**Shakespeare’s Sonnets**

**Material for Worksheet 1**

Background to Sonnets

* The two major types of sonnets are the Petrarchan Sonnet and the Shakespearean Sonnet
* Both are fourteen lines long and written in iambic pentameter (see next heading).
* Petrarchan Sonnets are divided into an octave and a sestet, usually rhyming ABBAABBA (the rhyme scheme of the sestet varies but is often CDCDCD). In this type of sonnet the sestet usually provides a contrast to the octave – either introducing an opposing idea, taking a different approach to the theme which has been set up or providing a solution to a problem which has been introduced.
* An example (if required) of a Petrarchan Sonnet could be Keats’s *On Looking into Chapman’s Homer*:

Much have I travell’d in the realms of gold,

And many goodly states and kingdoms seen;

Round many western islands have I been

Which bards in fealty to Apollo hold.

Oft of one wide expanse had I been told

That deep-brow’d Homer ruled as his demesne;

Yet did I never breathe its pure serene

Till I heard Chapman speak out loud and bold:

Then felt I like some watcher of the skies

When a new planet swims into his ken;

Or like stout Cortez when with eagle eyes

He star’d at the Pacific–and all his men

Look’d at each other with a wild surmise

Silent, upon a peak in Darien.

* Note the ABBAABBA CDCDCD rhyme scheme, and contrast of the octave (Keats’s description of reading other translations of Homer) with the sestet (Keats’s description of reading Chapman)
* Shakespearean Sonnets on the other hand are divided into three quatrains and a couplet rhyming, ABAB CDCD EFEF GG. The couplet usually summarises or reinterprets the imagery, theme, idea or argument of the poem.
* An example could be Shakespeare’s *Sonnet 29*:

When in disgrace with fortune and men’s eyes

I all alone beweep my outcast state,

And trouble deaf heav'n with my bootless cries,

And look upon myself, and curse my fate,

Wishing me like to one more rich in 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.

* Note rhyme scheme, quatrains and couplet summing up the idea that the narrator of the sonnet is cheered up by his love although he his dissatisfied with his life. Also note the similarity to the Petrarchan sonnet – The first eight lines describe the narrator’s unhappiness while the last six describe the effect his love has in cheering him up.
* Metaphor and Simile are also often central to the ideas of the sonnets (see material for worksheet 2)

Iambic Pentameter

* Sonnets are written in iambic pentameter. In this metre lines are ten syllables long and divided into five feet each with two syllables (this is the pentameter). These feet are iambic – the second syllable in each pair is stressed. This gives the lines the rhythm di-DUM di-DUM di-DUM di-DUM di-DUM.
* Examples from Shakespeare’s sonnets:

“Shall **I** com**pare** thee **to** a **sum**mer’s **day**?”

“When **in** dis**grace** with **for**tune **and** men’s **eyes**”

“My **mis**tress’ **eyes** are **noth**ing **like** the **sun**”

**Material For Worksheet 2**

Many of Shakespeare’s sonnets are unconventional in comparison with the traditional love sonnet form that he was influenced by. The two poems on the worksheet can be used to show how Shakespeare uses and subverts the idea of love poetry. The worksheet also illustrates how sonnets can be built around metaphors and similes (although in both cases Shakespeare argues that comparisons like these are inadequate.) The questions on the worksheet could be used as the basis for class discussion.