

National Poetry Month

Lesson: Sounds of the Sonnet

Introduction

"Pleasure" is probably not the first word that springs to the mind of a high school student required to study *rhyme schemes*, *iambic pentameter*, *enjambment*, *quatrains*, and *epigrammatic couplets*. While teaching some of the formal terms used to describe sonnets will be one of the aims of this lesson, our starting point and central focus throughout will be learning to appreciate the *sounds* of poetry. For it is in sound--and in the subtle interplay of sound and form and meaning--that much of the pleasure of poetry resides. By focusing on the sounds of poetry, the exercises below seek to demonstrate that there is always an underlying sense of form or structure at work in language, whether we happen to know the names for the formal elements of poetry or not.

At the heart of the lesson are its seven **sound experiments**, designed to help students understand how form, meter, and rhythm all combine to shape our experience of poetry, and the meanings we derive from it. After some preliminary sound experiments with Lewis Carroll's nonsense poem, "**Jabberwocky**," we turn to Shakespeare's **Sonnet 29**, a model of how the sonnet form, with its dense knitting together of sound and meaning, can suggest an astonishing variety of emotional effects.

In the capstone activity, **sound experiment 7**, students choose a sonnet from the **Sonnet Bank**, a collection of links to online sonnets, organized into historical periods from Elizabethan England to Twentieth Century America, and drawn from a diverse group of well- and lesser-known writers. The resources of the **Sonnet Bank** hint at the remarkable durability and adaptability of the sonnet form, and hint as well at the extensive online resources for studying poetry.

Guiding Question

How does author's choice of sound and meter structure influence meaning in poetry?

Ohio's Learning Standards

RL.9-12.1 CLOSE READING/CITE TEXT; **RL.9-12.2** DETERMINE/ANALYZE/SUMMARIZE CENTRAL IDEAS/ THEMES/ SUPPORTING DETAILS; **RL.9-12.3** ANALYZE HOW/WHY INTERACTIONS; **RL.9-12.4** INTERPRET WORD MEANING/ANALYZE DICTION; **RL.9-12.5** ANALYZE STRUCTURE; **RL.9-12.6** HOW P.O.V./PURPOSE SHAPE CONTENT/STYLE; **RL.9-12.10** READ/COMPREHEND COMPLEX TEXTS; **W.9-12.4** PRODUCE CLEAR/ COHERENT WRITING; **W.9-12.9** USE LITERARY TEXTUAL EVIDENCE; **SL.9-12.1** PREPARE FOR/ENGAGE IN COLLABORATIVE DISCUSSIONS; **L.9-12.4** DETERMINE/CLARIFY WORD MEANINGS; **L.6-12.5** DEMONSTRATE UNDERSTANDING OF FIGURATIVE LANGUAGE/WORD RELATIONSHIPS/MEANING NUANCES; **L.9-12.6** ACQUIRE/USE ACADEMIC & DOMAIN-SPECIFIC VOCAB

Lesson Activities

Activity 1. Learning from Nonsense

- Hand out copies or have students look at digital copies of "**Jabberwocky**," by Lewis Carroll, available at <https://www.poets.org/poetsorg/poem/jabberwocky>. Give students time to read it silently on their own for the first reading and have them make a situation chart at the bottom of the poem or on their own paper.

Who is speaking or narrating?	
To Whom?	
About What? (Subject)	
When? Where?	
Why? (Purpose)	
Tone?	

Read it aloud to them for the second reading, having them annotate the text using the "Close Reading_Unlocking Poetry" Guide from the Reading Resources at the ELA Strand Resources Quick Link link on the ELA 6-12 Webpage <https://tinyurl.com/CCSEnglish6-12>. Ask the class to summarize the action of the poem, and make sure everyone has a sense of the scene that is being described.

