

**Unit Plan Title:** 14 Lines: A Romantic Approach to Sonnets

**Framework:** Romantic

**Target Age:** 14-16

**Unit Length:** 3 to 4 weeks

**Unit Author:** Allie Hamilton

**Description Lesson Plan:**

The following unit presents the history and construction of the sonnet, focusing mainly on the Petrarchan form.

**Cognitive Tools used:**

Heroic Quality, Narrative, Image, Extremes and Limits, Collections and Hobbies, Connection to Hopes and Fears, Change of Context, Literate Eye, Sense of Wonder, Embryonic Philosophic, Somatic (Rhythm) and Mythic (Binary Opposites)

**Keywords:**

Sonnet, Poetry, Writing, Petrarch, Transformation, Unrequited love, Accuracy, English

**1. Identifying “heroic” qualities**

*What heroic human qualities are central to the topic? What emotional images do they evoke? What within the topic can best evoke wonder?*

**Heroic quality:**

The sonnet’s heroic quality is its power of transformation. Through the sonnet, our indescribable emotions can be transformed and understood; the sonnet transforms the inexpressible into the expressed. Also, no matter what problem the octave or the quatrains present, there will inevitably be a *volta*, a turning point, from which the problem is transformed into a solution.

**Alternative(s):**

The sonnet’s secondary heroic quality is its accuracy. The form, especially the Italian form, must be incredibly restrictive in order to represent the minute, miniscule details of human emotion (specifically love).

**Images that show these qualities:**

Unrequited love is the epitome of wanting something you can’t have. So, imagine yourself in a cupcake store that has all its cupcakes displayed behind a glass counter. You browse the counter and there are so many cupcakes that eventually they all look the same. But then, you lock eyes with the cupcake of your dreams: a moist double chocolate cupcake with velvety cream cheese icing. Your mouth watering, you take out your wallet and look inside: empty. Debit card? Not there. Credit card? You’re 16. Crestfallen, you are left standing in the store, cupcakeless. All you can do is look and imagine its taste, and, in your imagination, it becomes even more blissfully delicious. The chocolate is richer, and the icing is smoother; the tastes dance in your mouth in a beautiful symphony of flavour.

In reality, the cupcake may have been too sweet; it may have left a funny taste in your mouth or been dry or undercooked, but because you can never taste it, you will never know, and it remains perfect in your mind. This is

the nature of unrequited love. Its perfection is preserved because its imperfections can never be realized; because it can never start, it can never end.

Also:

A sonnet is the Rosetta Stone that lets us read the hieroglyphics of love; to some, it is only through this poem that love can truly make sense. Because love is so complicated and illogical, it can only be expressed and understood when it is transformed through a highly structured and logical medium. The sonnet is a bilingual entity that speaks both reason and emotion.

Also:

Imagine the rhyme scheme of the octave of a sonnet (abbaabba) like a piece of rope in which you have been tied. And actually, you've tied yourself in it. Your emotions have been so enmeshed in your consciousness that you think and think about them, wrapping yourself up even more. Now, you are looking for the end of the rope so you might get yourself out of this situation. You follow one strand and then it changes (a, b), you follow that strand for a bit but then it changes back (b, a). It stays the same for a moment (a), but soon you are back to the second strand, which again changes back to the strand with which you started (b, b, a). Then suddenly, you find something. (The *volta*.) You find a Swiss Army knife with scissors, a tiny little saw, and a Philips head screwdriver (rhymes cde). They may not work, but knowing you can use these tools in many ways, you feel hope; despite the ropes, the conflicts that bind you, you have moved towards a solution and the possibility of freedom.

## **2. Shaping the lesson or unit**

*Teaching shares some features with news reporting. Just as the reporter's aim is to select and shape events to bring out clearly their meaning and emotional importance for readers or listeners, so your aim as a teacher is to present your topic in a way that engages the emotions and imaginations of your students. To do so, consider which of the following dimensions of your students' emotional and imaginative lives can be used to shape your lesson or unit—all related to the skills the good reporter works with:*

### **2.1. Finding the story or narrative:**

*What's "the story" on the topic? How can the narrative illustrate the heroic qualities of the topic?*

The sonnet, which means "little song," was invented in the 13<sup>th</sup> century by an Italian named Giacomo da Lentino. In its beginning, a sonnet was simply any lyric poem accompanied by music, but the 14 line version we know today was perfected and made popular by Francesco Petrarca (Petrarch), a great Italian scholar and thinker. Although Petrarch is considered the "Father of Humanism" (<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Petrarch>), was one of first tourists, was a Latin scholar and the discoverer of several lost classics, he is still best known for his sonnets. But what led him to write sonnets is perhaps the most interesting aspect of his story: one of Petrarch's greatest dedications was to a woman he called Laura, with whom he spent more than 21 years of his life in love. Throughout his travels and studies as a pious and virtuous man (despite having two children out of wedlock), he was completely dedicated to his love for her. Though she never returned his love, he published 297 sonnets on his feelings for her.

