



Shakespeare's Sonnets: A Critical Study

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ABSTRACT

William Shakespeare needs no introduction to scholars of English literature, particularly those interested in poetry. As a sonnet writer, he composed 154 sonnets that have gained immense popularity among readers across the world and through various ages. His sonnets are seen as a continuation of the sonnet tradition that began with Petrarch in 14th-century Italy and was introduced to 16th-century England by Thomas Wyatt. Wyatt's work, along with Henry Howard's establishment of the rhyming meter and division into quatrains, set the stage for the English sonnet. While Shakespeare's sonnets generally adhere to the stylistic conventions of the English sonnet—such as the rhyme scheme, the 14 lines, and the meter—they introduce significant departures in content. These departures often seem to challenge the well-established traditions of the form.

Instead of idealizing an unattainable female love object as seen in the works of Petrarch, Dante, and Philip Sidney, Shakespeare introduces a young man as well as the "Dark Lady," who is decidedly not divine. He explores themes such as lust, homoeroticism, misogyny, infidelity, and acrimony, challenging traditional notions and opening new avenues for the sonnet form. Shakespeare's Sonnets remain among the most fascinating and influential poems in the English language.

KEYWORDS

Shakespearean sonnets, Italian model, theme of love, compensation and separation, Wyatt and Surrey's style, Youth-hood

INTRODUCTION

English poetry has been significantly influenced by Italian poetry. Italian poets such as Petrarch, Dante, Tasso, Ariosto, Michelangelo, and Colonna cultivated high-quality poetry, including the Petrarchan sonnet—a 14-line poem with an octave (rhyming abba abba) and a sestet (with various rhyme schemes). The octave introduces the subject, while the sestet provides a resolution. Petrarchan sonnets feature a "turn" (volte) at the end of the octave, which English sonneteers did not follow, opting instead for varied sestet rhyme schemes. While Petrarchan



sonnets often focus on themes of love and chivalry, the Italian, French, and English sonneteers utilized the sonnet form as a literary exercise.

Objective of This Study

The objective of this study is twofold. First, it aims to analyze the styles and themes present in Shakespearean sonnets. Second, it seeks to discuss the various figures of speech, meters, and rhyme schemes used by Shakespeare, and to provide a comparative study of the styles of his contemporary poets.

The English poet Sir Thomas Wyatt (1503-1542) was instrumental in introducing the Italian sonnet form to England. His contemporary, Henry Howard, Earl of Surrey (1517-1547), further expanded the English sonnet tradition. The works of Wyatt and Surrey, circulated in manuscript form during their lifetimes, were included in "Songs and Sonnets" (1557), also known as Tottel's Miscellany. This collection significantly influenced later poets.

In 1582, Thomas Watson published "Hekatompathia," a collection of sonnets with an unusual eighteen-line structure. His subsequent work, "Tears of Fancy" (1593), contained a sequence of sonnets on a unified theme. Sir Philip Sidney (1554-1586) authored "Astrophel and Stella," a sonnet sequence expressing the speaker's emotions towards his mistress, achieving notable originality and high-quality poetry. Shakespeare's work can be seen as an improvement upon Sidney's, and many poets followed this tradition, including Samuel Daniel, Henry Constable, Thomas Lodge, Barnaby Barnes, Michael Drayton, and Edmund Spenser.

Shakespeare's approach to the sonnet form was informed by the works of these poets, including Petrarch and Sidney, resulting in his 154 sonnets. Francis Meres' "Palladis Tamia" (1598), a contemporary work, provides insight into Shakespeare's poetry. Shakespeare's sonnets, often referred to as "Sugared Sonnets," gained popularity, with sonnets 138 and 144 appearing in "The Passionate Pilgrim" in 1599. Shakespeare began writing sonnets in 1592, with many appearing in his plays, such as "Love's Labor's Lost," reflecting his deep interest in the form.

C.K. Hillegass notes that the sonnets contain references to people, events, or specific periods, which critics have used to date them between the late 1580s and 1609. For example, the young man addressed in the first 126 sonnets is often believed to be either the Earl of Southampton or the Earl of Pembroke.

