

A comparative study of three pre-1914 love poems



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Throughout history people have shared their deepest feelings and thoughts through the medium of poetry.

The form and genre this poetry takes can vary dramatically. One poet's interpretation of a given theme can be very different from another's and as can the poet's means of expressing his viewpoint through the use of language, structure and other literary techniques. One of the most common themes in poetry is love. In the following comparative study I will be analysing three Pre-1914 love poems and comparing the literary techniques used and the context to which the poems were written. Even before you begin to read "First Love" by John Clare you are immediately drawn into the writer's world by the poem's evocative title. "First Love" is a theme everyone can relate to; as everyone remembers their first love.

By using such a simple and yet powerful title the reader feels empathy with the writer from the start and this empathy continues as you read through the beginning of the poem. This is achieved by the use of simple, yet romantic and emotive language to describe the writer's love. An example of this would be: "Her face it bloomed like a sweet flower". John Clare uses this simile to compare the beauty of his love to a flower; her face opening, revealing her beauty like a flower. This simile also conjures thoughts of spring, with flowers "blooming". This simple and innocent comparison with nature allows the reader to empathise with John Clare and the feelings of first love which he has suddenly been overcome with.

Another example of this innocence is "With love so sudden and so sweet". This tells us of how this love has been triggered suddenly. It is "love at first

sight”; a thought which reinforces the theme of romance in this scene.

Another important element of “ First Love” is its rhythm.

Stress is placed upon the most important words and the rhythm reflects the heart beat of the writer, changing depending on the scene. An example is: “ And then my blood rushed to my face”. This shows how emphasis is placed on the word “ rushed” and how “ And then” is used to depict speed as the heart begins to beat faster. By placing stress on important words and using a rhythm which reflects a beating heart the reader can understand John Clare’s feelings more clearly. Unlike “ First Love”, the title of William Shakespeare’s poem “ Shall I compare thee.

..? does not relate to the reader in the same way. William Shakespeare wrote many Sonnets and many of them were in a similar format to this one.

I believe the title is more aimed at himself than any reader. He is asking himself: “ what else in this world can I compare my love to? ” and then the answer comes to him “ a summer’s day”. The poem starts in exactly this way with Shakespeare comparing his love to a summer’s day and then on the following line telling of how his love is “ more temperate” than a summer’s day. A summer’s day is not always perfect and can have excesses, such as gusty winds or extreme heat.

By saying his love is “ more temperate” Shakespeare is saying how the one he loves is even gentler and has no such excesses. Somewhat different in structure to “ First Love”, “ Shall I compare thee...? ” is a sonnet arranged in quatrains. The rhyming pattern is three quatrains and a rhyming couplet.

The rhythm is also very important to the poem. As with many Shakespeare poems it uses iambic pentameter, an example is: " And summer's lease hath all too short a date". All the lines in the poem follow this pattern of five iambic feet in a row and this gives the poem a flowing and dramatic presence when read aloud. "To his coy mistress" by Andrew Marvell is a complex poem which approaches the theme of love from a different angle to either of the above. It is written in the first person, however the title says "To his coy mistress" so it is as if the writer Andrew Marvell was looking over the shoulder of a young man when he wrote it.

In the poem the immature and somewhat selfish young man is attempting to win over " his coy mistress" and put forward a " seize the moment" type of argument. Unlike John Clare in " First Love" he appears to have no interest in true love, but merely desires to make love to the women. An example is: " At every pore with instant fires". This is an example of the young man's urgent passion for immediate love. There is no romance to it; he is only after one thing! The young man's intentions become even more apparent as we look further on in the poem.

On the final two lines Andrew Marvell uses a clever pun: " Thus, though we cannot make our sun / Stand still, yet we will make him run". The word " sun" is a homophone of " son" and is used to great effect in this example. He uses " sun" to say that he cannot stop the inevitable passing of time and " son" to mean they will make a baby that will be able to " run". By saying that he cannot stop time the young man is reinforcing his argument that the women should " seize the moment" and they should " make" a son together. This is also an example of his immaturity. It would appear their relationship

is still in the early stages and despite the fact she is “ coy” he is already thinking about children and only wants to take advantage and use her.

The use of imagery through metaphors and similes is very apparent in all three of the poems. In “ First Love” John Clare uses similes and metaphors to paint a picture in the readers’ mind through his comparison. An example of this is: “ My life and all seemed turned to clay”. This is an example of John Clare creating imagery through the use of a metaphor. By “ turning to clay” his world is changing colors. The dark, bleak colours of clay are filling his world because he cannot reach out to the one he loves.

Another example would be: “ They spoke as chords do from the string”. This simile is used to tell of the feelings which are rushing around him inside, the feelings of love being pumped from his heart. To really understand poetry, you need to be able to place meaning behind the words in the form of context. This is especially important when analysing “ Shall I compare thee”. Shakespeare is believed to of written hundreds of sonnets in his lifetime and “ Shall I compare thee” is part of the Fair Youth sequence.

The Fair Youth is an unnamed young man who Shakespeare dedicated sonnets one to one hundred and twenty six to. There are many theories as to the identity of this mystery youth. The majority of theories center around the initials Shakespeare dedicated the sonnets to: “ Mr. W. H”. The most common theory is that it is Henry Wriothesley, the 3rd Earl of Southampton, a handsome, young adult.

Whoever it was they clearly had quite an effect on Shakespeare. An effect large enough to warrant one hundred and twenty six poems dedicated to

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them! The context is also extremely important when reading “ First Love”. John Clare was born into extreme poverty and was forced into hard manual labour from a very early age. He was not educated and would have had little access to any kind of reading material. Having this insight into his background shapes your judgment of the poem and makes it all the more genius and yet so tragic. Being of his social class it meant that the “ sweet flower” he describes in the poem would always be out of his reach, no matter what.

The love he describes is almost certainly unrequited and is said to of left a mental scar which paved his future; eventually ending up in an asylum in Northampton. This is an example of how important context is; as without this insight into John Clare’s background and life we would not be able to fully understand the poem or take such a powerful message away from it. I have compared the key literary techniques used in these three poems and to what effect they have on the reader. My favourite of the three is “ First Love”.

It is a compelling tale, very simple and innocently written and yet tragic because due to John Clare’s social status he would never be able to be with the one he loved. As mentioned above John Clare’s humble background makes his work all the more impressive and meaningful. Though “ To his coy mistress” has less substance and background to it; I really enjoyed the wittiness and style. I like the way it makes a mockery of the idealised love poem and instead portrays a rather crude form of love. I was particularly impressed with the skillful use of puns and metaphoric language throughout and the use of iambic pentameter.

With regards to “ Shall I compare thee...? ” I like the iambic pentameter and the use of rhyming couplets; however I find it more difficult to relate to when compared with “ First Love”. I’m also not very fond of the ending.

It is almost as if Shakespeare could not think of a suitable ending, so he devised one which could basically fit onto any poem. The mystery surrounding “ Shall I compare thee...? ” is quite an attractive feature to it.

Who is the youth who Shakespeare writes about in so many of his sonnets? Is the love described merely platonic? It almost certainly, will never truly be known. Each one of the poems I studied displays numerous literary techniques which I will be trying to adapt into my own future work. I have enjoyed analysing the three poems and have learnt how even poems in the same genre can vary dramatically in both style and content. This in my opinion is the beauty of poetry. It thrives on open-mindedness and demonstrates how varied our different interpretations of the same genre are.