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Form and Content: A Critical Appreciation of Shakespeare's Sonnet 104

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Abstract

Undoubtedly, William Shakespeare's Sonnets have achieved enduring popularity through several generations for several reasons. Arguably, one of the factors that accounts for this achievement may be traced to the architecture - content and form - of the poetry. Studies have revealed that the sonnets is a pathfinder in the forging of the Elizabethan sonnets and that Shakespeare, through the poems, is able to hint on several issues relevant to the existence of man. The intention of this paper is, therefore, to carry out a critical assessment of "Sonnet 104" by examining its form and content.

Keywords: Shakespeare; Sonnet 104; Form and Content; Shakespearean Sonnet; Elizabethan Sonnet.

Among several poets of his time, to say that William Shakespeare is among the most successful is to let the proverbial drop of water in the ocean. Not just famed for his Elizabethan plays which includes his magnum opuses such as *Julius Caesar* (1599), *The Merchant of Venice* (1600), *Othello* (1565), *The Tempest* (1623), *King Lear* (1606), *Romeo and Juliet* (1597), *Hamlet* (1599) and *Macbeth* (1606) but also his 154 sonnets. Although there are considerable disputation on authorship as popularised by the Anti-Stratfordians and counterarguments from the Stratfordian adherents. Shakespeare's sonnets have been consistently divided into two broad groups by critics. Such distinctions are validated on the basis of who is being addressed by the speaker in the poems. In the first group which Sonnet 104 belongs to, the person who the speaker refers to is a fair young man. Still in this category of poems, Shakespeare appears to concern himself with thematic and philosophical preoccupations such as love, afterlife, precreation, beauty and death. The attempt here is to provide a critical analysis of Sonnet 104.

William Shakespeare was born in 1564 to John Shakespeare in the village, Stratford-upon-Avon in Warwickshire, near the middle of England. Biographers

believe Shakespeare is a beneficiary of the free school charter of 1553 and equally believed that he was educated at the King's New School in Stratford which is about a quarter-mile from his home. At age 18, he married Anne Hathaway and had three children with her. Between 1585 and 1592, Shakespeare began his enviable career in London as an actor, writer and part-owner of a playing company. Shakespeare is generally regarded as the greatest writer in the English language and his Sonnets happen to be part of what has contributed to his fame. Both the form and content of the sonnets add to its perceived beauty and, is in fact, the rationale behind its enjoyed wide readership. The lyrical poem, Sonnet 104, is a typical sonnet consisting of 14 lines. It follows the rhyming pattern, ab ab cd cd ef ef gg. The poem is structured into three quatrains accompanied by a final rhyming couplet. The cadence of aesthetics of the poem is realised in the bountifully deployed figures of speech, imagery, rhyme, rhythm and meter, word sounds, symbols and thematic preoccupation.

The figure of speech evident in Sonnet 104 includes simile. In line 9, the speaker says "Ah yet doth beauty like a dial hand". The line indicates that Shakespeare attempts to show the progression of time and its attendant impact on beauty. Personification is also observed as the speaker mentions, "three winters cold// have from the forests shook three summers' pride" (4); "there April perfumes in three hot Junes burned" (7), and, "like a dial hand, steal from his figure, and no pace perceived" (9-10).

Metaphor is also realised in line 8 as the speaker notes "since first I saw you fresh, which yet are green" (8). Hyperbole is equally evidential in the poem. The speaker exaggerates, "To me, fair friend, you never can be old" (1) and "Ere you were born was beauty's summer dead" (14). Imagery beautifully contributes to the uniqueness of the poem. Shakespeare combines visual imagery, tactile and the olfactory in supplying descriptive meaning of the poem. In line 80, the reader notices how Shakespeare appeals to the sense of sight in describing the beauty of the fair youth as the speaker reveals, "since first I saw you

