

## 4.4 – What do Shakespeare and Taylor Swift Have in Common?

### Angourie [host]

Before I begin, I 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.

### Taylor Swift

*“And I realise  
The blame is on me  
Cause I knew you were trouble when you walked in  
So shame on me now  
Flew me to places I'd never been  
Til you put me down, oh”*

### Angourie [host]

That’s Taylor Swift with her hit single *I Knew You Were Trouble* from her 2012 album, *Red*.

### Sir Patrick Stewart

*“All men make faults, and even I in this,  
Authorizing thy trespass with compare,  
Myself corrupting, salving thy amiss,  
Excusing thy sins more than thy sins are;”*

### Angourie [host]

And that’s Sir Patrick Stewart reading William Shakespeare’s Sonnet 35. What’s a 400-year-old poem got to do with a 2012 breakup song? Well, more than you might think ...

[fade in: plucky theme music with violins, clarinet, piano, and twinkly triangle]

### Angourie

Welcome to The Community Library: a podcast and book club for anyone interested in stories, and how and why we tell them. I’m your host, Angourie Rice.

[fade out: theme music]

### Angourie

I love break-up songs. I really do. I think there is something so raw and powerful about them – they illicit such strong emotion both from the singer and the listener. Break-up songs can be bitter and angry, they can be sad and emotional. They can be funny in their pettiness, and they can make you cry with their rawness. Even if you’ve never been in love or had your heart broken, break-up songs give you permission to explore your anger or disappointment or frustration.

I grew up listening to an artist who is infamous for her break up songs: Taylor Swift. I was about to turn twelve when her 2012 album *Red* was released – a true break up album with hits like *We Are Never Ever Getting Back Together*, *22* and of course, *I Knew You Were Trouble*. This was Swift's earliest foray into the pop sound, with the hit singles off this album shifting away from country and more into the gloss pop genre that would define her next album, 1989.

Now, at eleven years old, I had never been through a break up. I was a pretty reserved and awkward tween who constantly stressed about being nice and likable all the time. But every time I belted out "I knew you were trouble when you walked in," I pretended I was singing it right into the face of some mystery lover who had broken my heart. Songs like that gave me permission to feel any pent-up anger and frustration without the fear of being deemed unlikable. Nine years later, and ... not much has changed. I've been through a few of my own heartbreaks, but I still struggle with allowing myself to feel all my anger and disappointment without the help of Taylor Swift's catchy and petulant break-up songs.

A few months ago, I did an experiment for this podcast in which I read one Shakespearean sonnet a day for twenty-two days. And at the time, I was also nursing a broken heart, which is not a great idea if you want to go on an escapade of reading from a writer who was known for his sonnets about love. And so by day seven, I was growing sick of all the sappy love sonnets, and so I asked a friend who is very knowledgeable about Shakespeare, if there were any break-up sonnets, to which he replied: Sonnet 35. I read it and loved it. And at the time, I remarked how similar the themes were to Taylor Swift's iconic break-up song *I Knew You Were Trouble*. I even said in the episode ...

**Angourie from the past [with a crackly telephone filter on her voice]**

"... the sonnet hit me in the same way that Taylor Swift's song does. [...] 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."

**Present-day Angourie**

And so here it is, my friends. Here is my comparative audio essay on William Shakespeare's Sonnet 35, and Taylor Swift's *I Knew You Were Trouble*.

[fade in: Medieval-style music with lute, harpsichord? Maybe? And possibly flute? It's very dubious but it sounds somewhat Shakespearean]

**Angourie**

I think it's only fair we go in chronological order and start with our good friend Billy Shakes. Though the exact date is not known, Shakespeare was probably born in April of 1564 in Stratford-upon-Avon, around 100 miles northwest of London. Coming from a well-respected family, Shakespeare attended Stratford's school where he would have learnt reading and writing and Latin. In 1582, William married Anne Hathaway – no, not that one – and they had twins in 1585. Not much is known about Shakespeare's life in the few years after the twins' birth, but it can be surmised that he worked in London as an actor and playwright. First editions of his early plays were published in 1594, and over the next twenty years he

became one of the most well-known actors and playwrights in London, before he died in 1616.

