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GENRE AND STYLISTIC PECULIARITIES OF SHAKESPEARE’S SONNETS

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The English word “sonnet” comes from the Italian word “sonetto”, meaning “little song”. Some early sonnets were set to music, with accompaniment provided by a lute.

The sonnet originated in Sicily in the 13th century with Giacomo da Lentino (1188-1240), a lawyer. The poetic traditions of the Provençal region of France apparently 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.

A sonnet is usually characterized by the following features:
- it has 14 lines;
- it must be written in iambic pentameter;
- it must follow a specific rhyme scheme, depending on the type of a sonnet;
- it can be about any subject, though sonnets are often about love or nature;
- a sonnet introduces a problem or question in the beginning, and a resolution is offered after the turn.
There are two types of sonnets in the modern literary tradition: Italian and English sonnets. An Italian sonnet is also called a Petrarchan sonnet. It includes an octave (eight lines) and a sestet (six lines). The rhyme scheme must begin with abbaabba, and can conclude with any variation of c, d, and e (cdecde, cdcdee, etc.). The turn must occur between the octave and the sestet.

The structure of the early typical Italian sonnets included two parts that together formed a compact form of “argument”. First, the octave (two quatrains), forms the “proposition”, which describes a “problem”, or “question”, followed by a sestet (two tercets), which proposes a “resolution”. Typically, the ninth line initiates what is called the “turn”, or “volta”, which signals the move from proposition to resolution. Even in sonnets that don’t strictly follow the problem/resolution structure, the ninth line still often marks a “turn” by signaling a change in the tone, mood, or stance of the poem. Later, the a-b-b-a, a-b-b-a pattern became the standard for Italian sonnets. For the sestet there were two different possibilities: c-d-e-c-d-e and c-d-c-c-d-c. In time, other variants on this rhyming scheme were introduced, such as c-d-c-c-d-c.

An English sonnet is also called a Shakespearean sonnet. It includes three quatrains (groups of four lines) and a couplet (two lines). The rhyme scheme is often abab cdcd efef gg. The turn is either after eight lines or ten lines.

When English sonnets were introduced by Thomas Wyatt in the early 16th century, his sonnets and those of his contemporary the Earl of Surrey were chiefly translations from the Italian of Petrarch and the French of Ronsard and others. While Wyatt introduced the sonnet into English, it was Surrey who gave it a rhyming meter, and a structural division into quatrains of a kind that now characterizes the typical English sonnet. Having previously circulated in manuscripts only, both poets’ sonnets were first published in Richard Tottel’s “Songs and Sonnets”, better known as “Tottel’s Miscellany”.

“The form is often named after Shakespeare, not because he was the first to write in this form but because he became its most famous practitioner. The form consists of fourteen lines structured as three quatrains and a couplet. The third quatrain generally introduces an unexpected sharp thematic or imagistic “turn”, the volta. In Shakespeare’s sonnets, however, the volta usually comes in the couplet, and usually summarizes the theme of the poem or introduces a fresh new look at the theme. With only a rare exception, the meter is iambic pentameter, although there is some accepted metrical flexibility (e.g., lines ending with an extra-syllable feminine rhyme, or a trochaic foot rather than an iamb, particularly at the beginning of a line). The usual rhyme scheme is end-rhymed a-b-a-b, c-d-c-d, e-f-e-f, g-g.

Shakespeare’s “Sonnet 116”, illustrates the form (with some typical variances one may expect when reading an Elizabethan-age sonnet with modern eyes):

(1) Let me not to the marriage of true minds (a)
Admit impediments, love is not love (b)
Which alters when it alteration finds, (a)
Or bends with the remover to remove. (b)
O no, it is an ever fixèd mark (c)
That looks on tempests and is never shaken; (d)
It is the star to every wand’ring bark, (c)
Whose worth's unknown although his height be taken. (d)
Love's not time's fool, though rosy lips and cheeks (e)
Within his bending sickle's compass come, (f)
Love alters not with his brief hours and weeks, (e)
But bears it out even to the edge of doom: (f)
If this be error and upon me proved, (g)
I never writ, nor no man ever loved) (g)” [1;133].
“The Prologue to Romeo and Juliet is also a sonnet, as is Romeo and Juliet’s first exchange in Act One, Scene Five, lines 104 -117, beginning with (“If I profane with my unworthiest hand”) (104) and ending with (“Then move not while my prayer’s effect I take”) (117)” [2;83].

