Daily Bard

LESSON PLANS

Shakespeare's Sonnets: three lesson plans

Three hour-long lessons that teach the sonnet form through Sonnet 18, anti-Petrarchan satire through Sonnet 130, and comparison through Sonnets 73 and 116, with a printable worksheet and indicative answers.



LEVEL
Ages 14-18 (GCSE, A-level, AP Lit, IB); adaptable for first-year seminars

SEQUENCE
3 lessons of 60 minutes

FOCUS
Sonnet form and the volta; Petrarchan convention and satire; time and constancy; comparing poems

YOU WILL NEED
Copies of Sonnets 18, 130, 73 and 116; the worksheet below; scissors and envelopes for Lesson 1; highlighters

Overview

This sequence needs no prior knowledge of the Sonnets, only a willingness to read fourteen lines several times. It teaches the form first, because every later judgement depends on it, then uses that knowledge to read a satire and to compare two poems. Background on the 1609 sequence is in the Sonnets study guide.

- Students will be able to identify quatrains, couplet, rhyme scheme and volta, and explain how each shapes an argument.
- Students will be able to explain Petrarchan convention and analyse how Sonnet 130 mocks it.
- Students will be able to compare how Sonnets 73 and 116 present love and time, integrating both poems in one paragraph.
- Students will be able to write about "the speaker" using precise terminology.

Assessment focus. The lessons build a supported personal response (AO1) and close analysis of language, form and structure (AO2), with literary context, chiefly the Petrarchan tradition, used where it explains a choice (AO3). Lesson 3 practises comparison, and older students can weigh alternative readings of Sonnet 116. See the assessment map for the general alignment.

Lesson 1: The form and the turn (Sonnet 18)

Key question: How does the shape of a sonnet shape its argument?

- Identify the parts of a Shakespearean sonnet.
- Locate the volta in Sonnet 18 and explain what changes there.

- Analyse how the couplet completes the argument.

TIME	ACTIVITY	WHY
0-8 min	**Starter.** Pairs receive Sonnet 18 cut into four strips (three quatrains and the couplet) in an envelope, and put them in order, using rhyme and sense as clues.	Students discover the structure for themselves before it is named.
8-18 min	**Teaching input.** Reveal the order. Name quatrain, couplet, rhyme scheme (abab cdcd efef gg) and volta. Clap the five beats of *"Shall I compare thee to a summer's day?"* and define iambic pentameter.	Supplies the vocabulary; hearing the metre is more reliable than counting it.
18-33 min	**Main task 1.** Students label each quatrain with a five-word summary. Questions: what is wrong with summer in lines 3-8? Which legal word appears in *"summer's lease hath all too short a date"*, and why is it apt?	Tracks the argument step by step.
33-45 min	**Main task 2.** Highlight the first word of line 9, *"But thy eternal summer shall not fade"*. Pairs write what the poem claims before and after "But". Then annotate the couplet: what does *"this"* refer to?	Fixes the volta as a change in argument, not just a line number.
45-55 min	**Discussion.** Is this a love poem about a person, or a poem about poetry? What do we actually learn about the beloved?	Introduces a debatable reading.
55-60 min	**Plenary.** Three-sentence exit ticket: "In the quatrains ... At the volta ... The couplet ...".	Checks that structure is tied to meaning.

Differentiation

- **Support:** strips printed with rhyme words in bold; a glossary for *"temperate"*, *"untrimmed"* and *"ow'st"*.
- **Core:** complete summaries and the exit ticket using two terms correctly.
- **Stretch:** explore the double sense of *"eternal lines"* and read the essay on "Shall I compare thee".

Assessment and homework

Exit tickets should name the volta and say what turns. Homework: learn the couplet by heart and write a four-line summary of the poem's argument. As a small daily habit, students with an iPhone or iPad can read the page in Daily Bard each morning and try to put the passage into plain English before turning the leaf.

