

3.3 I Read 22 Sonnets in 22 Days

Angourie [host]

Before I begin, I would like to acknowledge the Wurundjeri People of the Kulin Nation as the traditional custodians of the land on which this work was developed and is presented. I pay my respects to Elders past, present and emerging.

[theme music]

Hello and welcome back to The Community Library: a podcast, book club and discussion space. I'm your host, Angourie Rice, and this week, I'm going to tell you what happened when I read 22 sonnets in 22 days.

[theme music ends]

So, a few weeks ago, a family friend of ours was talking about poetry. And he's not familiar with poetry himself, and so he was asking those of us present how to read poetry and understand it. Everyone kind of jumped in and offered suggestions and recommended poets and poems, and it really got me thinking about how little poetry I've read, and how it's quite a large gap in my reading. So, I thought to myself, since Melbourne is still in lockdown, and I have nothing better to do, why don't I go on a journey to read more poetry?

So, I sat down, with this intention in mind of reading more poetry, and then the question hit me: where on earth do I begin? I thought my own bookshelf would be the best starting place – um, also considering that bookshops are closed and libraries are closed – and so I pulled down every poetry collection I own. I then went to the family bookshelf, and pulled down all the poetry collections on that shelf, too, and I ended up with twelve books of poetry, including The New Oxford Book of English Verse, which is almost 1000 pages long. So with this big stack of books in front of me, I again asked myself: where on earth do I begin?

I flicked through the books, I perused the big bind-ups, and I just got completely overwhelmed by the lists of names I recognised, but I'd never actually read from, or knew nothing about. At first I thought I should start early, and move my way through chronologically, up to present day. But after trying to read some very early medieval Scottish poetry, I thought I should narrow my field of exploration to make it a little easier.

And then the idea hit me: Shakespeare. Sonnets. A sonnet every day. Shakespeare is by no means the first poet, but he is definitely one of the most famous, and one of the earlier ones. And there's a whole hoard of content online about the sonnets, so I knew that if I needed help with understanding them, it was only a google search away. But, most importantly, probably the main reason I settled on the sonnets first, is that they are short. Only fourteen lines! Easy peasy. And so I decided that a sonnet a day would be the first instalment on my journey to reading more poetry.

But now, where to begin with the sonnets? He wrote over 150, maybe 154, I don't know the exact number. Anyway, I consulted the internet, of course, and founded two lists that ranked Shakespeare's best poems. I combined them, I came up with a list of 21, and then I asked friend-of-

the-podcast Laurence, for a recommendation, and then added it to my list. By the way, Laurence and I did a whole episode on Shakespeare together, which I'll link in the show notes if you are interested. So, at this point I had 22 sonnets, I had 22 days, and I was ready to go.

[questionable Elizabethan-era music]

Day One

Sonnet 1

From fairest creatures we desire increase,

[questionable Elizabethan-era music fades out]

Okay, so we're off to a little bit of a weird start, because the speaker is basically, like, telling the subject that they must have children, otherwise they're very selfish. It's saying: if you doesn't have children, you're denying the world of having your beauty immortalised through your line of descendants, and that's, like a really selfish thing to do. I don't really know what to do with this information? Um, I thought the sonnets were, like, love sonnets, but I – I guess I was wrong.

[more Elizabethan-era music fades in and out]

I later learnt that the first 17 sonnets are called the "procreation sonnets", as they're all on the topic of urging young men to have babies and continue their line. On day two, I read sonnet 3, which echoed this sentiment again.

[music fades in]

Look in thy glass and tell the face thou viewest

[music fades out]

Again, like, the whole idea of not having children is selfish. I don't really understand why Shakespeare is going on about this? I guess – I mean, I guess it echoes kind of a very imperial, colonialist mindset of continuing the bloodline and ensuring that it's kept pure, and, you know, furthering one's own beauty and genes and all of that. Um, but I would argue that having children to indulge one's youth and beauty and immortalise that, is kind of selfish? But, I don't know, maybe that's just me. I also understood this one much better on the first read, so either I'm getting smarter or is Shakey getting clearer. Or maybe both?

[music fades in and out]

Already, after two days, my brain was able to understand the general meaning a lot quicker, and I didn't have to rely so heavily on what the internet explained for me. And I was excited for day three, because that was sonnet 18, which meant we would be out of the procreation sonnets. Though I had only read two of the procreation sonnets, I was pretty certain that it just wasn't my thing. And I was also excited about sonnet 18 because it is Shakespeare's most famous sonnet. I'm sure you all know the first line...

