

TELLING TALES OUT OF SCHOOL

Chris Lowe and friends

Number 31

Shall I Compare Thee to a Summer's Day

There are times when teaching and learning come together in glorious synchronicity – not pre-planned, not deliberately sought, just there, all of a sudden. The learner realises that knowledge and ideas are percolating through; the teacher knows that learning is taking place. Neither at that moment quite understands how, but just goes with it. Such lessons cannot be sabotaged by a determined – or plain awkward – student....or be side-tracked by competing interests.

Rachel Duffy told me of one particular Lower Sixth A Level English lesson on a glorious summer morning which took on a momentum of its own, radiating edification and entertainment – for all.

Rachel began her lesson brightly, full of the confidence that knowledge of the subject, love of literature, and particular delight in reading Shakespeare, engenders.

'Now, Lower Sixth A, this bright sunny morning we are going to study a short poem by Shakespeare that is in your anthology, but I don't want you to open your book just yet. Sit back and listen to it.'

The Lower Sixth English group of 16/17 year olds settled down in all their familiar poses. Rachel read Sonnet 18 with due emphasis on the conversational rhythm and the poet's wit.

AT THIS POINT, DEAR READER, HAVE A GO AT READING AND APPRECIATING THE SONNET. ASK YOURSELF:

WHO MIGHT HE BE ADDRESSING?

WHAT TONE IS HE ADDRESSING THEM IN? AND HOW DOES SHAKESPEARE CONVEY THE TONE?

WHAT IMPRESSES YOU (OR NOT) ABOUT THE SONNET?

THEN READ ON AND SEE WHAT HAPPENED IN RACHEL'S LESSON.

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 his gold complexion dimmed;

*And every fair from fair sometime declines,
By chance, or nature's changing course, untrimmed;*

*But thy eternal summer shall not fade,
Nor lose possession of that fair thou ow'st,
Nor shall death brag thou wand'rest in his shade,
When in eternal lines to Time thou grow'st.*

*So long as men do breathe, or eye can see,
So long lives this and this gives life to thee.*

When she had finished the class was silent. She could see they were struck by it.... but were not sure why.

'So, what are your first thoughts, Cynthia? What is Shakespeare saying....and to whom?'

Cynthia....the obvious choice for a first attempt as she had proved to me the most sensitive reader, and had already indulged in her own poetry-writing.... sat up and smiled.

'I think it is beautiful, miss. Shakespeare is obviously in love with this woman.....'

'Hey up, our Cynthia.....How do you know it is a woman, eh?' Siggy, Siegfried Bluhm to his parents, had made his first strike.... 'It does not say it's a woman. He could be writing to a bloke.'

Cynthia bridled. 'Don't be daft, Siggy. Would Shakespeare call a man 'lovely'?

'He might....He could be gay. Perfectly possible. You obviously haven't read any gay poetry.'

'Yes I have, and it's nothing like this.... My friend Belle writes gay poems.....'

'What!... Isabelle in Year 11? Blimee....I'm going to a gig with her on Friday! She's not gay....is she?'

'I didn't say she was! I just said she wrote poems about gay people... and things....' Cynthia was getting flustered.

Rachel considered it time to intervene.

'OK....OK. That's enough. We are discussing poems of 1607 not Belle of Year Eleven.'

'That's a rhyme, miss. Well done! A cue for a poem, I think.' A voice piped up from the back of the class, where Keith Kingdom was leaning back against the lockers. Keith was the class observer.... the MI5 undercover agent....George Smiley of Lower Sixth English....working in the shadows and ready to strike if he thought the cat needed putting among the pigeons.

He launched forth.

*'It was the year of Our Lord 1607,
And Shakespeare was in seventh heaven.*

*He'd pulled a Dark Lady,
And a bloke, rather shady,
But he'd missed out on Belle of Year Eleven.'*

Laughter....and then clapping and a few whistles from the rest of the class. Rachel gave him a wan smile and a little nod of acknowledgement. She admired Keith's ability to knock off witty ditties at will. They were always pointed, relevant, and funny.... a refreshing change from the introspective moanings of much of modern music, she thought.... Keith had his own group and wrote both lyrics and music. In common with most contemporary pop music you couldn't hear the words when accompanied by the thump of the drums and twangs of guitars, but Keith always surreptitiously left a handwritten copy on Rachel's table. He was highly intelligent and talented with it....but he did like stirring things up if he could. She reckoned that Keith Kingdom and The IsamBards might have a bright future if Keith could keep it up..

