

Shakespeare's Sonnets: A Critical Study

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Abstract

William Shakespeare needs no introduction to **the scholars** of English **generally**, and poetry **especially**. As a sonnet writer, he penned 154 sonnets which became extremely popular among the readers of all the ages throughout the world. His sonnets are measured a continuation of the sonnet tradition that swept through the Renaissance from Petrarch in 14th-century Italy and was finally introduced in 16th-century England by Thomas Wyatt and was given its rhyming meter and division into quatrains by Henry Howard. With few exceptions, Shakespeare's sonnets observe the stylistic **sort of English** sonnet—the rhyme scheme, the 14 lines, **and therefore the** meter. But Shakespeare's sonnets introduce such significant departures of content that **they appear** to be rebelling against well-worn 200-year-old traditions.[2] Instead of expressing worshipful love for an almost goddess-like yet unobtainable female love-object, as Petrarch, Dante, and Philip Sidney had done, Shakespeare introduces a young man. He also introduces the Dark Lady, who **is not any** goddess. Shakespeare explores themes **like** lust, homoeroticism, misogyny, infidelity, and acrimony in **ways in which** may challenge, but which also open new terrain for the sonnet form. Shakespeare's Sonnets are some of the most fascinating and influential poems written in English.

Keywords: Shakespearean sonnets, Italian model, Theme of love, compensation and separation, Wyatt and Surrey's style, Youth-hood.

English poetry is modeled upon Italian poetry. The Italian poets Petrarch, Dante, Tasso, Ariosto, Michelangelo and Colonna cultivated fine poetry. Petrarchian style of poetry, particularly the sonnet in 14 lines with Octave (rhyming abba abba) and a sestet (with several rhyme schemes) came into vogue. Octave provided the subject and sestet provided the resolution. Petrarchan sonnet had a turn (volte) at the end of octave. The English sonneteers did not follow it, and they adopted varied rhyme schemes in sestet. Petrarchan sonnets spoke of love and chivalry. The Italian, French and English sonneteers used the sonnet as if a literary exercise.

The English poet Sir Thomas Wyatt (1503-1542) introduced the Italian sonnet form in England. Henry Howard, Earl of Surrey (1517-1547) broadened the scope of the English sonnet.

The poems of Wyatt and Surrey circulated in manuscript during their lifetime and were included in *Songs and Sonnets* (1557), the first printed collection of English verse, better known as *Tottel's Miscellany*, which became a source of inspiration for later poets.

A poet by name Thomas Watson published his collection *Hekatompathia* in 1582. His sonnet had eighteen lines. His book *Tears of Fancy* (1593) had a sequence of sonnets on a compact theme. Sir Philip Sidney (1554-1586) wrote *Astrophel and Stella*, a sonnet sequence, speaking of the speaker's feelings for his mistress. He achieved originality and first rate poetry. Shakespeare improved upon Sidney. Many others followed the suit.

The sonnet books of Samuel Daniel, Henry Constable, Thomas Lodge, Barnaby Barnes, Michael Drayton and Edmund Spenser have close affinities.

Shakespeare made use of the knowledge about sonnet from all those poets including Petrarch and Sidney, and he wrote 154 sonnets. Francis Mere's *Palladis Tamia* (1598), a contemporary work throws light on his poetry. Shakespeare's sonnets as he calls 'sugred sonnets' were already popular, and Shakespeare's sonnets of the number 138 and 144 appeared in *The Passionate Pilgrim* in 1599.

Shakespeare began writing sonnets in 1592, and went on doing it, and many of his sonnets have appeared in his plays. His play *Love's Labor's Lost* speaks of his keen interest in sonnet. C.K. Hillegass observes:

The sonnets are filled with what appears to be allusions or references to persons, events, or specific years or seasons; and these have been used by critics in an attempt to date them from the late 1580's to 1609. For example, those who believe that the young man addressed in the first 126 sonnets is either the Earl of Southampton or the Earl of Pembroke.¹

Thomas Thorpe published Shakespeare's sonnets in 1609. The book's first 1 to 126 sonnets refer to a fair young man called 'WH.' This 'WH' should be William Harvey, who married the mother of the young Earl of Southampton in 1598. This brings us to the two more leading candidates. Henry Wriothesley, third Earl of Southampton, who must be given first position, and William Herbert, third Earl of Pembroke. The Southampton identification, first made by Nathan Drake (in his *Shakespeare and His Times*, 1817) was inevitable in view of Shakespeare's dedication of *Venus and Adonis* to him and the circumstances relating to efforts to get him to marry. The young earl loved poetry and drama and may well have sought out Shakespeare and offered himself as the poet's patron.

