Shakespeare's Sonnets: Crash Course Literature 304

Crash Course: Literature
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===== Introduction =====

Hi I'm John Green and this is Crash Course: Literature and you look great! Shall I compare thee to a summer's day? Nah, thou art more lovely and more temperate.

(Intro)

===== Structure of a Sonnet =====

(0:17)
That William Shakespeare he knew how to deliver a complement. That's right, today we're talking about Shakespeare's sonnets, collected and published in 1609.

John from the Past: Mr. Green! Mr. Green! What's a sonnet?

John: Good question me from the past. In fact, such a good question that your seventh grade English teacher answered it for you, but apparently, you've forgotten. A sonnet is a poetic form consisting of fourteen lines and there are various ways to order the stanzas and the rhyme scheme. But the Shakespearean stanza (named for Will, not because he invented it, but because, you know, he was the best at it) consists of three four line stanzas and a final rhymed couplet. So the rhyme scheme is ABAB CDCD EFEF GG. And the meter in Shakespearean sonnets, as in much of Shakespeare's plays, is iambic pentameter, which means that every line has 10 syllables consisting of five iambs. Which is just a fancy word for pairs of unstressed and stressed syllables. So a line of a Shakespearean poem goes da-Duh-da-Duh-da-Duh-da-Duh-da-Duh. This turns out to do something to English speaking brains that's just very catchy. Like, a lot of times pop songs are written in iambs, like a lot of times when we speak we accidentally speak in them. But when I'm trying to remember the sound of iambic pentameter, I just remember John Keats's last will and testament, which was one line of iambic pentameter: "My chest of books divide among my friends."

===== Overview of Episode =====

(1:35)
So today, we're going to look at the history and the controversy surrounding Shakespeare's sonnets. And we'll look at three particular sonnets. They're often known by their first line, but they're also known by numbers, so we're gonna look at sonnet 18 AKA "*Shall I Compare Thee to a Summer's Day?*", Sonnet 116: "*Let Me Not to the Marriage of True Minds Admit Impediment*", and sonnet 130: "*My Mistress's Eyes are Nothing Like the Sun*."

So the sonnet got it's start like so many great things in thirteenth century Italy. Dante got into it, and then Michelangelo. Let's go to the thought bubble.

===== Thought Bubble =====

(2:04)
So the most famous early examples of sonnets were probably those by Petrarca. He used a different structure from Shakespeare, and spent most of his time talking about a woman named Laura, which you have to pronounce La-oo-ra, to make it fit the meter. Anyway, he barely knew Laura, but when did stop men from romanticizing women? English sonnets started in the 16th century, and by the 1590s there was a huge craze for them. Kinda like the craze for boy bands in the the 1990's except with less choreography and hair gel. This is more or less when Shakespeare started writing them. Dates for his sonnets are pretty inexact, but actually that's the least of our problems. I mean, we know almost nothing about the poems except the sweet rhyme scheme and that Shakespeare wrote them. And yes, we are sure that Shakespeare wrote them. He also wrote all of his plays, although the earlier and later plays were probably collaborations. Okay? That's settled.

So Shakespeare wrote these sonnets, 154 of them, probably some time in the 1590s and early 1600s. We don't know if the speaker in the sonnets is Shakespeare himself or some imagined figure, although it's widely assumed that they're fairly personal, as were most sonnets. And we don't know if these were all the sonnets he wrote, they're just the ones we have. And they might have been intended for an audience of everyone or just for the people they were written for or for audience of no one. However, two of the sonnets showed up in a collection in 1599. So he definitely didn't keep them too private and a contemporary describes him as showing his quote "sugared sonnets" around to his quote "private friends." And then in 1609, a reputable publisher, Thomas Thorpe, published "Shakespeare's Sonnets - Never Before Imprinted", well except for those two published earlier. Thanks thought bubble.