'Thank you for that, Keith. But let's get back to the seventeenth century....and Shakespeare's sonnet....because that is what it is..... I have to say, Cynthia, that actually Siggy is probably right. This is sonnet 18 in a whole volume of over 150 sonnets. and it is right in the middle of the sonnets addressed to some mysterious man. There is a reference to a W.H on the title page of the first collected edition. We don't know if it is this man being addressed in Sonnet 18, or some other....or, indeed, whether it is the woman he addresses in over a hundred of the later sonnets. She is often referred to as the Dark Lady of the Sonnets.'

'So it could be the Dark Lady he is making eyes at here.' Cynthia was not about to give in. 'It could have been slipped in here. Much more likely, if you ask me.'

'We are not asking you,' muttered Siggy ungraciously. 'Whoever it is, miss, it does not alter the words, or what he is saying, does it?'

'No, that is true....' Well worked out, Siggy, she thought

Siggy kept going. 'Anyway, why do you say it is written by Shakespeare, miss? It might not be written by Shakespeare. You have told us that some people think he did not write the plays, so he might not have written these poems either.'

Rachel had the first pangs of a sinking feeling. She needed to get control of the discussion or they would never get round to the amazing subtlety of the language and all that is gloriously positive about English poetry.

'Siggy, we know it is by Shakespeare, because the first edition was printed in 1609 and says it is Shakespeare's sonnets. Doesn't that sound good enough?'

'That doesn't prove anything, miss. You told us that people in Shakespeare's time often pinched each other's works... and Shakespeare did not bother to have his plays published in his lifetime, did he? So why would he bother to publish poems?'

Rachel detected a rustle of restlessness in the class.

'Can't we get on, miss,' whispered Bronwen, normally hidden behind others and generally silent..

'Yes, Bronwen, good idea. Let's just call him 'the poet'. It does not matter whether it is William Shakespeare or not. We still have the poem.'

As soon as she said it she knew it was the wrong call.

'Not matter, miss!' It was Siggy again. 'I would have thought it mattered a lot. We are studying Shakespeare for A Level, not some mysterious poetry-writing narcissistic ghoul !'

'All right! It's definitely Shakespeare!'

Rachel felt her voice getting a little strident and tried to rein it in.

'Your A Level poetry anthology says it is by Shakespeare, just as it says there are poems by Donne, Milton, Pope, Wordsworth, Tennyson and others. If the Exam Board thinks it is by Shakespeare then it is by Shakespeare. Right?' She did not wait for an answer. 'Open your books now.... at the poem....Sonnet 18.... now and have a look at it.'

Rachel sensed that Siggy was about to find issue with this simple request so she added quickly, 'And when you have read it through we can discuss it.'

Rachel watched the group bend their heads over the text. Very satisfying. She never had any problem with this group as far as interest went. They were keen to learn.... and argue. For some, notably Siggy, the arguing came before the learning. But there was never a dull moment, that's for sure.

'Olive, what are your first thoughts?' Olive was thoughtful and careful. She could be relied on not to say anything outrageous, which might get Siggy going again.

'If he is addressing his patron, miss, and trying to butter him up, then I am not sure about the 'lovely' bit. Would you really try to please another man by calling him 'lovely'....especially if the patron is an old man with a lot of money?'

Rachel wondered how they had managed to become so fixated on this one word....not one she had given much thought to when she was preparing the lesson. She was beaten to a reply....once again.... by Siggy.

'That's my point! It isn't to his patron at all! It seems to me more likely that he was trying to get off with one of the actors.'

There was a distinctly uncomfortable murmur around the class at this. Siggy, oblivious, ploughed on.

'Look, all the actors in Shakespeare's time were male, and it is well known that all actors are luvvies!'

An even more anxious murmur now. But Siggy was racing down his tangent.

'Yes, I see it now. It's a subtle hint to one of his mates...probably one of the younger actors who used to play the female parts. '*Thou art more lovely and more temperate*'.....it's a definite call to come up to his place and study his collected poems....if you see what I mean!'

