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Song To Celia Summary

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An In-Depth Look at Ben Jonson's Classic Poem: Song To Celia Summary and Analysis

When one thinks of the most enduring love poems in the English language, Ben Jonson's "Song: To Celia" invariably comes to mind. Known to many by its famous opening line, "Drink to me only with thine eyes," this lyrical masterpiece has captivated readers for over four centuries. In this comprehensive article, we will provide a thorough **Song To Celia summary**, explore its historical background, dissect its poetic devices, and discuss why it remains a cornerstone of English literature. Whether you are a student preparing for an exam or a poetry enthusiast seeking a deeper understanding, this guide will illuminate every facet of Jonson's celebrated work.

Historical Context: The Man Behind the Poem

Ben Jonson (1572–1637) was a contemporary of William Shakespeare and one of the most influential playwrights and poets of the Jacobean era. Unlike many poets of his time, Jonson was deeply learned, drawing heavily on classical Greek and Roman literature. "Song: To Celia" was first published in 1616 in Jonson's collection *The Forest*. The poem is a masterful example of the Cavalier lyric style, which emphasized elegance, wit, and the celebration of love and beauty. Understanding this background enriches any **Song To Celia summary**, as it reveals a poet who was not merely writing from personal experience but was also engaging in a sophisticated literary tradition of imitation and adaptation.

The poem's primary source is a series of prose love letters written by the Greek philosopher Philostratus, titled *Epistolai Erotikai*(Love Letters). Jonson transformed these prose passages into a tight, lyrical poem, demonstrating the Renaissance humanist ideal of reinterpreting classical works for a contemporary audience. This act of creative borrowing was not considered plagiarism in the 17th century; rather, it was seen as a mark of erudition and skill.

Full Text of the Poem

Before diving into our detailed **Song To Celia summary**, it is essential to have the full text of the poem present. This allows readers to follow along with the analysis and appreciate the poem's compact elegance.

Drink to me only with thine eyes,
And I will pledge with mine;
Or leave a kiss but in the cup,
And I'll not look for wine.
The thirst that from the soul doth rise
Doth ask a drink divine;
But might I of Jove's nectar sup,
I would not change for thine.

I sent thee late a rosy wreath,

Not so much honouring thee
As giving it a hope that there
It could not withered be.
But thou thereon didst only breathe,
And sent'st it back to me;
Since when it grows, and smells, I swear,
Not of itself, but thee.

Complete Song To Celia Summary: Stanza by Stanza

A reliable **Song To Celia summary** must break the poem into its two stanzas and explain the progression of thought. The poem is deceptively simple, but each line carries multiple layers of meaning.

The poem opens with one of the most famous couplets in English poetry: "Drink to me only with thine eyes, / And I will pledge with mine." The speaker invites his beloved, Celia, to engage in a symbolic toast. Instead of using wine, he asks her to use her gaze. This establishes the central metaphor of the poem: love as a form of intoxication. The speaker is not interested in physical wine; he is enraptured by the "drink divine" that comes from the soul. He declares that even if he could drink Jove's nectar—the drink of the gods on Mount Olympus—he would not exchange it for the metaphorical drink that Celia offers. This is a powerful statement of devotion, placing the beloved's love above even the most supreme pleasures of the classical world.

This stanza establishes the Platonic ideal of love, where the spiritual connection is valued above physical gratification. However, there is also a playful, witty tone. Jonson is not being overly sentimental; the "drink me with thine eyes" line is clever and direct, showing the Cavalier poet's characteristic blend of passion and intellect.

The second stanza shifts from a direct address to a brief narrative. The speaker reveals that he recently sent Celia a "rosy wreath." He clarifies his intention: he was not trying to honor her in a conventional way, but rather, he was hoping that the wreath might "not withered be" because of its association with her. In other words, he hoped that the flowers would be preserved by her beauty and virtue.

Celia, however, does not keep the wreath. She "only didst breathe" on it and sent it back to the speaker. This could be seen as a rejection, but the speaker transforms it into a miracle. He swears that since Celia breathed on it and returned it, the wreath "grows, and smells, I swear, / Not of itself, but thee." The flowers are now imbued with the essence of Celia. Her breath has given them eternal life and a fragrance that surpasses their natural scent. This is a brilliant poetic conceit: the beloved's breath is so powerful that it can overcome the natural decay of flowers, turning a rebuff into a testament to her magical power.

Major Themes in Song To Celia

A thorough **Song To Celia summary** would be incomplete without examining the core themes that drive the poem. These themes are what give the poem its lasting power.

- Spiritual Love over Physical Love: The poem consistently elevates the spiritual aspect of love. The speaker does not want wine or physical kisses; he wants the gaze and the breath of his beloved. This aligns with the Neoplatonic philosophy popular during the Renaissance, which held that true love was a ladder leading from physical beauty to spiritual truth.
- Intoxication of Love: The metaphor of drinking and intoxication runs throughout the poem. Love is not a gentle feeling but a powerful, consuming force that inebriates the senses. The speaker is "drunk" on Celia's existence, and no real wine can compete.
- Transformation and Miracle: The second stanza is a meditation on transformation. A simple act of breathing on a wreath turns it into an eternal, fragrant token. This suggests that love has the power to transform the mundane into the miraculous. It also hints at the idea of the lover's imagination: the speaker sees Celia's power everywhere, even in a returning gift.

