

Immortality Through Love in Shakespearian Sonnets

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Abstract

This paper is a close analysis of immortality in Shakespearian sonnets. First, the researcher defines sonnets in general defining the two types of sonnets, then narrows it down to Shakespearian sonnets: a history of the sonnets, to whom where they addressed to and the themes they discuss. To Shakespeare immortality is achieved through three ways, through procreation, through verse and immortality through love. This paper addresses the latter, analyzing samples from sonnets 15, 22, 25, 26, 55, 108, 115, 116, 123 and 124 and providing them with deeper analysis. These sonnets are chosen because they deal with the theme of immortality through love in Shakespearian sonnets.

Key words: Immortality – Shakespear – Love - Sonnets

I. An Introduction to Sonnets

A sonnet is a fourteen line lyric song, derived from 'sonnetto' an Italian word which means a little sound or song. It is a popular classical form that has compelled poets for centuries. It is written in iambic pentameter. Iambic pentameter is a rhyme scheme in which each line consists of ten syllables, these ten syllables are further divided into five pairs called feet. An iambic foot is a metrical unit in which one unstressed syllable is followed by a stressed syllable⁽ⁱ⁾.

There are two types of sonnets: the Petrarchan or Italian (named after the Italian poet Petrarch), which follows the rhyme scheme of abba abba cde cde, and the Shakespearian or the English sonnet (named after William Shakespeare) which follows the rhyme scheme of abab cdcd efef gg. The rhyme scheme is the pattern of rhymes at the end of each line of a poem or song. It is usually referred to by using small letters of the alphabet to indicate which lines rhyme; lines designated with the same letter all rhyme with each other⁽ⁱⁱ⁾.

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II. *An Introduction to Shakespearean Sonnets*

A collection of 154 sonnets were the last of Shakespeare's non-dramatic works to be printed and were first published in 1609. Scholars are not certain when each of the 154 sonnets was composed, but evidence suggests that Shakespeare wrote sonnets throughout his career for a private readership⁽ⁱⁱⁱ⁾.

The Shakespearean sonnets are each constructed from three four-line stanzas (called quatrains) and a final couplet used to summarize the previous 12 lines or present a surprise ending composed in iambic pentameter with the rhyme scheme abab cdcd efef gg. The only exceptions are sonnets 99, 126 and 145. Often, the beginning of the third quatrain marks the volta of the poem, a volta is the turn in a sonnet, where the line in which the mood of the poem shifts, and the poet expresses a revelation or epiphany (a moment of great revelation or realization)^(iv).

Most of the sonnets are addressed to a beautiful young man, a rival poet, and a dark-haired lady. Readers of the sonnets today commonly refer to these characters as the Fair Youth, the Dark Lady, and the Rival Poet. It remains unclear if these figures represent real individuals, or if the authorial "I" who addresses them represents Shakespeare himself, though Wordsworth believed that "with this key, Shakespeare unlocked his heart"^(v).

III. *Immortality through Love in Shakespearean Sonnets*

The theme of immortality and how to achieve it pervades Shakespeare's sonnet sequence. Throughout the first seventeen sonnets, the poet urges the young man to marry and have children. Sonnet 1 ensures that through procreation our names will be carried on by them. If we do not have children, our names will die when we do.

*From fairest creatures we desire increase ‘
That thereby beauty's rose might never die ‘
But as the ripper should by time decease ‘
His tender heir might bear his memory:*^(vi)

The scenario the poet repeats in the first seventeen sonnets apparently has been rejected by the young man. Interested only in his own selfish desires, the youth is the embodiment of narcissism, a destructively excessive love of oneself. The poet makes clear that the youth's self-love is unhealthy, not only for himself but for the entire world. Because the young man does not share himself with the world by having a child to carry on his beauty. The poet glories in the young man's beauty and takes consolation in the fact that his sonnets will preserve the youth's beauty forever. Sonnet 15 is the first to introduce the power of the poet's verse to memorialize forever the young man's beauty.

*And all in war with Time for love of you ،
As he takes from you , I engraft you new^(vii).*

However steady is the charge of decay, his verse about the young man will keep the youth's beauty always fresh, always new; the sonnets immortalize this beauty. Ironically, the poet's sonnets serve the same purpose as a son whom the poet wants the young man to father: they perpetuate the youth's beauty just as a son would. In fact, the sonnets are even more immortal than a son. The sonnets continue to be read today, whereas the young man's progeny may have completely died out. However the youth attains immortality only as an abstraction, the essence of something beautiful. Shakespeare immortalizes the youth without revealing him, which is ironic because the very fact of immortality seems to confer anonymity. But as Shakespeare would have no doubt reminded us, what is in a name that which we call a rose by any other name would smell as sweet^(viii).