Unfortunately for us, the background of Shakespeare's sonnets remains somewhat of a mystery. Our definitive source of Shakespeare's sonnets is a quarto published in 1609 by Thomas Thorpe – whether this was published with or without permission from Shakespeare himself, is unknown. This booklet contains 154 sonnets, probably written between 1591 and 1603, and it's dedicated to, quote: "the onlie begetter of these insuing sonnets, Mr. W. H." [sic]. The identity of this mysterious Mr. W. H. is much debated, and a discussion for another time. The first 126 sonnets are addressed to whom scholars call the "Fair Youth" – a young man who is most likely our elusive Mr. W. H. – and the rest of the poems are either addressed to or refer to a woman whom scholars call the "Dark Lady". The first 17 sonnets in the collection are called the "procreation sonnets", all of which urge the Fair Youth to marry and have children to continue his legacy. The rest of the collection covers a range of topics, from ageing, time, death, to infidelity, and of course, love.

Shakespeare did not invent the sonnet. It was a popular form of poetry during the Renaissance, but its origins date back to the 13<sup>th</sup> Century in Sicily. A sonnet consists of fourteen lines, and follows a strict rhyme scheme. But what that strict rhyme scheme *is* depends on who you ask. For Shakespeare's sonnets, the lines were divided into three quatrains – a quatrain is a verse of four lines – and one couplet at the end. The rhyme scheme he tended to follow was ABAB, CDCD, 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.

Shakespeare's sonnets follow iambic pentameter, which is the meter used in his plays, too. Iambic pentameter is a way to describe the rhythm of the poem, and this rhythm is established by the syllables of the words that make up each line. "Iambic" means that the stress is on every second syllable of the line, and "pentameter" means that there are five stressed syllables and five un-stressed syllables, thus ten syllables in a line. If this all sounds like nonsense to you, as it mostly does to me, here's a way I remember it: 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?*"

In addition to rules of form in a sonnet, there are story conventions. There are a few ways to divide and group the fourteen lines of a sonnet to tell a story. It's divided into two groups – the first being the "octave" of eight lines, and then the "sestet" of remaining six. When the lines of a sonnet are grouped in this way, a story convention emerges. The octave introduces a main theme, idea or metaphor, and then once the octave ends, and we go into the sestet, or the last six lines, there is a twist, or conflict, or shift in the ideas, which is then resolved by the last two lines in the sestet, which in Shakespeare's sonnet, is a rhyming couplet.

All this formatting might seem very arbitrary and irrelevant, but it is important to understand the rules of a sonnet so we can also understand the ways in which Shakespeare broke the rules. And I also, personally, find it easier to understand a sonnet when I know the rules by which it abides. It's easier to identify the thematic shift if you know it'll come in at

around line nine, and also to identify the resolution, which is always in the last couplet. And, when you think about it, the rules of a sonnet are actually very similar to the rules of a pop song, which follows a structure. You've got verse, pre-chorus, chorus, and then bridge. So, with all this in mind, let's finally read *Sonnet 35*.

### Angourie

*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, salving 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.*

### Angourie

Okay, let's decode this together. What is this sonnet all about? In this poem, the speaker reprimands himself for making excuses for his lover's wrongdoings. In this case, we can assume the speaker is Willy Shakes, and the lover, or the subject of the sonnet, is the Fair Youth. So it's a poem about the inner conflict of making excuses for the pain that someone has inflicted upon you. Red flags are just flags through rose-tinted glasses, am I right?

The first quatrain begins with the line: "No more be griev'd at that which thou hast done." Here, the speaker is talking directly to the subject, telling him: "Don't worry about that bad thing that you did. Roses have thorns, silver fountains have mud, clouds obscure the moon, eclipses the sun, even diseases can lurk in the most beautiful of flowers." In essence, everything that is beautiful is also imperfect, and thus the Fair Youth is excused of his bad behaviour.