'Siggy! Stop there! All actors are not luvvies.' Rachel decided she had to cut him short. 'That is not a fair remark....I'll grant you that it certainly suggests that the man is a young man. He probably would not call an older man 'lovely', that's true. But does it matter who it is?.....'

Rachel was hoping that she could get them round to discussing how the sonnet form is handled, the way the wheedling tone is created, the extraordinary ability to make such a tight poetic form as a Petrarchan sonnet seem like effortless spoken conversation... But Siggy wasn't finished yet.

'It matters to the actor he is addressing, miss.... and it matters to Shakespeare, too! He doesn't want any hoary old luvvee getting the wrong idea and knocking on his door, and crawling all over him, does he?'

'Siggy, I know you are sincere about wanting to understand the poems we read, but could you just accept for one moment that Shakespeare is addressing some unknown person that he wants to praise ... (she put up her hand here to stop Siggy muscling in)....for whatever purpose, and whoever it is....and concentrate on how he uses the poetic form and language to do it.'

She paused, and picked out Bronwen.

'What do you notice about the language of the poem, Bronwen?'

Bronwen traced a couple of lines with her finger.

'It's not like poetry...not like sort of...flowery music. ...is it?' She looked up at Rachel, not sure whether she was making a fool of herself, or not. Rachel smiled and nodded encouragingly. Bronwen continued. 'It seems as though Shakespeare....er...the poet...is talking to us....in a normal speaking voice.' She looked up again.

'Excellent, Bronwen! Well noticed.' At last we can get back on track, thought Rachel. 'In my view all great English poetry uses what you might call 'ordinary speech'.... Chaucer, Shakespeare, Donne, Wordsworth...' She wanted to move on to discussing how the choice of words, the length of line, the rhythm, the imagery were all used to create the tone and full meaning of the poem. It was not to be....

'What about Milton? You haven't mentioned him, miss. My mum says he is the greatest English poet. Paradise Lost....and Paradise Regained.... Great stuff....so my mother says...Why haven't you included him?'

Rachel pushed her hand through her hair. She respected Siggy's mother, a lecturer in Classics at the university... but as far as Rachel was concerned Milton was not really in the main speaking voice tradition that she found so rewarding.... but was it wise to start another hare running? If she weakly caved in and said 'yes, I include Milton', she would be untrue to herself. She sighed inwardly.

'I have not included Milton....great as he is, Siggy.... Because he was more in the tradition of the ancient Greek and Roman poetry...of poets like Homer and Vergil. You had to be very well educated...even very learned.... to be able to engage with Milton's poetry...and still do. That is why he is not widely read these days.....I commend your mother for her support of him.' That should do the trick, she thought.... she hoped.

'An amorphous heap of pseudo knowledge.' A voice intoned from the right.... under the large windows where the sun continued to shine its light on the class.

Hello, thought Rachel. Ernie is up to it again! Faroukh will follow shortly, I'll bet my life on it!

Sure enough Ernie's neighbour leant forward.

'Quite right, Ernie, nothing but a khamsim of ecclesiastical mongering.'

Rachel put her elbow on the table and cupped her chin in her hand. She knew from previous encounters that the two friends liked to make up an outrageous phrase and then challenge each other to get them into a class discussion. If they decided they had agreeably agitated 'miss' they awarded themselves a high five. She knew very well what they were doing.

At first she had been totally thrown by their air of serious literary criticism, but she had never told them to stop it. If being egregiously witty grabbed them, then it grabbed her as well.

They had excelled themselves this time, she thought....two phrases!

Rachel had a choice now. She could just smile knowingly at them and offer them her own metaphoric high five, and move on....as she normally did....or challenge them for an explanation.....Hmm....Best get on, she thought.....no, maybe not...that is what they expect...they ought to be put on the spot sometimes. Here goes. She straightened up and pointed at Faroukh.

'Who are we talking about here, Faroukh? Shakespeare or Milton?'

'Oh, goodness me, miss, Milton, of course! You wouldn't call Shakespeare 'amorphous' or 'pseudo' or 'an ecclesiastical monger' now would you?'

'So, Faroukh, explain to us why Milton's poetry is....as you describe.

Faroukh did not answer immediately. She could detect his mind going into overdrive. He was not expecting to have to justify himself.