- SOUND EXPERIMENT 1:** Have students stand up and assume a bearing appropriate to the poem—boastful, pompous, as if recounting an exaggerated account of their own heroism, perhaps waving their imaginary vorpal swords in the air. Now have everyone sit down and hunch over the poem. Ask them to read as if they were recounting a horror story around a campfire. Students should speak in a raspy or creepy voice and fill their speech with dramatic pauses, gestures, grimaces, and wide-eyed staring to punctuate their tales of fear and terror.
 - Discuss the contrasting effects of these two styles of reading. Did anyone picture the scene being described? How can we understand and even visualize the events, if most of the words used to describe those events are nonsensical? How is meaning conveyed, if not by the literal meanings of words? On the board, try to list the ways that a poem, particularly a poem read aloud, conveys its meaning. Note that one of the reasons the poem conveys meaning is that its nonsense words are not, in fact, complete nonsense, that they convey information because they correspond to recognizable parts of speech—nouns, verbs, adjectives. Use this to introduce the main point of this exercise and lesson (see the guiding question, above).
 - Point out that poetic meter is another kind of underlying form or structure in poetry that affects meaning. Explain that *iambic* meter refers to accentual feet of an unstressed followed by a stressed syllable. To illustrate the sound and effect of iambic meter, read aloud stanzas five and six of "**Jabberwocky**"; notice that in one of the lines—"Come to my arms, my beamish boy!"—the iamb is reversed at the beginning. This reversed iamb is called a trochee. (Here's a mnemonic: You can remember the difference between iamb and *trochee* by saying iamb the way Popeye might say it: "i AMB what i AMB." To remember "trochee," say it quickly as if you were clearing your throat: "TRO chee, TRO chee.") Point out to students that a good poet will always vary the meter, and that these variations contribute to meaning. How, for example, does the metrical variation in the line, "Come to my arms..." change the feeling of the line, and therefore contribute to its meaning? How does it enhance the story being told?

- **SOUND EXPERIMENT 2:** The purpose of this experiment is to demonstrate how meter is as much a matter of what we expect to hear as it an intrinsic property of the words themselves. Meter in English poetry, as we will see, has subjective as well objective aspects. Let's start with the subjective aspects of meter. An example of a sound pattern that exists only in our minds is the *tick-tock* of clocks. Objectively, the sound might be a steady *tick-tick-tick*, but the pattern-loving human mind will hear tick-tock, tick-tock, tick-tock. Another example: have you ever been kept awake by a dripping faucet that seemed to take on rhythmic pattern--*drip, drop, drippety-drippety, drip, drop?*

In a sense, the human mind is wired for poetry. To illustrate the role of pattern in our minds, have the class reread (everyone at the same time) stanzas four and five while exaggerating the iambic meter (what Shakespearean actors call a "singsong" reading). The idea here is to imprint the pattern as strongly as possible in the minds of listeners. Next, have one person reread the same stanzas with normal emphasis; you might want to do this, rather than asking a student to read, because it's important this time to avoid any trace of iambic "singsong." This experiment can have some surprising effects! Discuss what effect hearing the poem read the second time had on listeners. Could they still "hear" the strong iambic ta-DA just below the surface?

- In the next experiment in sound, we will learn how that "surface" constitutes a second level of pattern: *rhythm*. As we will see in our experiments with the sounds of Shakespeare's **Sonnet 29**, a skilled poet is able to play meter and rhythm against each other in meaningful ways.

Activity 2. The Shakespearean Sonnet

- Hand out copies or have students look at digital copies of **Sonnet 29**, "When in disgrace with fortune and men's eyes..." available at <https://www.poets.org/poetsorg/poem/when-disgrace-fortune-and-mens-eyes-sonnet-29>. Using instructions and links from Activity 1, give students time to read the poem silently and make a situation chart. Have them annotate the poem on the second read using the "Close Reading_Unlocking Poetry" Guide and ask questions about any unfamiliar words or syntax. As a class, discuss the literal meaning of the poem: What is happening? What is the speaker feeling? Where and why does that feeling change?
- **SOUND EXPERIMENT 3:** First, have everyone stand up on their feet, assuming a defiant and boastful stance. All students should now read **Sonnet 29** with as much bombast and triumph as possible. Now have students sit down and read the entire poem in a whisper. They should not read too quickly, and they should read as if they were very sad (perhaps punctuating their speech with heavy sighs). Neither of these readings, of course, is entirely accurate. Discuss their different effects. Which one best fits the poem? Where are the places that do not fit one style of delivery or the other? Are there emotional shifts in the poem? If so, where are they, and how could a person reading aloud modulate his or her voice to express those shifts accurately, perhaps by combining aspects of the two delivery styles we practiced earlier? As you discuss particular lines or sections, ask your students to mark down the points at which these emotional shifts occur.

