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Curriculum Units by Fellows of the National Initiative
2008 Volume I: Approaches to Teaching Shakespeare

Detecting Shakespeare's Sonnets

Guide for Curriculum Unit 08.01.10, published September 2008
by Deborah Samuel

In this curriculum unit, students will do close readings of Shakespeare's sonnets, connecting the nuances of his language, meter, and structure to the meaning. We will review the structure of a sonnet and notice its rhyme scheme, learn to scan the sonnet, interpret its meaning, and look for the shift in tone. Students will be working in groups and examine a number of sonnets organized by theme. The four themes are those found quite frequently in the sonnets: the power of love to change reality, attitudes toward love and lust, the never ending passage of time, and the power of poetry to bestow eternal life. With my guidance, students will search and hopefully find much evidence to discuss each theme intelligently, and will learn to carefully explicate the intricate workings of the sonnet. The culminating activity would be for each group to teach the class what they have discovered, proving their theses with evidence presented in power point presentations.

(Developed for AP English Literature and Composition, grade 12; recommended for English, High School grades)

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