However, in the second quatrain, ol' Billy Shakes does a complete 180. He begins with "All men make faults," which checks out and aligns with what he was saying in the first quatrain, but then he continues to say: "and even I in this, / Authorising thy trespass with compare." So here Shakespeare is saying that he himself is making a mistake in justifying the Fair Youth's transgressions. He goes on to say that he knows he's only corrupting himself by making allowances, giving the Fair Youth more leeway than he deserves.

In the third quatrain, Shakespeare tries to explain how this inner conflict manifests. With the line "For to thy sensual fault I bring in sense," Shakespeare explains how he's trying to understand and excuse the Fair Youth's "sensual fault" – read that as "passionate affair" – with logic and rationality. And then comes my favourite line: "Thy adverse party is thy advocate." Meaning, the injured party, the victim, Shakespeare himself, is also the

perpetrator's defender. He continues on with the legal terminology to say he's pleading the Fair Youth's case against himself. His love and hate are at war with one another.

In the final couplet, Shakespeare recycles this legal metaphor, but this time from the perspective of the criminal. "I can't help being an accessory to the thief who robs from me."

So now that we've decoded Shakespeare's language and we actually know what he's saying in this poem, let's unpack it a bit. This is a poem about an inner conflict – that feeling of being pulled in two different directions. And this duality is mirrored in the metaphors and poetic devices Shakespeare chooses to illustrate this feeling. Like with any sonnet, there is a plethora of interpretations out there, some of which I'd like to share with you.

One reading is the courtroom metaphor that frames the second half of the poem. When we read the poem like this, the speaker is enacting these two sides: the accuser and the defendant. The first quatrain is the part of himself that defends his lover, while the second quatrain is the part of himself that takes the blame for making excuses where they are not deserved. And the final six lines support this reading further by bringing in legal terminology and metaphors. Terms like "adverse party" in line ten and "lawful plea" in line eleven reference a courtroom in which the speaker is putting himself on trial. In the final couplet, the metaphor shifts from a civilised metaphor to imagery of crime. The speaker describes himself as an accessory to the thief – that is, the Fair Youth – who robs from him.

The idea of analysing and judging the emotional through the means of logic comes up in line 9: "For to thy sensual fault I bring in sense." The speaker is approaching this emotional conflict with a black-and-white view. So again, we see this duality emerge, which is mirrored in the first quatrain of the poem. We've got the rose vs. the thorn, the fountain vs. the mud, etc., etc.. And zooming out from this, you know, line by line analysis, we see a greater rhetoric emerge from the poem. So with all this imagery of courts and crimes, we get these overarching ideas of guilt vs. innocence, justice and injustice. The logical, rational, common sense approach to an emotional, "sensual" problem. And so the first quatrain can also be read as, not only the "defence", but the emotional side of the speaker's brain, which is then combatted by logic. And where the guilt lies is very interesting, because at no point is the Fair Youth on trial. Rather, the speaker is determining his own guilt from being an accomplice to the crime.

So when we take this idea of the courtroom, we frame this sonnet as a well-thought-out argument. Our speaker has taken time to carefully construct each argument, explaining his inner conflict and sharing it with the reader so that we may understand, and even excuse, his faults. But, as we know, my friends, there are two sides to every coin, there are many ways to skin a cat, and there are many readings we can apply *Sonnet 35*. So what if we read this not as a carefully thought-out plea in court, but rather as a real-time confession?

The thing that makes this sonnet seem so alive and real and human is Shakespeare's constant switching perspectives, changing his mind. In the space of a single line, "All men make faults, and even I in this," he goes from excusing his lover to condemning himself. Rather than interpreting this sonnet as a pro-cons list, we can interpret it as a man so completely in two minds, he cannot follow his own train of thought. We witness him as he

tries to wrinkle out his conflicting thoughts, eventually coming to settle the blame not on his lover, but merely himself. And suddenly, to me, this sonnet becomes messy, desperate, confessional.

And my use of the word “confessional” is deliberate, here, because for all the courtroom imagery Shakey throws in there, he also adds a big spoonful of religious references. “Authorising thy trespass with compare,” echoes the line in the well-known Lord’s prayer: “Forgive us our trespasses, / as we forgive those who trespass against us.” And so here we find a new image: one of a distressed man confessing the conflicting thoughts in his mind, and asking the reader for forgiveness.