Thomas Thorpe published Shakespeare's sonnets in 1609, with the first 126 sonnets referring to a fair young man identified as 'WH.' This 'WH' is speculated to be William Harvey, who married the mother of the young Earl of Southampton in 1598. The leading candidates for this identity are Henry Wriothesley, the third Earl of Southampton, and William Herbert, the third Earl of Pembroke.



The identification of Southampton, initially proposed by Nathan Drake in 1817, is supported by Shakespeare's dedication of "Venus and Adonis" to him and the related efforts to secure his marriage. The young earl's interest in poetry and drama may have led him to seek out Shakespeare as a patron.

The 1625 First Folio was dedicated to William Herbert. Since the second publication of the sonnets in 1640, scholars have debated their ordering. Malone and Stevens, in their 1780 edition, established the widely accepted belief that the first 126 sonnets were addressed to a man, while the remainder were directed to a woman. This remains the dominant view, although modern scholars argue that Thorpe's arrangement reflects Shakespeare's own organization. C.A. Brown's theory suggests an autobiographical approach, positing that the sonnets are actually six "poems," with five addressed to Shakespeare's friend, each ending with an envoy, and the sixth addressed to the poet's mistress.

An Analysis

In Shakespeare's sonnets, the figure referred to as 'WH,' who is speculated to be the Earl of Pembroke, is depicted as a handsome youth. Sonnet 20 highlights that his beauty possesses a feminine quality. Although he is an aristocrat and can be gracious and kind, he is not without faults. The poet expresses regret that the youth sometimes indulges in wanton behavior, as illustrated in sonnets 35, 40, 42, and 89. Additionally, the youth's charm extends to winning the favor of the poet's mistress, leading to a description of him as the poet's 'master-mistress,' which hints at themes of homosexuality.

The sonnets explore several prominent themes. One central theme is the concept of time as an adversary to youth and beauty. The word "time" appears 78 times in the first 126 sonnets. Sonnets 1 to 17 emphasize the youth's unparalleled beauty and urge him to marry and have children to counteract the ravages of time. Shakespeare presents this argument through various metaphors, as seen in Sonnet 2, where time is compared to an enemy besieging one's beauty. The poet uses a martial metaphor:

"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..."

This theme continues in Sonnet 3 with a metaphor related to husbandry, suggesting that the youth's beauty is like an untended field that should be cultivated:

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



The poem ends with a grim prophecy:

“Die single and thine image dies with thee.”

Sonnet 4 further expands on these themes. Sonnets 5 and 6 explore the concept of immortality through the metaphor of distillation, focusing on the preservation of beauty in poetry.

A significant subset of sonnets, particularly 9 and 10, argues that beauty, when not used or cherished, is ultimately wasted:

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

Sonnets 12, 15, and 16 address the destructive power of time, with references to ‘Time’s scythe’ and ‘this bloody tyrant Time.’

The theme of the power of poetry to overcome time is encapsulated in Sonnet 18, which asserts that the beauty captured in poetry can defeat the ravages of time. The poet claims that his verse will immortalize the young man's beauty, a concept echoed in Sonnet 19 and Sonnet 38, where the poet assures that his love for the youth will live on in his verse, and urges the youth to inspire ‘eternal numbers.’

The theme of love is prevalent in the first 125 sonnets. Love is portrayed as a force that can transcend time, with Sonnet 22, 25, and 62 illustrating this idea:

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

Finally, the theme of compensation appears, where the youth’s love compensates for any adverse fortune. This is notably expressed in Sonnet 29, which includes a remarkable simile in the third quatrain, emphasizing how the youth’s love enriches the poet’s life despite his misfortunes.

An Analysis

The sonnet excerpt you provided 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 this sonnet, the poet laments his misfortune and sense of exclusion, comparing his feelings of inadequacy and envy of others to his own state. Despite his grievances and self-destructive thoughts, he finds solace and transformation in thoughts of the young man. The young man's love elevates the poet's spirits, making him feel as if he has transcended his earthly troubles and is contented, even more so than kings.

Sonnet 37 provides an even more explicit treatment of the poet's sentiments, emphasizing that Youthhood, or the presence of the young man, compensates for life's deficiencies and troubles. The poet views the youth's presence as a great asset, enhancing his life and providing him with emotional and spiritual wealth.