There are certain sonnets (sonnet 15, 22, 25, 26, 55, 108, 115, 116, 123 and 124) in which, neither procreation nor poetry, but love appears to defy time, sonnets on the theme that

*Love's not Time's fool, though rosy lips and cheeks,
Within his bending sickle's compass come;^(ix)*

These sonnets appear later in the collection and are probably written much later than his other sonnets, probably because when he writing some of his former sonnets, he was too

much afraid of the tyranny of Time and too little aware of the continually growing and counteracting power of love. He did not realize that love, no less than Time, does not stand still. *Fearing of Time's tyranny*^(x),. Time is always changing, dimming and blunting, love is always growing.

The poet marvels how his love can still seem to increase, even though in sonnet 115 he claimed that it was impossible to love with any greater love than he knew at the time. *"Those lines that I before have writ do lie· Even those that said I could not love you dearer"*^(xi):

Yet, on looking back, he finds that his love has grown miraculously even beyond that complete measure which he thought was the limit of its fulfillment. His past confidence in how much he loved the youth was false, which is why he cannot say *'Now I Love you best'*^(xii). The poet now admits that his believing that his love for the youth was as great as it could ever be was wrong; he can love the young man even more fully than he has done in the past. And yet such security is exactly what the poet craves. He wants to say decisively that at the current time he loves the youth as much as he can ever love him, but the poet again is saying that now is the time that he most loves the youth may be detrimental, for such an expression may very well limit any future growth in the relationship. However, he defends his past claim by affirming the existence of something unchangeable in a world of change and eternal in transient mortality.

Yet then my judgment knew no reason why

My full flame should afterwards burn clearer^(xiii).

The facts of death and transience remained for him tragic facts, which he could not diminish, but which; nevertheless, he could confront with the affirmation of something eternal within himself. In sonnet 115, he assures his love is stronger than the uncertainties of time, and is able to conquer them. *I was certain o'er uncertainty.*

Crowning the present, doubting of the rest^(xiv) ?

Comparing how things change over time to his newfound knowledge of how much his love for the youth can yet increase, the poet questions why he let time scare him previously into saying '*Now I love you best*'^(xv) to the youth when his love for the young man grows the longer the poet knows him.

Love is continually growing; there must be at least some sense in which time is not its irreconcilable enemy, since growth becoming, can take place only in time. Hence it might be said that love requires time in order to realize its potentiality, to become what it was intended to be.

*Love is begun by time ;
And that I see, in passages of proof ;
Time qualifies the spark and fire of it.
There lives within the very flame of love
A kind of wick or snuff that will abate it;*^(xvi)

In chronicling the change in his love for the youth, and noticing its continuous growth, he decides that it must be because 'love is a babe' and as such is bond to grow. The mystery is that it always remains a babe, yet always grows, it is eternally youthful.

*Love is a babe, then might I not say so ;
To give full growth to that which still doth grow*^(xvii)

The question remains: how could love both be perfect, and full grown, and yet continue to grow? The answer Shakespeare provides us with is

*So that eternal love in love's fresh case ;
Weighs not the dust and injury of age,*⁽¹⁸⁾

Love is interchangeable, it does not take account of such temporal failings such as death, or the shabbiness of old age. Being eternally new, it makes age and decrepitude his

servants and is in no way subservient to them, but sees in them the eternity of loving, a symbol of something always beautiful; 'Finding the first conceit of love there bred,' (19) Discovering love again, finding the first impression still there to be as fresh as it was in those early days when it first came into being, where time and outward appearance would suppose it dead.

While many people pride themselves in wealth and the material possessions they own, what they achieved, how far they've come and all the honours and titles that were bestowed upon them along the way.

*Let those who are in favour with their stars
Of public honour and proud titles boast⁽²⁰⁾*

The poet's greatest honour is something far greater, more precious and everlasting than one can hope to achieve *Unlook'd for joy in that I honour most.*⁽²¹⁾ He measures his wealth not in material possessions that can by bad fortune be gone, or looks that will fade with time. The poet has more riches than one man can claim; he is rich in love.

