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## ***Shakespeare's Sonnets: A Thematic Study***

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### ***Abstract :***

*Shakespeare is the greatest sonneteer of the Elizabethan period of English literature and further one of the greatest sonneteers of the world. This paper attempts to make an exploration of the thematic uniqueness of Shakespeare's sonnets through analyzing the themes of time, beauty, and love. The 154 Sonnets of Shakespeare can broadly be divided into*

*two groups; the first 126 sonnets as addressed to fair youth and rest or addressed to Dark Lady. In the first 17 of the 126 fair youth sonnets the poet persuade the fair youth to produce his own copies by marrying some fortunate girl, so that the charm of his beauty may be perpetuated.*

***Keywords:*** *Shakespeare, sonnets, Fair Youth, Dark Lady, Love.*



## 1. Introduction

Shakespeare totally wrote 154 sonnets throughout his lifetime. His sonnets break the restriction of Petrarch's sonnets, in that he did not merely praise the love to a beauty, in actuality, most of his sonnets are devoted to his male friend. There are many themes in Shakespeare's sonnets that were popular in the Renaissance works such as time, friendship, love, beauty and so on. Sonnet is "a lyric poem comprising 14 rhyming lines of equal length: iambic pentameters in English" (Baldick, 2004, p. 207). It originated in Italy, and Petrarch was the most renowned Italian sonneteer of that time. Sonnet was introduced to England by Henry Howard & Thomas Wyatt in the early 16th century. By the end of the 16th century, sonnet has become the most popular genre of poetry in Britain, and it was in full flourish through artistic endeavors of some eminent poets such as Edmund Spenser, Philip Sidney, and so forth. Shakespeare's sonnets are usually pentameter in each line. The sonnets can be divided into four parts, which are the first four lines, the middle four lines, the back four lines and the final two lines, and the rhyme is "abab, cdcd, efef, gg", which is later known as the "Shakespearian form". The themes of Shakespeare's sonnets are of rich implications. They not only reflect the humanistic spirit of that era, but also contain some philosophical value that transcends the era. In 1609, the first academically acknowledged edition of Shakespeare's sonnets came into being.

Shakespeare often caught in his sonnets the platonic note with equal subtlety. Shakespearean sonnets are the superior works of lyrical artistry. These sonnets are the lyrical expressions of Shakespeare's perception of friendship and devotion to his love and of his experiences is andideals.

## 2. The Theme of Time

In Shakespeare's sonnets, time is a powerful and destructive force that relentlessly marches on, leading to decay, aging, and ultimately, death. Sonnets 12, 15, 16, 17, 18, 19, 60, 63, 64 and 65 in all which the concepts of Time predominates. However, Shakespeare also explores ways to transcend time's effects, primarily through procreation and the enduring power of art, particularly poetry. According to Shen, Yuan, "Time is a major theme and keynote of Shakespeare's sonnets. Time is cruel and merciless. Man can only fight and conquer it through offspring, poetry and true love". (Page 103)

### Time as a Destroyer:

Shakespeare frequently portrays time as a cruel and relentless force, a "tyrant" that destroys beauty, youth, and love. He uses vivid imagery to emphasize time's power to ravage and change everything. Examples include the decay of beautiful things, the fading of youth, and the inevitability of death. Sonnet 12 shows that the poet witnesses the passing of time, the constant alternation of day and night, and the changes it brings about as violet has lost its color, black hair has turned white. The poet visualizes the change of time. Time expressed in Shakespeare's sonnets is a linear movement, instead of circular motion, which shows the poet's pessimistic view of time. We can feel the pessimistic mood of Shakespeare from many adjectives modified time as follows: never-resting, devouring, swift-footed, sluttish, injurious, balmy, reckoning and so forth. In Shakespeare's sonnets, time is cruel and destructive. Time is ever-lapsing, and everything in the world is leasing. These images like "Time's scythe/ sickle", "Time's fickle glass", "Time's tyranny", and "Time's injurious hand", can be found everywhere, which embody the ruthless lapse of destructive time. Faced with it, people are very tiny and insignificant, and they are incapable of conquering time. These images also embody the pessimistic consciousness.

### **Time as a Natural Process:**

While acknowledging time's destructive power, Shakespeare also recognizes it as a natural part of life's cycle. He uses imagery of nature's changing seasons to illustrate time's progression, like the transition from spring to winter. This natural aspect of time suggests that aging and death are not necessarily negative, but rather a part of the natural order.

### **3. The Theme of Beauty**

The sonnets present beauty as a powerful force, capable of inspiring love, provoking desire, and even prompting reflection on mortality. In the first Sonnet the poet says that all men desire that the world grow more and more beautiful through increase of beautiful things- beautiful flowers, beautiful animals, beautiful birds, and to cap it all, beautiful human beings- so that the loveliness of beauty or beauty itself may never vanish from the Earth: from fairest creatures we desire increase, that thereby beauty's Rose might never die.'

Shakespeare never blindly praises beauty. He thinks that outer beauty and inner beauty are independent of each other, and simultaneously connected with each other.

### **4. The Theme of Love**

Shakespeare's sonnets explore love in its various forms, including romantic, platonic, and even the love of life before death. They delve into the complexities of human relationships, showcasing both the euphoria and despair that love can evoke. Shakespeare's sonnets also challenge traditional ideals, exploring unconventional beauty, tragic realism, and the impact of time on love.