'I haven't actually read Paradise Lost, miss... who has? But we Jains don't believe in one creator god, you know. In our religion we have a number of gods...and we don't believe the world was created by anybody. It just exists, see.... So it is not surprising I think, like Ernie, that all Milton's meanderings are pseudo? Isn't that so, Ernie?'

Ernie was not expecting his friend to pass the buck.

'Er....well....er...'

'Yes, Ernie, do explain it to us. We are all agog with anticipation.' It was Keith from the shadows of the back of the room. He was smiling sweetly at a flummoxed Ernie.

Ernie ignored the interruption and addressed Rachel.

'Well, miss.....Faroukh, and me, we have been giving this some thought....'

Rachel could not let this pass.

'But, Ernest, Faroukh just said that you have not read Paradise Lost.'

'Ah...not the whole of it, miss...but we have read....a bit...And Faroukh and me don't think he's following the Bible story anyway.... Do we, Faroukh?'

Faroukh wasn't playing. He waved airily at his friend. 'You are doing very well, Ernie. Carry on.'

Ernie stared at his pal and then round the class.

'As I was saying, we....that is Faroukh and me...we have noticed that Milton does not even mention the name of Jesus....in ten books. He's just peddling his own version....so it is fair to say the poem is 'amorphous' and 'pseudo'. That's my....our.... view.'

'So, congratulations, Ernie! Fancy being able to reach that profound conclusion about Paradise Lost without having read it....'

'Er...well, as I said....not all of it...not quite.... I mean.... it's more than 10,000 lines....life is too short! But I've read a synopsis, miss....and I did start reading the first book....but when you see that it takes sixteen lines to write the first sentence...just to say that he is going to

describe *'man's first disobedience....'* and twenty six lines to tell us he is going to *'justify the ways of god to man'*, then I think it is reasonable to lift your eyes to heaven....if you see what I mean. You know you are in for the long haul....your life is not going to be in the fast lane!...But I tell you what, miss, Shakespeare would have taken at most just two lines to tell us what he was up to.'

Ernie was beginning to warm to his defence now. Rachel admired his growing skill. But before she could cut things short Keith's voice came from the shadows.....straight in there.

*"Of man's first disobedience I'll let you know,
You'll hear about it all from the upstart crow."*

There you are, miss. Two lines. Sorted.'

More persistent rustling from the rest of the class. Some chuckles, a few groans.

'Do we have to sit through all this, miss? Can't we get on with Sonnet 18? It is much more interesting.' This from Greta, usually silent on any issue unless pressed.

'OK, Greta. Let's get back to Shakespeare....but, thanks Keith. I admire the way you can invent lines just like that..... and thanks Ernest and Faroukh for your Miltonic interlude. Greta, tell me what your thoughts are.'

'Well, miss. I've been looking at the rhymes....'

'There's only one rhyme!' Siggy was back, clearly thinking he had been left out for far too long. 'The last two lines.....'

'What are you on about, Siggy?' Greta was indignant. 'The whole poem is rhymed. Just look ABAB CDCD EFEF GG.'

Siggy bent down and peered at the text.

'Blimee, you're right, Greta. It sounded so natural when miss recited it. I never gave rhyme a thought. How cool is that!'

Siggy traced the lines in the text. 'It's got a rhyme scheme and all the lines are ten syllables. Yet it sounds just as if he is talking to this W.H. chap, or whoever it is. Are all one hundred and fifty four sonnets like that, miss?'

'Yes, Siggy, every one. Extraordinary isn't it? All the same....yet all of them different.'

Rachel explained further. 'Shakespeare constructed his sonnets in the style of the fourteenth century Italian poet, Petrarch – 14 lines, rhyming just as Greta had noted. A few years after Shakespeare John Milton....I am sure Ernie and Faroukh know this.... used a variant – still fourteen lines, but in two halves.... an octet and sestet, rhyming ABBAABBA and then CDECDE.'

'Hey!' This was Faroukh interjecting. He had stopped leaning against the radiator and was now leaning forward holding two books, one in each hand. 'I am having another look at this extract from Paradise Lost. Seems as if Milton also wants a private chat with us....but he is

talking to his learned university mates, I reckon. He says it is his 'Heavenly Muse' who is singing, not him personally; But Shakespeare just calls his poem 'this'.'