*For thy sweet love remembered such wealth brings,
That then I scorn to change my state with kings⁽²²⁾*

Shakespeare reminds us in sonnet 55 of the power of love to transcend mortality. Long after the poet is gone, the memory of his love remains , it lives on giving life to the beloved. *'The living record of your memory'.*⁽²³⁾ When Shakespeare promised immortality to the youth in his sonnets, he was well aware that love more than poetry exceeds death and the choice of words used in sonnet 55 to sustain this point, *'You live in this, and dwell in lover's eyes'*⁽²⁴⁾ the repetition of words live and dwell counteracts the effect of death, war and destruction. However, dwell is more potent, it gives the sense that long after we are gone love remains, it lingers deep like a song you can hear long after the music has stopped playing, the echo continues to ring in your ear. It's a reminder that love is a legacy; it continuous on forever.

The expressions of care and tenderness, of love's togetherness and the prospect of youth growing old, of two hearts united in one, of the commitment of love until the severance of death, combine to make a rare moment in the heart's history. Sonnet 22 assures that love triumphs over age and death.

Presume not on thy heart when mine is slain ‘

Thou gav'st me thine not to give back again⁽²⁵⁾

The exchange of heart between two lovers faces us with the responsibilities of love as is shown in sonnet 22: the tenderness and devotion which are inseparable from it . When you love someone, you take care not to hurt them, you develop this overwhelming sense that everything you do will have an effect for good or ill upon the loved one, you cherish their feelings, hold them to your heart and feel a fondness of some kind. *Bearing thy heart, which I will keep so chary*⁽²⁶⁾

The sonnets continue with the theme of the superiority of love, that stands above the independences of human conventions; and is secure in the knowledge that it is out of reach of any of them. The contrast is drawn between this love and the love which is perjured, partial, and is dependent on court favours, or on the politics of time.

If the poet's love were subjected to the calculating effects of personal power, advantage and the love or hatred of Time. Its projected life will be brief and indifferent. The poet's love is not the child of time nor chance nor fortune and therefore is unaffected by them.

If my dear love were but the child of state ‘

It might for Fortune's bastard be unfathered ‘

As subject to Time's love or to Time's hate ‘

Weeds among weeds, or flowers with flower's gathered⁽²⁷⁾

Time and decay are personified in sonnet 15 as two gruesome characters who discuss how best to achieve their hated aims – the destruction of living things. In effect of course they are both part of the same scene: Time brings decay, and decay is inseparable from any living or existing forms. *Where wasteful time debateth with decay*⁽²⁸⁾

Shakespeare compares the stability of love with the instability of the political scene. He reflects in sonnet 25 on the vagaries of fortune, and how those who enjoy high estates and public favour are at the mercy of the power of princes.

*Great princes' favourites their fair leaves spread
But as the marigold at the sun's eye,
And in themselves their pride lies buried,
For at a frown they in their glory die.* ⁽²⁹⁾

Even the most famous warriors and leaders can suddenly fall into disfavor, especially if fortune turns against them, all their former victories are forgotten and their names are erased from the book of honour as is exemplified in sonnet 25,

*The painful warrior famoused for fight,
After a thousand victories once foiled,
Is from the book of honour razed quite,
And all the rest forgot for which he toiled.* ⁽³⁰⁾

The poet's condition however is much more blessed; he will be remembered for something less destructive and far more beautiful. He lives in the heart of his beloved, and cannot be removed from that seat, nor he from the poet's. The love they share guarantees immortality for both lovers.

*Then happy I, that love and am beloved,
Where I may not remove nor be removed.* ⁽³¹⁾

Such debased loves, or those who indulge in them, are time's fools and are the sport of every wind that blows and every rain that falls. But not so for true love, which in sonnet 55 is shown to remain constant and steady-fast, and will outlive the pyramids and time itself.

*Not marble, nor the glided monuments
Of princes shall outlive this powerful rhyme;* ⁽³²⁾

Despite love being expressed through negatives in sonnet 116:

*... Love is not love
Which alters when it alteration finds ‘
Or bends with the remover to remove* ⁽³³⁾

And in sonnet 124:

*It was builded far from from accident ‘
It suffers not in smiling pomp, nor falls
It fears not policy... ‘
That it nor grows with heat, nor drowns with showers* ⁽³⁴⁾

One receives from it a positive sense that it describes a love such as all loves should be. Nothing can diminish it, nothing can prevent it from being the supreme achievement, nothing can corrupt it or swerve it from its path. It is the most extraordinary of all loves, it does not subject to the change of time, does not alter with the days, but keeps straight on and will survive the threshold of doomsday. Such is its strength that nothing else will ever be able to match it.

*Love alters not with his brief hours and weeks ‘
But bears it out even to the edge of doom* ⁽³⁵⁾

The human life in sonnet 116 is measured by the brief hours and weeks of experience. *Which works on leases of short-number'd hours* ⁽³⁶⁾
In comparison with the eternity of love, any unit of time is short.

