

# Sonnets

by PB Shelley and William Wordsworth

Poems 1 and 2

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## Background

A sonnet is a poem consisting of 14 lines of ten syllables. Sonnets are often love poems but the form has also been used for reflective and for comic purposes. The rhyme schemes of sonnets vary; Shakespeare used a particular pattern which is now called the Shakespearean sonnet. The final six lines of a sonnet often provide a contrast in tone and meaning to the first eight lines.

Ozymandias, the Greek name for Ramases II, was pharaoh of Egypt at the time of Moses, according to the book of Exodus. Shelley's (1792–1822) poem, written in 1818, describes a traveller's encounter with a ruined statue of the pharaoh. The last six lines (sestet) include the words of the inscription found on the pedestal of the colossus. Ironically, the intention had been for the statue to subdue and intimidate Ramases' rivals but ultimately it is reduced to dust and fragments.

Wordsworth's (1770–1850) 'Sonnet composed upon Westminster Bridge, 3rd September 1802' also pictures a scene – less exotic, but one that Wordsworth directly experienced. It describes the city early in the morning before the daily bustle begins. In the first eight lines he pictures the scene and in the final six lines he offers his thoughts about what he sees.

## Shared reading and discussing the text

- Read Shelley's poem. Clarify unfamiliar vocabulary, then read it a second time. Ask the children to jot down one thought about the poem.
- Ask the children to share their thoughts. Extend discussion about the poem, drawing attention to the contrast between the inscription and the reality – introduce the term *irony* if appropriate. Provide some contextual information about the poem.
- Read Wordsworth's poem. Clarify unfamiliar vocabulary. Highlight old verb forms (*doth*, *glideth*) and tell the children the modern equivalents. Establish that the poem is written

in the first-person present tense. Read it a second time and explore the children's initial responses.

- Ask guided questions about the second poem. What time of day is it? From what viewpoint is the scene seen? (From the bridge, where it is possible to see the tops of buildings.)
- To Wordsworth the city is like a living being. What words and phrases does he use to convey this idea? (For example, *This City now doth, like a garment, wear; The very houses seem asleep.* Introduce the term *personification*.)
- Ask the children if they can see any similarities between the two poems. They will notice that both poems consist of 14 lines. Introduce the term *sonnet* and give the children some background about the form. Note that neither Wordsworth nor Shelley uses the more traditional rhyme scheme of the Shakespearean sonnet (abab, cdcd, efef, gg).

## Activities

- Organise the children into small groups. Ask them to talk about their experiences of special places they have seen or visited, and describe the scene to each other. Encourage them to share some of these experiences with the whole class. Independently the children can write descriptions of their special places. They may choose to write about the place in the early hours of the morning, as Wordsworth did, and then think of a contrasting time to describe it. Or they might think of contrasting times of the year, for example spring and winter.
- Take a trip outside the classroom and ask the children to describe what they see. They should now try personifying the scene. For example, is the sun male or female? Young or old? If it could speak what would it want to say? What would it enjoy? Ask the children to think of their own questions and write down the answers. They should then use their ideas to write a description of the view. On returning to the classroom, these ideas can be used as the basis for shared writing.