

SHAKESPEARE'S SONNETS - A CRITICAL ANALYSIS

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INTRODUCTION

William Shakespeare was born to John Shakespeare and mother Mary Arden sometime in late April 1564 in Stratford-upon-Avon. There is no record of his birth, but his baptism was recorded by the church, thus his birthday is assumed to be the 23 of April. His father was a prominent and prosperous alderman in the town of Stratford-upon-Avon, and was later granted a coat of arms by the College of Heralds. All that is known of Shakespeare's youth is that he presumably attended the Stratford Grammar School, and did not proceed to Oxford or Cambridge. The next record we have of him is his marriage to Anne Hathaway in 1582. The next year she bore a daughter for him, Susanna, followed by the twins Judith and Hamnet two years later.

Seven years later Shakespeare is recognized as an actor, poet and playwright, when a rival playwright, Robert Greene, refers to him as "an upstart crow" in *A Groatsworth of Wit*. A few years later he joined up with one of the most successful acting troupe's in London: The Lord Chamberlain's Men. When, in 1599, the troupe lost the lease of the theatre where they performed, (appropriately called The Theatre) they were wealthy enough to build their own theatre across the Thames, south of London, which they called "The Globe." The new theatre opened in July of 1599, built from the timbers of The Theatre, with the motto "Totus mundus agit histrionem" (A whole world of players) When James I came to the throne (1603) the troupe was designated by the new king as the King's Men (or King's Company).

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The Letters Patent of the company specifically charged Shakespeare and eight others “freely to use and exercise the art and faculty of playing Comedies, Tragedies, Histories, Morals, Pastorals, stage plays as well for recreation of our loving subjects as for our solace and pleasure.”

Shakespeare entertained the king and the people for another ten years until June 19, 1613, when a canon fired from the roof of the theatre for a gala performance of Henry VIII set fire to the thatch roof and burned the theatre to the ground. The audience ignored the smoke from the roof at first, being too absorbed in the play, until the flames caught the walls and the fabric of the curtains. Amazingly there were no casualties, and the next spring the company had the theatre “new build in a far fairer manner than before.” Although Shakespeare invested in the rebuilding, he retired from the stage to the Great House of New Place in Stratford that he had purchased in 1597, and some considerable land holdings, where he continued to write until his death in 1616 on the day of his 52nd birthday.

In his time William wrote 13 Comedies, 13 Historical Plays, 6 Tragedies, 4 Tragicomedies, as well as many sonnets (154), which were mostly dedicated to his patron, Henry Wriothesley, The Earl of Southampton.

BACKGROUND OF SHAKESPEARE'S SONNETS

Like all of Shakespeare's sonnets, Sonnet 146 was probably written in the mid to late 1590s. While the sonnets of Sidney, Spenser, and other contemporaries celebrate idealized women, Shakespeare's sonnets are often introspective, brooding, and enigmatic. Sonnets 1 through 126 are addressed; it is generally agreed, to a beautiful young man. Twenty-six subsequent poems deal with an unfaithful, physically unattractive, yet somehow irresistible “dark lady.” Shakespeare circulated his sonnets among friends and acquaintances; he probably never intended for them to be published.

Shakespeare's sonnets are considered to be among the best of the Elizabethan sonnet form, a style that was popular during his time. His precise tonal and textural control of language, combined with witty and often surprising turns of metaphors and ideas, often display Shakespeare's strongest capabilities.

SONNET 4

The themes of narcissism and usury (meant here as a form of use) are most developed in this sonnet, with its references to wills and testaments. The terms “unthrifty,” “legacy,” “bequest,” and “free” (which in line 4 means to be generous), imply that nature's generosity should be

matched by those who benefit from it. The poet, who calls the youth a “beauteous niggard,” or a miser of his good looks, claims that his young friend abuses the many gifts of beauty nature has given him and thus is a “profitless usurer,” a business term that recalls the three previous sonnets.