- Reciprocity and Devotion: The poem is built on a structure of giving and receiving. The speaker gives a toast and a wreath; Celia gives her gaze and her breath. Even when Celia returns the wreath, the speaker interprets this as a form of giving, not rejection. This shows a relationship that is intensely reciprocal, even if the reciprocity exists primarily in the speaker's mind.

Poetic Devices and Literary Craftsmanship

Ben Jonson was a meticulous craftsman, and "Song: To Celia" is a showcase of poetic technique. Any detailed **Song To Celia summary** should highlight these devices, as they are integral to the poem's effect.

The central metaphor of the poem is love as a kind of drinking. This is a "conceit," an extended metaphor that the poet develops throughout the work. Jonson takes a simple idea—toasting to one's lover—and extends it into a complex argument about the nature of love. The second stanza uses another conceit: the wreath that takes on the life of its owner. These conceits are typical of the Metaphysical poets, though Jonson is often classified as a Cavalier poet.

Hyperbole, or deliberate exaggeration, is used to elevate the beloved to a divine status. The speaker claims that he would refuse Jove's nectar for Celia's love and that Celia's breath can cheat death. These are not meant to be taken literally; they are poetic strategies to express the intensity of the speaker's feelings.

The poem is written in iambic meter, with a rhythm that alternates between tetrameter (four feet) and trimeter (three feet). The rhyme scheme is ABAB CDCD in the first stanza and ABAB CDCD in the second stanza. This regularity gives the poem a song-like quality, which is appropriate for a poem titled "Song: To Celia." The musicality of the verse makes it easy to memorize and recite.

The entire poem is an apostrophe—a direct address to an absent or imagined person. The speaker is not talking to Celia in person but is imagining her presence. This creates a sense of intimacy and longing, as if the reader is overhearing a private thought.

The Identity of Celia: Fact or Fiction?

One question that often arises in any **Song To Celia summary** is whether Celia was a real person. There is no historical evidence that Ben Jonson wrote this poem for a specific woman named Celia. Instead, "Celia" is a conventional name derived from the Latin *caelum*, meaning "heaven." It was a common name used by Renaissance poets to represent an idealized, unattainable beloved. Celia is a type, not an individual. She represents the perfect woman of the poet's imagination—beautiful, virtuous, and distant. This aligns with the Petrarchan tradition, where the beloved is often a distant, almost divine figure.

Knowing this adds depth to the **Song To Celia summary**. The poem is not a personal confession but a public performance of love in the classical and Petrarchan tradition. It is a display of wit, learning, and poetic skill. The fact that the poem has resonated for so long suggests that Jonson succeeded in creating a universal expression of ideal love, even if the specific "Celia" was a fiction.

Comparison with Other Renaissance Love Poems

To fully appreciate Jonson's achievement, it helps to compare "Song: To Celia" with other famous love poems of the era. Christopher Marlowe's "The Passionate Shepherd to His Love" offers a pastoral vision of love, full of promises of material pleasures. In contrast, Jonson's poem is more restrained and intellectual. There are no promises of "beds of roses" or "gowns of wool"; instead, the pleasure is purely spiritual—a gaze, a breath, a toast.

Similarly, Andrew Marvell's "To His Coy Mistress" is a poem of carpe diem, urging the beloved to seize the day and engage in physical love before time runs out. Jonson's poem has no such urgency. It is timeless and static; the speaker is content to live in the moment of admiration. This makes "Song: To Celia" a quieter, more meditative poem than its passionate counterparts. It is a poem of contemplation rather than persuasion.

John Donne's "The Good-Morrow" also explores the theme of spiritual love transcending the physical. But where Donne is dramatic and argumentative, Jonson is smooth and elegant. Jonson's poem is more polished and less challenging. It invites the reader in rather than confronting them. This accessibility is part of why "Song: To Celia" has remained popular for so long.

Enduring Legacy and Cultural Impact

The influence of "Song: To Celia" extends far beyond the 17th century. The poem has been set to music numerous times, most notably by the English composer Thomas Campion shortly after its publication. In the 20th century, it became a standard piece in school curricula, introducing generations of students to the joys of Renaissance poetry.

The poem's opening line has entered the cultural lexicon. People who have never read the poem still recognize "Drink to me only with thine eyes" as a romantic sentiment. It has been quoted in films, novels, and speeches. This demonstrates the power of a well-crafted poem to transcend its original context and speak to universal human emotions.

For students and scholars, the poem remains a rich text for analysis. It is a perfect example of the Cavalier lyric, of Neoplatonic love theory, and of classical imitation in Renaissance literature. A comprehensive Song To

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