*Shall I compare thee to a summer's day?
Thou art more lovely and more temperate.*

[soft flute music, or maybe panpipes? Fades in]

*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 wand'rest 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.*

[music fades out]

I want to take a moment to talk about sonnet 18, because, after reading it, I finally understood why it was so famous. I had been familiar with the opening line for so long, but I had also gone so long not really knowing what it was about.

So, the opening line asks a simple rhetorical question: "*Shall I compare thee to a summer's day?*" Over the next few lines, Shakespeare does, indeed, compare the subject to a summer's day, but says that the subject is even lovelier than a summer's day, because summer isn't perfect. Sometimes it's really windy, sometimes it's too short, sometimes the sun is too hot, and sometimes it's too cloudy. He then goes on to say that, at some point, all beautiful things fade, just like summer, because that's the way life goes. But! "*thy eternal summer shall not fade.*" The subject will never grow old, their beauty will never fade, because it's immortalised in this sonnet. So long as people continue to read this poem, so long lives their beauty.

So after finally understanding this sonnet, I read it again, and again, and again, and determined, three poems into my experiment, that this was my favourite. I think the reason I love this one so much, and possibly also the reason why it's so beloved by so many, is because the whole sentiment relies on the participation of the reader. The last couplet is almost a plea to the audience, you know: keep reading me, keep passing me down from generation to generation, otherwise my lover's beauty will decay. I love how it speaks to the idea that writing – whether that be poetry or prose or song – captures a moment in time and holds it there, immortalising it, so that feeling, or that person, or that experience, can continue to exist, can continue to be shared.

[more Elizabethan-era music fades in! This one's a little more upbeat]

Day Four

Sonnet 20
A woman's face, with Nature's own hand painted,

[music fades out]

Okay, so I didn't really get this one until I googled it, and now that I know, um ... was Shakespeare gay? Because in this sonnet, he's talking about a young man who is so beautiful he looks like a woman. But he's not, he's better than a woman, because he doesn't have the character flaws of women. And then Shakespeare says that, like, he's sure that when Mother Nature made this young man, she made the mistake in giving him a dick, and now Shakespeare's all disappointed because that means they can't be together. And then in the final line, he's like: Ah, well, you can be my love, and your lover can use your dick instead. So ... was Shakespeare gay? Or bi?

[music fades in and out]

Now, there's definitely a plethora of academic writings on Shakespeare's sexuality. When I studied *Twelfth Night* in literature class, I did read some queer theory, but that was more about the content of the play, not Shakespeare himself. So, when questioning Shakespeare's sexuality, a few things come into play. The first being that we don't actually know the context in which he wrote this sonnet. It could have been commissioned, it could have been a joke, it could have been a writing exercise, or it could actually be about Shakespeare's very real feelings for another man. The other thing to consider is historical context, and how sexuality was viewed in the time. This is something I don't know about and I haven't researched, so I suggest you go and research it yourself if you're interested. But, historical context and queer theory aside, in my very uneducated and very unresearched opinion, Shakespeare was probably bi.

On day five, I read sonnet 22, which begins "*My glass shall not persuade me I am old.*" This was my first taste of a theme I would come to discover is very present in Shakespeare's sonnets: ageing, decaying beauty, and Time with a capital T.

[music fades in – this time with bagpipes!]

Day Six

Sonnet 23

As an unperfect actor on the stage,

[music fades out]

Oh, I actually really loved this one! He's talking about, like, being so full of love that it's his own weakness, or undoing. And he's unable to express his feelings, and so his lover, like, just must be content with understanding the silent language of love.

[music fades in and out]

That day I discovered I liked the more romantic sonnets. On day seven, I read sonnet 27 – "*Weary with toil, I haste me to my bed*" – and was surprised at how much my reading comprehension had improved. I no longer needed NoFear Shakespeare's help to get the meaning, and I really fell into a rhythm, and started to look forward [to] setting aside the time to study each day.

On day eight, we were “*in disgrace with Fortune and men’s eyes*” with sonnet 29, and on day nine we were in “*sessions of sweet silent thought*” with sonnet 30. Both were all about being sad and lonely, and then thinking about one’s lover and feeling all happy again.

Day ten was a suggestion from aforementioned Shakespeare-nerd Laurence. At this point I was getting a bit sick of the love sonnets, and I asked him if there were any break up sonnets, to which he replied sonnet 35.