Sonnet 4 summarizes all that the poet has been saying thus far. In a series of questions and statements, the poet lectures about the wise use of nature, which liberally lends its gifts to those who are equally generous in perpetuating nature by having children. But the youth's hoarding contrasts to nature's bountifulness. Lines 7 and 8 express this contrast in terms of usury: “Profitless usurer, why dost thou use, So great a sum of sums, yet canst not live?” The term use here means both invest and use up. Similarly, “live” means both to gain immortality and to make a living.

The inevitable conclusion is that if the youth does not properly use his beauty, he will die childless and doom himself to oblivion, but if he fathers a child, he will be remembered. The final couplet presents these contrasting possibilities. Line 13 uses familiar death imagery to express the negative result of dying childless: “Thy unused beauty must be tom-bed with thee.” However, line 14 suggests that should the young man use his beauty to have a child, an “executor to be,” his beauty will be enhanced because he will have used it as nature intended.

SONNET 10

Shakespeare's Sonnet 10 is a confrontation with the subject to bear children so that beauty may flourish within the narrator's family. Additionally, the narrator acknowledges that the subject's unwillingness to have children may stem from the subject's sense of worth. Because of this, throughout Sonnet 10 the narrator attempts to communicate that he and many others do love the subject. Thus, Sonnet 10 is best characterized by a husband's desire for his wife to be kind to herself and others by consenting to having children.

The first two lines of Shakespeare's Sonnet 10 include the narrator urging the listener to admit they are not appropriately taking care of themselves. He even asserts that the subject is so poorly attending her own needs that she is beginning to appear to flout everyone's concern for her well-being and thus appears cruel. However, the first line contains foreshadowing for Shakespeare's ultimate thesis. Sonnet 10's narrator writes “For shame deny that thou bea'st love to any,” which under a superficial reading literally translates into “out of shamefulness admit you hold no love for anyone.” However, Shakespeare has chosen to use the word “bearst” specifically to reference

Sonnet 10's ultimate point, which is the theme Shakespeare's earlier sonnets in general, that the listener should *bear* children.

Though, Shakespeare does not wish to back the listener in a corner. As it may be assumed the narrator is a husband, it is clear he does love the subject and wishes to communicate his concern without harming the subject. He says "Grant if thou wilt, thou art beloved of many," or that he knows the listener is loved by many people. Though, Sonnet 10 goes on to reinforce that this does not mean the listener has love for everyone else, "But that thou none love is most evident". He goes on to say that the listener is in fact consumed by "hate" which he calls "murderous". It is interesting to note that Shakespeare should use this diction. It's possible this is another act of foreshadowing to Sonnet 10's thesis and that Shakespeare refers to the listener as such because he equates her unwillingness to have children to an act of murder. This becomes even more obvious when he writes that she is "Seeking that beauteous roof to ruin-ate" or for her house to fall apart because in Shakespeare's day, house was terminology for a family line.

Towards the end of Sonnet 10, Shakespeare appeals to the listener to change her ways. He writes "O change thy thought, that I may change my mind.", which is a direct request for the listener to reconsider her stance on child bearing so that Shakespeare may reconsider his feelings toward her character. When he asks "Shall hate be fairer lodged than gentle love?" he is inquiring whether her unpleasantness should be more developed than her love, referring back to the metaphor that her house is crumbling when Shakespeare uses the word "lodged". In attempting to change her mind, Shakespeare again flatters the subject of Sonnet 10, telling her to act as beautiful as she appears physically, "Be as thy presence is, gracious and kind," or at least to herself; "Or to thyself at least kind-hearted prove."

The closing couplet embodies the melancholy of Sonnet 10's narrator and finally directly addresses his motivation for speaking. He asks "Make thee another self for love of me," which is ambiguous with two equally valid and implied interpretations. First, the Sonnet 10 narrator is asking the listener to change herself out of love for him. Thus, the audience may assume that when the narrator formerly claimed the subject did not love anyone, he was merely stating this to illustrate how poorly she appeared to think of herself.