From this, we can examine the sonnet and determine why it would be a form perfect for expressing love. The Petrarchan sonnet in particular has 14 lines and is divided into two parts: the first eight lines are called the octave (which can then be divided into two quatrains) and the last six lines are called the sestet (two tercets). The ninth line, or the first line of the sestet, includes the *volta* (a turning point), which is where the sonnet's transformation begins: the octave sets up the problem of the poem, and the sestet works to transform it. The Petrarchan sonnet is also called the Italian sonnet and lends itself better to Italian than English, since Italian is a much more rhyme-rich language. In addition, its structure requires fewer syllables to say more words, so each line has more potential to accurately capture an image. It is perhaps because the sonnet was so accurate and perfect for the expression of love that the English slightly altered its form to fit our language. Many other great writers used the form for their dilemmas and to capture their emotions with the remarkable accuracy and weight of Petrarch's sonnets. In addition to form alteration, English writers also made thematic alterations and used the sonnet's powers of transformation for topics other than humanly love: Shakespeare discussed time, Donne discussed death, Milton discussed his work and his blindness, Wordsworth discussed the political state of London, etc.

The following is a little scene I might read the students to bring imagery into the classroom, to connect the story to human emotions, and to introduce Petrarch's dedication to Laura.

The church bell rings, a loud boom of sound that is so close and would be startling if it were not so high above their heads, like an underwater explosion sending waves of sound out for miles. A young man stands in the churchyard alone, basking in the beauty of the day: April 6<sup>th</sup>, 1327. He closes his eyes, feels the heat all over his body, feels sporadic breezes sweep the heat off his skin for moments, and sees the brightness of the sun through his eyelids, red and black specks. Though the perfection of the day seems obvious, it is only when he feels the day through his body does he sense its perfection and he awes in the glory of this simple moment, in the sun, waves of sound turning to ripples on the far edges of town.

It's a Sunday in Avignon, Italy, and the Easter Mass has just concluded. As the young man walks through the crowd, he is in solitude but he is not alone. He stops walking for a moment and with his eyes closed he thinks, *I could be anywhere I want to be*. And with his eyes open he thinks, *Why would I want to be anywhere else?* Flowers are beginning to bud and grass sprouts up from cracks in the cobblestone, slowly remembering their duties forgotten by winter; they too feel the heat and are warmed, nourished, leaning towards the sun and the possibility of life. The church's garden is beginning to blossom and its smells impregnate the air. The smell is not of flowers or of ripeness, though: not yet. *If green had a smell*, he thinks, *it would smell like this*.

But suddenly, he is shocked from his reverie when he sees something that outshines the beauty of the church grounds around him. No smell of spring, no lulling murmur or rich laughter of the crowd, but something that far surpasses all of this: her. His heart speeds up; his face feels hot. He may be staring, but it doesn't matter. She moves and he moves too, like a compass fixed. He needs to talk to her, but how could he? What would he possibly say?

Yes, what would he possibly say? Petrarch spent the next 21 years of his life dedicated to express his love for this woman in over 25 odes, 8 sestinas, 7 ballads, 4 madrigals, and 297 sonnets.

## **2.2. Finding extremes and limits:**

*What aspects of the topic expose extremes of experience or limits of reality? What is most exotic, bizarre or strange about the topic?*

To start, students could examine the sheer size of Petrarch's body of work by seeing what 297 sonnets (4,158 lines!) actually looks like. In 12 point Times New Roman font, 4,158 lines is approximately 41,580 centimeters, 16,370 inches, 1,364 feet. 297 sonnets is about equal to a 10x10 space covered entirely with words.