The 1625 First Folio was dedicated to William Herbert. Shakespeare scholars have been bothering about the **ordering** of sonnets since the sonnet's second publication in 1640.

Malone and Stevens, in their 1780 edition of Shakespeare's works, initiated in England the still widely held belief that the first 126 sonnets were addressed to a man, and that the rest of the poems were addressed to a woman. By and large, this remains what may be called the orthodox view. Modern scholars believe that Thorpe's arrangement is Shakespeare's. C.A. Brown's theory is autobiographical. For Brown, the sonnets are really six 'poems' – five addressed to Shakespeare's friend, each ending with an Envoy; the sixth addressed to the poet's mistress.

An Analysis

The 'WH', the earl of Pembroke as spoken of in 1 to 126 sonnets is a handsome youth. Sonnet 20 tells his beauty was of feminine cast. He is an aristocrat. If the youth can be gracious and kind, he is not without his faults. Much to the poet's regret, he is on occasion given to wantonness, as we learn from sonnets 35, 40, 42 and 89. He even wins the favors of the Poet's mistress. He is described as the poet's 'master-mistress,' hinting at homosexuality.

There are many dominant themes in the sonnets.

The Young Man: Youthhood and offspring: Time is viewed as an enemy of youthhood and beauty. The word time is used 78 times in these sonnets 1 to 126. The first 17 sonnets deal with the young man's unmatched beauty. One should marry and get children, and thus defeat time.

Shakespeare develops the theme in three quatrains, wherein he generalizes; then, in the final couplet, he particularizes, addressing the young man directly. The argument and plea are continued in sonnet 2, wherein Shakespeare finds another metaphor, a martial one, to make his case:

When forty winters shall besiege thy brow,
And dig deep trenches in thy beauty's field,
Thy youth's proud livery, so gazed on now,
Will be a tattered weed (garment) of small
Worth held....²

The argument is carried forward in the sonnet 3 by means of a metaphor from husbandry:

For where is she so fair whose unheard (untilled) womb
Disdains the tillage of thy husbandry?

The poet insists that the youth is the image of his mother, and that in him she ‘Calls back the lovely April of his prime.’ The poem (sonnet 3) ends with the dire prophecy: ‘Die single and thine image dies with thee.’

Sonnet 4 provides a kind of explication of all the Poet has been saying so far.

Sonnets 5 and 6 are a set of closely related poems in which the individual’s mortal partaking of immortality finds expression in the erotic image of distillation, the use of which does not make for an obtrusion of its physical nature.

A second set, sonnets 9 and 10, deserves some special attention. In these poems, the Poet develops the argument that,

Beauty’s waste hath in the world an end,
And kept unused, the user so destroys it....

Sonnets 12, 15, and 16 constitute a final set of closely related poems. Here especially the Poet inveighs against devouring Time, making reference to ‘Time’s scythe’ and to ‘this bloody tyrant Time.’

The Importance of Poetry: The beauty of poetry and the beauty of youth are powerful enough to defeat time. One of the best sonnet 18 introduces this theme.

There are many classical and medieval antecedents for such a self-claim of immortality. In sonnet 19, the Poet assures the young man that his ‘love shall in (his) verse ever live long’; in Sonnet 38, he addresses the youth, urging him to be the tenth Muse and ‘let him bring forth/Eternal numbers to outlive long date.’

The Theme of Love: The theme of love is explicit in the first 125 sonnets. The concept of love that defeats the tyranny of time is explicit in sonnets 22, 25 and 62 :

‘Tis thee, myself, that for myself I praise,
Painting my age with beauty of thy days.

The Theme of Compensation: The youth’s love more than compensates for his adverse fortune. Better known is sonnet 29, with its magnificent simile in the third quatrain. This deserves quotation in full:

When in disgrace with Fortune and men’s eyes,
I all alone between my outcast state,
And trouble deal heaven with my bootless cries,
And look upon myself and curse my fate,
Wishing me like to one more rich in hope,

Featured like him, like him with friends possessed,
Desiring this man's art, and that man's scope,
With what I most enjoy contented least;
Yet in these thoughts myself almost despising,
Haply I think on thee, and then my state,
Like to the lark at break of day arising
From sullen earth, sings hymns at heaven's gate:
For thy sweet love rememb'ed such wealth brings,
That then I scorn to change my state with kings.

In Sonnet 37 there is an even more explicit treatment of this. The poet thinks youthhood is a great compensation for life's deficiencies. (for 'Sea of trouble')

The Theme of Separation: Many sonnets like 36, 46 and 57 speak of separation, or absence and grief.

In the next sonnet he complains against 'injurious distance' which has separated him from the young man but expresses satisfaction in the fact that 'nimble thought can jump both sea and land' so that mentally he is united with his friend.

