

Name _____

♥♥Shakespeare's Sonnets

Shakespeare did not invent the sonnet, but he certainly mastered the art form. The Bard (his *epithet*, remember them?) is credited with composing **154 sonnets**, none of which were given titles by him. They are referred to by number; it is believed that the numbers were assigned to each sonnet by the publisher, not Shakespeare himself. However, there is logical order to the numbering of his sonnets: Sonnets 1-126 appear to chart the development of a relationship with a "**Fair Youth**," a young man. Most of these poems suggest a strong friendship with the man, but references to love, jealousy, lapses of fidelity, and regret over temporary separations have given rise to speculation about Shakespeare's sexual orientation. Sonnets 127-154 are generally addressed to a "**Dark Lady**." During Elizabethan times, the fashion was to be "fair," (blonde, pale skinned women) but Shakespeare speaks openly of his lust and obsession for a dark-haired, dark-eyed, dark-complexioned mistress. Evidently, Shakespeare was a man of strong passions!

So if Shakespeare didn't invent the sonnet, who did? Well, there is no record of the first sonnet ever composed, but a 14th century Italian poet, Francesco **Petrarch**, was the first to gain fame for his sonnets, which he dedicated to his beloved Laura. The structure that he used became the dominant model for the sonnet form for over 200 years. Petrarch's work reflected the then-popular ideas of courtly love: he speaks of Laura's beauty in terms of **hyperbole*** (her hair "outshines the sun"; she is "too beautiful" to be human), but he also describes her as cold and hard to get. Petrarch loved to use **oxymorons*** to describe his love ("sweet pain"). Shakespeare often imitated Petrarch's style, but frequently he had a satirical purpose. He would ridicule the style of the Petrarchan lover and make fun of the exaggerated oxymorons of Petrarch. (Watch for this in Romeo and Juliet.)

Although courtly love was on the way out by Shakespeare's time, the sonnet craze was just getting started. Sonnets spread to England in the 1500s; at the courts of Henry VIII and Elizabeth I, composing a sonnet was absolutely the best way for a nobleman to show his love. No woman could resist a well-written sonnet, and the better sonnets were passed around like trophies. Long before their publication in 1609, Shakespeare's sonnets really caught the attention of many at the royal court: one London critic wrote in 1598 of the popularity of Shakespeare's "sugared sonnets among his private friends."

So why were Elizabethans "hooked on sonnets"? Writing a sonnet is no easy thing to do (as you'll find out, but more about that later). When a lover received a well-written sonnet, she (or he) knew that some real "quality time" was spent crafting the ideas into **sonnet form**. Good sonnets are a real labor of love.

* **hyperbole** is a literary term for *exaggerations*.

* Remember **oxymorons** from Inherit the Wind? They are two opposite ideas put together in a way that they appear to contradict each other, but really they make sense. (jumbo shrimp/ average genius)

Here's a sonnet to read **three times**. The first time, just read it to get its feel. Don't try to analyze it too much, just let your mind make any connections it wants to. On the second reading, think about Shakespeare's message or point. After the third reading, answer the interpretation question that follows as best as you can.

Sonnet 29

When in disgrace with fortune and men's eyes,
I all alone bewep my outcast state,
And trouble deaf heaven with my bootless cries,
And look upon myself, and curse my fate,
Wishing me like to one more rich with hope,
Featured like him, like him with friends possessed,
Desiring this man's art, and that man's scope,
With what I most enjoy contented least;
Yet in these thoughts myself almost despising,
Haply I think on thee, and then my state,
Like to the lark at break of day arising
From sullen earth, sings hymns at heaven's gate;
 For thy sweet love remembered such wealth brings,
 That then I scorn to change my state with kings.

Interpretation questions:

1. In the first 8 lines, Shakespeare talks about how he is feeling in general with his life. Re-read the first 8 lines. What is his mood in them?

- ❖ What words or phrases support your interpretation here? List them and bullet how they back up your conclusion about his mood.

2. In the last 6 lines, Shakespeare explains how quickly his mood can change when he thinks of the person to whom he writing the poem. Identify explicitly how his mood changes. What words are your proof?

3. So how would you explain Shakespeare's message in this poem? Answer in 2-4 sentences.

What is "sonnet form"?

"Sonnet 29" is a model of a Shakespearean sonnet.

♥ A sonnet has 14 lines.

♥ A Shakespearean (also known as English or Elizabethan) sonnet has the following rhyme scheme: *abab cdcd efef gg* (All this means is that the poem has a pattern of rhyming so that the last word of the first line rhymes with the last word of the third line; the last word of the second line rhymes with the fourth line. Rhyme also occurs in the 5th and 7th lines, the 6th and 8th lines, the 9th and 11th lines, the 10th and 12th lines, and the 13th and 14th lines.)

♥ A sonnet has a special beat or **rhythm** called **iambic pentameter**--ten syllables per line; these syllables come in five pairs; each pair sounds like a **heartbeat**.

♥ The **usual topic** of a sonnet is (you guessed it) love!

Your assignment, due _____:

- ❖ Answer all questions in this handout.
- ❖ In addition, **type a 10-14 line poem** about someone or something you love (your pet, your guitar, clause punctuation, *anything!*) It should demonstrate some poetic language --similes, metaphors, alliteration, rhyme, and/or imagery. It should also say something thoughtful or witty. (Please do not include lines that seem completely random and just shoved in to add up to 10 lines or just forced to rhyme.)

If you want to earn 5 points extra credit, conform your poem to SONNET FORM. It must be 14 lines long (no more, no less), follow the sonnet rhyme scheme, and employ iambic pentameter rhythm in **most** of the lines. No title is necessary, but it should make sense. Remember that in Shakespeare's time, skillful sonnet writing is what separated "who's hot" from "who's not."