The theme of separation is also prevalent in several sonnets, such as 36, 46, and 57, where the poet expresses his sorrow over distance and absence from the young man. For instance, in one sonnet, he laments the 'injurious distance' that separates him from his friend but finds comfort in the ability of 'nimble thought' to bridge the gap mentally:

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

In Sonnet 47, the poet takes solace in carrying a picture of the young man, which allows him to feel connected despite physical separation.

The farewell sonnets, spanning 87 to 93, reveal the poet's sense of impending loss and the emotional struggle of bidding farewell. Sonnet 87, for example, reflects on the value and cost of the relationship:

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

Sonnet 88 offers a clear expression of the poet's willingness to endure hardship for the sake of the young man:

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



In Sonnet 89, the poet addresses the friend he is about to lose, expressing a sense of sacrifice and loyalty despite the change:

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 portrayed in sonnets 127 to 152, is a captivating figure whose identity has intrigued scholars and readers alike. Some suggest that the Dark Lady could be Shakespeare's wife, Anne Hathaway, though this is speculative. Real or fictitious, she is a compelling presence in the sonnets, described with a spellbinding allure that causes both warmth and coldness in the poet's heart. The Dark Lady first appears in Sonnet 40, where the poet laments that his friend has sought her out, resulting in a mix of envy and sorrow, yet he ultimately forgives his friend. She becomes the central figure from Sonnet 127 onward, praised for her dark beauty, particularly her raven-black eyes. In Sonnet 128, her musical prowess is revealed.

The poet's relationship with the Dark Lady is fraught with contradictions. He acknowledges her cruelty and 'proud heart,' and in Sonnet 141, he confesses to loving her despite recognizing 'a thousand errors' in her. The poet grapples with feelings of 'sinful loving' and infidelity, condemning her for breaking her vows in Sonnet 152:

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

This tumultuous love, marked by deep passion and intense emotions, contrasts sharply with the idealized love of the Petrarchan tradition. Shakespeare's portrayal of the Dark Lady, who has 'black wires' rather than golden strands and lacks the 'roses damasked red and white,' reflects an anti-Petrarchan stance. In Sonnet 132, the poet wittily concludes that:

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

Love and Lust

Shakespeare's sonnets delineate a clear preference for love over lust. Sonnet 129, for instance, reflects the destructive nature of lust:

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



Religion

Sonnet 146 introduces religious themes, with Edward Hubler suggesting that Shakespeare presents Christianity unapologetically, asserting that 'man needs to be spiritual.'

The Rival Poet

Sonnets 100 to 103 address a rival poet, who some speculate might be Christopher Marlowe. Other candidates include Michael Drayton, Samuel Daniel, George Peele, Thomas Nash, Thomas Lodge, Richard Barnfield, Barnaby Rich, Robert Greene, Edmund Spenser, George Chapman, and Ben Jonson.

Reception and Criticism

Shakespeare's sonnets have received varied critical responses. Initially, they were celebrated for their poetic brilliance, though not without criticism. George Chambers, in his *Supplemental Apology* (1797), was the first to offer a substantial critique, describing the sonnets as obscure and tedious but acknowledging their moments of elegance and insight. J.W. Mackail argued that the sonnets should be appreciated as poetry in its own right, without relying on historical or biographical interpretations. Thomas Seacombe and J.W. Allen, in their book *The Age of Shakespeare*, considered Shakespeare's passion in his sonnets to be tragic and masterful compared to his contemporaries, including John Donne. They concluded that only Shakespeare and Donne produced true love poetry of absolute passion in the Elizabethan era. Thomas Marc Parrott emphasized that the sonnets gain value through selective reading, noting that not all sonnets are of equal worth. C.S. Lewis regarded Shakespeare's sonnets as supreme love poetry, while W.H. Auden suggested they serve as a touchstone for distinguishing true poetry lovers from those who merely value poems for their historical or emotional content.

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International Journal on Recent Researches in Science, Engineering & Technology (IJRRSET)

A Journal Established in early 2000 as National journal and upgraded to International journal in 2013 and is in existence for the last 10 years. It is run by Retired Professors from NIT, Trichy. Journal Indexed in JIR, DIIF and SJIF.

Available online at: www.ijsrset.com

ISSN (Print) : 2347-6729

ISSN (Online) : 2348-3105

JIR IF : 2.54

SJIF IF : 4.334

Cosmos: 5.395

Volume 10, Issue 6 - June 2022-2023 - Pages 59-66

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