Students could also find the biggest or oldest sonnet series or examine what some scholars consider the "best" sonnets. Also, students could find sonnets that defy the set structure, either because they do not use the traditional form or do not discuss traditional content. They could examine the different rhyme schemes of Petrarchan sestets or find what sonnets differed in his (or Shakespeare's) sonnet series. Students could also examine the stages of Shakespeare's sonnets and speculate on the turning points—why were his early sonnets about the young man and his last sonnets about "the dark lady"? Finally, the sonnet, as a form of poetry, started off as a love poem but has been used for an array of topics over centuries, and students could find how poets other than Petrarch and Shakespeare (Milton, Donne, Wordsworth, Shelley, Browning, St. Vincent Millay, etc.) have used sonnets.

Because of the sonnet's strict structure that relies so heavily on rhyme scheme, its form is perfect for examining the extremes and limits of rhyme. Students could find how many rhymes are in the English language or the words with the most rhymes or words with no rhymes at all. Students might also be fascinated by the rebels of rhyme: imperfect rhymes, eye rhymes, macaronic rhymes (rhyming words from different languages), etc.

Also, students may find it bizarre that Laura died on April 6<sup>th</sup>, the very same day Petrarch saw her for the first time, 21 years earlier.

### **2.3. Finding connections to human hopes, fears, and passions:**

*To what human hopes, fears, and passions does the topic connect? What ideals and/or challenges to conventions are evident in the content? Through what human emotions can students access the topic?*

The main heroic quality of the sonnet is Petrarch's dedication to Laura, which did not waver despite his love being unrequited. Unrequited love is a major theme of this unit, and, though I would not consider it particularly heroic, it is through this that students will see Petrarch's dedication; he was in love with Laura from the day he saw her until the day she died, even though all the while his undying love was not returned.

The feeling students will connect with the most is unrequited love; one would be hard pressed, especially in high school, to find a student who has not had a "crush" on someone who did not like him or her back. Even if they have never loved, all people can connect to the idea of wanting something they cannot have, whether it is love or an Xbox or a driver's license or a cupcake. I think the exploration of students' own feelings coupled with the emphasis on Petrarch's dedication will reinforce for them the idea of unrequited love. Petrarch's sonnets represent any cliché we know about love poetry: his feelings towards Laura were so intense that he wrote love poem after love poem about her. One scholar noted the rhyme scheme of the Petrarchan sonnet lends itself extremely well to the exploration of love's dilemmas (and the heroic quality of accuracy comes in here); the abbaabba allows for an echo of the rhyme in the middle 4 lines (baab) which represents the degree to which the dilemma pervades the speaker (Sarker 18). The flexibility of the last sestet allows for various solutions and provides hope for the speaker. This is another attractive quality of the sonnet: sonneteers are courageous, and though they express worries about love (or London or time or blindness), they never fail to transform their worries and provide their readers with hope or the possibility of change. Students could connect to the fact that people have been trying for centuries to work through their complex and complicated emotions; they could recognize how people have found solstice and comfort in this little poem and its ability to transform and persevere.

### **2.4. Employing additional cognitive tools of Romantic understanding:**

*What kinds of activities might you design to deploy other tools in your students' cognitive toolkits? Consider the following:*

**Collections and hobbies:** *What parts of the topic can students explore in exhaustive detail? What activity might engage students in learning everything they can about some aspect of the topic?*

- they could find the most famous, biggest, or smallest sonnet collections.
- students could hunt for variations in traditional rhyme scheme or topic.
- they could act as "literary detectives" and find the "conspiracy theories" behind Petrarch and Shakespeare's sonnet series. For example, Shakespeare's sonnet series are dedicated to "Mr. W. H." but no one knows for sure who that is. Furthermore, no one knows for sure who Petrarch's Laura—if her name is even Laura—is or Shakespeare's "the dark lady."
- to explore rhyme and the musicality of language, students could find oddities in rhyme (words with no rhymes, words with many rhymes, etc.).

**Change of context:** *What kinds of activities could change the context in the classroom? How might drama or role-play be employed or how might students engage the body's senses in learning?*

- could have a lyric poetry reading and turn the classroom into an open-mic café. I could dress in a black turtleneck and a beret and have the smell of incense in the class somehow. To applaud readers, we would click our fingers rather than clap.
- could also dress like Petrarch or Shakespeare or simply wear the laurel headband Petrarch is often depicted wearing.

