

## **An Analysis of William Shakespeare's Sonnets: A Critical Study**

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### **Abstract**

For English scholars in general and poets in particular, William Shakespeare doesn't need an introduction. He wrote 154 sonnets in total, and they were all very well-liked by readers of all ages around the world. His sonnets are considered a continuation of the sonnet tradition that began with Petrarch in the 14th century in Italy and was finally introduced by Thomas Wyatt in the 16th century in England. Henry Howard gave the sonnet its rhyming metre and quatrain-based structure. With very few exceptions, Shakespeare's sonnets adhere to the 14 lines, rhyme pattern, and consequently, metre of the English sonnet. Shakespeare's sonnets, however, make such significant content changes that it seems as though they are defying over 200-year-old conventions. Shakespeare introduces a young man instead of expressing worshipful love for an almost goddess-like but unattainable female love object, as had Petrarch, Dante, and Philip Sidney. Additionally, he introduces the Dark Lady, a non-goddess. Shakespeare delves into subjects like lust, homoeroticism, misogyny, adultery, and animosity in ways that may be challenging but also pave the way for new sonnet forms. Some of the most intriguing and influential poems ever written in English are Shakespeare's sonnets.

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

Italian poetry serves as a model for English poetry. Fine poetry was developed by the Italian poets Petrarch, Dante, Tasso, Ariosto, Michelangelo, and Colonna. The Petrarchan school of poetry gained popularity, especially the 14-line sonnet with an Octave (rhyming abba abba) and a sestet (with multiple rhyme schemes). The subject came from the octave, and the resolution came from the sestet. At the octave's end, the Petrarchan sonnet took a turn (volte). The English sonneteers chose different rhyme schemes for their sestet instead of adhering to it. Petrarch's sonnets discussed chivalry and love. The sonnet was used as a literary exercise by the Italian, French, and English sonneteers.

The Italian sonnet form was introduced to England by the English poet Sir Thomas Wyatt (1503–1542). The English sonnet's range was expanded by Henry Howard, Earl of Surrey (1517–1547).

A source of inspiration for later poets, *Songs and Sonnets* (1557), the first printed collection of English verse, also known as Tottel's Miscellany, contained the poems of Wyatt and

Surrey that were circulated in manuscript

In 1582, a poet by the name of Thomas Watson released his book *Hekatompathia*. He used 18 lines in his sonnet. A series of sonnets on a condensed theme were included in his book *Tears of Fancy* (1593). *Astrophel and Stella*, a sonnet sequence by Sir Philip Sidney (1554–1586), describes the speaker's affections for his mistress. He wrote poetry of the highest calibre and creativity. Shakespeare outperformed Sidney. Many other people did the same.

Samuel Daniel, Henry Constable, Thomas Lodge, Barnaby Barnes, Michael Drayton, and Edmund Spenser's sonnet collections are very similar to each other.

Shakespeare authored 154 sonnets using the information about sonnets he learned from all of those poets, including Petrarch and Sidney. His poetry is illuminated by Francis Mere's *Palladis Tamia* (1598), a contemporaneous work. Shakespeare's sonnets, which he refers to as "sugred sonnets," were already well-known, and his sonnets 138 and 144 first appeared in *The Passionate Pilgrim* in 1599.

Shakespeare started composing sonnets in 1592 and continued to do so. Many of his sonnets have been included into his plays. He had a strong interest in sonnets, as evidenced by his play *Love's Labor's Lost*. As C.K. Hillegass notes:

Attempts to date the sonnets from the late 1580s to 1609 have been made by critics using what appear to be allusions or references to people, events, or particular years or seasons that are present throughout the sonnets. For instance, some who think that either the Earl of Southampton or the Earl of Pembroke is the young man addressed in the first 126 sonnets.

Shakespeare's sonnets were published by Thomas Thorpe in 1609. The first 1 to 126 sonnets in the book mention a handsome young man by the name of "WH." This "WH" is actually William Harvey, who wed the young earl of Southampton's mother in 1598. This takes us to the next two front-runners. William Herbert, third Earl of Pembroke, and Henry Wriothesley, third Earl of Southampton, who deserves to be in first place. Shakespeare's dedication of *Venus and Adonis* to him and the circumstances surrounding attempts to get him married made the Southampton identification, first made by Nathan Drake (in his *Shakespeare and His Times*, 1817), unavoidable. Shakespeare may have been approached by the young earl, who loved poetry and theatre, and offered himself as the poet's patron.

William Herbert was honoured with a First Folio in 1625. Since the second publication of the sonnet in 1640, Shakespeare scholars have been troubled by the sonnets' chronological arrangement.

Shakespeare's writings were originally published by Malone and Stevens in 1780. It is still popularly believed in England that the first 126 sonnets are written to a male, while the

remaining sonnets are devoted to women. This is still largely considered to be the orthodox viewpoint. Modern academics concur that Shakespeare wrote the arrangement that Thorpe used. The philosophy of C.A. Brown is autobiographical. The sonnets are actually six "poems," according to Brown, five of which are addressed to Shakespeare's friend and each of which ends with an envoy. The sixth is devoted to the poet's mistress.

### **An Analysis**

The "WH," the Earl of Pembroke described in sonnets 1 through 126, is a lovely young man. He was described as having a feminine tint in Sonnet 20. He is a nobleman. Even if the young man might be pleasant and friendly, he nonetheless has shortcomings. We can infer from sonnets 35, 40, 42, and 89 that the poet is occasionally prone to wantonness, much to his chagrin. Even the mistress of the poet gives him her blessing. He is referred to as the poet's "master-mistress," making homophobia clear.