This was how I first read *Sonnet 35* – a real and raw confession happening right before my eyes. How many times had I done that same flip-flopping between anger at the person who had done me wrong, and then anger at only myself, for getting myself into this situation? This sentiment was one I recognised and knew immediately. I’ve recounted very similar scenarios in my diary, I’ve expressed them to my friends, parents, therapist. Of course, not in such eloquent words as Shakespeare, and usually with a lot more swear words, but I think this reading of *Sonnet 35* is possibly the most recognisable and accessible – at least, it’s the reading I immediately connected with. It demonstrates intense feeling in the heat of the moment. Struggling to reconcile the pain someone has caused us with the love we have for them is a conflict that hasn’t changed in four hundred years, and it’s spectacular to read that same sentiment distilled into fourteen lines of poetry.

But there’s a third, more cynical reading of this sonnet that I’d like to share with you before we get to Taylor Swift. And again, it concerns the flip Shakespeare seems to make at the beginning of the second quatrain – when he switches from excusing his lover to then emphasising the lover’s blame. In these first two readings that I shared with you, the courtroom and the confession, the speaker has been completely sincere in his conflict. He is truly in two minds, doesn’t know which narrative to believe. But what if we read the first quatrain as self-mockery, instead? We can read the first four lines, in which Shakespeare sweetly excuses the Fair Youth by comparing his faults to faults in nature, as a sarcastic re-enactment. Suddenly Shakespeare’s generosity towards his lover is nothing but hollow spite. The tone becomes petulant and dripping with self-loathing. Reading the first quatrain like this, it gives the rest of the poem so much more power in its anger, because the speaker has a clear understanding of who is at fault, here: no one but himself. His argument, or his confession – whatever it may be – is no longer weakened by ambivalence, it’s strengthened by white hot, acute and uncompromising anger that manifests in sarcastic mockery. So, on that note of wild rage and deep emotion, let’s talk about Taylor Swift.

[fade in: boppy high-pitched synth-bell note, almost like the opening of a Taylor Swift song but from a Royalty-Free music website, instead]

### **Angourie**

Taylor Swift rose to fame in 2006, at the age of sixteen, with her self-titled debut album. The lead single was country hit *Tim McGraw*, supported by the more boppy single *Our Song* and the very melancholy *Teardrops on My Guitar*. But her sophomore album, 2008’s *Fearless*, was what really launched her into stardom. The album featured classic country music

instruments such as banjo and fiddle, yet also achieved cross-genre appeal with the more pop-sounding singles such as *You Belong with Me* and *Love Story*. *Fearless* won Album of the Year and Best Country Album at the 2010 Grammys. In late 2010, Taylor released her third album, *Speak Now*. This album was more grown-up, and was written entirely on her own, as a response to critics who attributed her success to her song-writing collaborators. Though *Speak Now* didn't win any Grammys, it was a commercial success and continued to build Taylor's brand as Country-Pop-Princess. After a two year break, Taylor Swift released her fourth album in late 2012, titled *Red*.

In the lead up to the album's November release, Taylor put out a slew of promotional singles, the first two being the petty pop song *We Are Never Ever Getting Back Together*, and the slow heartbreak ballad *Begin Again*. Both of these singles were moving away from Taylor's country roots, and listeners and critics were already anticipating that *Red* would be an album like none other Taylor had created before. But when *I Knew You Were Trouble* was released on the 9<sup>th</sup> of October, 2012, as *Red*'s third promotional single, not to be dramatic, but ... it was a game-changer. With its synth, dance-pop sound and dubstep influence, Chris Wilman from *The Hollywood Reporter* labelled it a, quote: "great rock & roll song [...] though the ear candy elements disguise that at first." End quote. The song debuted at number three on the Billboard Hot 100 chart, and made it to number sixteen on the year-end hot 100 of 2013.