===== Overview of Shakespeare's Sonnets =====
(3:35)
So the book is dedicated to quote "The only begetter of these ensuing sonnets Mr. W. H. All happiness and that eternity promised by our ever-living poet wisheth that well-wishing adventurer in setting forth." Now this dedication is signed "T.T" or Thomas Thorpe. So we have no idea if the dedication was actually Shakespeare's or if it was just Thomas Thorpe. And we don't have any idea who Mr. W. H. is. Although that hasn't stopped scholars from trying to find out. We also don't know if Shakespeare wrote the sonnets in the order they were published in or if he wanted them to be published in that order.

So as originally published, the first seventeen sonnets are addressed to a young man, telling him to settle down and have kids. And then sonnets 18-126 are still concerned with that young man - probably. Relatively few of the sonnets have gendered pronouns which has caused a lot of bother over the last 400 years. But there's fairly widespread agreement these days that in these sonnets there is a relationship between two men that is passionate and possibly even erotic. And this bothered a lot of early editors so much that some went to all the trouble to change the pronouns from male to female. So does this mean that Shakespeare was gay? I don't know. I wasn't alive in the 17th century. I also think it's dangerous to read biography into poetry. Also in 16th and 17th century England passionate friendships between men were common and they didn't' necessarily involve sex.

That said, I still think it's worth noting and understanding that all of the most romantic and loving of the sonnets are those addressed to the young man. Like sonnets 127-154, the ones addressed to the so called "black mistress" are a lot darker and no one's reading those at weddings. But about the "black mistress" or "dark lady" who appears in those sonnets, we also don't know who she is. Scholars have suggested royal waiting women, female poets, at least one British-African brothel owner; but we don't even know if she was black as we use the term today, or just brunette in contrast to the blond young man.
But the dark lady sonnets are more complicated than the one's addressed to the young man. The speaker feels tormented and ashamed of his sexual attraction to the woman and even in the sonnets praising her he gets as we'll see some insults in. Like in sonnet 144 he actually compares the two muses. He talks of having two loves: "The better angel is a man right fair; the worser spirit a

woman colour'd ill."

One more thing to know, although Shakespeare was a beloved and popular playwright, his sonnets, were not initially a hit. Like that 1609 edition, pretty much nobody payed attention. In fact for 200 years whenever anyone wrote about the sonnets, it was to complain about how boring they were. One editor explaining why he didn't reprint them in 1793 wrote that not even, quote, "the strongest act of parliament that could be framed" would make readers like them.

And yet - I quite like them, like, Shakespeare manages to cram a lot of emotion into his highly structured form. And maybe most importantly, the sonnet's make Shakespeare's case for why he thinks poetry is important in the first place: that people die but poetry lives on. Like in sonnet 55, Shakespeare writes: "Not marble nor the gilded monuments of princes shall outlast this powerful rhyme/ but you shall shine more brightly in these contents than unswept stone besmeared with sluttish time." And yet, quick side-note, Shakespeare talks about how bright this young man's memory will shine but we know nothing about him. The poetry may last but people still don't.

===== Sonnet 18 =====

(6:47)
So okay, let's move on to sonnet 18. Now if you've seen Shakespeare in love, you know that Shakespeare wrote this for Gwyneth Paltrow. Nope, he didn't. In "*Shall I Compare Thee to a Summer's Day?*" the thee in question is that mysterious young man. Basically sonnet 18 is one big extended metaphor, but the hook is that it's a metaphor that the poet admits isn't especially successful. Yes, the poet could compare his beloved to a summer's day, but it turns out that this comparison isn't really apt. Like the beloved, is nicer than a summer's day, the beloved has better weather. Really? Better weather? Well, I guess this was England, so yeah, let's just go with it. And there's always something lousy about summer days they're too hot, or they're windy, or if they're perfect they're over too quickly. But that's not going to be the case with the beloved. Because just like in sonnet 55 the poet is going to immortalize the beloved in this very poem. Thereby he will make the young man perfect eternally. Like a summer day might end, but the beauty of the beloved is going to go on forever "so long as men can breathe or eyes can see." And this wasn't, like, Shakespeare being arrogant, this was a pretty common trope in Elizabethan verse, this idea that human life was temporary but that poetry is forever.