Secondly, he requests that she literally make another being of herself, or to have a child. Shakespeare ends Sonnet 10 by admitting that he wishes her true beauty would live on in at least her child, if it cannot live on in both her child and herself. "That beauty still may live in thine or

thee.” Thus, Shakespeare's narrator, and the purpose of Sonnet 10 is revealed; beauty should be preserved in any way possible, though the reality that it may diminish or fade within the original source is acknowledged.

SONNET 18

temperate (1): i.e., evenly-tempered; not overcome by passion.

the eye of heaven (5): i.e., the sun.

every fair from fair sometime declines (7): i.e., the beauty (fair) of everything beautiful (fair) will fade (declines).

Compare to Sonnet 116: “rosy lips and cheeks/within his bending sickles compass come.”

nature's changing course (8): i.e., the natural changes age brings.

that fair thou owest (10): i.e., that beauty you possess.

in eternal lines...growest (12): The poet is using a grafting metaphor in this line. Grafting is a technique used to join parts from two plants with cords so that they grow as one. Thus the beloved becomes immortal, grafted to time with the poet's cords (his “eternal lines”). For commentary on whether this sonnet is really “one long exercise in self-glorification”, please see below.

Sonnet 18 is the best known and well-loved of all 154 sonnets. It is also one of the most straightforward in language and intent. The stability of love and its power to immortalize the poetry and the subject of that poetry is the theme.

The poet starts the praise of his dear friend without ostentation, but he slowly builds the image of his friend into that of a perfect being. His friend is first compared to summer in the octave, but, at the start of the third quatrain (9), he is summer, and thus, he has metamorphosed into the standard by which true beauty can and should be judged.

The poet's only answer to such profound joy and beauty is to ensure that his friend be forever in human memory, saved from the oblivion that accompanies death. He achieves this through his verse, believing that, as history writes itself, his friend will become one with time. The final couplet reaffirms the poet's hope that as long as there is breath in mankind, his poetry too will live on, and ensure the immortality of his muse.

Interestingly, not everyone is willing to accept the role of Sonnet 18 as the ultimate English love poem. As James Boyd-White puts it:

What kind of love does 'this' in fact give to 'thee'? We know nothing of the beloved's form or height or hair or eyes or bearing, nothing of her character or mind, nothing of her at all, really. This 'love poem' is actually written not in praise of the beloved, as it seems, but in praise of itself. Death shall not brag, says the poet; the poet shall brag. This famous sonnet is on this view one long exercise in self-glorification, not a love poem at all; surely not suitable for earnest recitation at a wedding or anniversary party, or in a Valentine.

SONNET 30

Shakespeare's "Sonnet 30" is a Shakespearean sonnet, composed of three quatrains and a couplet. In the couplet, the writer tends to take a different track compared to the rest of the sonnet. The change in this one is signaled by a single word—"But." This sonnet, like most is written in iambic pentameter.

The entire three quatrains are devoted to showing us his grief over his "fair lord." Shakespeare uses language in this sonnet to draw the reader in to the emotional pain portrayed with lines like, "I summon up" and "Then I can." These lines help draw the reader to his sad feelings about his friend balanced by the realization that he had such a friend. A courtroom motif is used in the first part with "session," "summon up," and "cancelled." This motif is used to stress his dependence financially on his fair lord. He also uses the words "expense," "grievances," "account," "paid," and "losses" to further emphasize that fiscal relationship. The speaker realizes in the poem that the fair lord has credits on his side. In other words, the speaker can never repay all that his fair lord has given him.

Shakespeare also uses both repetition and internal rhyme to convey his message. Alliteration is shown in "sigh," "sight," and "sought," "things," and "past" as well as in the phrase "sessions of sweet silent thought." Internal rhyme is used in "foregone," "fore bemoaned," "before" and "restored." He uses assonance as well in the use of a short e in phrases like "sessions" and "remembrance." Shakespeare actually cleverly uses this sort of assonance to unify the poem's beginning and end. "When" begins the poem, and "end" ends the poem.

Shakespeare, a master poet, once again writes a beautifully complicated yet simply sonnets, tying it all together with elaborate assonance. Alliteration and internal rhyme also help to convey his intense grief in Sonnet 30.