- Now step back a bit and look at the text on the paper. What kinds of punctuation do you see? Where do the pauses fall? Which kind of pause do students think should be longest: semicolon, dash, or comma? If you look at the poem as a whole, could you divide pieces of it into stand alone sentences? Where would you make the division? Finally, look at lines 11 and 12: "Like to the lark at break of day arising / From sullen earth sings hymns at heaven's gate." Notice that the syntax of the sentence runs over the end of line 11: point out to students that this is called *enjambment*. Again, have students note these features on their copy of the poem.
All the sentence and phrase level features we have been examining constitute the rhythm of the poem. Ordinary conversational speech has its own distinct rhythms, as do formal speeches or sports broadcasts or rap music. Rhythm, like meter, expresses meaning. Compare the notes you made on the rhythm of the poem to the places where you found emotional shifts. What kinds of correspondences do you find?
- **SOUND EXPERIMENT 4:** Now redo the exercise described in **Sound Experiment 2**, this time with **Sonnet 29**. Have the entire class read the sonnet with an exaggerated emphasis on the iambic meter. (Before you read, this might be a good time to introduce the term *iambic pentameter*. Demonstrate the meaning of this term by writing one line of the sonnet on the board, and dividing it into five metrical feet.) Tell students to force the iambic ta DA, ta DA, even if it doesn't seem quite right for the line they are reading.

For it turns out that it is difficult to read Sonnet 29 in this way, despite the fact that it's iambic pentameter. Did your students find that there were places where it was hard to maintain the iambic meter? Was this harder or easier than reading Carroll's poem in an iambic "singsong"? What might account for the difference?

Point out to students that the places where they may have stumbled, where they felt that they were forcing the iambic meter upon the words, probably indicate *metrical variation*. Such variation is employed for expressive purposes--and Shakespeare's meter is constantly varied (in fact, it is sometimes difficult to find lines of unvaried iambic pentameter). As a class, try to locate the places of metrical variation in this poem, the places where you stumbled in your singsong reading. Now, look again at your notes on the rhythm of the poem and its emotional shifts. Is there any correspondence? Does metrical variation contribute to meaning in this poem? (Don't worry if you can't assign a meaning to every single variation--just have students keep these places in mind as they complete the next two experiments in sound.)

- **SOUND EXPERIMENT 5:** Now ask students to read the poem silently to themselves. Ask them to try to imagine a voice not their own. It could be a deep male voice, or a woman's voice. They could even try to imagine Shakespeare's voice. The point is to imagine the sound of a voice and to try to really "hear" it in their minds. After everyone has had a chance to read through the sonnet in this way, discuss any discoveries they made about the sonnet. Could they hear the pauses, the rhythm, as well as the expressive variations in meter? Could they feel the places in the poem where an emotional shift occurred?

- Now may be a good time to introduce some of the formal terms that are used to describe the structure of a sonnet—what makes the sonnet a sonnet and not something else? You might think of these as a third level of form, the foundation "beneath" the levels of meter and rhythm. Introduce the distinction between a Shakespearean or English sonnet, which divides its 14 lines into three quatrains and a couplet, with the rhyme scheme abab cdcd efef gg; and a Petrarchan sonnet (the Italian original from which the English imitation was derived), which divides its 14 lines into an eight-line octave and a six-line sestet, with the rhyme scheme abbaabba cdecde. An example of a Petrarchan sonnet, translated into English but retaining the Petrarchan rhyme scheme, is Thomas Wyatt's "The long love that in my heart doth harbor" (see the **Sonnet Bank** below for more details).

Petrarch's model had established the custom of presenting a problem, situation, or incident in the octave, followed by a resolution in the sestet. But English poets eventually developed a more flexible sonnet form which could be divided not only into octave and sestet, in the manner of Petrarch, but also into three quatrain-length variations on a theme followed by an epigrammatic couplet. Shakespeare uses this form, quatrains followed by couplet, to embody the nuances of shifting emotion and thought. On their copies of the poem, have students write letters corresponding to different line endings. Note how these groups of rhyme create quatrains. Draw lines indicating the divisions into quatrains and a final couplet. How does this form correspond to the shifts of rhythm, meter, and emotion that you detected earlier? How do sound and formal structure (the three quatrains followed by epigrammatic couplet) work together to produce an emotional effect on the reader?

- **SOUND EXPERIMENT 6 (Optional):** This exercise involves watching an online video available at http://www.favoritepoem.org/favoritepoem/poem_Sonnet29.html from the **Favorite Poem Project**. On the video, Daniel McCall, an 81-year-old retired anthropologist, speaks about how a poem he memorized when he was in seventh grade, Shakespeare's Sonnet 29, has stayed with him all his life. Sometimes there is a strange and wonderful alchemy between the performer of a poem and the poem itself. The poem takes on something of the personality of the speaker, and the personality of the speaker is revealed in the words of the poem. After speaking briefly about his life, Daniel McCall recites Sonnet 29, conveying to us a sense of words imbued with a lifetime of experience and feeling. (Just possibly, his example might inspire some students to memorize a sonnet themselves!)