No-one said a word. Faroukh looked up. 'Interesting that....I thought.' He shrugged his shoulders and looked rather apologetically at his classmates.

'Faroukh, I think we are all quiet because we are thinking about what you said, and we do not have the Milton in front of us.'

Rachel was impressed by Faroukh's obvious engagement with the poetry.

'But I have to say, I think you are making a very good point of comparison....or perhaps, contrast....between the way the two poets use language. They are both writing for audiences they know...and know how to address. I am so glad you have noticed that. Now,, getting back to Sonnet 18, what are your thoughts, Jamie....'

Before timid Jamie could open his mouth a different voice cut in....Kaye, who was another one who was usually intimidated by the stronger characters in the group, and never said a word if she could get away with it.

'Oh, I think I have cracked it, miss....he starts with.... what's it?...a rhetorical question... he asks if he should compare this person to a summer's day... but he is going to anyway so he doesn't wait. He says he would do so, but the person he is addressing is more lovely than the summer, more balanced, 'temperate'....that's a compliment...and then he butters up the man...or woman, if you prefer...by saying that his 'eternal' summer will never fade, because it will be kept fresh in this poem.....is that right, miss?'

Rachel was once again impressed...not just by the simple exposition, but by the fact that Kaye had felt moved enough by the poem to want to say something about it. She did not have to say whether she liked it or not. Her engagement with it was clear to everyone.

'Well expressed, Kaye. You have sorted it out in your mind really well.'

Keith came back again.

'Not only are the lines all ten syllables, miss...they are all based on that iambic thing you explained to us....SHORT/LONG, SHORT/LONG...tee tum, tee tum, tee tum....but he doesn't bother keeping strictly to it. He is more interested in suggesting that he is having a private conversation....well, not a conversation, perhaps, more trying on a bit of smarm. Look how he uses long languorous words and syllables in the first line to bamboozle the reader into thinking this is going to be a conventional love poem. And then he changes tack completely at the start of the second line with a thumping 'Thou....' And the mood has changed, and the rhythm of the line has changed.'

Rachel was open-mouthed.

'Have you just thought that up, Keith?'

'Not the gist of it, miss, I have to admit.....my mum and dad and me... actually we were discussing it last night...But it has all become a bit clearer this morning. I can see now how Shakespeare manipulates our feelings by modulating the rhythm. We were talking about

modulation at the County Orchestra practice last Saturday. You can do it with words as well as music. I see that now.'

Before Rachel could reply Kaye continued. 'Everyone knows the line 'Rough winds do shake the darling buds of May', miss, but what a brilliant use of the rhymes -- 'shines' and 'declines' and 'dimmed' and 'untrimm'd' and 'ow'st' and 'grow'st'. We could spend ages discussing them, I expect....couldn't we, miss?'

Kaye tailed off and subsided back into her chair, fearful that perhaps she had gone too far. She could not bear the others laughing at her. She could not explain, even to herself, what had made her want to speak out. Rachel gave her a little clap.

'I enjoyed that, Kaye. I don't think anyone could have put it better.' Kaye's day was made. Though she did not know it then her whole attitude to academic learning changed with that lesson. She blossomed.

'Well, has anyone else got more to add...after that?' asked Rachel.

Silence. Then Siggy put his hand up, while still staring at the page in front of him.

'Kaye was good miss, but I think she has missed something....I think you too have missed something...if I may be so bold!'

'You may, Siggy, but make it quick. The bell will be going soon.'

' You say....or perhaps have implied, miss....that Shakespeare is just trying to make the bloke feel good, because his handsomeness will live on forever....right?'

'Yeeees,' said Rachel cautiously. She had met this enigmatic side of Siggy before. 'Go on.'

'You know, that isn't the real point?'

'OK....so what is it?'

'Well, miss...the crunch comes in the last two lines – the rhyming couplet.....

*So long as men do breathe, or eye can see,
So long lives this and this gives life to thee.*

You see, miss, what Faroukh said made me think.....It's his, Shakespeare's, poem that will live on! It is '*this*' that will '*give life*' to his boss.... I don't think he cares a fig about the everlasting beauty of the man....so long as his poetry lives on. The man will be nothing if it was not for this poem! That's what he wants to leave us with. What an ending! Cool, eh? Brilliant!'