And the music video, too, was unlike anything we had ever seen from Swift. The video is unexpectedly grunge and edgy, featuring a punk-rock version of Taylor, complete with pink dip-dyed hair – which was all the rage in 2012 – and smudged eyeliner. A far cry from the quirky New-Girl-esque style of the *We Are Never Ever Getting Back Together* video, or even the Blair Waldorf-inspired Parisienne look in the *Begin Again* video. And the *I Knew You Were Trouble* music video was also different in that it didn't just include the song, oh, no – the song is preceded by a two-minute-long spoken-word prologue, in which Taylor expands on the story.

### **Taylor Swift**

"I think part of me knew the second I saw him that this would happen. [...] I knew his world moved too fast and burned too bright. But I just thought, how can the devil be pulling you toward someone who looks so much like an angel when he smiles at you? [...] I think that the worst part of it all wasn't losing him. It was losing me."

### **Angourie**

Now, if you haven't heard the song or seen the music video, first of all, where the hell were you in 2012? And second of all, you should definitely go watch it now. Unlike Shakespeare's sonnets, Taylor Swift's songs are still very much under copyright protection, and so I can't play the full song here for you. So, please take a moment to go and listen. I'll wait.

[fade in: *Girl from Ipanema* elevator music – high-hat drums, saxophone, piano, and maracas]

### **Angourie**

You're back! Did you enjoy it? I sure hope so. So let's talk about *I Knew You Were Trouble* – which will henceforth be referred to as *Trouble* for brevity. *Trouble* is all about rage and self-blame. It's less about putting oneself on trial, or thinking about logical arguments for either side of the issue. It's deeply, wildly emotional, and shares that emotion with the listener. Right from the beginning, we are put in a world of broken promises. Taylor begins with "Once upon a time, a few mistakes ago." She frames the song in hindsight, viewing things with more clarity from a distance. The thesis of the song – admitting blame for getting her heart broken – is a revelation for her. "I realise the blame is on me," she sings. "Now I see he was long gone when he met me."

In Shakespeare's *Sonnet 35*, it's a little trickier to determine the context of time and place, because it changes depending on which reading you apply. Is he laying out all the arguments after the fact, or are we watching him deal with this internal struggle in real time? Or both? Either way, both Shakespeare and Swift recognise the toxicity of the relationship they're struggling to reconcile. Both Shakespeare and Swift recall trying to explain their partners' faults away. Shakespeare laments "authorizing thy trespass." Taylor sings: "I guess you didn't care, and I guess I liked that," admitting that, in the moment, this carelessness was an attractive quality, rather than one that would leave her, quote: "lying on the cold, hard ground". End quote. Taylor's repetition of the phrase "I guess" in this line echoes a larger theme in both *Trouble* and *Sonnet 35*: duality. In *Sonnet 35*, it's the beauty of nature versus its ugly faults, and in *Trouble* it's the contrast between being, quote: "[flown] to places I'd never been", and then being, quote: "put down". The soaring highs – literally, in Taylor's imagery of flight – are tarnished by the bitter lows.

And musically, the song mimics the intensity of this contrast. Much like the structure of *Sonnet 35* – which is twisting and turning, the speaker constantly changing his train of thought – the vocals and instruments in *Trouble* are big, chaotic and contrasting. The verse is in a major key, with an up-tempo electric guitar strum almost reminiscent of the opening of *You Belong With Me*. Taylor's vocals are clear and sweet, even as she sings "he's long gone". And then as we hit the chorus, the drums cut out and we're left with one-strum electric guitar chords and a bit of piano: the quiet before the storm. As the chorus is repeated, the drums kick in again and a warped synth sound is introduced, anticipating the almost-beat drop of the post-chorus. This is where the dubstep, subwoofer bass sound comes in, accompanied by Taylor's screaming "OH!"s. This sound was, of course, made into various memes with screaming goats and Michael Scott yelling "No", but, in all seriousness, I think it's a powerful moment in the song that captures the pain Taylor was feeling in the moment. It's such a desperate, screeching scream, a massive contrast to the sweet and bright sound of the verse. She suddenly goes from storytelling mode with her "Once Upon a Time", to reigniting the rage she felt in the moment of regret – and it catches the listener off guard. In anticipation of the song's release, Taylor introduced a sneak-peak of *Trouble* on Good Morning America. She wore a demure rose-patterned dress and pink cardigan, and said:

### **Taylor Swift**

"And it's a song that's one of my favourites on the album because it sounds just as chaotic as the feeling was when I wrote it."