*No more be grieved at that which thou hast done:
Roses have thorns, and silver fountains mud,
Clouds and eclipses stain both moon and sun,
And loathsome canker lives in sweetest bud.
All men make faults, and even I in this,
Authorizing thy trespass with compare,
Myself corrupting, saving thy amiss,
Excusing thy sins more than thy sins are;
For to thy sensual fault I bring in sense –
Thy adverse party is thy advocate –
And ‘gainst myself a lawful plea commence.
Such civil war is in my love and hate
That I an accessory needs must be
To that sweet thief which sourly robs from me.*

[ominous bagpipes music fades in and out]

Okay, wow, I really loved this one. The first quatrain talks about how – quatrain? Is that how you say it? I’m just – yeah, hopefully. Anyway, the first quatrain talks about how all pretty things are bad or corrupted in some way: roses have thorns, fountains have mud, etc. So he’s referencing the fact that his lover, though they were beautiful, they were also mean. And then in the second quatrain, he talks about how it’s just as much his fault, for letting his lover hurt him in such a way, and for, like, not sticking up for himself. And he talks about how he is simultaneously his lover’s enemy and advocate, and he kind of has to, like, fight a war with himself in his brain. Um, which is like, so relatable.

[music fades in and out]

I loved reading a sonnet that had a bit of anger, a bit of bite to it, and I think that’s what made me feel so connected to sonnet 35. The thing that really struck me with sonnet – and something I continued to feel throughout the process – is how relatable it was. In Taylor Swift’s classic break-up song, *I Knew You Were Trouble*, she sings: “And he’s long gone when he’s next to me / And I realise the blame is on me / Cause I knew you were trouble when you walked in / So shame on me now.” In sonnet 35, Shakespeare is essentially saying the same thing, and so the sonnet hit me in the same way that Taylor Swift’s song does. He’s saying he knows that roses have thorns, he knows that fountains can have mud, he knows that lovers can be bad and hurtful, and yet he still got himself into that situation and allowed himself to be hurt. Just like Taylor, he blames himself for ignoring the warning signs. I think this warrants a whole discussion episode, but that’ll come in future.

On day eleven, Shakespeare wished in sonnet 44 that he was not tied to his corporeal form, so that he could travel with his thoughts to where his lover was. *"But, ah, thought kills me that I am not thought."*

Days twelve, thirteen and fourteen I read sonnets 60, 64 and 65, all of which were about how time with a capital T destroys everything.

[the following sentences have an echoey effect on them and overlap]

*Our minutes hasten to their end ...
Time will come and take my love away ...
Sad mortality o'ersways their power ...*

Etc., etc., etc.

[upbeat medieval-ish music fades in]

Look, Billy, I see you, I appreciate you, I know you're going through something right now, but can you please write me something happy tomorrow? K thanks bye.

On day fifteen I read sonnet 75, which was a love sonnet that passed without much consequence.

I guess I kind of like this one. I don't know, I think it's my fault I'm just, like, not vibing today. I'm two sonnets behind, I'm tired, I have a headache. I'm in a bit of an irritable mood. So, sorry, Will, not your fault.

[music fades out]

But on day sixteen, I got back on the horse with sonnet 80.

*Oh, how I faint when I of you do write,
Knowing a better spirit doth use your name,
And in the praise thereof spends all his might,
To make me tongue-tied speaking of your fame.
But since your worth, wide as the ocean is,
The humble as the proudest sail doth bear,
My saucy bark, inferior far to his,
On your broad main doth willfully appear.
Your shallowest help will hold me up afloat
Whilst he upon your soundless deep doth ride;
Or, being wracked, I am a worthless boat,
He of tall building, and of goodly pride.
Then if he thrive, and I be cast away,
The worst was this: my love was my decay.*

[sad piano music fades in and out – we're getting further and further from historical accuracy, here]

Aw, I love this one, even though it's kind of sad! It's all about how Shakespeare is in competition with another man for the subject's love. And he uses the metaphor of oceans and boats to say that this man is, like, a big, sturdy ship, while Shakespeare is just a little boat. And all he needs is just, like, a little gesture from the subject, and that'll give him enough to keep going and sustain his love. And then the last couplet is my favourite. Um, cause he says that, if the other guy succeeds, then the worst was that his love was his downfall. But I think I like this one because this is the first time – of the sonnets I've read, at least – that Shakespeare is, like – he's kind of unsure of himself, and he feels inferior. In all the other love sonnets, the tension comes from, like, the inevitability of ageing and losing one's love, but like, at least he's got love now. Whereas in this one, the tension comes from the fact that maybe the subject doesn't love him back at all. And this sentiment, this desperation and yearning, feels more real and human somehow.