Rachel stared at him. Once again Siggy, despite all his irritating habits, had hit the nail on the head. She could not help feeling proud of him.

'Well said, Siggy....really good, close reading of the text. And that goes for all of you....'

And then the bell went....as it often did in the middle of an interesting discussion....and never did when the lesson was dragging, Rachel thought.

'That's a pity, miss. We had just got going.' Cynthia was looking radiant.

'Don't worry, Cynthia, we'll be back to the sonnets, I am sure....and wait till we get on to John Donne....'

Lower Sixth English melted into the corridor crowd. Rachel started to gather her books and was suddenly aware that Keith was waiting by the side....last to leave.

'Sorry to bother you, miss, but I just wanted to say that I thoroughly enjoyed that lesson.'

'Didn't you find it a bit chaotic, Keith?'

'Oh, I don't worry about that. If you are exploring the unknown you are bound to go down blind alleys, go up snakes and down ladders. We were all trying to tease out the meaning and I noticed that you did not try to dictate to us. You were really good....a referee rather than a player. Hope you don't mind me telling you that.'

If she did not know that she would be sacked for doing so she would have hugged Keith at that moment.

'Thank you so much, Keith. It is always good to get feedback. I appreciate it.'

'You're welcome, miss....oh, and I have penned a sonnet of my own to mark the occasion.'

'What! During the lesson?'

'No problem, miss. I seem to be able to knock off lyrics at a moment's notice... not very good ones...but it amuses me....When I pen lyrics for my group I often go over the top with my tongue-in-the-cheek sentimentality. So it make a change to have to keep to a strict metre and rhyme scheme.....I'll leave it with you.'

He plonked his sheet on her table.

'Aren't you going to read it to me?' Rachel pushed it back at him.

'No, miss.' Keith backed off. 'That would be much too embarrassing. I don't mind if there is a class there...but not on my own!'

Keith touched his forehead in salute and made for the door.

'At least let me copy it for you.'

'Definitely not, miss,' Keith replied over his shoulder. 'Like Ariel, it's gone now...and so have I.'

Rachel contemplated his departing back and picked up the scribbled text.

The Lower Sixth were puzzled by Shakespeare,
Sonnet eighteen to be pernickety precise.
Who 'thou' is in the poem was not clear;
To know for sure would be quite nice.

Some plumped for the shadowy Dark Lady;
Some insisted it was an even darker man.
The Bard's motif for penning it was shady;
Was poesy for patronage his plan?

By guile their furrowed brows you diverted;
You squeezed their understanding over time.
It struck them how meaning is converted
By imagery, by rhythm, and by rhyme.

So, to grip young readers, setting minds on fire,
Know, problems dismay, challenges inspire.

It might not be Shakesoeare...but it is Shakespearean, she thought. 'How does he do it in the middle of a lesson?' She shook her head and leaned back in her chair, putting her hands behind her head. She sat contemplating for a moment, and then addressed the empty room. 'See that, you four walls! A good lesson was that. I've not a care in the world.'

'Well you should have,' said a voice from the doorway.'

Rachel spun round in her chair. It was Vice Principal, Fred.

'What's the matter, Fred?'

'You should be on break duty, Rachel, not talking to the blackboard!. The Principal is doing it at the moment...he was second reserve.'

'So who was first?'

Fred smiled. 'I was me....but I had to find you, didn't I? He told me to hurry up about t!'

Rachel sprang up. 'Oh dear, Fred. That's the trouble with teaching. Somebody always wants you to be doing something else....always 'more important'. I'll be out.... straightaway!'

'Don't rush! It will do the Principal no harm to speak to a few kids on the playground for a few minutes. I'll tell him you were sorting out a serious student problem. You can explain what it was to him at your leisure....when you have decided what it was, of course! Necessity is the mother of invention. A very useful proverb, don't you think?'

'Thanks, Fred. Actually nothing can dampen the joy of my last lesson. One of those occasions when you know deep down that you have made a difference.'

'I won't enquire now what went on. But you do intrigue me, so perhaps you will enlighten me later, eh?'

'Of course. But I will tell you this....problems dismay; challenges inspire.'

'That's neat. Who said it?'

'A philosopher, Fred....currently my very favourite philosopher!'
