

ODE TO PIZZA
Shakespearean Sonnets for Middle Schoolers
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Yes, it can be done. In fact, I did this project with fifth graders – I swear! -- on two separate occasions, though both long, long ago. The results were fantastic though I assume there may have been some parental coaching in some cases. Nevertheless, the local newspaper carried excerpts from the project and everyone seemed awfully pleased with themselves. I wasn't going for perfection. A decent approximation made me happy. (After all, how many examples of perfection do I encounter each day? Besides Maureen, precious few.)

This was the culmination of a six week poetry project, the *pièce de resistance*, if you will.

I started with Sonnet 18 by Shakespeare, thoroughly impossible to comprehend for many students. But my “translations” helped. Following is the poem:

Sonnet 18
by William Shakespeare

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:
Sometime too hot the eye of heaven shines,
And often is his gold complexion dimm'd;
And every fair from fair sometime declines,
By chance or nature's changing course untrimm'd;
But thy eternal summer shall not fade
Nor lose possession of that fair thou owest;
Nor shall Death brag thou wander'st in his shade,
When in eternal lines to time thou growest:
So long as men can breathe or eyes can see,
So long lives this and this gives life to thee.

My translation went something like this:

Okay, baby, let's put you up against a summer day? Who wins that contest, huh?

Well, to start with, you're prettier and not as moody.

I mean, nature ain't so perfect.

Summer can get windy or too hot or too cloudy.

Downright unpleasant at times, you know.

And then, of course, summer always ends up a bummer 'cause it ends..

*But you, oh you're so much better.
Because you'll never lose any of your beauty.
Heck, you won't ever even have to die.
Say what? How is that possible?
Because this poem will live forever, that's how.
And because of that, people will know how beautiful you are forever,
Just the way you are right now.*

Admittedly, this takes some discipline to get the students to see this. So I took as little time as possible on the language that is beyond them. But the message, ah, that message definitely had some kids intrigued. So to get them into the swing of things, I'd use my own examples, four lines here, four lines there, in order to show how the rhyme and meter should go. But I'd always start off with a variation of Shakespeare's opening, or even the exact same one (though that definitely restricts the rhyme).

Let's see. I'll create one right now:

*Shall I compare thee to a baseball team?
You do come close the way you move around;
Your eighteen legs and arms are like a bad dream;
I do believe you'd kill me, pound for pound.*

Now that took me maybe five minutes. And that kind of example, of course, gets more of a reaction than the Shakespeare. Yeah, it's stupid, yeah, it's one syllable off in line 3, and yeah, it's a bit cruel, but it's so over the top, it's not like anyone would think it applied to herm (combination of her/him). (BTW, you can steer results toward the optimistic side by announcing that you're giving Extra Credit to those sonnets that accent the positive.)

At this point, the class resistance has been lowered to some degree and it's time to start drilling students on how to create iambic pentameter in the sonnet format.

The sonnet traditionally has 14 lines – three verses of four lines with a couplet at the end. The rhyme pattern is abab/cdcd/efef/gg. Each line is in iambic pentameter.

Here's a quick explanation from Wikipedia.com, one of my five or six favorite research sites, that explains iambic pentameter.

Simple example

An iambic foot is an unstressed syllable followed by a stressed syllable. The rhythm can be written as:

da	DUM
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The da-DUM of a human heartbeat is the most common example of this rhythm.

A line of iambic pentameter is five iambic feet in a row:

da	DUM	da	DUM	da	DUM	da	DUM	da	DUM
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The tick-TOCK rhythm of iambic pentameter can be heard in the opening line of Shakespeare's Sonnet 12:

When I do count the clock that tells the time

It is possible to notate this with a ˇ (breve) mark representing an unstressed syllable and a / (slash or ictus) mark representing a stressed syllable.^[1] In this notation a line of iambic pentameter would look like this:

ˇ	/	ˇ	/	ˇ	/	ˇ	/	ˇ	/
---	---	---	---	---	---	---	---	---	---

The following line from [John Keats' Ode to Autumn](#) is a straightforward example.^[2]

To swell the gourd, and plump the hazel shells

The [scansion](#) of this can be notated as follows:

ˇ	/	ˇ	/	ˇ	/	ˇ	/	ˇ	/
To	swell	the	gourd,	and	plump	the	ha-	zel	shells

The divisions between feet are marked with a |, and the [caesura](#) (a pause) with a double vertical bar ||.

ˇ	/	ˇ	/	ˇ	/	ˇ	/	ˇ	/				
To	swell		the	gourd,		and	plump		the	ha-		zel	shells

Here are a few less formal examples of my own, using my own method of showing how the even-numbered syllables should be emphasized/accented. Again, I'm creating them on the fly.

How WOULD you LIKE to GO and DANCE with ME?

How PUTrid SMELLS the FISH afTER five DAYS!

BeHAVE yourSELF unTIL you LEAVE my SIGHT.

Get OUT of HERE; you MAKE me FEEL quite ILL.

I LOVE the WAY you SHINE your LIGHT on ME.

InTO the VOID our HEroes VENture FORTH.

Kind of a fun exercise, don't you think? I intended to do maybe two or three, but the Shakespearean spirit caught hold o' me (just like it can grab your students if you do this first in a large group, then in small groups or individually, sharing with each other as you progress).

Whatever you do, don't assign the whole poem at once. Start with just the first two lines for one night, then a whole verse. By the third night, they'll be ready for more. Some will finish by Day #3. Most of the others can be coaxed on through class review of the successes.

Now for the even funner part: Elizabethan language. A quick review:

Thou = you (as a subject) *Thou art my love until eternity.*

Thee = you (as an object) *What doth it matter to thee?*

Thy, thine = your, yours *Would this be thy fork?* Carrying this example even farther: *Would this tyme be thine?*

And after a *thou*, it's nice to add an *-st* or an *-est* to the following verb. *Whither thou goest, I shall follow.*

The only trouble with the rule above is that it will add an extra syllable to a line. Ah, so be it if it sounds all right. Gadzooks, don't be a stickler for perfection. And wouldn't it be fun to have students get creative with their own Elizabethan dollops, be they proper or no?

I hopest this lesson enticeth thee into a stalwart attempt at helping thy students create divine poesie. (Ooh, that's bad, and to think I majored in English. But that's so long ago, it was then known as Olde English. You see, I attended university BEFORE Shakespeare's time; therefore, cut me some slack, dawg!)