### Angourie

Taylor isn't the only one who uses contrast to emphasise a feeling or an idea. In *Sonnet 35*, Shakespeare breaks iambic pentameter at the beginning of the second and third lines. In his chosen meter, the stress should be on the second syllable, like this: "Roses", but that doesn't sound right, because the emphasis naturally falls on the first syllable: "Roses". And in the third line, what should be "Clouds and", sounds bizarre, as the stress naturally falls: "Clouds and". So, in these two instances Shakespeare breaks the rules to emphasise the nouns "Rose" and "Cloud". He creates a jarring contrast to engage the reader, just like Taylor uses musical contrasts in *Trouble* to create a feeling of chaos and distress, alike to how she felt when she wrote it.

Both *Sonnet 35* and *Trouble* chronicle the fallout of a relationship, but the latter is more decided in its anger and blame. While Shakespeare still gives weight to the argument of his lover's innocence, Swift illustrates a relationship beyond repair. Though, at that point in time, meaning 2012, the moral of Taylor's story was different to her other music. So known for her sweetheart love songs and melancholy breakup songs, this was a song about anger and blame. As Taylor says, herself, before a live acoustic performance of *Trouble*:

### Taylor Swift

"This is kind of the only song that I've ever written about, like, taking blame for getting my heart broken, 'cause this time, like, I definitely knew that it was gonna happen."

### Angourie

As we have already discussed, blame is a key theme in *Sonnet 35*, too. Shakespeare laments in his own "faults" in "excusing [his lover's] sins". Taylor, meanwhile literally sings "I realise the blame is on me." But something I'd like to point out is the change in the second pre-chorus, when the lyric "the blame is on me" becomes "the joke is on me". I think this speaks to a key difference between Shakespeare's *Sonnet 35* and Taylor Swift's *Trouble*: at no point in *Sonnet 35* is Shakespeare the butt of his own joke.

Okay, I did mention that one reading interprets the first four lines as self-mockery, but there is a lack of shame from outside perspectives. Shakespeare is frustrated at himself, he's frustrated at his lover, but it's a solely intimate, personal affair. Shakespeare loves to address and reference the reader in his sonnets, but he does not employ this literary device in *Sonnet 35*. But I would like to argue that, in *Trouble*, this slight change of phrase from "blame" to "joke", shows Taylor is highly aware of the audience. Because, to say that there is a joke, would imply that someone's laughing, wouldn't it?

Taylor Swift's audience, at the time of her writing *Trouble*, was very different to Shakey's when he wrote *Sonnet 35*. For one thing, Taylor's was a lot larger. The song sold 400,000 copies in its first week, a record-breaking number. I'm not sure how many copies of the 1609 Quarto were sold in its first week, but I doubt it was that many, seeing as the population of London and its surrounding suburbs at that time was only around 250,000. But even so, we're not even sure if Shakespeare wrote these sonnets with the intention of sharing them. It's still unclear if the 1609 edition was published with his permission or

endorsement. So, when Shakespeare wrote *Sonnet 35*, it could have been intended to be read by no one but himself.

The context of Taylor Swift's audience, her reputation as an musician, and her platform as a public figure, is important to understanding *Trouble* as a text. Taylor Swift had built an entire career on pop songs about love. Unrequited love in *You Belong With Me*, forbidden love in *Love Story*, broken love in *White Horse* and cherished love in *Ours*. And with this, the media latched onto painting her as a clingy-ex-girlfriend, obsessed with ensnaring men. It wasn't until 2014, with the song *Blank Space* from her album *1989*, when Swift capitalised on this idea and wrote a satirical song about this portrayal of her. Before a live performance of *Blank Space* at the Grammy Museum in early 2015, Taylor spoke about the inspiration behind the song:

### Taylor Swift

'In the last couple of years the media have had a really wonderful fixation on kind of painting me as, like, the 'psycho serial-dater girl'. [...] She jet-sets around the world, collecting men, and then ... and she can get any of them, but she's so clingy that they leave, and she cries. And then she gets another one in her web and she traps them and locks them in her mansion, and then she's crying in her marble bathtub surrounded by pearls.'

