



ISSN Print: 2394-7500
ISSN Online: 2394-5869
Impact Factor: 8.4
IJAR 2023; 9(2): 352-353
www.allresearchjournal.com
Received: 16-12-2022
Accepted: 24-01-2023

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Thematic study of Shakespearian Sonnet

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Abstract

Shakespeare's sonnets are a summit in terms of their thematic profundity as well as their rhetorical beauty and emotional exquisiteness. These sonnets show that men should conquer time through offspring, poetry and true love to procure eternal beauty and life, and thus reflect Shakespeare's humanistic consciousness and his philosophical thoughts.

Keywords: Emotional exquisiteness, internal beauty and time

Introduction

A Shakespearean sonnet is one of the best-known sonnet forms. Along with the Petrarchan sonnet, it is the most popular to this day. It is sometimes referred to as "Elizabethan" or "English," but since Shakespeare used to with so much success in his 154 sonnets published after his death, it has become synonymous with his name. The Shakespearean sonnet is fourteen lines long, as are all traditional sonnets. These fourteen lines are usually seen together in one stanza of text, but throughout time poets have chosen to break the structure up into stanzas. These are generally created with the basic form of the sonnet in mind. Even if the poem is contained within one stanza of text, for the purpose of analyses or simply in order to come to a better understanding of what the poet is saying, it can be separated into three quatrains or sets of four lines. These make up the bulk of the poem. They are then followed by a concluding couplet or set of two rhyming lines.

In Shakespeare's sonnets, the rhyme pattern is ABAB CDCD EFEF GG, with the final couplet used to summarize the previous 12 lines or present a surprise ending. The rhythmic pattern of the sonnets is the iambic pentameter. An iamb is a metrical foot consisting of one stressed syllable and one unstressed syllable. Although the entirety of Shakespeare's sonnets were not formally published until 1609 (and even then, they were published without the author's knowledge), an allusion to their existence appeared eleven years earlier, in Francis Meres' *Palladis Tamia* (1598), in which Meres commented that Shakespeare's "sugred Sonnets" were circulating privately among the poet's friends. Approximately a year later, William Jaggard's miscellany, *The Passionate Pilgrim*, appeared, containing twenty poems, five of which are known to be Shakespeare's — two of the Dark Lady sonnets (Sonnets 138 and 144) and three poems included in the play *Love's Labour's Lost*. Apparently these five poems were printed in Jaggard's miscellany (a collection of writings on various subjects) without Shakespeare's authorization.

The text of Shakespeare's sonnets generally considered to be definitive is that of the 1609 edition, which was published by Thomas Thorpe, a publisher having less than a professional reputation. Thorpe's edition, titled *Shakespeare's Sonnets: Never before imprinted*, is referred to today as the "Quarto," and is the basis for all modern texts of the sonnets. The belief that the first 126 sonnets are addressed to a man and that the rest are addressed to a woman has become the prevailing contemporary view. In addition, a majority of modern critics remain sufficiently satisfied with Thorpe's 1609 ordering of those sonnets addressed to the young man, but most of them have serious reservations about the second group addressed to the woman. Another controversy surrounding the sonnets is the dedication at the beginning of Thorpe's 1609 edition. Addressed to "Mr. WH," the dedication has led to a series of conjectures as to the identity of this person. The two leading candidates are Henry Wriothesley, third Earl of Southampton, and William Herbert, third Earl of Pembroke.

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Although Shakespeare's sonnets can be divided into different sections numerous ways, the most apparent division involves Sonnets 1–126, in which the poet strikes up a relationship with a young man, and Sonnets 127–154, which are concerned with the poet's relationship with a woman, variously referred to as the Dark Lady, or as his mistress. In the first large division, Sonnets 1–126, the poet addresses an alluring young man with whom he has struck up a relationship. In Sonnets 1–17, he tries to convince the handsome young man to marry and beget children so that the youth's incredible beauty will not die when the youth dies. Starting in Sonnet 18, when the youth appears to reject this argument for procreation, the poet glories in the young man's beauty and takes consolation in the fact that his sonnets will preserve the youth's beauty, much like the youth's children would.

These sonnets are actually the thematic expression of his unique experience and thinking of time. Shakespeare not only describes time's ruthless consumption of beauty and love, but also displays that he has done all his efforts to surpass time and preserve immortality with two solutions, thus the most outstanding result of his philosophical thinking of time is that his bionomy and poetics comes into being. The word "time" is directly used about 86 times in the sonnets, among which most occurs in the capitalized form "Time". Moreover, some words showing time concept can be frequently found in Shakespeare's sonnets: "day", 46 times; "hour", 16 times; "spring", 6 times; "summer", 20 times; "autumn", 2 times; "winter", 10 times; etc. Shakespeare describes time as a "bloody tyrant" (Sonnet 16), "devouring" and "swift-footed" (Sonnet 19), "injurious hand" and "age's cruel knife" (Sonnet 63). Time is often personified and appears capitalized, like in a name, in some sonnets. Time is making Shakespeare old and near "hideous night" (Sonnet 12) or death, and time will eventually rob the beauty of the young man. Shakespeare presents time as the protagonist and aggressor throughout his sonnets¹. Shakespeare begins his sonnets by introducing six of his most important themes—beauty, time, decay, immortality, procreation and selfishness, which are interrelated in sonnet 1 both thematically and through the use of images associated with business or commerce². In sonnet 2, time again is the great enemy, besieging the youth's brow, digging trenches and wrinkles in his face, and ravaging his good looks. Sonnet 5 compares nature's four seasons with the stages of the young man's life. Although the seasons are cyclical, his life is linear, and hours become tyrants that oppress him because he cannot escape time's grasp. Time might "frame/The lovely gaze where every eye doth dwell", meaning that everyone notices the youth's beauty, but time's "never-resting" progress ensures that this beauty will finally fade. In Sonnet 19, the poet addresses time and, using vivid animal imagery, comments on time's normal effects on the nature³.

In Shakespeare's sonnets, time is a significant theme. The word "time" has totally occurred 79 times, along with many other words about time, such as hour, week, day, month, season, winter, spring and so on, frequently occurring in the sonnets. In Shakespeare's sonnets, time is kinetic.

When I do count the clock that tells the time,
And see the brave day sunk in hideous night;
When I behold the violet past prime,
And sable curls silvered o'er with white. (Gu, 2008)^[3].

Sonnet 12 shows that the poet witnesses the passing of time, the constant alternation of day and night, and the changes it brings about as violet has lost its color, black hair has turned white. The poet visualizes the change of time.

Time expressed in Shakespeare's sonnets is a linear movement, instead of circular motion, which shows the poet's pessimistic view of time. We can feel the pessimistic mood of Shakespeare from many adjectives modified time as follows: never-resting, devouring, swift-footed, sluttish, injurious, balmy, reckoning and so forth. In Shakespeare's sonnets, time is cruel and destructive. Time is ever-lapsing, and everything in the world is leasing. These images like "Time's scythe/ sickle", "Time's fickle glass", "Time's tyranny", and "Time's injurious hand", can be found everywhere, which embody the ruthless lapse of destructive time. Faced with it, people are very tiny and insignificant, and they are incapable of conquering time. These images also embody the pessimistic consciousness.

Conclusion

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 no goddess. Shakespeare explores themes such as lust, homoeroticism, misogyny, infidelity, and acrimony in ways that may challenge, but which also open new terrain for the sonnet form.

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