



Teaching Shakespeare's Greatest Plays & Sonnets with Dr. Joshua Avery

Lecture 2: Shakespeare's Sonnets

Outline:

Shakespeare's Sonnets

- Renaissance self-fashioning becomes especially important in the sonnets.
- The roles that we make can have a genuineness to them. The sonnets are fantastic for role-playing, irony, slipperiness, ambiguity. Who is the speaker? What is the identity of that speaker?
- Shakespeare is creating a speaker, which is a moment of self-fashioning.
- This is more about a creative construction of somebody. The voice of the sonnets is the Speaker. We have to look for irony.
- Shakespeare inherits the sonnet convention.
 - The main speaker is a man but the beloved figure is also a younger man. There is clearly a male-male friendship. Shakespeare turns this convention on its head (male beloved rather than female beloved).
 - The Speaker is promising the Fair Youth that he will be able to preserve his beauty for the power of his poetry. You can kind of piece together a narrative with the sub narrative.
 - There is a rival poet, who is also writing to and about the Fair Youth and the Speaker seems jealous. Is this Shakespeare? Steer students away from speculating on what is or isn't historical. Treat it as characters in a story.
- Go over the English sonnet structure versus the Petrarchan structure.
 - Shakespeare basically always follows the English sonnet structure.
 - Sometimes he will take the logic of the Petrarchan structure and playfully import it into an English sonnet structure.

Sonnet 12

- When I do count the clock that tells the time,
And see the brave day sunk in hideous night;
When I behold the violet past prime,
And sable curls all silver'd o'er with white;
When lofty trees I see barren of leaves
Which erst from heat did canopy the herd,
And summer's green all girded up in sheaves
Borne on the bier with white and bristly beard,
Then of thy beauty do I question make,
That thou among the wastes of time must go,



Since sweets and beauties do themselves forsake
And die as fast as they see others grow;
And nothing 'gainst Time's scythe can make defence
Save breed, to brave him when he takes thee hence.

- Read it out loud. Focus on each quatrain. Have the students do a scan of the first two lines. Look for the rhythm and meter.
- Iambic meter is the dominant rhythm of English poetry and Shakespeare's sonnets. Shakespeare varies this creatively when it is appropriate.
- A spondaic foot (two accented in a row) slows the rhythm to draw our attention (gaze at it more carefully) and it also conveys gravitas. What does that substitution do? Why slow it down? It is to convey a feeling.
- Ask the students to paraphrase. What is he seeing? What is happening?
- Shakespeare has a fascination of taking the English sonnet structure and importing a Petrarchan login into it. Then of thy beauty do I question make: *When I see all of these things taking place, I want to understand something.*
- Why does this have to happen? The Speaker is anxiety ridden over the loss of beauty in the Fair Youth.
- "Save breed, to brave him when he takes thee hence." This is the procreation theme.
- Line 11: "Since sweets and beauties do themselves forsake." What does it mean that the sweets and beauties are forsaking themselves? How did he forsake himself? This could be sinister. The Fair Youth is being told that when you stop being beautiful, you stop being you.
 - What is the Speaker's obsession with beauty?
 - Is this love for the Fair Youth? If you love his beauty, do you love him? Is the beauty intrinsically tied to him? One can love someone's beauty and not love the person, and the two may even be at odds.
 - The speaker has a kind of Platonic (abstracted) fascination with beauty itself that stands outside of the particular individual. The ideal may be of more interest to the speaker than the actual human being.

Sonnet 65

- Since brass, nor stone, nor earth, nor boundless sea
But sad mortality o'er-sways their power,
How with this rage shall beauty hold a plea,
Whose action is no stronger than a flower?
O, how shall summer's honey breath hold out
Against the wrackful siege of batt'ring days,
When rocks impregnable are not so stout,
Nor gates of steel so strong, but time decays?
O fearful meditation! where, alack,
Shall time's best jewel from time's chest lie hid?
Or what strong hand can hold his swift foot back?
Or who his spoil of beauty can forbid?
O, none, unless this miracle have might,



That in black ink my love may still shine bright.

- This moved from the procreation sequence to the “recreation” sequence.
 - Recreation subsequence is now the poet claiming that since the young man is not reproducing himself, it is time for the poet to do so with his art.
 - What about your beauty? What does that mean? Does the Speaker love that individual or both? Is there a hierarchy.
 - Polysyndeton is the repetition of conjunctions (nor, nor, nor). What does this do? That repetition conveys that you are being hit again and again (repetition conveys outrage).
 - Why is it brass, then stone, then earth, then sea?
 - Try to get a paraphrase from the students.
 - If these things cannot stop the power and movement of time, what chance do we have with beauty, which is more fragile.
 - This is a movement from highest to lowest. Brass is higher than stone. This is an ordering of civilization itself. What is this sonnet talking about? This sonnet maps the crumbling of civilization.
 - What is the imagery of holding a plea? This is courtroom imagery. How will beauty win in court? The analogy is legal.
 - The second quatrain is siege imagery. We’ve moved from law court to war. What does that mean? Why do wars happen? In a way a law court is civilized warfare. We move from civilization to barbarism (uncivilized fighting).
 - The third quatrain is about time loving and wanting beauty. Time both love beauty and hurts it at the same time. The outcome: the war is lost.
 - Notice the logic:
 - You open with a law court, you move to siege warfare, and then you have the outcome.
 - You have the crumbling of civilization. The law court did not work, actual fighting did not work, and we are in a bad place.
 - Line 11 & 12: Who can stop him? “O, none, unless this miracle have might, That in black ink my love may still shine bright.”
 - Love has ambiguity here.
 - Shakespeare wants his love to shine bright, his love or the Fair Youth to shine bright.
 - What or whom does the speaker love? Is he in love with the Fair Youth or is he in love with his own love?
 - Civilization fails against nature. It descends into chaos and it descends into horror. This will happen to beauty itself.
 - What is the solution? You have to get outside of nature. If you can’t beat nature, maybe the supernatural can come to our rescue.