The sonnets' recurrent topics are numerous.

**The Young Man: Youthhood and offspring:** It is believed that beauty and youth are threatened by time. These 126 sonnets contain 78 instances of the word "time." The young man's unrivalled beauty is the subject of the first 17 sonnets. To beat time, one should get married and have kids.

In three quatrains where he generalises, Shakespeare develops the theme; in the final couplet, he particularises and addresses the young man specifically. Shakespeare continues the argument and plea in sonnet 2, using a different metaphor—a martial one—to support his claims:

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....

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 maintains that the young man is his mother's reflection and that she "Calls back the exquisite April of his prime" in him. Sonnet number three finishes with the ominous proclamation, "Die single and thin image dies with thee."

In a way, Sonnet 4 explains what the poet has spoken up to this point.

The sensual picture of distillation, which is used in Sonnets 5 and 6, allows the individual's mortal participation in immortality to be expressed. The use of this image does not obscure the physical aspect of the subject.

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:** Time cannot withstand the beauty of poetry or the beauty of youth. This idea is introduced in one of sonnet 18's greatest lines.

Such a claim of immortality has many historical precedents in the classical and mediaeval periods. The poet promises the young man in sonnet 19 that his "love shall in (his) verse eternally live long," and in sonnet 38, he again addresses the young man, pushing him to be the tenth Muse and "let him pour forth/Eternal numbers to survive 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:** A lot of sonnets, including 36, 46, and 57, discuss separation, absence, and sadness.

In the following sonnet, he laments the "injurious distance" that has kept him from the young man but expresses joy that "nimble thinking can jump both sea and land," enabling him to remain mentally connected to him.

A picture of the young man that the poet keeps around gives him comfort in Sonnet 47:

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 is 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 they will.

**Dear Lady Theme:** The Dark Lady mentioned in sonnets 127–152 might represent the poet's spouse, Anna Hathway. 3

The Dark Lady is an intriguing character, whether she is real or not. She captivates with some unnamed spell that makes the heart go hot and cold. In Sonnet 40, along with the following two sonnets, the poet regrets the fact that his buddy has sought out the lady, who is seduced

by his beauty and "straying youth," assuming that just one lady is being discussed. The poet apologises and then extends forgiveness to the fair young man. She returns in sonnet 127 and then takes centre stage in the remaining sonnets. She is praised for her black beauty, particularly her eyes of 'raven black.' In sonnet 128, we learn that she is an accomplished musician.

The poet then focuses on her brutality and her "proud heart." He claims in sonnet 141 that despite his inability to help falling in love with her, he sees "a thousand mistakes" in her. Then he talks of her infidelity, his "sinful loving," the "false connections of love," and himself. He accuses the Dark Lady of being "twice foresworn," one who has betrayed her bed-vows, in

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

It is clear that the love depicted in the sonnets was turbulent, characterised by intense passion and frequently violent emotion.

Shakespeare also appreciated the gloom. This is more of a Petrarchan mindset. You may recall that the poet nearly brags that her cheeks don't have "roses damasked crimson and white" and that "black wires," not golden strands, sprout on her head. He celebrates the mysterious beauty of his lady love in sonnet 132, concluding wryly:

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:** The sonnets from 100 to 103 mention this poet. He might be Christopher Marlowe, according to M.A.L. Rowse. Along with Marlowe, other poets who compete with him have supporters including Michael Drayton, Samuel Daniel, George Peele, Thomas Nash, Thomas Lodge, Richard Barnfield, Barnaby Rich, Robert Greene, Edmund Spenser, George Chapman, and

**Reception and Criticism:** Although Shakespeare's 1-126 sonnets are an admiration of a

young man, they have earned both warm praise and gentle criticism over the years. George Chambers established himself as the first to negatively critique Shakespeare's sonnets in his *Supplemental Apology* (1797). They were confusing and tedious to him. However, he remarked that these are "usually clouded by conceit and tarnished by affectation." He did give Shakespeare credit for "many joyful words and exquisite sentences.'

Shakespeare's sonnets should be viewed as poetry for poetry's sake, J.W. Mackail wrote in his book. We don't have to analyse them using historical and biographical methods. Shakespeare's sonnets, in his opinion, are the best in the English language.

Shakespeare's passion is tragic, according to Thomas Seccombe and J.W. Allen in their book *The Age of Shakespeare*, and both Shakespeare and John Donne created the best sonnets in the Middle Ages. Seccombe and Allen write in their conclusion that "Sir William Shakespeare and John Donne produced love poetry in which the genuine note of utter emotion is touched." Shakespeare is superior to Donne, who "seems occasionally to write down his impressions hot and rough, in Shakespeare the passion is always mastered by the artist."

Thomas Marc Parrott is one of those who serves as a reminder that sonnets do benefit from selection. All sonnets are not equally important or valuable. 6

Shakespeare's sonnets, in C.S. Lewis' opinion, are the best examples of love poetry. According to W.H. Auden, they "have become the best touchstone for sorting the sheep from the goats" that is, those who appreciate poetry and comprehend it, as opposed to others who just respect poems as historical artefacts or as expressions of viewpoints that the reader happens to agree with.

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