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fresh which yet are green". In line 7, he aligns with the olfactory imagery as the speaker tells, "three April perfumes in three hot Junes burned". While the tactile is observed in line 3 capturing "three winters cold" and "three hot Junes burned" (7). In terms of rhythm and meter construction, Shakespeare adopts the iambic pentameter because each line has 5 feet and the stressing pattern is all iambs. Iamb is known to be a foot or beat consisting of unstressed followed by stressed syllable, while pentameter means five meters. Therefore, a line of poetry written in pentameter has 5 feet. In the case of poem, Shakespeare artistically conforms with this structure. In addition to the mentioned, the figures of sound also reveals certain aspect of beauty in the poem. Alliteration which is the repetition of initial sound on the same line or stanza is realised in line 1, "fair friend" and line 2, "eye I eyed". Anaphora which is the repetition of a word or phrase is noticed at the beginning of successive lines. The word "three" represents this figure of sound as it is repeated in both lines 5 and 7. The symbolic representation also advance the resplendence of the poem. The poem symbolises the changes in season which marks the ever-burgeoning locomotion of time and its reverberating impact on beauty. It also suggest how beauty become a victim of time as it subtly responds to the passage of time.

The Sonnets of Shakespeare brings to focus certain core thematic foci, especially as it appeals to human existence. One of the thematic discourses Shakespeare concerns himself with regards to Sonnet 104 is the unity in opposites. Sonnet 104 shows how man exists and grows organically in the midst of conflicting or irreconcilable opposites. The attempt by Shakespeare here is to, arguably, demonstrate that the harmony of binary opposites is critical to mankind and that such situation provides the terminal balance upon which his existence finds its bearing. This suggests that there is a symbiotic fusion of these opposite so that man and nature are forced to live by and within such order. One of the opposites that can be realised here is beauty and ugliness. In Sonnet 104, the speaker commences his appraisal for the young man who happens to be his friend by noting his overwhelming beauty. The reader can almost picture the beauty of the fair friend through the lines of the speaker. Indeed, one can assume that the beloved here is an expression of enormous and unquantifiable beauty. The speaker notes, "to me, fair friend, you never can be old, // for as you were when first your eye I eyed, // such seems your beauty still" (1-3). This line necessitates the assumption on the beauty of the

friend. Indeed, the quality and extent of such beauty as mentioned by the speaker brings us to the understanding that Shakespeare appears to deposit his first pair of opposites, commencing with beauty. It can be argued that Shakespeare uses the object of love to substantiate his argument concerning the beauty of man. He seems to note that among other creations, man reflects beauty. However, Shakespeare reaches to establish that where beauty abounds, ugliness must also be introduced to balance the beauty. Therefore, to identify this mutual binary, the poet submits that as much as man exudes and represents beauty, he is also a metaphor of ugliness. To achieve this, Shakespeare tells his readers that the beauty of this friend does not assume a stagnant position, that it depreciates. The poet persona notes, "ah yet doth beauty like a dial hand, // steal from his figure, and no pace perceived" (9-10). Through this, Shakespeare has subtly introduced the presence of ugliness in beauty. One can infer that the poet injects this ugliness into his poetic rendition to help shape the sensibilities of the reader that the omnipresence of contrasting opposite is a certain order in the tapestry of a man's life. To corroborate his argument, the speaker notes that even though it appears that he has lived in self-denial, the truth remains that he has not undermined the presence of this ugliness and in fact, he tells that by temporarily assuming that the ugliness of man does not exist may have been tantamount to an effort in self-deception. In the light of this, the speaker acknowledges "so your sweet hue, which me thinks still doth stand // hath motion" (11-12). In the effort to deduce the meaning of beauty from the poem, one can also approximate the established beauty of not just physical attribute but to also attribute of behavioural patterns. Upon this score, it can be analysed that the anonymous friend has displayed the beauty of being consistent with his "beautiful" character so much that it has become noticeable even to his friend, the speaker. In contrast, as observed by the speaker, this paragon of virtue is also a conduit for behaviours assumed as vice and for him, no matter how inconsequential such displays are that make it easy for him to express it without significant notice, the fact remains that he manifests it and it may be that it is the observer's "eye [that] may [have] be[en] deceived" (12).

