The English poet who inspired Lin-Manuel Miranda's Tonys speech - and why it's a literary masterstroke

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Lin-Manuel Miranda reading his Tony Awards acceptance speech

When Lin-Manuel Miranda, the writer and star of Broadway’s runaway hit musical Hamilton, received his Tony Award for Best Original Score at the ceremony, he came prepared. He didn’t just speak off the cuff in accepting the honour, but recited what he called a sonnet that he had written specially for the occasion.

It was a poem about love, thanking Miranda’s wife for her love and support for him personally, and making broader references to the importance of love as a redemptive experience.

As he finished reading, he was crying, and the audience were cheering him on. It was a poignant and meaningful gesture in response to the mass shooting at an LGBT club in Orlando, Florida, the full horror of which was still only just becoming known as police sifted through the wreckage.

But the poem is also, as you might expect from such a gifted writer as Miranda, a dazzlingly clever piece of writing. It isn't just any sonnet. Most sonnets, written by poets from Shakespeare to Wordsworth and beyond, are identifiable by their structure of 14 lines and a regular rhythm and rhyme scheme. This allows the poet a controlled structure in which to explore otherwise unruly and complex ideas about love and personal emotion.

But Miranda’s sonnet is 16 lines long, and has some moments of unconventional rhythm. What does that tell us? The best-known writer of the 16-line sonnet is probably the Victorian writer George Meredith, who wrote a sequence of them titled ‘Modern Love’, exploring his own disastrous marriage and expressing a sentiment that love in his time had become corrupted and corrosive.

Miranda adopts Meredith’s form and uses it to talk about his own good marriage, and about love as a positive and unbeatable force. To take a form that had been associated with a poet claiming love is rotten, only to turn it around to use it as a poem about the healing power of love in the face of darkness, is elegant, beautiful and extremely powerful.

Miranda's poem reaches a climax with the penultimate couplet (which would have been the final couplet in a more conventional 14-line sonnet):

**And love is love is love is love is love is love is love;**

**Cannot be killed or swept aside.**

These two lines show mastery of the form from Miranda. The other lines in the sonnet have five stressed syllables each and are written in iambic pentameter, the meter most famously used by Shakespeare. But in the line “And love is love…” there are three extra syllables.

George Meredith Credit: Getty

The word “love” actually breaks the boundaries of the strict sonnet form here, just as love - as Miranda is saying -
can break boundaries in every other area of life. The very next line is a stressed syllable short of the typical five: it needs the extra syllables from the line before it to balance it out within the poem. It needs that extra love to become whole.

Just like Miranda’s hugely successful hip-hop musical Hamilton, which tells the story of the American revolution and the life of Founding Father Alexander Hamilton, the sonnet is thoughtful, lyrically complex and perfectly expressed. It shows one eye towards Miranda’s extensive knowledge of literary tradition and history, and one eye on the future. It’s a call for love in defiance of hate and fear, and it’s a tribute to Miranda’s own overwhelming personal experience of love.

It was particularly appropriate for the Tony Awards to pay tribute to the victims of the Orlando shooting because theatre, and Broadway in particular, have always been seen as a safe haven for LGBT people. On a day of unspeakable tragedy as the result of a hate crime against gay people, Lin-Manuel Miranda and the Tony Awards provided a loving refuge.

The full text of Lin-Manuel Miranda’s sonnet:

My wife’s the reason anything gets done.
She nudges me towards promise by degrees.
She is a perfect symphony of one.
Our son is her most beautiful reprise.
We chase the melodies that seem to find us
Until they’re finished songs and start to play.
When senseless acts of tragedy remind us
That nothing here is promised, not one day
This show is proof that history remembers.
We live through times when hate and fear seem stronger.
We rise and fall, and light from dying embers
Remembrances that hope and love last longer.
And love is love is love is love is love is love is love is love;
Cannot be killed or swept aside.
I sing Vanessa’s symphony; Eliza tells her story.
Now fill the world with music, love, and pride.

Hamilton is coming to London in 2017 - here’s how to buy tickets