[music fades in and out]

Day seventeen was sonnet 94, which was a strange one. It talked about how beautiful people are dangerous, and you're better off being with a plain old nobody than with a corrupted beautiful person. I want to read you the last couplet, though, because I thought it was pretty great. For context, throughout the whole poem Shakespeare has used the metaphor of flowers. So, beautiful people are flowers, and plain people are weeds. He says: "*For sweetest things turn sourest by their deeds; / Lilies that fester smell far worse than weeds.*"

Day eighteen was sonnet 104, yet another sonnet about Time with a capital T and ageing. On day nineteen, however, I discovered another favourite.

[sad clarinet music fades in]

Sonnet 106

[sad clarinet music fades out]

*When in the chronicle of wasted time
I see descriptions of the fairest nights,
And beauty making beautiful old rhyme
In praise of ladies dead and lovely knights;
Then, in the blazon of sweet beauty's best,
Of hand, of foot, of lip, of eye, of brow,
I see their antique pen would have expressed
Even such a beauty as you master now.
So all their praises are but prophecies
Of this our time, all you prefiguring,
And, for they looked but with divining eyes,
They hold not still enough your worth to since:
For we, which now behold these present days,
Have eyes to wonder, but lack tongues to praise.*

[music fades in and out]

I really love this one, but I'm kind of struggling to figure out why. It starts with Will looking back on all the poets that came before him, and how they described beautiful ladies and lovely knights. And he says that those great poets were trying to express the kind of beauty that the subject holds now, in the present day. So all those old writers were actually prophets, and now, in present day, Shakespeare is unable to express that same beauty. And I love the last line: "*Have eyes to wonder, but lack tongues to praise.*" I'm trying to figure out what it is, but I think this sonnet somehow makes me feel more connected to Shakespeare as a person, and it feels like he was a real person, like, he wasn't just some serious, self-obsessed poet with no self-awareness. In this sonnet, I think he – he talks about the act of writing and what it means, and the writers who came before him, and the writers that were going to come after him, and I think ... it – it just makes him feel more real, somehow.

[music fades in and out]

What I was trying to so ineloquently express the other day is this is what intrigues me about Shakespeare and classics in general. I ask myself: Why have the works of Shakespeare continued to connect with people? Can still, in this day and age, connect with something that was written four hundred years ago? And that's really what this experiment was about for me. It wasn't about trying to be all literary, or about the dark academia aesthetic – although I do love that. It was seeing what all the fuss is about. I understand that what is considered good and important and worth studying in the literary canon has been influenced by those who have power in culture in society. Shakespeare is, in part, "good", because centuries of white men have said so. But, after conducting this experiment, I also think there's a reason why his works continue to be prevalent in pop culture today, why people keep revisiting these narratives, and remixing them, and adapting them.

On days twenty and twenty-one I read sonnet 116, which was about unconditional love, and sonnet 129, which was about sex and lust. And at this point, I had become pretty good at cracking Shakespeare's code, and I could understand the meaning just after the first read. And I noticed that, even though this poetry was written four whole centuries ago, these human emotions he's writing about are still the same. You know, love is the same, revenge and hate and shame are all the same. Feeling that connection through time is quite a powerful thing for me, personally.

But I guess, the question is, if you don't feel that connection when you read Shakespeare's sonnets, then what's the point? You know, why should you read Shakespeare when you can read a modern book about love that relates to you directly – a book where you don't have to wade through old English words and confusing verse? Well, I think, for one thing, Shakespeare's command of language is exquisite. Even though, in sonnet 35, he says the same thing Taylor Swift does in *I Knew You Were Trouble*, he expresses it in a way I had never considered before. And this leads me onto my second point, which is: I think Shakespeare offers insight on how language and storytelling has evolved. Looking back on the foundations of storytelling can help us understand why and how we tell certain stories today, and also what storytelling might look like in the future.

[music fades in]

Sonnet 130

My mistress' eyes are nothing like the sun;

[music fades out]

Well, this is a weird one to end on. Shakespeare basically just roasts this mysterious mistress for the first twelve lines, saying she's not pretty, her lips aren't that red, her voice isn't that nice, her cheeks aren't rosy, and then in the last couplet, he's like: "Oh, but I really love her and she's really special to me." Like, if I were Shakespeare's girlfriend, and he wrote me this sonnet, I would be pretty upset. I really hope she never saw it. But, you know, maybe she did, and maybe she had a great sense of humour and they had a laugh about it. I don't know.