Shakespeare also confirms the metaphysics of such opposites in nature and not just human beings. In this regard, he introduces his readers to the manifestation of seasons. The poet reveals how the cycle of season is an expression of these opposites. The speaker underscores

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that the presence of winter is an opposite balance to summer. Given this establishment, he delivers that "Winter cold// have from the forests shook three summers' pride" (3-4). The assumption here is that the construction of heat which summer identifies with is uncharitably paralleled by winter which is analysed as cold. Through this construction, Shakespeare reinstates his thesis on the harmony of opposites in the affairs of mankind. It notes that though the season of the sun and heat tarry but it will only be for a while as the snow and cold will define it out of existence. Perhaps, the poet aims to say that man cannot survive by experiencing only considerable perfect things, if he himself remains imperfect, as such, both opposite sides can help to condition and balance the trajectory of his life. In the same vein, it can also be interpreted that Shakespeare also helps us to understand that man's life is regulated by good times and bad times. For him both times are existences the man is subjected to. Following this schema, the speaker says "three beauteous springs to yellow autumn turned// in process of the season have I seen" (5-6). This interprets into a consciousness that good and bad seasons are common to all man. In the same way he considers the blossoming nature and beautiful image associated with the spring, so also does he represent the drought, deficiency and scarcity associated with "yellow autumn". In this, he is of the hunch and, perhaps, philosophises that there is no particular season that is permanent, that as man faces the unfavorable season of winter as well as time of scarcity, so also should the same be aware that the moment is for a phase because in the infrastructure of man's living, the balance of good and bad must co-exist. For this principle to become true, the season of scarcity will be substituted for harvest after a while and such cycle will keep rolling until the death of man. It is to this that the speaker mentioned the opposites that he experiences as he says, " three April perfumes in three hot Junes burned" (7). This supplies one with the effect that pleasant times and unpleasant times are both situations, he, that is, the speaker, has experienced.

Shakespeare also portrays another common opposite applicable to all living things - the opposites of life and death. Through this poem, Shakespeare brings this into the consciousness of man that as much as they enjoy life, that the existence of death is concrete and cannot be wished away. He is of the opinion that regardless of how we reinvent ourselves and wish to live forever, death remains a necessary event that balances the existence of life. Therefore, based on Shakespeare's theory, since life is

witnessed, therefore, all living things cannot dwell outside the event of death. To identify this construction vividly, Shakespeare introduces his readers to the opposite concepts of young and old. For him, for life and death to happen, then the progression of age must advance the growth. Thus, he notes that old age must militate against the days of youth. To investigate how Shakespeare captures this is to note the strategy he adopts in inviting the readers to appreciate the beauty of his friend. The speaker says, "to me, fair friend, you never can be old" (1). This immediately suggests that the speaker is aware that old age is inevitable and a constant event in the life of every man who does not die prematurely. It is this that surprises him as he wonders at the beauty of his friend and as such, wonders if such youthful beauty will ever attain the developmental milestone of old age. Despite the awed beauty associated with youthfulness, the speaker suspends his reverie to inform the reader that as much as we readily acknowledge the place of youth and young age, so also must one acknowledge the presence of old age. This ageing process is reemphasized by the poet as he illustrates with plants. In this regard, he informs that the blossoming age of "beauteous spring" will eventually grow into "yellow autumn" (5). For him, given this illustration, both man and plants as well as all living things are products of the ageing process. The thesis he presents here is that as much as we experience young age so also must one be ready to embrace old age. This argument is consolidated in the statement of the speaker:

Since first I saw you fresh which yet are
green.
Ah yet doth beauty like a dial hand,
Steal from his figure, and no pace
perceived
So your sweet hue, which methinks still
doth stand
Hath motion, and mine eye may be
deceived (8-12).

The above suggests the ageing process of man, reaffirming that the cycle from young to old is a necessary opposing trajectory that is identifiable in living things. Following this through, through the introduction of the growth from young to old, it then becomes comfortable for Shakespeare to introduce the event of death to balance up life. Given this, Shakespeare remarks that the existence of death is certain when he notes that the young people who are identified in the last line of the couplet as beauty's

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summer" (14) have died before the next generation emerges and so, this generation must come to that consciousness.

Succinctly, Shakespeare 104 has lend its voice to some philosophical issues that are imperative to the existence of man. As much as the themes of beauty, ugliness, mortality, among others have been identified in the appreciation of the text here, so also has the form been

appreciated. Essentially, these two aspects of the poem has given the poem its evidential beauty.

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