

Cultural Daily

Independent Voices, New Perspectives

First Date with Shakespeare

Charity Hume · Wednesday, April 23rd, 2014

Is Shakespeare someone you've always wanted to know, but you've never had the time to get involved? If so, consider this a literary first date. Our plan is to meet with him in Sonnet 73, and see where things will go. It's just fourteen lines, not too much of a commitment—Why not give it a try?

On a first date with the sonnet, I'd say the first thing is the visual. In this case, try for the casual scan – not too deep, not too disinterested, but definitely give him your attention. On first read, just let it play. Later we're going to get to the nitty gritty, with techniques that unearth more of the buried treasure in these lines.

That time of year thou mayst in me behold
 When yellow leaves, or none, or few, do hang
 Upon those boughs which shake against the cold,
 Bare ruined choirs, where late the sweet birds sang.
 In me thou see'st the twilight of such day
 As after sunset fadeth in the west;
 Which by and by black night doth take away,
 Death's second self, that seals up all in rest.
 In me thou see'st the glowing of such fire,
 That on the ashes of his youth doth lie,
 As the deathbed whereon it must expire,
 Consumed with that which it was nourished by.
 This thou perceiv'st, which makes thy love more strong,
 To love that well which thou must leave ere long.

When you began to read, did you stop at the end of the first line, and feel puzzled? Here's a technique that might really put you at ease in figuring him out. Try printing this out and circling all the punctuation in the poem. You'll realize you can't understand the first line unless you finish reading the whole sentence, and in this sonnet, it ends four lines down.

This simple technique of looking for the syntax, the logic of a sentence, is a first step in untangling the sonnet's meaning. Many of Shakespeare's sonnets form a single sentence that extends through all fourteen lines.

A sonnet's numbers are worth knowing. There are more than meet the eye. In a sonnet, there are

fourteen lines. The meter, or rhythm of the line, is made of a regular beat. Similar to some of the contemporary performance beats like rap, the sonnet was a popular form and its rhythm helped people memorize. Shakespeare used a rhythmic pattern of *iamb*s, where every second syllable has more punch: “That *time of year* thou *mayst* in me *behold*.” In most of the sonnets he keeps to the pattern, ten syllables, but only five stronger beats per line. Sometimes he varies the rhythm to provide some emphasis, but his default pattern is iambic, with five beats to a line. That’s why it’s called *iambic pentameter*.

There’s more math to the sonnet : *quatrains* make up four-line stanzas inside the fourteen lines; frequently the quatrains form one sentence and organize the steps of logic he is following in the poem. They have alternating rhymes at the end of each line.

After three quatrains, Shakespeare concludes the sonnet with two identical rhyming lines, called a *rhyming couplet*. The final couplet often sums up, or reflects on, the meaning of the previous twelve lines. The first two quatrains combined are called an *octet*, and it typically sets up an initial premise of the poem. The final six lines, made up of the remaining quatrain and couplet, are called the *sestet*. At the beginning of the sestet, Shakespeare frequently changes direction in his thinking, or comments on the octet’s ideas, with a word like “but,” “yet,” or “even so...”

Did you print out the poem? Good. Shakespeare loves to have readers write all over him. You can underline any word that creates a physical sensation – these words are called images. In the first quatrain of Sonnet 73, there are many images that pertain to the fall – “time of year,” “yellow leaves,” “Bare ruined choirs,” and the departure of the birds for sweeter climates. As you start hunting for images you’ll begin to respond to the texture woven into the poetry, and see that there are groups of images that belong together. In his sonnets, Shakespeare may group images that have to do with accounting, debts, legal matters, religion, the weather, and light, all in the service of his “argument” to the listener. These image patterns, when they form connections throughout the lines, are called *motifs*.

Let’s look back at Sonnet 73. Do you see how, in the first quatrain, Shakespeare sets up the central premise of a comparison between the speaker and the dying season? Now, you can unravel the way each succeeding quatrain accelerates time: the second quatrain describes the dying of a day and descends from twilight into black night; the third quatrain compares the poet to a fire that burns to ash.

The final couplet reflects on this declining day of love and power within the poet, addressing an unknown friend or lover: “This thou perceivest, which makes thy love more strong, to love that well which thou must leave ere long.” Because you have worked through the progress of the three quatrains, you now understand that in the closing couplet, the speaker confides that his lover’s perception of his aging makes each remaining day they have together even more precious.

Few people who watch the play *Romeo and Juliet* know that when the lovers speak to one another for the first time, Shakespeare writes their passionate dialogue in the form of a sonnet. Romeo has crashed a party at Capulet’s palace, at a masked ball; Romeo and Juliet are in private, but their identities are hidden to one another. Shakespeare chooses this moment for Romeo to capture Juliet’s hand.

What happens next is written below in sonnet form. Juliet’s words are italicized; Romeo is the first speaker:

If I profane with my unworhiest hand
 This holy shrine, the gentle sin is this:
 My lips, two blushing pilgrims, ready stand
 To smooth that rough touch with a tender kiss.
*Good pilgrim, you do wrong your hand too much,
 Which mannerly devotion shows in this;
 For saints have hands that pilgrims' hands do touch,
 And palm to palm is holy palmers' kiss.*
 Have not saints lips, and holy palmers too?
Ay, pilgrim, lips that they must use in prayer.
 O, then, dear saint, let lips do what hands do;
 They pray — grant thou, lest faith turn to despair.
Saints do not move, though grant for prayers' sake.
 Then move not, while my prayer's effect I take.
[Kisses her.]

In this scene, the sonnet becomes a dramatic *pas de deux*. Seek out and reflect on the beautiful images of religion he uses here to wed the fated lovers in sonnet form from the first moment they see one another. Look how Shakespeare repeats the word “palm” as though the lovers are beginning to touch one another with the images: the words *lips*, *smooth*, *rough touch* and *tender kiss* accelerate and repeat with the word *hand*, as the lovers seem to burn with holy fire. Look how many times he uses the word *lips* in those fourteen lines. Just count them. How many *hands* are in those lines? How many *kisses*?

Sometimes first dates are like that. You think you're going to do something casual, and instead, you meet the love of your life. At the end of the night, your life has changed. Maybe that's you and Shakespeare.

Image from Baz Luhrmann's 1996 film, Romeo+Juliet.

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