Analyzing Syntax to Understand Meaning

“A poet is, before anything else, a person who is passionately in love with language.”

What makes reading Shakespeare difficult?

1. **Vocabulary** - uses words no longer in use or words that have evolved different meanings
2. **Syntax (the order and relationship of words in a sentence)** -
   - Writing all of his plays and sonnets in iambic pentameter, Shakespeare habitually plays with the standard English word order: subject-verb (all the verbs stay together)-(complement). **NOTE:** a sentence will not always have a complement and separating a helping verb from the main verb is considered inverted word order. For example, *I might sing at the talent show*, is in standard order. All the verbs stick together- the helping verb, might, and the main verb, sing. When the syntax is altered to, *Sing I might at the talent show*, the syntax is inverted. The verbs have been separated by the subject, I. Also, subjects and verbs can have modifiers.
   - Shakespeare, for example, often places the complement before the subject or the verb before the subject. This is called inverted word order. Authors alter the syntax to achieve a certain artistic effect. This is often used in poetry, allowing the poet to maintain rhythm or create rhyme. However, when rhyming is not part of the equation, authors may invert the word order to place emphasis on a particular word by placing it in the first or last position of a sentence. It is the unique syntax in poetry that makes it different from prose.

**Examples:**

If we were asked to go to the movies and we couldn’t, we would simply say, “I cannot go out” to convey that we are unable to go. A poet, however, might shift the standard syntax and say, “Go out I cannot,” which places a stronger emphasis on the word cannot.

- **Standard:** I cannot go out.
- **Inverted:** Go out I cannot.

*The souls did from their bodies fly,*—
They fled to bliss or woe!
And every soul, it passed me by,
Like the whizz of my crossbow!

How does the author rearrange the syntax of the first line? ______________________________________

What is the effect of the change in syntax? ___________________________________________________

Analyzing the syntax of an author’s work, such as Shakespeare’s, allows the reader to fully see the thought and craftsmanship behind it-it’s artistic beauty. The first step to analyzing syntax is to label the parts of speech, which determines the syntax order. A review of the types of complements is needed to begin.
Complements:

1. Direct object - Who or what receives the action; noun or pronoun

(Ex. The earthquake destroyed the city.)

2. Indirect object - To whom or for whom the action is performed; noun or pronoun; will have a DO; comes before the DO in standard order

(Ex. One company offered its employees bonuses.)

3. Subject complement - Renames or describes the subject; noun or adj.

(Ex. The man became an accountant.)

4. Object complement - Renames or describes the direct object; noun or adj.; comes after the DO

(Ex. Success makes some people nervous.)

NOTE: Complements are required to complete the predicate, whereas modifiers are optional.
Analyzing Syntax and Understanding Shakespeare’s Use of Language

Our study of Shakespeare’s syntax will involve the following steps:

1. Label the parts of speech, specifying what specific type of complement there is, if applicable.
2. Indicate the syntax, which is the order the parts of the sentence are in. What comes first, next, and last? If the sentence is in standard order, the syntax is Subject-Verb (all parts)-(Complement). If it is inverted, the standard order will be rearranged or the subject remains in the first position and there is a helping verb that is separated from the main verb, meaning modifiers are in between them, such as a prepositional phrase.
3. If the sentence is written in inverted word order, rewrite the sentence in standard word order.
4. Provide a translation of the sentence as it might be written in Modern English.

Example:

Inverted Word Order: “O, never shall sun tomorrow see.”

Standard Order: _______________________________________________________________

EXERCISE A: The following sentences have been taken from Hamlet and are either written in Inverted Word Order or Standard Word Order. If the sentence is in Standard Word Order write “standard” on the line. If the sentence is in Inverted Word Order, convert the sentence into standard on the line.

1. In dreadful secrecy impart they did.____________________________________________________

____________________________________________________________

2. He the ambitious Norway combated.__________________________________________________

____________________________________________________________

3. So frowned he once when in an angry parle._____________________________________________

____________________________________________________________

4. My necessaries are embarked._________________________________________________________

____________________________________________________________

5. The effect of this good lesson I shall keep._____________________________________________

____________________________________________________________
EXERCISE B: In the example below, label the subject, verb, and the specific type of complement if given in the example sentence. Indicate the order that the parts of the sentence are in by abbreviating S for subject, HV for helping verb, MV for main verb and DO, IO, OC, or SC for the type of complement. Then rewrite the sentence in standard word order. Finally, explain what the statement is saying in modern terms (how we would say it today).

| Then I precepts gave her. | Note: Precepts means orders. |

| Inverted Word Order (What is the syntax of the sentence?) |

| Convert to standard word order (Rewrite the sentence in standard word order.) |

| Modern Translation |