- Shakespeare is interested in the poet as miracle worker and magician. Is poetry in some sense supernatural? Does the poet become a god? Does the poet take on the role of miracle worker, a figure like Christ?
- Does art take us out of the natural? Does art take us to the metaphysical? There is a kind of miracle in art.
- Shakespeare has the Speaker be the miracle worker, who is a miracle worker because of his art (instead of saying a prayer).

Sonnet 71

- No longer mourn for me when I am dead
Than you shall hear the surly sullen bell
Give warning to the world that I am fled
From this vile world with vilest worms to dwell;
Nay, if you read this line, remember not
The hand that writ it; for I love you so,
That I in your sweet thoughts would be forgot,
If thinking on me then should make you woe.
O, if (I say) you look upon this verse,
When I (perhaps) compounded am with clay,
Do not so much as my poor name rehearse,
But let your love even with my life decay,
Lest the wise world should look into your moan,
And mock you with me after I am gone.

Sonnet 73

- 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 ruin'd 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 death-bed whereon it must expire,
Consum'd with that which it was nourish'd by.
This thou perceiv'st, which makes thy love more strong,
To love that well which thou must leave ere long.
- Read the whole sonnet first.
- What is the direct object? What is that you are beholding in me? What time of year is it when yellow leaves are none or few? The Speaker is saying that you see winter in me.



- Why “or none, or few”, which seems out of order? Everything dies. Death is not orderly. The exact time of the death is a horror. That is mimicked in the randomness of the scanning of the leaves.
- The second quatrain is now twilight, evening. You see in me a time of day.
- There is an image of the sealing up of a tomb in death (with nighttime), and the falcon’s eyes being forcibly shut (blindness in the falcon).
- Third quatrain: Ask the students, “What is the thing in relation to a fire which consumes the fire but also nourishes the fire.” The thing that fed the fire now suffocates the fire. It is in a way the same material.
 - What is it with human beings that nourishes them and ends up consuming them?
 - What is the sonnet sequence all about? Human beings are time bound. Time allows us to flourish, develop, thrive, and then it kills us. Time is a friend and a time is an enemy.
 - Notice how this seems to follow the logic of the English sonnet structure. The answer is in the couplet.
 - What is the logic of the third quatrain? It seems to be about the moment of death. What is the pattern? It starts wide, narrows, and comes to the point.
 - This is about the inexorable approach of death.
- The couplet: The fact that I know you’re temporal, makes you more precious to me. You are caused to love me more.
 - Every single word may have multiple possibilities in it.

Sonnet 116

- Let me not to the marriage of true minds
Admit impediments. Love is not love
Which alters when it alteration finds,
Or bends with the remover to remove.
O no! it is an ever-fixed mark
That looks on tempests and is never shaken;
It is the star to every wand'ring bark,
Whose worth's unknown, although his height be taken.
Love's not Time's fool, though rosy lips and cheeks
Within his bending sickle's compass come;
Love alters not with his brief hours and weeks,
But bears it out even to the edge of doom.
If this be error and upon me prov'd,
I never writ, nor no man ever lov'd.
- First quatrain
 - This is an echo of the marriage service.
 - This is a marriage of minds, not of bodies. This suggests we’re moving out of the physical realm.
 - The Speaker has a horror of physical dissolution, and a fascination with the possibilities of salvation.



- Have the students think about what it would mean to alter when one finds an alteration. This is talking about unconditional love.
- The last line: The lover has removed their love, the beloved says, “Sounds good to me.”
- If you love somebody, and they turn evil, and so you realize that you can’t be friends with them. Does that mean that because your love was conditional, that you don’t really love them?
- Second Quatrain
 - This is the image of love as guide. The meaning of love is that it directs you. It is fixed, it is not going to scurry away on you.
 - Can you measure love (yes and no)? There is no mechanical measurement that can give us a quantification of love. There is something ineffable going on with love.
 - How does love functionally act as a guide if you take love in an ideal sense? Love tells you what to do. Love is a direction giver.
 - Love is a vision of the good. Follow the vision of the good.
- Third Quatrain
 - “Love is not the fool of time.” Is love the plaything of time or is it not? Time wins at the physical level. How do we get out of the physical? We are looking now for the supernatural.
 - Your mind is a part of your soul. We are talking about the metaphysical side of things. Maybe the soul could be immortal.
 - We come back to the intrinsic permanence and reliability of love.
- Last Couplet
 - Is it really the case that if you have a lower form of love and it is not completely unconditional that there is no love at all?
 - Are we supposed to even take this literally? Is the speaker being so absolute about this? Where is the truth in this?
 - For things to have meaning and truth, they have to be connected with a most full and true version of it, according to a Platonic conception of it.
 - There has to be a perfect version of love which gives meaning and truth the imperfect version. Love is outside of any conditions.
 - Christ on the cross says, “Father, forgive them for they know not what they do.”
 - Are there times when human love more approximates that than others?
 - Insofar as love participates in the true and perfect vision of love, it’s real love.
 - You’ve got to have the truth of that thing. The truth of that thing is the measure of all love.
 - This sonnet is aiming at a metaphysical answer. This is highly Platonic, but also is also very Christian sounding. You want the students to wrestle with this idea: Does the ideal give us the guide?