the form been made? What does the sonnet form do enhance the subject and overall meaning of the sonnet? What is the strongest part of the sonnet? Which words and phrases seem to be particularly well chosen? Are there any general nouns that can be replaced by more specific ones? Which weak verbs can be replaced by vivid verbs? Where is the rhyme so weak that it detracts from the sonnet? Are there any similes or metaphors? Are they clichés?

If a teacher is interested in a more expansive list of revision guidelines for poetry an excellent one is available on the *Fooling With Words* website.

WORKS CITED/ TEACHER BIBLIOGRAPHY

Birkerts, Sven. *The Electric Life: Essays on Modern Poetry*. William Morrow and Company, Inc.: New York, 1989.

Sven Birkerts has published reviews in most of the major literary magazines in the United States. He has also taught at Harvard University and has been a bookseller. The essays in this collection deal with ways of reading contemporary poetry as well as close readings of particular poems.

Brooks, Cleanth and Robert Penn Warren. *Understanding Poetry, Fourth Edition*. Harcourt Brace College Publishers: New York, 1976.

This classic textbook should be on the shelf of every English teacher. It is a comprehensive guide to reading poetry and writing about poetry.

Cotter, Janet M. *Invitation to Poetry*. Withrop Publishers, Inc.: Cambridge, Massachusetts, 1971.

In this fairly straightforward textbook, Cotter presents a wide variety of poems with questions to encourage discussion and interpretation.

Davis, William V. *Concerning Poetry*. 1970. Retrieved from the World Wide Web: http://www.english.uiuc.edu/maps/poets/a_f/cummings/nexttoofcourse.htm
This article was excerpted on the useful site *Modern American Poetry*.

Fry, Paul. Yale National Initiative July Intensive Seminar, *Reading Poetry of All Kinds: Pictures, Places and Things, People*. New Haven, July 2005.

Hollander, John. *Powers of Thirteen*. Atheneum: New York, 1983.

The poems in this collection were not easily found on the internet. If at all possible, the teacher should obtain a copy of this book, especially so that students can view the entire sequence of sonnets of 13 lines.

Hollander, John. *Rhyme's Reason, A Guide to English Verse*. Yale University Press: New Haven and London, 1981.

As mentioned in the unit, this slim volume contains witty verse written by Hollander to explain a variety of forms of poetry.

Johnson, Charles Frederick. *Forms of English Poetry*. Folcroft Library Editions, 1979. Retrieved July 26, 2005 from the World Wide Web: <http://www.sonnets.org/>

Mayes, Frances. *The Discovery of Poetry: A Field Guide to Reading and Writing Poetry*. Harcourt: New York, 2001.

I found this book to be extremely accessible because it was written for non-academics. Mayes loves poetry and wants to share her passion with the general public. Mayes teaches poetry at San Francisco State University and it seems as though the structure of the book might stem from the classes she has taught. There is plenty of advice concerning how to read and understand poetry, but she also offers many exercises for the writer of poetry.

Strand, Mark and Eavan Boland, ed. *The Making of a Poem: A Norton Anthology of Poetic Forms*. W.W. Norton and Co.: New York, 2000.

Another book that should be on classroom shelves, this is a comprehensive catalog of forms in English poetry, each chapter covering one form and providing examples. Both authors are poets themselves and they each write their own forward, explaining how they became acquainted with poetic form.

Wagner, Jennifer. *A Moment's Monument: Revisionary Poetics and the Nineteenth-Century English Sonnet*. Associated University Presses: Cranbury, N.J., 1996.

This academic treatise stemmed from Wagner's graduate work. Although the writing is dense, the reader will find many in depth and scholarly approaches to viewing the sonnet.

White, Gertrude and Joan Rosen. *A Moment's Monument: The Development of the Sonnet*. Charles Scribner's Sons: New York, 1972.

Although probably out of print, if a teacher can get her hands on this collection, she should. It includes a comprehensive sampling of sonnets throughout history and the commentaries written by the editors are very helpful.

WEBSITES FOR STUDENTS AND TEACHERS

Folger Shakespeare Library <http://www.folger.edu/>

At this website teachers can find lesson plans relating to all Shakespearean plays, but also to his sonnets.

Fooling With Words http://www.pbs.org/wnet/foolingwithwords/main_revise.html

Bill Moyers is responsible for creating this website, which is closely associated with a PBS series and a book. The website is mentioned here because of the helpful poetry revision suggestions provided.

Modern American Poetry <http://www.english.uiuc.edu/maps/>

This online journal and multimedia companion to the *Anthology of Modern American Poetry* is invaluable to teachers and students. Many poems are presented at this site as well as excerpts from essays related to the poems.

Sonnet Central <http://www.sonnets.org/>

This website will prove to be incredibly helpful to all teachers and students studying the sonnet. Almost all of the sonnets referred to in this curriculum unit can be found at this website. In addition there is much information regarding the history of the sonnet as well as a contest for sonnet writers.

Read Write Think <http://www.readwritethink.org/>

Maintained by the National Council of Teachers of English, this website provides a large assortment of lesson plans for teachers written by teachers. Several deal with the sonnet and close reading of poetry in general.