Activity 3. Sonnet Bank

- **SOUND EXPERIMENT 7:** Individually or in groups, have students select a sonnet from this **Sonnet Bank** and use it to assess student mastery of standards. Students should use some or all of the Close Reading Strategies and Sound Experiments (1-6) Activities they used with "Jabberwocky" and "Sonnet 29" to analyze their new poem. They should explore the sonnet at the meter, rhythm, and form levels in order to discern meaning. The students should write a brief analysis of how sound and meter affects meaning in their chosen sonnet. They may also produce a recording of a chosen sonnet and share with other students.

1. Elizabethan and 17th Century Sonnets

- Sonnets by Shakespeare:
 - "When to the sessions of sweet silent thought" (Sonnet 30)
 - "My mistress' eyes are nothing like the sun" (Sonnet 130)
 - "Not marble nor the gilded monuments" (Sonnet 55)
 - "That time of year thou mayst in me behold" (Sonnet 73)
 - "When in disgrace with fortune and men's eyes" (Sonnet 29)
- A complete text of Shakespeare's sonnets is available at Shakespeare's Sonnets
 - "Like as the waves make toward the pebb'l'd shore" (Sonnet 60)
 - "Let me not to the marriage of true minds" (Sonnet 116)
- Thomas Wyatt, "The long love that in my heart doth harbor" (translated from Petrarch)
- Milton, "Methought I saw my late espoused saint"
- Donne, "Death Be Not Proud" (Holy Sonnet 10)
- Lady Mary Wroth, "Come darkest Night, becomming sorrow best," "Flye hence, O Joy, no longer heere abide"

2. Romantic Poets

- Lord Byron, "On the Castle of Chillon"
- John Keats, "Bright Star"
 - "When I have Fears"
 - "On First Looking Into Chapman's Homer"
- Percy Shelley, "Ozymandius"
- Horace Smith, "On a Stupendous Leg of Granite, Discovered Standing by Itself in the Deserts of Egypt, with the Inscription Inserted Below"
- Mary Tighe, "Sonnet Addressed to My Mother," dedicatory poem for her longer allegorical work, *Psyche*
- Helen Maria Williams, "Sonnet to Hope," "Sonnet to Twilight"
- William Wordsworth, "Composed Upon Westminster Bridge, September 3, 1802"
- Wordsworth, "The World Is Too Much With Us, Late and Soon"

3. British Victorian and 19th Century American Poets

- Louisa Sarah Bevington, "I Thought I was quite happy yesterday (from Victorian Women Writers Project)"
- Elisabeth Barrett Browning, "How Do I Love Thee?"
 - "My Letters! all dead paper ... (Sonnet XXVIII)"
 - "If Thou Must Love Me"
 - "Is it indeed so? If I lay here dead"
- Christina Rossetti, "REMEMBER me when I am gone away," "Aloof"
- Edward Arlington Robinson, "Oh for a poet for a beacon bright"
- Emma Lazarus, "STILL northward is the central mount of Maine"
 - "The New Colossus," American Verse Project
- Dante Rossetti (Sonnets to be chosen from The Rossetti Archive)
- Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, "O River of Yesterday, with current swift"
- Edgar Allan Poe, "Sonnet to Zante, Sonnet to Science"

4. 20th Century Americans

- Branch, Anna Hempstead (1875–1937), “A SONNET FOR THE EARTH”
- Louise Bogan, “Sonnet”
- Gwendolyn Brooks, "The Sonnet-Ballad"
- Edna St. Vincent Millay, “What lips my lips have kissed, and where, and why” (Sonnet XLIII), and "I will put Chaos into fourteen lines"
- There is also a selection of **six sonnets** by Millay, originally published in the volume *Renascence*; available online at the Women’s Studies Database Reading Room, a site on **Academy of American Poets**.
- Robert Frost, "Oven Bird"
- Countee Cullen, "Yet Do I Marvel"
- Wanda Coleman, "American Sonnet" (10)

-Lesson adapted from “Listening to Poetry: Sounds of the Sonnet” from EDSITEment
<http://edsitement.neh.gov/lesson-plan/listening-poetry-sounds-sonnet#sect-thelesson>