### Angourie

Though the gaze of the media features more prominently in the song *Blank Space*, I think it's still present in *Trouble*. "The joke is on me", she sings, referencing the media's joke on her failed love affairs, but with none of the satire or cheek from *Blank Space*. In *Trouble*, we feel not only her self-inflicted shame, but also the shame from the media, sneering at her heartbreaks.

And I think here lies the key difference between these two texts: it's not the themes they explore, but rather their place in pop culture. One is considered for the elite, the other for the masses. One is considered complicated, the other simple. Both are parodied and memified, but one is revered and respected in its interpretations, whereas the other tends to be ridiculed. Why is that?

It's at this point where I would like to introduce the idea of the literary canon. The literary canon refers to a group of works of literature from a particular time or place that are considered influential, important and valuable. Important works in the western literary canon, for example, would Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet* and Jane Austen's *Pride and Prejudice*. Historically, the western literary canon is dominated by straight white men and women, however we see this slowly starting to change with the addition of modern classics such as the works of Zora Neale Hurston and Toni Morrison.

But, mark my emphasis on "slowly changing". The western literary canon is still dominated by Shakespeare and his chums. There's an idea that classics – that is to say old works from the literary canon – have achieved the status of "classic" and been inducted into the western literary canon because they are inherently "good". Not only "good", they are perhaps "better" than other, more contemporary works. That these works are old, yes, but

they are timeless, because they speak to a universal truth within all of us – removed from time and place and identity.

However, this is not necessarily the case. Works that make it into the literary canon are not only determined by the relatability and timelessness of their content, but also by the surrounding social context. Shakespeare is valued because he is good at what he does, yes, but also because he subscribes to the identity of the people who determined what was good at the time. As far as we know, he was a straight – though that is debated – white, able-bodied and cis-gendered man, and therefore, in the early 17<sup>th</sup> Century, his stories carried more weight and value. In fact, in the early 17<sup>th</sup> Century, his was the only identity who could write and produce work. Women were not educated to the same degree, and so white men were the only ones who could write at that time, let alone have anyone read their work.

So, how is this related to Taylor Swift? Well, when we look at the music equivalent of the literary canon – if that's even a thing? If it's not, I'm making it a thing – Taylor's stories of rage, heartbreak and blame have received very differently from her male contemporaries who explore similar themes. Taylor Swift addressed this double standard in a 2014 interview, when promoting her album *1989*:

### **Taylor Swift**

“You're gonna have people who are gonna say, oh, you know, like, she just writes songs about her ex-boyfriends. And I think, frankly, that's a very sexist angle to take. No one says that about Ed Sheeran, no one says that about Bruno Mars. They're all writing songs about their exes, their current girlfriends, their love life, and no one raises a red flag there.”

### **Angourie**

Taylor raises a really good point here. Of course, she's talking about contemporary musicians ... so can we apply that same theory to comparing her to Shakespeare? I think gender politics is definitely part of the difference in attitudes towards Shakespeare's works and Taylor Swift's works. And it's not just Swift; anything made by and for teenage girls is viewed as frivolous and vapid – just think of the whole VSCO-girl trend. But comparing Taylor Swift and Shakespeare is a little tricky, because they're not competing in the same field, or for the same audience. But ... should they be? Should equal weight be given to these two texts, considering they explore the same themes in a similar way? What makes Shakespeare's text more worthy of literary analysis and criticism?

I think elitism comes into play here. Pop music is created for and enjoyed by the masses. It's catchy, it's easy to understand, it doesn't require as much critical thinking to get past surface level understanding. But that doesn't mean it can't be analysed in the same way, or that its analysis is any less valuable to understanding our culture. Shakespeare is important to understand and study when looking at contemporary works of media, because he shaped so much of how we tell stories – but, Taylor Swift is also shaping how stories are told through music, and we're witnessing it happen right now. However you may feel about Taylor Swift, whether you like her music or you don't, she has been one of the biggest pop artists from the past ten years, and she's made an impact. And I think it's worth applying

that same critical thinking to her works – or any work of pop culture – because these things don't exist in a vacuum. As much as we may think our favourite guilty pleasure movies, TV shows, or songs are lowbrow, silly, or irrelevant, they're not – especially if that piece of media is consumed by millions.

