In Eternal Lines: How and Why I Teach the Sonnets

Barry Gilmore
Lausanne Collegiate School
Memphis, Tennessee

I admit it: I resent Shakespeare. Every year when I plan my syllabi, I grumble about the amount of time I have to set aside for him—two weeks for a comedy, two or three for *Hamlet,* and, worst of all, at least six or seven classes to teach the sonnets. Add in the extra days any unit inevitably takes to complete, and this one author has just occupied almost an entire grading period.

Then I teach the sonnets, and I remember: they are worth all the trouble.

Not all my colleagues are so certain of this. If I teach two entire plays, they argue, do I really need to teach the sonnets? Would my time not be better spent teaching some other group of poems?

It might. But I would argue that the sonnets, if not crucial reading for students, are at the very least an invaluable tool for teaching them to read poetry. In fact, I would argue that there is almost no better place to start. Sure, the language can be tough, but experience has taught me that after a student learns to make sense of the sonnets, he or she will do a better job making sense of a poem by, say, Wordsworth, Giovanni, or cummings.

What follows is a description of how—and, I hope, why—I teach this body of poems.

Pre-reading exercises: rhyme, meter, and logic

Before students dive into the content of the sonnets, I think it is a good idea to demystify the structure and form. In particular, I want to prove to them that Shakespeare's sonnets are at the same time exercises in logic, artistic exploration, and emotional expression. I use these three exercises before we read a single poem.

1. Rhyme and Structure: Fourteen Words

This activity is one of my summer reading assignments. It is simple, really; I supply a list of fourteen words. Each student writes a fourteen-line poem. Each line has to end with one of the words on the list, and the words must be used in order. At this point, I don't even bring up the idea of meter.

These, for instance, are the first four in a list of fourteen words I supplied this year: *monuments, rhyme, contents, time.*

If these words sound familiar, it is for a good reason—they are in the first quatrain of Sonnet 55:

> Not marble nor the gilded monuments
> Of princes shall outlive this powerful rhyme,

But you shall shine more bright in
these contents
Than unswept stone, besmeared by
sluttish time.

The students, of course, do not know that they are competing with Shakespeare by using his words. It is an enjoyable exercise, and the results do not need to be outstanding, or even particularly good poetry, to demonstrate the point successfully—though it is exciting when they are. Here is one example:

That street performer at Monument
Park? Sure he could rhyme,
But what matters is content.
If he just gave his lyrics more time...
Overall, he needed more grace,
But his raspy voice was a good cover.
Still, it's too early for him to be facing
Defeat. Maybe we should've heard
another
Piece. And his vocab was pretty sweet,
But the arrangement just seemed like
frosting;
It's rare for the right words and syntax to meet
Up perfectly. And he did better than
most
Of them do. At least it was an original song;
Haven't heard anything like that for
so long...

-Joe Clark

Joe combined two of my lists of words to make his poem, so after the first quatrain he is no longer using Shakespeare's original list. But who cares? The result taught him exactly those lessons I wanted him to learn: that writing a sonnet is challenging but possible and that the rhyme scheme and structure (three quatrains and a couplet) help to determine shifts in meaning and imagery.

I do not mention the word *sonnet* anywhere in the assignment—it is enough for the students to play the game and figure out what they have accomplished later.

2. Meter: Running Down Stairs

A couple of years ago, I made a fantastic discovery, after which I sat on the bottom step of one of our school stairways and listened as students and teachers traveled up and down. One of the seniors stopped and asked me what I was doing.

"Two flights of stairs," I told her. "Ten stairs each. I'm listening to how people go up and down."

Sarah shook her head. "You've finally lost your mind."

"Maybe, but just listen."

Here's what was happening: as people walked up the stairs, they sounded like this:

Clump clump clump clump clump clump clump clump clump clump

And so on. But as students came rushing down the stairs, they'd do a sort of shuffle, favoring one foot over the other:

ba-D UM ba-D UM ba-D UM ba-DUM ba-D UM

Five "ba-DUMs," two times each: two perfect lines of iambic pentameter:

So LONG as MEN can BREATHE and EYES can SEE
So LONG lives THIS and THIS gives LIFE to THEE.

Sarah heard it, too. I wasn't losing my mind. That afternoon I took a class to the stairway and had Sarah walk up and run down the stairs a few times while we listened. Then I handed a sheet of paper to each of twenty students—one word from

the couplet above per sheet—and had them stand on the stairs and read the lines together. Then I gave them new sheets with a line that still contained ten syllables, but fewer than ten words:

Not MARble NOR the GILDed MONuMENTS

And then, a line of blank verse that didn't quite scan:

To BE or NOT to BE, that IS the QUESTion...