SONNET 146**EXPLICATION OF SONNET 146**

- First quatrain: The poem is an internal monologue, essentially the poet's persona speaking to him. The speaker addresses his "soul," comparing the soul to someone who languishes and pines away within a big house while going to great expense to make the house look beautiful and happy on the outside.
- The second quatrain: The house metaphor is expanded. Why, the soul is asked, does it invest so much in things of the temporal world - the fading mansion - when life is short and things of the world are temporary, ephemeral? Just at the end of the quatrain, the poet jumps out of the mansion metaphor to drive home the point that the body came from the earth and will return to the earth, with the help of the worms.
- Third quatrain: Here, at the point where the sonnet form generally turns, the soul is exhorted to invest within, not without: to trade the false, costly facades of the world for the inner "divine" values that will not fade with time. Let the outside wither ("pine") so that the inner soul can prosper.
- Closing couplet: The feeding metaphor from the 3rd quatrain is continued and expanded. The couplet finishes the metaphor from the 1st quatrain of the starving person within the mansion. The ironic juxtaposition of death that feeds on men, being fed on, and further Death itself being dead is typical Shakespearean irony. So too is the use, in two lines, of the words "death" (twice), "dead" and "dying," when the final image points to eternal life.

SONNET 146 AS PROOF OF SHAKESPEARE'S RELIGION

Many readers view Sonnet 146 as proof of Shakespeare's religious fervor. The poem sets up a body/soul dichotomy. Several words within the poem are religiously loaded "soul" and "sinful" in the first line, "divine" in the 3rd quatrain. Further, the entire concept of abandoning the things of the world for the "greater" goal of eternal life - the crux of the poem's argument - is distinctly religious. Such sentiment would have been typical of much poetry of the time.

However, several arguments can be made against this reading of Sonnet 146:

In very few places in the rest of Shakespeare do we find any unequivocally religious overtones? He often is dark and brooding think Hamlet, Lear, Mac Beth and it is often due to reflections upon the transience of youth and the temporality of life, yet he seldom turns to the afterlife for consolation.

The subject and metaphors in the sonnet would have been regularly heard by Shakespeare's readers in their weekly sermon, so the poem wasn't groundbreaking in its themes or images. Given the unpublished, epistolary nature of the sonnets, it's possible that Sonnet 146 was composed for a priest or other cleric. In most of his poetry and in the plays, Shakespeare's religion is so general as to be non-denominational and noncommittal, thus avoiding taking a stand in his troubled times, when the rift between the Church of England and Roman Catholicism was still relatively new and raw.

Throughout his works, Shakespeare often refers to the power of art to "immortalize" its subjects, without implying any religious belief in actual eternal life. In *Sonnet 18*, for example, the speaker alludes to the power of poetry to give eternal "life" to his beloved, without suggesting that the beloved would actually enjoy any such benefit, spiritual or otherwise.

Readers are entitled to their own conclusions, of course, and Sonnet 146 lends itself to religious interpretation. Critics have argued that Shakespeare was a catholic, a protestant, an atheist, a secularist. A fuller study of the sonnets, however, and of Shakespeare as a whole will produce little support for any particular view, other than that religion and the Bible were part and parcel of Shakespeare's milieu and that, as with politics and history, he used them to good artistic effect.

POETIC MERITS OF SONNET 146

It's easier, though, to find poetic fault with Sonnet 146. The metaphors are choppy, jumping quickly from the mansion to the worms, and then to Death eating man and vice-versa. The "cost" theme mixes uneasily with the soul/body comparison. The progression of the conceit is convoluted, even for Shakespeare. There are too many rhetorical questions. The sermon-like topic is trite and facile.

Among readers and literary critics, the poem is a favorite of those who seek to attribute religious faith to Shakespeare, or who enjoy the poem as an affirmation of their own beliefs. In the end, it is likely that Sonnet 146 is celebrated more for its religious ambiguity than for its poetic merits.

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