**The literate eye:** *How could graphs, lists, flowcharts or other visual formats be employed in learning about the topic?*

- label the poem's rhyme scheme with a's, b's, c's etc.
- divide by colour the octave and the sestet or the quatrains and the rhyming couplet. They could even take this further and colour the quatrains in the octave and the tercets in the sestet. It would also be interesting to consider what different colours could suggest; for example, perhaps the octave could be a primary colour and the sestet a secondary colour or perhaps the octave could be blue to suggest melancholy and the sestet yellow to suggest the brightness of a possible solution.
- have them make a visual representation of one of the sonnets, eliciting its visual images.
- have students follow a particular image through several sonnets (Literature 12 IRP).

**The sense of wonder:** *What kind of activity might evoke students' sense of wonder? How could you use that sense of wonder to draw students forward in thinking about further dimensions of the topic?*

Over centuries and centuries, people have chosen the sonnet to express love. Why is this? Why are these 14 little lines so perfect for the expression of love? How could an emotion as huge and overwhelming as love require a form so small and orderly? If we consider that the sonnet may never have become popular if not for Petrarch, students could speculate on how literature, culture, and the world would have been different if Petrarch had never suffered the agony of unrequited love. If not for Petrarch, Shakespeare may never have written his 154 sonnets. So why sonnets? It seems as though it is the emotion that requires the form, not the form that requires an emotion; the sonnet does not restrict the emotion but rather frees it. So, is there a connection between love and rhyme (well, why are there so many love songs)? There is a beautiful musicality of love, and it would be interesting to explore how rhyme adds a layer of meaning to poetry. The greatness of the sonnet is that it has so many tools for expression that work in particular ways to reinforce the poem's content. But what are these tools and how do they work?

**Embryonic tools of philosophic understanding:** *Consider how to frame the topic in terms of a general idea or theory. How can students begin to move from the particular aspects of what they have been learning to a more general explanation? How can students' sense of agency be engaged?*

An aspect of poetry, and of literature in general, that is particularly thought provoking is the relationship between art and culture. Art and culture have a symbiotic relationship, and students could examine art's influence on culture and culture's influence on art through the analysis of form and content and the nature of expression and interpretation. The following questions are intended to explore these, and other, big ideas.

- how do poets decide what form they will use? Does the form choose the content? Does the content choose the form? Art first influenced culture when Petrarch's love popularized sonnets, but then we see culture's influence on the sonnet in poems like Wordsworth's "London, 1812."
- students could research the cultural context of the poems we read in class. What was London like in 1812? What is the relationship between Petrarch's art and his part in the development of Humanism (the idea from which we get the "humanities") and how has this philosophy subsequently influenced other artists and cultures?
- students could examine some of the anomalies of poems in regard to form and content and could examine poems with forms that do not seem to fit their content. With the sonnet, because it is traditionally a love poem, students could examine how Donne uses the sonnet to personify (and subsequently diminish the power of) death. Students could also examine whether the sonnets that seem to deviate from the topic of love are not just about love of another kind; for example, is "On His Blindness" really just about Milton's love of writing and expression?
- what matters more, what we say or the way we say it? Before we had written language all we had was sound. Is the sonnet in some way going back to this, back to our base understandings of feelings to our

innate selves? Does the musicality of language somehow bring us closer to the true emotion that is not tied down in the forms of language but exists in the body? These types of questions are part of the larger question, “What is the role or purpose of poetry?”

- Finally, students could compare several interpretations of our numerous and often evasive emotions. Is love just biology—physical reactions to physical stimuli—or is it something else, something immeasurable?

## **2.5. Drawing on tools of previous kinds of understanding:**

### **Somatic understanding**

*How might students use some of the toolkit of Somatic Understanding in learning the topic? How might their senses, emotions, humor, musicality, and so on, be deployed?*

- to start, and this is quite simple, poems must be read aloud if students are truly meant to understand rhythm and rhyme. Students should be given the opportunity to listen to the poem without having to follow along and could be asked to close their eyes to help them focus on the sounds.
- one of the reasons Shakespeare wrote in iambic pentameter was because it mimics a natural breath, and this made it easier for these actors in terms of both delivery and memorization. Student could practice speaking and breathing in iambic pentameter.
- students could examine tone and read different lines of poems with different musicality to see how meaning is changed. For example, we could listen to Cindy Lauper and Greg Laswell’s versions of “Girls Just Wanna Have Fun”; though both artists use the same words, Lauper’s version is playful and upbeat and Laswell’s is slow and somber.
- to connect to the musicality of sonnets, students could put music to, or lay down a beat for, their favourite sonnets, which would also reinforce the idea that sonnet means “little song.”