It took eleven students to complete this line, and the last one was just standing on the landing looking lost. The student holding the sheet with "is" written on it wasn't quite sure that syllable was really stressed. Thus, we had matters to discuss—is it more or less powerful to vary the iambic line? Why might it make more sense to vary the structure in a soliloquy than in a sonnet? How should such lines be read? Are they even still iambic?

No kidding, I now pass seniors on the stairs who recite the couplet of Sonnet 18 to me as they pass by.

3. *And Finally, Logic. If—Then—But—Therefore*

Rhyme and meter are tools, but understanding the logic of a Shakespearean sonnet is, I would argue, even more valuable. The sonnets demonstrate one of the most important rules students can learn about all poetry by all poets: that every poem goes somewhere—there is always a shift, development, or change in the poem (and often more than one).

Shakespeare makes it easy; his sonnets are exercises in logic that unfold like scientific experiments. The shifts are obvious and intentional and are signaled by important words:

- Hypothetical and conditional words such as "if" (followed by "then"), "when," "shall I?"
- Transitional words such as "but," "however," "yet," "still," "although"
- Concluding words such as "thus, "therefore," "so"

Before we even read the sonnets, I have classes play with these words: Each student gets three sheets of construction paper. On the red piece, he or she writes, in marker, an "if/then" statement:

If the shoes don't fit,
Then the socks won't either...

If the snows come early this year
Then we lose our crops...

On the green paper, each student writes a clause beginning with "but" (or a synonym):

But bears don't like to ice skate...
Still, there's no joy to be had in clean ing an oven...

And on the blue paper, a concluding statement beginning with "thus" or a similar word:

Thus fish will outnumber the stars.
Therefore, I will eat my Halloween candy in one night.

The enjoyable part of the assignment comes when we tape the papers to the walls in my room—red on one line, each green sheet underneath one red sheet, each blue sheet underneath one green sheet. No one is allowed to have more than one of his or her sheets in a column, so that the result is a ridiculous but logical statement:

If no one bothered to drive a car,
Then the streets would be empty,

But there are colder places than the snowy Plains and frozen hills;
Therefore we will sleep
And sleep and sleep.

Or:

If today were tomorrow,
Then tomorrow's tomorrow would be tomorrow;
Yet there's no value in an old sandwich,
So let's take a nap now.

When this exercise is finished, a student who looks at, say, Sonnet 138 (one of my favorites—"When my love swears that she is made of truth..."), can see a clear roadmap to the argument of the sonnet before he or she even reads the content:

Line 1 (start of quatrain 1): begins with "when"
Line 2: implied "then"
Line 5 (start of quatrain 2): begins with "thus"
Line 9 (start of quatrain 3): begins with "but"
Line 13 (start of couplet): begins with "therefore"

A simple paraphrase of this logical form might look like this:

When A happens,
Then B also happens,
And thus C happens, too.
But one must also consider D,
Therefore the conclusion (A, B, C and D all considered) is E.

Not every sonnet uses this exact structure, of course, but many use some variation—transition and concluding words make it fairly easy to see such patterns.

Rhyme and meter are tools used to build a sonnet, but the argument is fundamental to its architecture. With an understanding of all three, students are much better prepared to read the poems themselves.

Teaching the sonnets

After our pre-reading exercises, I assign eleven sonnets: 12, 18, 29, 55, 60, 73, 106, 116, 130, 138, and 143. I choose these eleven for their structure, beauty, and because together they offer a useful cross-section of the poems by which we can discuss the overall structure of the cycle. I teach the sonnets in order (though I sometimes start with Sonnet 18 just because students recognize the first line).

I am not usually a teacher who likes rigid structure, but I am rigid about how we read the sonnets, because I believe this technique works not just for these poems but for other poetry, as well. Here is my approach:

Step One. Identify likely transitions. Before we read the poem, I ask students to look for signals that transitions in meaning are occurring, especially the following:

- Major stops in punctuation (periods, question marks, semi-colons—not commas)
- Stanza breaks (some editions of the sonnets indent the couplet)
- Self-contained rhyming sections (in a Shakespearean sonnet, each quatrain is a self-contained unit of rhyme)
- Transition words

Step Two. Read the poem, preferably out loud. I try to emphasize that it is not crucial that students understand the poem on the first reading but that they do need to have some general understanding of overall content at this point.

Step Three: Mark the shifts. I insist that my students actually draw horizontal lines across the page to separate sections from one another. In a Shakespearean sonnet, it almost always works to draw lines between each quatrain and before the couplet: four sections of no more than four lines each. These sections, I tell my students, do not just mark shifts: they offer a way to digest the poem more easily by creating bite-size pieces rather than one enormous mouthful. In fact, such sectioning allows students who are also learning to write essays in which they explicate poetry to correlate the poem with paragraphs fairly easily.