So, if both Shakespeare and Taylor have made an impact with their tales of anger, guilt and shame, and if they've explored these themes in a similar way, then ... why do we need them both? If we have Taylor's catchy pop-song, why should we slog through Shakespeare's purple prose? If we have Shakespeare's purple prose, why do we need Taylor's catchy pop-song? Maybe because we wouldn't have one without the other?

It is undeniable that, when looking at the bigger picture, the history of western literature, Taylor Swift's *Trouble* couldn't exist without Shakespeare. But we can also prove this in a very tangible way, directly related to Taylor Swift's success as an artist. Taylor's 2008 single *Love Story*, which retells the story of Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet*, is her most successful single to date, and arguably, the song that skyrocketed her to fame.

But, Shakespeare's *Sonnet 35* can exist without *I Knew You Were Trouble*, right? Well, yes, of course, it did so for four hundred years. But I think we can frame *I Knew You Were Trouble* as a gateway to *Sonnet 35*. When I first read *Sonnet 35*, unlike all the other sonnets I had read, I grasped the meaning on my first read. "Oh, I get it," I thought to myself, "this is just like *I Knew You Were Trouble*." Critically analysing and understanding concepts through pop culture is a step to tackling works from Shakespeare, Austen, Dickens, other authors represented in the literary canon. When I think about *Sonnet 35* and *I Knew You Were Trouble*, I visualise an golden thread connecting them. And this thread isn't one way – it isn't Shakespeare's works reaching out to Swift, it's a two-way stream of energy and influence. Okay, that analogy might sound a little bit hippy and weird, but what I mean is that because I understand *I Knew You Were Trouble*, I am able to better understand *Sonnet 35*, and vice versa. And these connections through time, I think, make us reconsider the attitudes we might have for all things old and classic, and all things new and shiny. Upon further analysis, maybe Shakespeare's sonnets aren't as inaccessible and alien as we might think, and maybe Taylor Swift's songs aren't as vapid and insubstantial as the media would want us to believe.

I want to bring us all back to the image of twelve-year-old me dancing in my bedroom that my sister and I shared, screaming *I Knew You Were Trouble* at the top of my lungs. At that point in time, I knew next to nothing about Shakespeare, but in my tweenage ignorance and desperation to impress the cool kids at school, I called him overrated and dull. Little did I know that just two years later, I would study *Romeo and Juliet* and become enchanted by his language and his world, that following year I'd write passionate essays about *Macbeth*, and when I had graduated, I would even start a podcast and analyse his work, not because I had to, but because it was a hobby of mine. The love I have for Taylor Swift's music is different to my admiration of Shakespeare's works, but it comes from a similar place. And in my mind, the importance of thinking critically about Shakespeare's sonnets is equal to the importance of thinking critically about Taylor Swift's songs. When remember my little high-pitched voice saying: "Yeah, Shakespeare's boring," I just think, to quote Taylor Swift: "the joke is on me." Or was it Shakespeare who said that?

*The Community Library* – Angourie Rice

[fade in: plucky theme music with violins, clarinet, piano, and twinkly triangle]

**Angourie**

Thank you very much for listening. If you're new here, welcome, I hope you enjoyed, please stick around if you did! On *The Community Library* we talk about literature and pop culture, I sometimes do more structured analysis like this episode, and sometimes I just sit down and chat. If you like this style of comparative analysis, I've done a few other episodes like this, including one on Taylor Swift's song *Blank Space* and the poem *My Last Duchess* by 19<sup>th</sup> Century poet Robert Browning. As always, you can follow me on Instagram @angourierice, or @the\_community\_library. Until next week, I hope you're taking care of yourself and singing your heart out to one of your favourite songs. Bye.

[fade out: theme music]