

Shakespearean Sonnets

Shakespeare's Sonnets are:

- Famous, full of quotes
- Enigmatic
- Unknown, where, why, who was he addressing?
- Did he approve of their printing?
- Full of puzzles

Sonnets

- Sonnets are difficult to write, 14 lines in iambic pentameter, with an intricate (and rigid) rhyming scheme, (abba abba, couplet or not)
- They are difficult to use - especially in English
- Sonnets originated in Italy, and Italian is a language which rhymes incredibly freely.
- Dante wrote sonnets in the 13th century - about Hell, Purgatory and Paradise - 'Dante's Divine Comedy'
- Petrarch invented the sonnet (he wrote a sonnet sequence - 300 sonnets - to Laura), to celebrate and woo her. It was about him offering his blandishments and her continual resistance of them.

When the 16th century came to sonnets:

- The poems were all under great tension, not relaxed; they seemed forced because there were less words in the English language to rhyme with.
- The sonnet was incredibly popular in Shakespeare's time.
- In Elizabethan times Sir Philip Sidney (a sensitive contemporary kind of guy) wrote a sonnet sequence of 124 sonnets
- It was so fashionable to write sonnets at that period in time, that often people wrote sonnets and included them in their CV's to impress.
- The fact that they were so popular, and rehashed the same tired old conventions makes them sound cold and artificial despite the fact that they were considered to be love poems. It makes it very difficult to judge the writer's sincerity.
- They were almost solely used for wooing.
- It becomes then a paradox - they were public poems because everyone was writing them, and yet they offer themselves to us as being very private.
- Everyone wanted to write a century of sonnets.

- Shakespeare's sonnets were unusual in their creativity and sensitivity. He does different and interesting stuff with them, and defies all the old conventions, creating his own.
- His writing came at the end of the fad, everything had already been said a hundred times before, and he had to play around with the clichés to create something new.
- They were printed in 1609 into a market glutted by sonnets, (written ten years earlier), and had already been in circulation prior to this date.
- They weren't written in a print culture.
- Nobody wrote sonnets after Shakespeare, he had totally changed the genre.
- Traditionally sonnets were discussing the blue eyed, blonde haired, alabaster skinned, cherry nipped, coral lipped, virtuous goddess, who always rejects the poet. It can become allegorical (not simply praising her because she is virtuous but because she IS virtue, but the basic concept is the same)

- We can't know if Shakespeare intended to have his sonnets published, but more likely some pirate publisher got hold of copies of his works and published them without his permission. The reader must then ask if these poems are more private, and perhaps more sincere than the others because they were written for himself and not the general public.
- It is documented that Edward Allen bought a copy of Shakespeare's sonnets for 6 pence. He probably took it home, flicked through, and started at page one. And this is what he would have seen:
- 'From fairest creatures we desire, increase' (from Sonnet 1) - he would have thought, 'okay, yep, I know where this is heading' The line translates in male terms to; 'come to bed with me before it's too late!' However as he read on, he would probably have become more and more confused, because it doesn't take the form that normal sonnets do.
- In Sonnet 2 he would have thought that Shakespeare was trying to scare the woman into submission by warning her that when she's an old hag no one will want her, so she should come to bed with him now - 'When forty winters shall besiege thy brow...' but as they go on they become more and more intriguing.

THEY AREN'T POEMS OF LOVE AND SEDUCTION, THE FIRST 127 ARE POEMS FROM ONE MAN (PRESUMABLY AND OLDER MAN) TO A YOUNGER MAN TELLING HIM TO GO FORTH AND MULTIPLY, IN ORDER TO REPRODUCE HIS BEAUTY.

SHAKESPEARE IS PLAYING GAMES WITH THE THEME AND PERSON OF SONNETS.

HIS SONNETS DEAL WITH A SENSE OF MORTALITY, LOVE, DEATH, BEAUTY. THEY ARE TESTING THE LIMITS.

SHAKESPEARE'S SONNETS MUST BE READ IN CONTEXT

- Shakespeare's sonnets are in an intricate order which creates a sense of echoes and anticipation from one sonnet to the next. Position is important. (1-127 are addressed to a young man, 127 - the end he appears to have got it right, and he is addressing a woman.)
- In an additional contrast to former sonnets, Shakespeare praises the older, tanned brunette, experienced gypsy, instead of the young, blonde, virtuous, pure, goddess. Shakespeare's mistress gets around, indeed she appears to be sleeping with everyone except the poet - including the guy from the first half!
- His later sonnets are seething with sexual jealousy and sexual tension.
- Sonnet 129 is about lust, and then moves on to a lightweight poem in 130.
- His sonnet 130 is self-conscious, and can be regarded as a comment on sonnets in general. Its exaggerated language seems to mock the conventionalities. It brings the whole thing down to earth. It's honest about it. There are lots of puns going on (lies around) It is full of subversions of expectations, regenerating the old ideas. It is both a satirical piece, but it also tells a story.

Sonnet 130

After sonnet 130, Shakespeare moves onto the lightweight sonnet 130, which is extremely self-reflexive. It is a comment on sonnets, and uses exaggerated language to mock the

conventionalities, and bring the whole thing down to earth. His poem is very honest when discussing the woman, and there is a lot of puns going on (eg. lies around) It is a sonnet which subverts the expectations, and renegotiating old ideas. It is very satirical writing, but it also tells a story.

The first 127 poems are from an older man directed to a younger man, instructing him to get married, and achieve immortality by passing on his genes.

- Shakespeare realises that the reader is having a hard time figuring this out, and is asking themselves if these poems are homo-erotic, and he teases us (as is shown in Sonnet 120).
- This poem reveals anti feminist quirks, and shows dramatic irony (because guys do have a rolling eye).
- This sonnet uses the mythology that nature is a woman, and she created a perfect human who she then fell in love with, and made him a guy. Shakespeare teases the audience with the thought of is supposed homosexuality, and then goes onto to state that he cannot love a man like that.
- It was a very important poem about gender relations in the seventeenth century. (Plays, girls couldn't act – gender games)
- Over the centuries as people's ideas towards these themes have changed, so have the readings of the sonnets.
- In 1609, the sonnets were suppressed, and in 1640 they were 'cleaned up' – the 'straight version,' however, in the late eighteenth century Edward Malone found the 1609 version and republished it. in the 1790's he republished them with a commentary that they were a celebration of male friendships.

Poetry

- Sound interrelates in a counterpoint to sense in poetry.
- Printing has only been around 50-60 years, before that all poetry was aural; therefore, rhymes, sound patterns, repetition, alliteration, rhythm and beat were all used to make the poem memorable (so that people could remember it to pass on). (Mnemonics – comes from the Greek Goddess of Memory)
- Patterns are also used in advertising to catch peoples' attention and to make people remember them.
- Poetry is designed to get into your head and stay there.
- It is also used to remember things – eg. 30 days, hath September, April, June, and November...