

Hello students!

Welcome to this module, which will be on Shakespeare's Sonnet 18.

I'm Roxana Singh and I will take you through a little bit of background to Shakespeare Sonnets as well as talk about the theme, style and structure of Sonnet 18. At the end of this module you should not only be able to understand and appreciate this particular poem and identify its rhyme and meter, but also be able to savour the different literary devices and symbols that Shakespeare constantly uses in all of his poetry - especially the sonnets; and also be able to perceive all the overt and covert meanings that Shakespeare always passes on through the few words that he uses.

So Shakespeare was lucky! - he was born at the right time, at the right place ! When Queen Elizabeth was the Regent. In 1588, England, under her helm, defeated the Spanish Armada and emerged as a world power. At that time, before England, it was Spain that was the world power and had total and complete mastery over the Atlantic. But under the leadership of Queen Elizabeth, England, entered a great time, a Golden Era , a time of peace and prosperity. It was the time of the English Renaissance, and you know when there's peace and prosperity and people have leisure. Then there's always a need for entertainment, for the performing arts. People now have leisure and time to listen to music, go to the theater, and seek other opportunities for entertainment.

And in comes our friend Shakespeare !!!!

He didn't live very long - for 52 years - and he actually started writing only when he was about 28 years old. So he actually only wrote for about 24 years. But in that time his was a prodigious output of outstanding talent. And in that time he not only wrote plays and two long poems, but he also wrote 154 sonnets.

Shakespeare was a brilliant sonneteer. And the sonnets are sometimes puzzling, sometimes elusive. All of them are love poems. They are divided into three major categories. The first 126 seem to be addressed to a fair youth; 127 to 152 are addressed to a dark lady. These are really puzzling, sometimes dark, baffling. They talk about the pain and the agony, not just the ecstasy, but the agony and the pain of love. Love can be a torturous state. And then - the last two poems, 153 and 154, which are tongue in cheek, playful, fun. They're addressed to Cupid.

1590s - fifteen 90s was when most of these poems were written. Now this is very significant. In the 1590s - about 1593, almost up to 1600, all the theatres in England were locked. Why? Because of a pandemic, the bubonic plague. They did open once in about 1594 but shut down again, and so this was a time when there was not much theatre happening - none in fact - and this was a time when poetry flourished. Shakespeare wrote most of his sonnets in the 1590s. They were actually published only in 1609. But his sonnets were all written between 1590 to 1604.

Let's look at Sonnet 18 by William Shakespeare addressed to a 'fair youth'.

In these first few poems in the first 17 poems, Shakespeare is telling the fair youth to multiply, to have children so that there would be more handsome children born in his image. This poem is a pure tribute to the 'Fair Youth', his handsome visage, his beauty and his grace.

Another point, sonnets often do not have a title. Very often it is the first line of the sonnet that is used as a title, although some later poets do title their sonnets, generally not up to the end of the Romantic era.

So now sit back and listen.

Sonnet 18 by William Shakespeare.

***Shall I compare thee to a summer's day?
Thou art more lovely and more temperate:
Rough winds do shake the darling buds of May,
And summer's lease hath all too short a date:
Sometime too hot the eye of heaven shines,
And often is his gold complexion dimmed,
And every fair from fair sometime declines,
By chance, or nature's changing course untrimmed:
But thy eternal summer shall not fade,
Nor lose possession of that fair thou ow'st,
Nor shall death brag thou wander'st in his shade,
When in eternal lines to time thou grow'st,
So long as men can breathe, or eyes can see,
So long lives this, and this gives life to thee.***

VERY IMPORTANT.

A poem is an auditory experience, and it must make you feel.

Let us now look at the poem in detail.

The 1st quatrain - its a very, very quirky thing that Shakespeare does. He talks about the attributes of the youth, about his beauty, by talking about making negative statements about summer, about the weather. Now everyone knows of course, English weather is probably the most fickle weather on Earth. He talks about how the summer's day is either too hot or too cold or too short; and the fair youth is above all of these shortcomings.

You will see on your screen that I have colour coded the rhyme scheme, so that's the classic Shakespearean first quatrain ABAB. He says that he wants to compare him to a summer's day, but he's better than the summer's day. He's even sunnier - er and handsomer than one of the best days of summer.

Summer is either too short or too hot. Sometimes the God's are angry and send in burning hot rays of sunshine. Sometimes the sun hides behind the clouds, even on a summer's day and it's just too dingy.

And in this way, by criticizing, by disparaging summer, he praises the fair youth and his beauty.

Shakespeare talks about how nature is always changing. The course nature of Nature is never constant and by saying all the negatives about nature and about a summer's day, he is indirectly praising the youth's beauty.

Then he says, you know, 'thy eternal summer shall not fade'

- No matter what happens to the weather, no matter that years will pass and summers will come and summers will go, your beauty will remain forever. Now this makes us wonder, wonder a little, because otherwise Shakespeare's always talking about the passing of time and how time robs one of beauty and brings in, you know wrinkles and old age. But here he says the youth will remain handsome, young forever; and he will be remembered, and his beauty will be remembered even after his death.

Now with Shakespeare you know one has to always be very careful. He's a very cocky guy you know and he's always saying many things at the same time. Is he saying that the youth will be remembered because he's an ideal of beauty? He's like, you know, Mr Universe, one of the most handsome men that ever walked and people will remember him. Is he saying that? Or is he saying something else? what are the covert meanings? Is he in fact saying that now that he, Shakespeare is writing these lines eulogizing him, writing his lines in praise of him, the youth will always be remembered. Why? Because his words will remain, this poem will remain, stand the test of time and so the youth too will be immortalised. Or is he saying that because the lines that he writes are about a handsome man? Both the beauty of this fair youth that he is extolling as well as the beauty of his words, he, Shakespeare, the poet, Shakespeare the writer is writing will remain - as long as men can breathe and eyes can see; as long as there is ink and paper on earth, these lines can be written and rewritten; can be copied, reprinted and will live on forever and ever,

Shakespeare, you know, has been called by one of the University wits of his time as an 'upstart crow'. Yet he is very confident that his word, his verse will endure.

Right, so there are all of these covert meanings.

Regarding the brilliant epigrammatic couplet - 'So long as men can breathe, or eyes can see,/ So long lives this, and this gives life to thee.' So in other words, his words will keep reminding generations of people about his beauty.

Let's look at the rhyme scheme. It's a classic Shakespeare in sonnet abab; cdcd; efef; gg. The volta here occurs in line 9 when you know the problem is finished being presented. And now a resolution is sort of working going to be worked out. .

Once again, the couplet - very very witty, very pithy, very succinct, saying in all, actually, three things at the same time.

OK, double or triple meanings?

The fact that not only was the youth's beauty legendary and memorable, even his poetry is the same. Even his poetry will be memorable and immortal - so sure he is of its merit !!! That it will remain for posterity.

References - on your screen.

Bye bye.