The themes of Shakespearean sonnets are very different. Such as:

The Ravages of Time

In sonnet 90, the poet characterizes time as a dimension of suffering, urging the fair lord to break with him “if ever, now”; “Give not a windy night a rainy morrow” [3; 17], he writes, pleading with him to end the desperation of hopeful unrequited love. The theme resurfaces throughout the sonnets in the narrator's various descriptions of himself as an aging man: “But when my glass shows me myself indeed / Beated and chopp’d with tann’d antiquity” (sonnet 62) [3; 87]; “And wherefore say not I that I am old?” (sonnet 138) [3; 203].

Platonic Love vs. Carnal Lust

While the narrator of the sonnets is clearly infatuated with both the fair lord and the dark lady, the language he uses to describe these infatuations shows them to be of disparate natures. If we take the angel of sonnet 144 to be the narrator’s fair lord, we see this contrast clearly: “To win me soon to hell, my female evil / Tempteth my better angel from my side / And would corrupt my saint to be a devil / Wooing his purity with her foul pride” [3; 223].

Selfishness and Greed

The themes of selfishness and greed are prevalent throughout the sonnets as a whole, emerging most perceptibly in the narrator's hypocritical expectation of faithfulness from the fair lord and the dark lady. The poet seems at times to advance a double standard on the issue of faithfulness: he is unfaithful himself, yet he condemns, is even surprised by, the unfaithfulness of others. The rival poet sonnets (79-86), for example, capture the poet’s jealousy of his fair lord’s having another admirer; dark lady sonnets 133-134 and 144 do the same, and they may even include a reference to an affair between her and the fair lord that perhaps was alluded to previously in sonnets 40-42.

Self-Deprecation and Inadequacy

Self-deprecatory language frequently appears regarding the poet’s various inadequacies, in particular his ability to keep his fair lord's interest. In sonnet 76 the poet basically calls himself a bore. He begins: “Why is my verse so barren of new pride / So far from variation or quick change?” [3; 87].

Financial Bondage

Throughout the sonnets there is considerable imagery of financial debt and obligation, bondage and transaction. Many scholars are convinced that the fair lord is not only the object of the poet’s affection but also his financial benefactor. In sonnet 4, financial imagery is ubiquitous: “unthrifty”, ”spend”, “bequest”, “lend”, “frank”, ”niggard”, “profitless”, “usurer”, “sum”, and “audit”, and more [3; 11].

Color Symbolism

This theme emerges mostly in the dark lady sonnets, where the poet’s repeated use of the color black to describe the dark lady’s features, both physical and intangible, ascribes her with the evilness or “otherness” that the color has often symbolized in the Western mentality. However, color imagery is present in the fair lord sonnets as well, especially in conjunction with the theme of passing time. In sonnet 12, for example, the poet draws a parallel between the “aging” of nature with the aging of human life, opposing “the violet” and “summer’s green” with the silver and white of age. Note, though, that the opposition here is not between black and white, as might be expected, but rather between color and absence of color, the latter of which is a product of passing time. The poet dreads both the passing of time as well as the sinfulness of his dark lady, and it is clear that the goal of his symbolism is to represent that he is afraid of having no color in his life.

Shakespeare often carefully combines sound and rhythm to produce the certain effect:
“Than you shall hear the surly sullen ell” (71) [3; 86] where “hear” and “bell”, and “surly” and “sullen” are at the same pitch while the rhythm follows the meter harmoniously. Shakespeare’s combination of alliteration and assonance shows great variety. In the sonnet 73 “Death’s second self that seals up all in rest” [3; 88]. Sometimes the alliteration and assonance go as far as repetition of the same word or word root within the same line:

“Love’s not love
That alters when it alterations finds
Or bends with the remove to remove” (sonnet 116)
and this just after writing the strong alliterative line

“Let me not to the marriage of true minds
Admit impediments”.

In 129 the repetition is double within one line

“Is lust in action, and, till action, lust” [3; 90-95].

The effect of raging impotence against lust here is well combined with the function of the word “lust” which is the grammatical subject of the next ten lines.

The tone is perhaps the most subtle and the most ambiguous element in these poems. It is a function of structure, imagery, rhythm, alliteration, and assonance plus undefinable factors related to the experience expressed in the sequence.

William Shakespeare was the most influential writer of all-time, his iambic pentameter verses utilized a natural rhythm of the English language and his themes as well as his literary devices continue to inspire and influence writers even now in the 21st century. There are fourteen lines in a Shakespearean sonnet. The first twelve lines are divided into three quatrains with four lines each. In the three quatrains the poet establishes a theme or problem and then resolves it in the final two lines, called the couplet. The rhyme scheme of the quatrains is abab cdcd efef. Only three of Shakespeare’s 154 sonnets do not conform to this structure: Sonnet 99, which has 15 lines; Sonnet 126, which has 12 lines; and Sonnet 145, which is written in iambic pentameter.

Literature: