

# Exploring the Complexities of Love in Shakespearean Sonnets: Themes, Motifs, and Literary Techniques

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## Abstract

Shakespearean sonnets are renowned for their intricate exploration of love in various forms. Shakespeare's sonnets cover a broad spectrum of emotions and experiences, from passionate and romantic love to unrequited and platonic love. In this context, the theme of love is not limited to the mere expression of romantic love but also extends to the complexities of human relationships. This is an attempt to analyze Shakespearean sonnets to comprehensively understand the theme of love in his works.

**Keywords:** Human relationships, Issue of identity, Love, Sonnet.

## Introduction

*Shakespeare "Not of an age but for all time..."*

*Ben Jonson [1573-1637]*

Shakespeare towers over all other English writers; his genius and creativity still delight the audience. Shakespeare can never be old-fashioned because although he is the outcome of his time, he gives us much more. He understands human nature; he saw beneath the outward dress and painted real men and women for us. Although fashion in clothing and mode of living may change, human nature does not change.

William Shakespeare was born in 1564 in Stratford, upon Avon. Shakespeare has had can turnout work of high calibre at an incredible speed. At the height of his career, he wrote an average of two plays a year and dozens of poems and songs, all while he continued to perform in the plays. He wrote 154 sonnets. Shakespeare wrote 13 Comedies, 6 Tragedies, and 13 Histories and 4 Tragic comedies plays. By 1584 he emerged as a rising playwright in London and became a central figure in London's leading theater company. Shakespeare was known in his days as a very rapid writer 'His mind and hand went together'.

Human Love in various manifestations is a principal focus of Shakespeare's sonnets. Commentators have called attention to the many kinds of love expressed in their verses, spiritual and erotic, parental and filial, love that exalts, and Love that corrupts. Many critics emphasize Shakespeare's innovative and unique treatment of courtly and Petrarchan Love traditions.

In Shakespeare's sonnets, critics have agreed love is sometimes presented as an inspiration for transcendent art, with the lover claiming that he can eternalize his beloved's worth and beauty by enshrining them in his poetry.. Yet some commentators maintain that the sonnet's depiction of self-effacing love represents a satire on the servile lover of sonnet tradition, who willingly assumed the role of object servant and devoted himself to obeying his mistress's every wish. It is also represented particularly in sonnets 127-52 as the most minor or carnal desire, a passion that corrupts the soul and debases the lover.

### **Origin and Development of Sonnet**

The English word 'Sonnet' derived from the Italian word 'Soneto', which means 'little song'; some early sonnets were set to music with accompaniment provided by a lute.

The sonnet originated in Sicily in the 13<sup>th</sup> century with Giacomo de Lentino (1188-1240); the poetic traditions of the provincial region of France influenced him, but he wrote his poems in the Sicilian dialect of Italian. Some authorities credit another Italian, Guittone d'Arezzo (1230-1294), with originating the sonnet.

The Italian poet Petrarch (1304-1374) popularized the sonnet more than two centuries before Shakespeare was born. The format of Petrarch's sonnets differs from that of Shakespeare's sonnets. He divided his poems into two parts- the first eight lines, called the octave, and the second of six, called the sestet. The first stanza presents a theme, and the second stanza develops it. Petrarch used the Iambic Penta Metre, and the rhyme scheme of his sonnets is the first stanza octave rhyme scheme is ab-ba,ab-ba, second stanza sestet cd-cd-cd or cde-cde, the octave divided into two stanzas of four lines each called quatrain and the sestet into two of three lines each called tercet.

The sonnet form was introduced in England by Sir Thomas Wyatt (1503-1542) and Henry Howard, earl of Surrey (1517-1547); they translated Italian sonnets into English and wrote their poems. Wyatt and Surrey sometimes replaced Petrarch's scheme of an eight-line stanza and a six-line stanza with three four-line stanzas and a two-line conclusion known as a couplet. Besides Shakespeare, well-known English sonneteers in the late 1500s included Sir Philip Sidney, Samuel Daniel, and Michael Drayton.

Shakespeare's sonnets were published in 1609 entitled Shakespeare's sonnets. Shakespearean sonnet, a 14-line stanza written in Iambic Pentameter, employs the rhyme scheme ab-ab, cd-cd, ef-ef, and gg, divided into three quatrains and a couplet. The sonnet lines can be divided into five metrical feet with the alternatively unstressed and stressed syllabus. The first eight of the fourteen lines comprise the octave, and the last six are the sestet. Thus, the Octave and sestet structure can be alternatively divided into three quatrains, a set of four lines with alternatively divided into three quatrains, and a bunch of four lines with alternating rhymes concluding in a rhymed couplet. With the lone exception of sonnet 145, the meter of

Shakespeare's poetry is iambic Pentameter, each line comprising a few double-syllable iambic feet.

### **Issue of Identity in Shakespeare's Sonnets.**

With the intimacy of the themes broached by Shakespeare in the sonnets, it is natural that scholars would entertain a search for autobiographical sources and that this search would focus on three identity issues:

Who is the young man to whom sonnets 1-126 are addressed?

Who is the Dark lady of sonnets 127-154?

Who are the rival poets who intrude in the love triangles of verses 78 through 86?

As to the first question, the search for the young man's identity is an inscription to a 'Mr. W.H.' in the first edition of Shakespeare's sonnets, these initially refer to a male called the 'On lie begetter' [only source] of the volume's contents. Literary historians have created many actual men whose names resonate with the 'W.H.' initial tag. They include William Herbert, Earl of Pembroke, and Henry Wriothesley, Earl of Southampton – both of whom were young nobles in the 1590s and literary patrons associated with Shakespeare and his circle.

As to the second question, the identity of the mysterious Dark landlady to whom sonnets 127 through 154 is addressed. According to one theory, she was the countess of Pembroke. George Bernard Shaw believed she was one of Elizabeth's court ladies, Marry Fritton. Some have thought she was the mother of Shakespeare's supposed illegitimate son, Henry Davenant, or she might have been Marie Mount Joy, Shakespeare's London landlady, or the black prostitute Luce Morgan or Emilia Bassano, the daughter of a court musician and mistress of the Lord Chamberlain, Lord Hudson has been suggested as women whom Shakespeare might have had in mind when he wrote his sonnets.

Third, the possible identity of the rival poet who appears in his sonnets 78 through 86, the names of George Chapman or Christopher Marlowe, are often mentioned. The conclusions that we reach from trying to identify the persons addressed in the sonnets are two-fold: no clear identification of the young man, the Dark lady, or the real poet has ever been made, and there is no reason to believe that any individual in Shakespeare's personal life directly corresponds with the beloved youth, the loose woman, or the artistic competitor of his sonnets.

### **Literary Technique of the Sonnets**

Shakespeare's 154 sonnets, taken together, are frequently described as a sequence, and this is generally divided into two sections. Sonnets 1-126 focus on a young man and the speaker's friendship with him, and sonnets 127-152 focus on the speaker's relationship with a woman. However, in only a few of the poems in the first group, it is clear that the person being addressed is a male, and most of the poems in the sequence are not directly addressed to another person. The two concluding sonnets, 153 and 154, are free translations or adaptations of classical verses about cupid.

However, the main topics of twentieth-century critical commentary on the sonnets are their themes and poetic style. Analyses of formal elements in the poems include syntax and diction. His words and phrases' multiple and indefinite associations have proved especially intriguing and problematic for scholars and general readers. Many of Shakespeare's themes

are conventional sonnet topics, such as love and beauty and the motif of time mutability. But Shakespeare treats this theme in his distinctive fashion-most notably by addressing the poems of love and praise not to a fair maiden but to a young man and by including a second subject of passion: a woman of questionable attractiveness and virtue.

Shakespeare's sonnets do not describe or enact a precise sequence of events or follow a straightforwardly logical or chronological order. They allude to only a few specific actions, and even those are presented in general rather than particular terms. The setting, too, is generalized, with no reference to any particular local. There is a sense of time elapsing as the sonnets portray developments in the speaker's relationships with the young man and the woman. Still, there is only one suggestion about how long either of these associations tasted.

The linguistic inventiveness of the sonnets is one of their chief characteristics. Critics have noted that the language is dense and complex, rich in significance, contradictions, overtones, and echoes. The multiple associations of a single image argue that readers should not try to find one meaning in this rich mixture of connotations - that is more significant than the others. Metaphor and Metric effects in the sonnets: The Metaphor, a primary device of poetry, can be defined as a play on words in which one object or idea is expressed as if it were something else, something with which it is said to share standard features. By the 1590's 'sonnets' was a well-established verse form, perfectly devised for expressing both sides of being in love, the pleasure and the pains; Shakespeare's sonnets, taken as a whole, are somewhat longer on the pains than the pleasure.

Meres' reference to Shakespeare's taste metaphor may have less to do with the poem's content than with the feel of Shakespeare's words in the mouth. In his own time, Shakespeare was known not as a creator of great characters but as a writer of great lines and lots of them.

### **The Theme of 'Love'**

Love has always been a recurring popular theme in literature. Shakespeare's sonnets are intensely personal and are records of his hopes and fears, love and friendship, infatuations and disillusionments that acquire a universal quality through their intensity.

Here is an attempt to analyze a few love sonnets – 01, 18, 29, 55, 58, 60, 105, 116, and 130.

- **Sonnet 1 – “From fairest creatures we desire increase”.**

Sonnet 1-17 is referred to as the 'Procreation sonnets', for in these sonnets, the poet pleads with the fair lord, begging him to have a child so that his beauty may be passed on to a future generation. The sonnet as a whole can be encapsulated under the theme of the savages of time, as a one-line summary of its content might be made thus: “Have a child now, beautiful man, because the clock is ticking; don't be selfish' In sonnet 1, the degree to which the images assist the organization of the poem is slight indeed. Almost every line has a different idea, which is heterogeneous, like Beauty's rose-heir-contracted-flame-famine-fee-herald-burliest-glutton. The relation between the images is, for the most part, a connection via the subject they illustrate; it is not by their links to one another that the poem is organized. In line 11, the word “content” could have two very different meanings depending on the position of the stress. If we follow the iambic rhythm, the focus falls on the second syllable, giving the word the meaning of 'happiness' or 'pleasure' here "you are burying your happiness within yourself". However, several scholars have suggested that the part makes a pun, with the

alternate meaning of 'content', a reference to the fair lord's content, his beauty. The poet was very deliberate in his choice of words.

- **Sonnet-18- "Shall I compare thee to a summer's day?"**

This sonnet is arguably the most famous of the poems. This is the first sonnet after the "procreation sonnets"; it marks where the poet abandoned his earlier push to persuade the fair lord to have a child. The first two quatrains focus on the fair lord's beauty: the poet attempts to compare it to a summer's day but shows that there can be no such comparison since the fair lord's timeless beauty far surpasses that of the fleeting, inconstant season.

The theme of the ravages of time again predominates, especially in line 7, where the poet speaks of the inevitable mortality of beauty: "And every fair from fair sometime declines". The poet plans to capture the fair lord's beauty in his verse, which he believes will withstand the ravages of time. The poets use 'summer' as a metaphor for youth or perhaps beauty or the beauty of youth.

Various scholars suggest that the 'eternal lines' in line 12 have a double meaning: the fair lord's beauty can live on not only in the written lines of the poet's verse but also in the family lines of the fair lord's progeny. 'Goriest' also implies an increase or change: the fair lord's family lines growing over time. Yet, this image is only as readily applicable to the lines of the poet's verse if it refers only to his intention to continue writing about the fair lord's beauty.

- **Sonnet 29- "When in disgrace with fortune and men's eyes."**

The speaker's emotional state in sonnet 29 is depression: in the first line, he assumes himself to be "in disgrace with fortune," meaning he has been having bad luck. He also feels disgraced by "men's eyes", implying that the general public looks at him unfavorably. This could be real or imagined, but it is enforced in line 2 when he bemoans his 'outcast state'. Here "state" refers to a state of being, and in this case, he is cast out from society. Lines 3-4 allude to the job of the Old Testament in the Bible, who was cast out onto a dung heap and called to a God who didn't listen. The poet finds himself in the same situation. The idea of cursing one's fate also harkens to job, who condemned himself after falling out of God's favor. In lines 5-9, he wishes to be like "one richer in hope", perhaps hopeful, and "featured like him", refers to someone handsome with beautiful features. In line 7, he envies the artistic talent of one man and the opportunities afforded to someone else. The speaker describes how a thought of his love has affected his 'state' or emotional well-being in lines 10-12. The fact that the lark rises from the "sullen earth" at the "break of day" implies that the day is much happier than the night; day break is compared to the dawning of a thought of beloved. As the lark "signs hymn at heaven's gate", the poet's soul is invigorated with the idea of the fair lord and seems to sing to the sky with regenerated hope.