### **Romantic Love:**

Many sonnets focus on the passionate and romantic love between the speaker and a young man (the "fair youth") or a woman (the "dark lady").

### **Platonic Love:**

Some sonnets explore a deep, non-romantic affection and admiration, particularly in the relationship between the speaker and the "fair youth".

### **Love and Time:**

Several sonnets explore the impact of time on love, with the speaker grappling with aging, mortality, and the fleeting nature of beauty and youth.

### **Love Beyond Beauty:**

Sonnet 130, for example, challenges conventional beauty standards, suggesting that love can exist beyond physical appearance.

### **Love as a Complex Emotion:**

The sonnets don't shy away from the darker aspects of love, depicting jealousy, despair, and the pain of unrequited affection.

### **Love in Relationships:**

Shakespeare's sonnets explore different types of relationships, including friendships, romantic relationships, and even love triangles.

### **The Power of Love:**

Despite the challenges and complexities, many sonnets highlight the enduring and powerful nature of love, suggesting it can transcend time and even death.

Love is another prominent theme of Shakespeare's sonnets. During the Renaissance, men broke through the mental slavery of the medieval age and passionately praised and eulogized love. Lived in the great changing period of the Renaissance, Shakespeare also had his deep understanding of the theme of love. In Shakespeare's view, love means the treasure not only for worldly love, but also for friendship, loyalty, sacrifice and tolerance. There is the concept of love all over Shakespeare's sonnets. Shakespeare always believes that true love should be perseverant, faithful and eternal. In the eyes of Shakespeare, love is the fundamental power to resolve annoyance and pursue dreams, and love can bring great joy to human beings. No matter what sorrows and frustrations the poet confronts, as soon as he thinks of his friend and lover, all glooms will vanish into thin air. As Shakespeare said in sonnet 47, "Or if they sleep, thy picture in my sight/ Awakes my heart to heart's and eye's delight" (p. 94). As long as there is love in the poet's heart, he will feel great joy. It is love that brings the poet back from the edge of destruction when the world treats him unkindly. Love is the center of his life and the sunshine on a cloudy day.

### **5. Theme of Friendship**

Shakespeare's sonnets explore a complex view of friendship, encompassing both its joys and potential for pain. The sonnets often focus on the speaker's deep emotional bond with a young man, highlighting loyalty, betrayal, and the solace found in friendship during life's challenges. Shakespeare uses his sonnets to portray friendship as a powerful force that can offer comfort, inspire creativity, and even transcend the passage of time.

Here's a more detailed look at the themes of friendship in Shakespeare's sonnets:

### 1. Enduring Bonds and Loyalty:

Shakespeare frequently portrays friendship as a source of strength and stability, particularly in the face of life's difficulties.

Sonnets 29 and 30, for example, show how the speaker finds solace and overcomes feelings of inadequacy by thinking of his beloved friend.

The speaker's loyalty to his friend is a recurring theme, suggesting that true friendship can withstand external pressures and internal struggles.

### 2. The Complexities of Friendship:

Shakespeare doesn't shy away from exploring the darker aspects of friendship, such as betrayal and disappointment.

In some sonnets, the speaker grapples with the potential for his friend to be unfaithful or to fall short of the speaker's expectations.

These explorations add depth to the portrayal of friendship, acknowledging that it is a dynamic and sometimes challenging relationship.

### 3. Friendship and Time:

Shakespeare often connects friendship with the theme of time, highlighting how friendship can offer a defense against the ravages of time.

The speaker's desire to immortalize his friend through his poetry suggests that true friendship can transcend the limitations of the physical world.

Sonnets like 104 explore the idea that friendship can remain fresh and vital even as time passes, suggesting that it can be a source of eternal youthfulness.

#### 4. Friendship as a Source of Inspiration:

Shakespeare's sonnets suggest that friendship can inspire creativity and artistic expression.

The speaker's close relationship with the young man fuels his poetic endeavors, leading him to create some of his most celebrated works.

This connection between friendship and artistic inspiration highlights the profound influence that deep relationships can have on human creativity.

#### 5. Unequal Friendship:

Some scholars have noted that Shakespeare's sonnets also explore the theme of unequal friendship, where the speaker's feelings or devotion may not be fully reciprocated by his friend.

This adds another layer of complexity to Shakespeare's depiction of friendship, suggesting that it can be a source of both joy and pain.

### 5. Conclusion

In the Sonnet series Shakespeare has tried to convey the concept of love regarding the spiritual communication between his love and friends. It does not confine itself to Physical Union. Shakespeare's notion of love is platonic. Shakespeare speaks of the compatibility of minds, ideas and thoughts and not the compatibility of body. Hence he has Universal appeal as he explores human nature to its depth. Shakespeare is not alone among Renaissance poets in writing about the love between men.



During the Renaissance, the traditional themes of European sonnets are friendship and love. Shakespeare not only inherits this tradition but also updates it. He especially observes the erosion and destruction of time and gains insights into its counterforce—sustainable beauty and love. Shakespeare not only exquisitely describes his internal world, but also deeply expresses his unique feeling on the external world. There are profound philosophical thoughts contained in the plain language, and his thoughts have impressive social meanings and remarkable characteristics of the era, which is exactly the charm of his sonnets and one of the important factors that make his sonnets an immortal classic.

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