### **Mythic understanding**

*How might students use some of the toolkit of Mythic Understanding in learning the topic? How might abstract and affective binary oppositions, metaphor, vivid mental imagery, puzzles and sense of mystery, and so on, be deployed?*

- Joke: Why didn’t anyone believe the sonnet? Because its tune was played by a lyre!
- Other joke: Why doesn’t a sonnet ever wear orange, purple, or silver? Because it can never find anything that matches!

Throughout the unit, we will examine restraint/freedom, emotion/reason, satisfaction/wanting more, and linear/cyclic. The hardest thing to understand about the sonnet and the thing that evokes the most wonder is how this remarkably restrictive form is so perfect for something such as love, which is imbedded in our primal, inescapable emotions and should, presumably, be incongruous with our rational selves.

With regard to Petrarch and Laura, we could examine the binary opposites active/inactive, pleasure/pain, and never/forever. Writing poetry blurs the lines of active and inactive because, at least objectively, Petrarch takes no action in his love for Laura. But his action (writing sonnets) is subjective and reflective and has had a major impact on literature. Unrequited love brings to mind pleasure/pain and never/forever. Since their love can never start, it can never end, and Petrarch is caught up in the pleasure of loving Laura at the same time he experiences the pain of knowing that she will never love him as well. These ideas could be reinforced by the part of Petrarch’s biography in which he chose to live in solitude; because it pained Petrarch to see Laura, he moved out of Avignon to avoid her, even though he still continued to write about her.

Finally, both Petrarch and Shakespeare’s sonnet series present the students with some avenues for detective work, since no one knows for certain the true identity of Laura, “the dark lady,” or Mr. W. H..

## **3. Resources**

*What resources can you use to learn more about the topic and to shape your story? What resources are useful in creating activities?*

1. *Petrarch: His Life and Times* by Henry Calthorp Holloway-Calthorp (Google Books: "Petrarch: His Life and Times")
2. *The Sonnet: its Origins, Structure, and Place in Poetry* by Charles Tomlinson (Google Books: "The Sonnet: its Origins, Structure, and Place in Poetry")
3. English Literature 12 IRP (<http://www.bced.gov.bc.ca/irp/englit12.pdf>)
4. <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sonnet>
5. <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Petrarch>
6. Shakespeare's Sonnets by Sunil Kumar Sarker (Google Books: Sarker, Sonnet)
7. <http://en.wikiquote.org/wiki/Petrarch>

#### 4.

#### Conclusion

*How does the narrative end? How can one best bring the topic to a satisfactory closure and how can students feel this satisfaction? Alternatively, what new questions can draw students to think more deeply about the topic? How can you extend students' sense of wonder?*

Laura died on the same day Petrarch saw her for the first time: April 6<sup>th</sup>. This simple factoid is a beautiful reinforcement of the sonnet's cyclical nature, which is demonstrated, in both Petrarchan and Shakespearean forms, through its rhyme scheme and symmetry. Laura died before Petrarch, and though he would never have her, he would forever love her; because their love can never start, it can never end, and that is why unrequited love resides at the boundary between never and forever. But students may find some satisfaction in what Petrarch's love for Laura contributed to culture, how it inspired other poets to write on other topics, and how it allowed other people to express what they could not express otherwise. At the very least, students may feel satisfied that no matter how sad or confused they feel about teenage love, they are not alone; emotions matter, so much so that many great thinkers have dedicated their lives to expressing them.

#### 5. Evaluation

*How can one know that the content has been learned and understood and has engaged and stimulated students' imaginations?*

Many of the student activities throughout this unit (such as coupling a sonnet with a song or investigating "the dark lady") could be used for assessment, depending on how they are presented in the classroom and the extent to which they are examined. In addition to the activities featured above, students could write a sonnet on one aspect of the unit that they loved or some dilemma it brought up for them. They could also critically examine the "embrace or departure" (Literature 12 IRP) from the Petrarchan sonnet and argue how the form captured the mood or theme of the poem and, therefore, reinforced its content. As an alternate activity for the exploration of form and content, students could write a formal essay on love or write a poem on something more formal, such as personal banking, and then reflect on how form and content affect each other.