You have to remember this was a time in human history where mortality was extremely common at all ages. It's not like the vast majority of people died old, there was a lot of chance involved. So it makes sense to draw distinction between the constant changing of nature's season versus the eternality of lines of poetry. In the end a poem that starts out saying that the beloved is not like a summer's day, turns out to be a poem in praise, not of the beloved or of summer, but of poetry itself.

But there's one more brilliant twist in this poem, I mean, look at the end. Future looking verbs like "shall not fade" and "nor shall brag" give way to ones in the conditional like "can read" and "can see". And then to the present tense of "lives" and "gives". So even Shakespeare is admitting that poetry has it's own limits too.

===== Sonnet 116 =====

(8:43)
And then there's sonnet 116 which is the one you're most likely to hear at somebody's wedding. This one is also addressed to the young man. This is in some ways the high point of Shakespeare's love poetry although it's perhaps a more insecure poem than it seems at first. Here it's not poetry that is the greatest thing ever, although Shakespeare definitely gives a tip of his hat to his own writing, but love itself.

Now just as in sonnet 18, there's worry of the impermanence of human life and beauty. How rosy lips and cheeks will be undone by time and death. But hey, that won't matter because love will last eternally, or at least until the, quote, edge of doom.
That's what Shakespeare hopes anyway, but maybe he's isn't certain because he's playing some games with the language here and he's showing how easily change and fickleness can happen. Like when you look at or read the poem, notice how easily words change in it. Alter to alteration, remover to remove, maybe he's worried that love might change too. I mean look at that first line: "Love is not love." And look at all the 'no' an 'nors' and 'nevers' in the poem.

But in the end he does come to an empathic conclusion he says that of all the things he's said about love are in error, quote, " I never writ, nor no man ever loved." Obviously he has written and men have loved, so his defense of love is solid right? Well, but then remember the line, "Love is not love." There are all kinds of explorations in Shakespeare's work about what real love is. But for me at least, the best line of the poem is when he writes that love is not time's fool. True love, to Shakespeare, is not beholden to time. It doesn't answer to time. It somehow transcends time.

===== Sonnet 130 =====

(10:10)
And lastly, let's take a brief look at sonnet 130. One of the one's addressed to the dark lady. This sonnet is almost a parody, a send up of Petrarch's sonnets about the lovely Laura, whom he barely knew. That weird renaissance worship of the person you met just one time twenty years ago, and the constant exploration of every facet of their beauty, their mouth, their eyes, their cheeks, their hair—it gets a little overwhelming.

In sonnet 130 Shakespeare simultaneously does that and refuses to do that. Like if he suggested that a summer's day wasn't a good enough descriptor of his beloved, now he's suggesting that if you compare his mistress to any of the typical stuff: suns roses, rose perfume, she's going to fall very short. Her breasts are the color of dun, her hair is like black wires, sometimes her breath smells. This strange descriptive aggression characterizes many of the late sonnets, where the poet seems to feel ashamed about being attracted to this women.

But again, there's a twist at the end as there is with every good sonnet's final couplet. "Any yet by heaven I think my love as rare/ as any she belied by false compare." Shakespeare isn't saying look my mistress has onion breath. Instead the speaker is saying "All of you other poets have been exaggerating like crazy, including past me. If you were actually going to describe people realistically, his lover would be as beautiful as any other. So take that Coral and perfume and summer days."

And for me at least, that humanization of the romantic other is, more romantic and ultimately more loving than any summer's day. Plus she's going to get to live forever, well, not actually, because we're all gonna die. Even the species is going to cease to exist.

Thanks for watching Crash Course: Literature, see you next week. Well actually, I can't guarantee that I'll see you next week, but I will

so long as you YouTube lives, and eyes can see.

===== Outro =====

(11:49)
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