[music fades in and out]

Sonnet 130 was kind of an unsatisfying end to my experiment, and I felt like I wasn't totally through with the sonnets yet. I wanted to do something that felt like a real ending, something that felt like a satisfying conclusion, something that summarised my experience.

I decided to write a sonnet.

Now, one cannot write a sonnet willy-nilly. There are rules to these kinds of things. There are syllables you must stress and pentameters you must conform to. So, I had to establish a set of criteria before writing my sonnet.

[upbeat 20s jazz music fades in]

Okay, so when you type "how to write a Shakespearean sonnet" into Ecosia, the first thing that comes up is dummies.com, so I think I'll give that a go.

[music fades out]

A sonnet is comprised of fourteen lines, divided into three sections of four lines, called quatrains, and one couplet. The Shakespearean rhyme scheme is ABAB, CDCC, EFEF, GG. This means the first line of each quatrain rhymes with the third, and the second line rhymes with the fourth. The last two lines of the sonnet rhyme with each other. The lines themselves must be written in iambic pentameter, which means the stress is on the second syllable. A friend said to me that this pentameter follows your heart-beat: da-DUM, da-DUM, da-DUM, da-DUM. "Shall I compare thee to a summer's day?" Each line should, in iambic pentameter, have ten syllables, but even Shakespeare broke this rule sometimes to put dramatic emphasis on certain words or ideas.

[jazz music fades in and out]

Okay, so there are quite a lot of rules you have to follow when writing a sonnet and I've written them all down here, but I do remember someone telling me that that actually makes it easier. Like with a haiku, for example. There are strict rules to writing a haiku, but I think that makes it easier, because you don't get overwhelmed by all these possibilities. So, like narrowing the creative field with constraints like rhyme scheme and form and number of lines and syllables is

probably a good thing. Um, the difference with a sonnet, though, is that it's five times as long as a haiku, so it might be a little trickier.

[jazz music fades in and out]

As well as learning about the rules of form, I also learnt about the story conventions of Shakespeare's sonnets. Dummies.com told me that the first quatrain introduces the main theme and metaphor, then the second quatrain expands on that idea and complicates it. The third quatrain often begins with the word "But", and introduces a twist or a conflict, which is then resolved by the couplet at the end.

[jazz music fades in and out]

At this point I've written the first two quatrains, so I'm just over halfway, but um, they're not very good. So far the hardest thing has just been getting the ideas out in a way that makes sense and kind of follows a story. I thought I would really struggle with iambic pentameter, like, trying to figure out which syllable in a word is the stressed one, but it's actually quite easy, because if it sounds wrong and weird, then the stress isn't right. So, I've been doing a lot of this, like: "The sourdough is still warm," which doesn't sound right, because warm sounds bad when it's said quickly like that, and it should be, like, more emphasised. So then I try again, like: "The sourdough is fresh and warm." I'm not writing my sonnet about sourdough, don't worry, it's just – just an example.

[jazz music fades in and out]

In total, it took me an hour and a half to write my sonnet. I made sure I followed all of the conventions of form, though I did break iambic pentameter a few times, but I think it adds a bit of spice and character, if I do say so myself. So here I present to you, sonnet 1. Or maybe it should just be called "sonnet", considering I haven't written any other sonnets yet. Anyway, here goes.

For two-and-twenty days I read of birds,
Of flower buds, of love, and Time's cruel cost.
For two-and-twenty days I read his words,
I sought his meaning, travelled through time lost.
Each day the lockèd chest would boast a new
Sly code to crack, a metaphor to find.
I'd analyse the phrases and each clue,
Until I heard the tell-tale click of mind.
I questioned his importance, I asked why
We care about four-hundred-years-old rhyme?
But when I read of love and hate, then I
Discovered this connection tightens time.
May this old man's old writing help me make
Some sense of love, of ruin, of heart-ache.

[theme music]

Thank you very much for listening. Don't forget that next week, I'll be discussing *Clap When You Land* by Elizabeth Acevedo for the book club pick, so you still have one week to read it! If you enjoyed listening, you can subscribe on iTunes or Spotify so you never miss an episode. You can follow The Community Library on Instagram @the_community_library, and use the hashtag #thecommunitylibrary on Instagram or Twitter. I also have a blog: angourieslibrary.wordpress.com, and there you can find full transcriptions of the episodes and more links and resources. The podcast artwork is designed by Ashley Ronning. You can look at more of her work at ashleyronning.com. Once again, thank you for listening, and I'll talk to you next time. Bye!

[theme music fades out]