In Sonnet 47, the Poet finds solace in a picture of the young man which he carries with him:

So, either by thy picture or my love,
Thyself away are present still with me....

Farewell Sonnets: The Poet talks of bidding adieu to his friend in sonnets 87 to 93.

Farewell, thou art too dear for my possessing,
And like enough thou know'st thy estimate (value).

This is clearer in sonnet 88:

Such is my love, to thee I so belong,
That for thy right myself will bear all wrong.

In sonnet 89, he again speaks on behalf of the friend he is about to lose:

Thou canst not, love, disgrace me half so ill,
To set a form upon desired change,
As I'll myself disgrace, knowing thy will.

Dear Lady Theme: The Dark Lady, as spoken of in sonnets from 127 to 152 may be the poet's wife Anna Hathway."³

Real or fictitious, the Dark Lady is a fascinating creature. She fascinates by some nameless spell; she can turn the heart hot and cold. Assuming that just one lady is referred to, one first finds reference to her in Sonnet 40, in which, along with the next two sonnets, the Poet laments the fact that his friend has sought out the lady, who is tempted by his beauty and 'straying youth.' The Poet expresses his grief, but forgives the Fair Young Man. She reappears in sonnet 127 and thereafter is the dominant figure in the poems. The Poet praises her dark beauty and especially her eyes of 'raven black.' In sonnet 128, we learn that she is an accomplished musician.

Subsequently, the Poet dwells upon her cruelty, her 'proud heart.' In sonnet 141 he states that, although he cannot help loving her, he discerns 'a thousand errors' in her. He then speaks of his 'sinful loving,' the 'false bonds of love,' and her infidelity. In sonnet 152, he charges the Dark Lady with being 'twice foresworn,' one who has broken her bed-vows:

For I have sworn thee fair, more perjured eye,
To swear against the truth so foul a lie.

It is apparent that love as it is revealed in the sonnets was a stormy one, marked by deep passion and often violent emotion.

Shakespeare valued the dark too. This is anti-Petrarchan attitude rather. It will be recalled that the Poet practically boasts that 'black wires,' not golden strands, grow on his lady's head, and that he sees no 'roses damasked red and white' in her cheeks. In sonnet 132 he praises the dark beauty of his lady love, concluding wittily:

Then will I swear beauty herself is black,
And all they foul that thy complexion lack.

Love and Lust: Shakespeare values love over lust. His sonnet 129 speaks of this:

Past reason hunted, and no sooner had,
Past reason hated as a swallowed bait
On purpose laid to make the taker mad.....

Religion: Shakespeare's sonnet 146 speaks of the theme of religion. Edward Hubler thinks Shakespeare presents Christianity without apology. 'Man needs to be spiritual,' he thinks.

The Rival Poet: This poet is spoken of in sonnets from 100 to 103. M.A.L. Rowse thinks he might be Christopher Marlowe. In addition to Marlowe, Michael Drayton, Samuel Daniel, George Peele, Thomas Nash, Thomas Lodge, Richard Barnfield, Barnaby Rich, Robert Greene, Edmund Spenser, George Chapman, and Ben Johnson have their champions, as the rival poet.

Reception and Criticism: Shakespeare's sonnets have been warmly received, and softly criticized over the centuries though his 1-126 sonnets are an adoration of a young man. In his *Supplemental Apology* (1797) George Chambers established himself as the first to criticize the Shakespeare of the sonnets adversely. He found them to be obscure and tedious. He did credit Shakespeare with 'many happy phrases and elegant lines,' but added that these are "generally darkened by conceit and marred by affectation."⁴

J.W. Mackail in his book observed that Shakespeare's sonnets should be read as poetry for its own sake. We need not adopt historical and biographical approaches for their study. He thinks Shakespeare's sonnets are the best in the English language.

Thomas Seccombe and J.W. Allen in their book *The Age of Shakespeare* think that Shakespeare's passion is tragic with the tragedy of youthful that both Shakespeare and John Donne wrote the best kind of sonnets in the Middle Ages. Seccombe and Allen conclude: "Two poets – and only two – of the Elizabethan Age produced love poetry in which the true note of absolute passion is struck – Shakespeare and Donne." In comparison to Donne, who "seems sometimes to set down his impressions hot and crude, in Shakespeare the passion is always mastered by the artist."⁵

Thomas Marc Parrott is among those who remind us that the sonnets indeed gain by selection. "All the sonnets are (not) of great and equal value."⁶

C.S. Lewis thinks Shakespeare's sonnets are the supreme love poetry. W.H. Auden said, "that they have become the best touchstone for separating the sheep from the goats"-that is, those who love and understand poetry, and those who only value poems either as historical documents or because they express feelings or beliefs of which the reader happens to approve."⁷

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