The final couplet of sonnet 29 declares that this joyfulness brought about by a thought of the fair lord is enough to convince the speaker that he is better off than royalty. The love of the fair lord makes the speaker so happy that a king's wealth would not be better. But it also refers to a nation or a kingdom.

- **Sonnet 55 – "Not marble, nor the gilded monuments."**

In this sonnet, Shakespeare seeks to build a symbolic monument to his beloved, the fair lord. The fair lord is not described or revealed in any way in this sonnet; the sonnet

addresses the idea of immortality through verse. The final couplet addresses this problem, assuring that it doesn't matter since "you live in this, and dwell in lover's eyes". It is enough that fair love lives in 'Lover's eyes or the eyes of the poet and presumably everyone else who sees him. The reference to judgment day in lines 12-13 also suggests that perhaps the identity of the fair lord will be revealed then.

The ravages of time are a recurring theme in Shakespeare's sonnets; often, it is addressed in terms of its unavoidable effect on beauty and youth, precisely that of the fair lord, but here its effects on status and monuments are the focus. "Wasteful War", "broils", the sword of Mars, and "war's quick fire" are seen as the chief causes of the destruction of statues and monuments in addition to "Sluttish Time". Here, "Sluttish" means lewd and whorish and characterizes time as numb to the world's orderliness. Line 13 refers to "the judgment that yourself arise", judgment day. In religious tradition, judgment day is when all souls, even those that have been dead for a long time, including that of the fair lord, will 'arise' to be judged by God. This day is also referred to as "the ending doom" in line 12, 'posterity' or future generation lives in the world until that final day when everyone is judged. After that day, there is no further reason for immortalizing anyone in poetry.

- **Sonnet – 58: “Against my love shall be as I am now”**

In this sonnet, the hope is expressed that the black lines of this verse will provide a form of immortality. The poem passes from the universality of hateful time's depravity which attacks and crushes individuals, destroys the flowers of the summer, and then turns its attention to my sweet love's beauty. So, all things that are mortal fade and soon are no more to be seen, "time's injurious hand" time is personified once again as the reckless destroyer of all things. "Crushed and O' sworn" – In addition, it is near the necessity of convention that the addresses of a love sonnet would be more beautiful and youthful than all earthly things. Using "My sweet love's beauty and my lover's life", has proved difficult for commentators not keen on open admissions of love between men. Blackness and beauty seem to be opposites partly; it is the blackness of night and oblivion set against the rightness of his youthful morn. The last lines, "And they shall live and he in them still green", the lines of verse shall continue to live. He is still green – his love shall always flourish in them with you and vitality.

- **Sonnet-60: “Like as the waves make towards the pebbled shore.”**

This is one of the most famous sonnets and the best illustration of the theme of the ravages of time. Each quatrain uniquely engages the music, with the destructive force of time redoubling with each successive line. Although the poet seems certain that time's destruction is inevitable, he hopes his verse will get away with it in the end. The second quatrain uses the sun as a metaphor for human life: it is born, Nativity, and crawls like a baby until it reaches its highest point; after that, it is "crowned" and proceeds to fall back into darkness or death. Line 8 concludes the metaphor with the assertion that times both give the gift of life and take it away again.

This sentiment is repeated in lines 9-12 more strongly and deeply. The narrator seems hauntingly preoccupied with the passing of time and everything it entails, including mortality, memory, inevitability, and change. The pun on "our minutes" in line 2 – the phrase sounds like "hour minutes"; this is sonnet 60, and there are 60 minutes in an hour.

- **Sonnet 105: "Let not my love be called idolatry."**

The theme is the Holy Trinity, and the poet's argument seems to be that his love is not idolatrous because it is a worship of the Holy Trinity, God the father, God the Son, and God the Holy Ghost, which three he transmutes into fairness, kindness, and truthfulness, all seen in his beloved.

There is one cryptic message relating to doctrinal disputes buried in the sonnet, or the love lauded here could be allegorically the love of the one true faith. Line 9: "Fair, kind and true, is all my argument", here poet describes: is all my argument, is the only them I have. The repetition stresses the constancy and invariability of his theme. However, it does vary to the extent of being expressible in different words.

- **Sonnet 116: "Let me not to the marriage of true minds".**

Sonnet 116 is one of the most famous of the sonnets for its stalwart defense of faithful love.

"Let me not to the marriage of true minds, admit impediments love is not love", this first quatrain asserts that faithful love is immortal and unchanging: it neither changes on its own nor allows itself to be changed, even when it encounters changes in the loved one. We can measure, although we may know nothing of its nature. Both these metaphors emphasize the Constancy and dependability of faithful love. Sonnet 116 closes with rather hefty wages against the validity of the poet's words: he writes that if what he claims above is proven untrue, then he never writes, nor no man ever loved, it should come as no wonder that the lines of this sonnet often are quoted as Shakespeare's exact definition of love.

- **Sonnet 130: "My mistress' eyes are nothing like the sun."**

Sonnet 130 is a pleasure to read for its simplicity and frankness of expression. This sonnet is generally considered a humorous parody of the typical love sonnet. Yet the narrator loves her nonetheless, and, in the closing, the couplet says that an infant is just as extraordinarily "rare" as any woman described with such exaggerated comparisons. This blunt but charming sincerity has made sonnet 130 one of the most famous in the sequence.

This sonnet also has some ulterior sentiment, perhaps that the dark landlady does not deserve the narrator's acceptable words. Comparing Shakespeare's sonnets to Petrarch, Petrarch addressed many of his most famous sonnets to an idealized woman named Laura, whose beauty he often likened to a goddess. In the lyrics, the poet-patron relationship is reflected. These sonnets bring about an expanding awareness of the nature of love and the realization of what faithful love is. Shakespeare was conscious of and disturbed by the dual nature of Human Love, which was physical and spiritual. He believed that love between two men would be purer and more lasting.

### **Conclusion**

"Nor sequent centuries could hit

Orbit and sum of Shakespeare's wit."

*Ralph Waldo Emerson Quote [1803 1882]*

*"May Day and Other Pieces"*

These above lines are proven true. No matter how many centuries passed after Shakespeare, no one can beat or imagine the wisdom of his writing. Shakespeare's love sonnets describe different contexts in which love operates, as such; he depicts a multi-faceted

picture of love. Love in Shakespeare's poems does not have a single definition but rather an intangible conglomeration of characteristics that make up an ever-powerful force that defeats all obstacles. As such, these sonnets create a vision of love as a dynamic and multi-relational force. Through capitalizing the words Love and Time, Shakespeare personifies both of these elements, giving them identities independent of any possessor time becomes godlike, omnipotent, yet abstract. Love, too, becomes a powerful character, despite remaining physically intangible. Love is presented as an entity with supernatural qualities. This identity is everlasting, immortal, and unaffected by the passing of time, which is also eternal. According to Shakespeare, true love is more permanent and potent than time; hence, love remains immutable despite the changes brought on by physical decay and changes wrought by the world, such as storms, wars, and revolutions. Shakespeare further develops his ideas of love as a force that overcomes the restraints of physical existence. Shakespeare expands his definition of love to include an image of love as a force that overcomes social pressures. Shakespeare refutes one of his culture's most fundamental ideals: that of the universal standard of beauty; if snow is white, why then are her breasts dun? Unlike other romantic poets of his time, he describes his beloved as an earthly and realistic woman. Shakespeare can depict her in human terms because, to the speaker, love is not based on physical beauty but rather on feelings, sensibilities, and affections. Shakespeare's speaker does not portray his lover as a goddess or a princess; she does not float on air as she walks, she is simply a human being, a woman, yet she is unique to him, regardless of her physical attributes. Of his great love, he remains unconcerned with her appearance. Shakespeare speaks of love not being subject to the rules and ideals created by social pressures claiming that one's beloved must look a certain way.

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