In sonnet 123, he declares that the whole world of Time is a world of illusion: that the Time's new 'pyramids', which seem as though they would last forever, are merely new versions of older ones that have decayed

*Thy pyramids built up with newer might
To me are nothing novel, nothing strange ‘
They are but dressings of a former sight* ⁽³⁷⁾

And that, short-lived as we are, we are deluded into supposing that the achievements of today have been created for the first time by ourselves "born to our desire", whereas they are merely repetitions and reproductions of things past. Despite all changing and all deluding time, love alone is eternal in this world of time and change and illusion.

The sonnets, with their continuous change and varying cycles of euphoria and melancholy, that the view is gradually inculcated into one's soul that is a history of love which anyone might have known, a mortal and immortal love such as any two lovers in the tide of times might have experienced, or might even be experiencing now.

Being told that love is not love, we are faced to question more profoundly what we mean by the word 'love'. What is that strange attraction which draws two minds so irresistibly together ? The feeling of completeness that two hearts and souls embrace to make one whole? Must we classify or restrict that love cannot last forever? That there are impediments, change and alteration, loss and physical decay, all of which militate against true love. Does it depend on time, place, beliefs, politics, life, death, change, removal, doom, eternity, the day of judgment? Or on none of these? Is human love an allegory of divine love? Or should one prefer the all too human conclusion of W. H. Auden "I thought that love would last forever. I was wrong." ⁽³⁸⁾

Shakespeare insists that it is not as others see it, that love can surmount all these obstacles, that although nothing can last forever , yet true love can last and hold out until the final reckoning. But the question remains: what is true love? Shakespeare does not fail to provide us with answers and gives us a declaration of what love should be in sonnet 116.

It is an ever-fixed mark،

That looks on tempests and is never shaken ؛

It is the star to every wandering bark ،

Whose worth's unknown, although his height be taken. ⁽³⁹⁾

The ever-fixed mark is permanent and unshakeable, always there to guide. Love, nevertheless, is the north star that shines brightly to guide the lover through the stormy waters of life. Because of their height, the sea-marks would appear to be looking down on

the world below, as like love, it watches over the beloved like a guardian angel that cannot be affected by the storms that rage through life occasionally.

The theme of Shakespeare expressing his affection to the youth has been a frequent one throughout the sonnets, and somehow is often seen as a cliché, but because his love is always absolute yet continuing to grow – his declaration of love, which though often repeated, is always new. In effect nothing has changed, and the first impulses of love, which brought into being their divine affection, remains as vital as ever. With some surprise and joy, the poet greets this discovery, and justifies once more to his friend the constancy and depth of his love. Expressed thought in old and worn out phrases. Having reached this vantage point, takes stock of his condition and the progress of his love. Is there anything new to express, anything which might enhance his love, or the mutual love of lover and beloved? The conclusion given in sonnet 108 is that, since love has been eternal, and always will be, the same prayers of devotion may be repeated over and over again, and love will remain fresh and green forever, despite the ravages of time and aging.

What's new to speak, what now to register

That may express my love, or thy dear merit? ⁽⁴⁰⁾

The poet here explores with some intensity the importance of the things he might say about his beloved. To what extent does love depend on the expression used to portray it and convey it to the loved one? He desires that the words show something real and lasting, something which transcends the boundaries of ordinary existence. Yet the paradox is that the utterance are always the same, they express the same love in the same way, and the sameness threatens to turn them into empty formulas, however, it is not so, as the poet declares in sonnet 108

Nothing, sweet boy; but yet, like prayers divine

I must each day say o'er the very same

Counting no old thing old, thou mine, I thine

Even as when first I hallowed thy fair name ⁽⁴¹⁾.

Just as divine prayers are significant and sincere, so too are the declaration of love which he makes to the young man. Even though they might appear to be mere repetitious

utterings. They are rich as 'prayers divine' and the love they show is on that level and as exemplary as divine love. He does not consider any old and often repeated prayer or formula of words as old or tedious; they are new each time he says them.

Shakespeare seems to be confident that love can and will defy time and live forever, in sonnet 116 he defies anyone who finds his claim that love lasts forever is erroneous.

If this be error and upon me proved،

I never writ, nor no man ever loved. ⁽⁴²⁾

Conclusion

The notion of 'love for love's sake' would probably be regarded by many modern readers as on a par with being in love with love and dismissed as sentimental, romantic or adolescent. Shakespeare seems to have felt differently, it is because his love is for love's sake that it can defy time.

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