This is a technique, incidentally, that I reinforce all year long. Months later, when we are practicing for the AP essay on a poem, I make my students draw those lines on poems by Margaret Atwell or Elizabeth Bishop. I want them to see the sections, the shifts in meaning—not to be able to ignore them.

Step Four: Paraphrase each section. The key to paraphrasing, I've found, is to make sure students are sticking to the *literal* events and ideas of the poem and not leaping, as students like to do, to figurative meanings. This is especially important when dealing with vocabulary and syntax four centuries old. Drawing—even with stick figures—can help students visualize the details and situations of a poem when verbal paraphrasing starts to break down.

Step Five: Now that you understand what the poem says, figure out what the poem means—what's the point? This step is tricky. Take, for instance, the famous Sonnet 18 ("Shall I compare thee to a summer's day?..."). According to my approach, here's what a student's notes on the poem might look like—the transition words and important punctuation marks are underlined, the sections have been created, and a basic, though unsophisticated, paraphrase has been added in italics:

Shall I compare thee to a summer's day?
Thou art more lovely and more temperate:
Rough winds do shake the darling buds of May,
And summer's lease hath all too short a date;

Should I compare you to a summer 's day? You are prettier and more even-tempered and there are problems with summer: it can be rough and it does not last very long...

Sometimes too hot the eye of heaven shines,
And often is his gold complexion dimmed;
And every fair from fair sometimes declines,
By chance or nature's changing course untrimmed;

And sometimes it's too hot, and sometimes it gets dark, and everything beautiful fades eventually...

But thy eternal summer shall not fade,
Nor lose possession of that fair thou ow'st;
Nor shall death brag thou wand'rest in his shade,
When in eternal lines to Time thou grow'st:

But you won't fade and your beauty won 't disappear. You won 't die.

So long as men can breathe, and eyes can see,

So long lives this, and this
gives life to thee.

You will live forever through my poetry.

So what's the overall meaning? Simple, right? *You are better than summer because you can live forever through my poetry.* There is a nice bit of tension in the poem created by the assertion that the "you" will not die before the reasons for that assertion become clear.

The poem is not that simple, though, and students realize that when they start discussing the implications of the poem. Has the "you" really lived forever? In one sense, yes—we are still reading the poem. But what do we know about this person? Not much—scholars aren't even certain whether the poem is addressed to a male or a female. So the person who really lives forever through the poem—Shakespeare himself—is perhaps more important; this may be not so much a love poem as a poem about the power of poetry and about confronting one's own mortality.

A paraphrase should not be nebulous, but meaning may—multiple meanings might be acceptable, even contradictory possibilities. The key is being able to understand the poem well enough to discuss and justify interpretations.

Step Six. Now—and only now—look at how style reinforces meaning. This is the time to look at rhetorical devices such as similes, metaphors, and alliteration. It is also the time to think about irony, tone, diction, syntax, and other elements of style. How does the metaphor in line five ("the eye of heaven") or the alliteration in line eight ("chance...changing") make a difference to our understanding of meaning? What are the possible meanings of the phrase "eternal lines" in line twelve—is this a pun?

Many students want to make such devices ends in themselves. "Why is there a metaphor in line five?" I might ask my class.

"Because that's what poetry does," someone will answer.

Or another popular response: "Because it makes the poem more interesting."

Or my favorite: "If he just said *the sun* it wouldn't be in iambic pentameter."

Those reasons may be true, but they aren't sufficient. Why is there a metaphor in line five? Does Shakespeare mean to put a religious element into this poem? Is the reference to sight an important part of a poem about beauty? How does the image relate to the overall meaning we established in step five—or does it? Another rule of poetry evolves here: rhetoric exists to reinforce meaning, not for its own sake.

Step Seven: Look at how form reinforces meaning. After we have read a few sonnets, it becomes pretty clear that the sonnet form is related to meaning—one idea per quatrain, etc. But this is a useful exercise for preparing students to read other poetry; does another poet choose his or her form, stanza length, meter, or rhyme scheme for a reason related to content? Again, the crucial element of this part of your reading is not just to accept that the meter, for instance, is chosen at random (Theodore Roethke's poem "My Papa's Waltz" does not contain three beat lines for no reason). Consider, in Sonnet 18, the placement of pauses, the forcefulness of certain words, and how the poet capitalizes on the meter to create a specific rhythm to the sentiment. Form and structure, like rhetoric and style, exist to support the content of the poem.

Step Eight. Read the poem again. It is tempting to skip this step, but you

shouldn't. There is nothing like rereading a poem out loud with students who now "get it."

There's also a final step that inevitably comes into play. After every sonnet we study, there is another kind of discussion to be had in class, a personal one. Do we believe that one achieves a sort of immortality through having children? Is it better to be blinded by love or realistic about the state of a relationship? Do we really, as Sonnet 73 suggests, love those things which we are about to lose more for the impending loss? Such discussions must be organic and open, so they are tough to plan for—but they make up my favorite memories of classes year after year.