Lesson 2: Praise without lies (Sonnet 130)

Key question: Is Sonnet 130 an insult, a joke or a love poem?

- Understand the conventions of Petrarchan praise.
- Analyse how Shakespeare overturns each convention.
- Evaluate the effect of the late volta.

TIME	ACTIVITY	WHY
0-7 min	**Starter.** Students complete compliments in the most predictable way: "eyes like …", "lips as red as …", "skin as white as …", "a voice like …". Collect answers on the board.	Shows that cliché is still alive, and builds the list the poem will attack.
7-16 min	**Teaching input.** Explain Petrarchan convention: the idealised lady praised feature by feature. Explain that readers of the 1590s knew many such sonnets.	Context that makes the satire visible.
16-31 min	**Main task 1.** Read Sonnet 130 aloud twice. In a two-column table, students set each convention against Shakespeare's version, for example sun against *"nothing like the sun"*, music against *"I love to hear her speak"*.	Makes the method of reversal explicit.
31-43 min	**Main task 2.** Tone hunt. Rate lines 1-12 from harsh to affectionate. Discuss *"reeks"* (in Shakespeare's time closer to "is breathed out" than to "stinks") and *"treads on the ground"*. Where does the speaker sound fond?	Prevents the misreading that the poem is merely rude.
43-54 min	**Discussion.** Read the couplet. Who is criticised by *"belied with false compare"*: the mistress or other poets? Why delay the turn until line 13?	Connects structure to purpose.
54-60 min	**Plenary.** Vote on the key question, then write one sentence justifying the vote with a quotation.	Commits each student to an evidenced judgement.

Differentiation

- **Support:** a part-completed table and glosses for *"dun"* and *"damasked"*.
- **Core:** complete the table and explain the couplet.
- **Stretch:** compare the turn at line 9 in Sonnet 18 with the turn at line 13 here. What does each placement allow?

Assessment and homework

Listen for students attributing the falseness to the comparisons, not the woman. Homework: write a paragraph on how the couplet changes the meaning of the first twelve lines, using the close reading toolkit.

Lesson 3: Time and constancy (Sonnets 73 and 116)

Key question: Does love defeat time, or does time make love stronger?

- Analyse the three images of Sonnet 73 and its couplet.
- Analyse how Sonnet 116 defines love against time.
- Write a comparative paragraph that moves between both poems.

TIME	ACTIVITY	WHY
0-6 min	**Starter.** Quick write: "Do we value things more when we know they will end?" Two minutes, then three responses heard.	Opens the idea behind Sonnet 73's couplet.
6-22 min	**Main task 1.** Read Sonnet 73 on the worksheet. Complete questions 1-5: the three images, the shrinking timescale, the couplet.	Secure reading of one poem before comparing.
22-36 min	**Main task 2.** Read Sonnet 116. Students underline every negative (not, no, never, nor) and circle the two images of what love is: *"an ever-fixed mark"* and *"the star to every wand'ring bark"*. Question: why define love mostly by what it is not?	Gives a concrete way into an abstract poem.
36-44 min	**Comparison grid.** Pairs complete three rows for each poem: how Time appears; what love does in response; what the couplet risks.	Organises points of comparison before writing.
44-56 min	**Writing.** One comparative paragraph on the key question. Success criteria: both poems named in the opening sentence; one quotation from each; a comparing connective (whereas, similarly, by contrast); one comment on form.	Individual, assessable outcome.
56-60 min	**Plenary.** Students swap and tick each success criterion in a partner's paragraph.	Peer assessment reinforces the criteria.

Differentiation

- **Support:** stems: "In Sonnet 73 time is shown as … whereas in Sonnet 116 …".
- **Core:** meet all four success criteria.

- **Stretch:** does the dare in *"If this be error, and upon me proved"* sound confident or anxious? Read the essay on Sonnet 116 and decide.

Assessment and homework

Mark the paragraph against the criteria, looking above all for movement between the poems within sentences. Homework: extend it into a full comparison using the essay planner.

Student worksheet: Sonnet 73 and the turn towards Sonnet 116

> That time of year thou mayst in me behold
> When yellow leaves, or none, or few, do hang
> Upon those boughs which shake against the cold,
> Bare ruined choirs where late the sweet birds sang.
> In me thou see'st the twilight of such day
> As after sunset fadeth in the west,
> Which by and by black night doth take away,
> Death's second self, that seals up all in rest.
> In me thou see'st the glowing of such fire
> That on the ashes of his youth doth lie,
> As the death-bed whereon it must expire,
> Consumed with that which it was nourished by.
> This thou perceiv'st, which makes thy love more strong,
> To love that well which thou must leave ere long.
>
> SONNET 73

1. Each quatrain compares the speaker to something. Name the three things.
2. What do the three images have in common?
3. Look at the lengths of time involved: a year, a day, a fire. What happens to the timescale as the poem goes on, and what is the effect?
4. What is *"Death's second self"*? Why might Shakespeare describe it that way?
5. Explain the paradox in *"Consumed with that which it was nourished by"*.
6. The phrases *"thou mayst in me behold"* and *"In me thou see'st"* keep returning. Whose attention is the speaker directing, and why?
7. In the couplet, what effect does the speaker say his ageing has on the listener's love? Do you read this as a fact, a hope or a request?
8. Sonnet 116 says *"Love alters not with his brief hours and weeks"*. Does Sonnet 73 agree that love ignores time? Explain your view.

Writing task. Compare how Shakespeare presents the relationship between love and time in Sonnet 73 and Sonnet 116. Write one paragraph of 150-180 words.

- Name both poems in your first sentence and state a clear comparison.
- Quote briefly from each poem.
- Comment on at least one feature of form or structure (quatrains, volta, couplet).

- Use a comparing connective and finish with a judgement.

Teacher notes and indicative answers

1. Late autumn; twilight; a dying fire.
2. Each is an ending in which something of the earlier fullness remains: a few leaves, fading light, a glow.
3. It shrinks from a season to an evening to the last minutes of a fire. Death seems to come closer and the poem's focus tightens.
4. Night, or the sleep it brings: a daily rehearsal of death, which *"seals up all in rest"*.
5. The ashes that choke the fire are the remains of the fuel that fed it. Life is used up by living.
6. The listener's. The poem is an act of persuasion: the speaker controls what the beloved sees.
7. It makes that love stronger. Accept any reasoned view; the best answers note that the confident statement may conceal a plea.
8. Not quite. In Sonnet 116 love is constant because it disregards time; in Sonnet 73 love intensifies because it perceives time.

Model paragraph. Both sonnets set love against time, but they disagree about how love responds. Sonnet 116 presents love as unmoved: it is *"an ever-fixed mark"*, and it *"alters not"* though Time's sickle cuts down beauty. Sonnet 73, by contrast, makes time the cause of love's strength. Its three quatrains narrow from a year to a dying fire, and the couplet turns to the listener, whose love grows *"more strong"* because it *"must leave ere long"*. Where Sonnet 116 offers a general definition built on negatives, Sonnet 73 is addressed to one person, so its certainty reads as a quiet appeal.

Extending the sequence

To go further, add Sonnet 29 as an unseen poem and ask students to find its volta unaided, or set one of the essay questions in the **study guide**. The **Sonnets quotation sheet** gathers the key lines for retrieval practice, and the **guide to Shakespeare's language** explains metre and "thou". Classes studying a play alongside can trace the sonnet form into drama through **Romeo and Juliet**, whose lovers share a sonnet at their first meeting. Between lessons, **the Daily Bard app** offers one Folger-verified passage a day with a plain-English reading, a gentle way to keep paraphrase in practice, though no substitute for reading the poems whole. A printable version of these plans is available as a **PDF**.



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