The big picture: putting the sonnets in context

One could, of course, spend weeks in a class discussing the historical, political, and biographical context of the 154 sonnets Shakespeare wrote just as one could with any of his plays. My interest is more immediate: I like students to consider the transitions and shift of meaning not just within a single one of the poems, but also within the sonnet cycle itself.

It is not generally thought that Shakespeare published the sonnets in the exact order in which they were written—it is not even certain that he ordered and numbered them himself. But I do believe that there is a recognizable development in the narrative voice of the sonnets and that students can trace this development fairly easily. Even here, one could spend days discussing the identities of the fair youth or the dark lady of the poems, possibilities of cycles within the cycles, and so forth. Before I share too much of the research and common critical thought about these issues with the students, I like to see what they can come up with on their own.

Here are the steps I use:

- First, I ask students to identify the worldly, physical, or immediate problem Shakespeare is confronting in each poem. We make a list on the board: he's worried about death (12, 18, 55); about his own depression and poverty (29); about the fact that his lover is not traditionally beautiful (130); about his lover cheating (138, 143).
- Next, I ask students to identify the solution—spiritual or worldly, long-term or immediate—that Shakespeare reaches. Again, a list: his lover can live forever through his poem (18, 55) or through children (12); love lifts his spirits (29); he accepts his lover as she is (130); he resigns himself to ignore the cheating (138).
- I ask these questions:
    - o What changes in subject matter occur from the early sonnets to the late sonnets? How accurately can we pinpoint these changes?
    - o What changes occur in the narrator's voice? How do these shifts change your impression of the "I" of each poem?
    - o Do the sonnets seem to come in groups of any kind?
    - o If Shakespeare chose this order for the poems, why would you guess he did so?

The lists of problems and solutions above are fairly revealing—students will often point out the shift from a youthful, optimistic, idealistic, and hopeful narrator in the early sonnets to a practical, cynical, and physical narrator in the late sonnets. They will point out the shift from general solutions of a spiritual or abstract nature to specific, short-term solutions and from a focus on broad issues (mortality, art) to narrow issues (sexuality, relationships).

If the students have read any of Shakespeare's plays, this is a good place to discuss how one playwright could so convincingly write both comedies and tragedies and to make comparisons between the two bodies of work, as well.

Following up: beyond fourteen lines

Understanding the sonnets means understanding more about poetry. I use the groundwork I lay with the sonnets to build interpretations throughout the course. Here are some examples:

- In *Hamlet,* we study Claudius' first speech to the court, which uses a logical structure very similar to the logical structure of the sonnets, with similar transition words and argumentation.
- We examine the scene in which Romeo and Juliet first meet and speak to one another—a beautiful sonnet in the middle of the play.
- When we study other poems, we use the same process—identifying shifts, paraphrasing, looking for overall meaning, applying that meaning to a discussion of style and rhetoric.

The pattern is one my students find helpful in demystifying poetry by nineteenth-and twentieth-century poets as well as those from earlier eras.

I also like to follow our study of the sonnets with more immediate forms of assessment and synthesis:

- All my students write a sonnet themselves, using Shakespeare's meter and rhyme scheme and in some way reflecting or reacting to an idea from one of the sonnets we have studied.
- My AP class writes a timed, AP-style essay on Sonnet 60. The prompt is simple: "Read the following sonnet carefully, noting the series of metahors used to describe the passage of time. Then, in a well-organized essay, discuss how the poet achieves meaning in the poem through elements such as structure, language, and comparison."
- Students choose another sonnet and write a short paraphrase and analysis of that poem.
- I often ask students to memorize and perform (there are many possibilities for performance besides dramatic recitation, from puppet shows to musical settings) all or part of one of the sonnets.

Conclusion

Is the study of Shakespeare's sonnets worthwhile? Again and again, I believe the answer is yes. I think that many students come to me with the sense that poetry is a murky quagmire of hidden meanings and vague innuendos, that teachers are always "reading too much into" a poem or have some secret code for unlocking a poet's ideas. They have been taught, all too often, that a poem "means whatever you want it to mean," leaving them with the sense that most poems mean nothing at all. They are afraid to analyze, to take a stand; and they certainly do not think of poetry as logical or sensible stuff.

Shakespeare proves them wrong. He makes sense. He tries to communicate. He is not out to trick us or to hide ideas from us—though he is being clever, witty, and sophisticated in his logic. It is worth looking up a few words or dealing with a tricky bit of syntax to convey this sense of intention in poetry to students.

The sonnets also contain beautiful poetry that challenges students to reflect on broad and narrow issues in our own lives—they do, in other words, what poetry is meant to do. If students feel that sense of connection and understanding with just one of these poems, I count it a victory; and I make my syllabus for the next year knowing that our time with these poems will be well spent.