

While Shakespeare was pursuing a successful career in acting, writing plays, promoting other playwrights and managing theatres he was also writing sonnets. He wrote most of them as a young man. Among Elizabethans, sonnets were regarded as personal poems not intended for publication. They were usually circulated among the poet's friends and it was actually considered out of order to write them for publication. Shakespeare's sonnets were published in 1609, however - almost certainly without his knowledge - by a disreputable publisher who was notorious for stealing manuscripts. When he was forty-five, seven years before his death, a slim volume entitled 'Shake-Speares Sonnets' appeared in London's two main bookshops. Although we now look back on the plays with a feeling that he said everything in them that a man might ever want to say about the world, they were not personal but written exclusively for public entertainment. The first hundred and twenty-six sonnets in Shakespeare's volume appear to be addressed to a beautiful young man. Although there is an erotic underlying theme running through them, that doesn't seem to be their main subject. **They express a wide range of topics from poetry, painting and music, to nobility, the breeding of children, sexual betrayal, and the ravages of Time.**

The next batch, 127 to 152, moves away from the young man to a shady, mysterious, dark woman who is fascinating but treacherous. The poet's passions become more personal and intense compared with the friendship displayed in the first batch - his adulterous obsession with her; his feelings of inadequacy; and the disgust and revulsion he feels when she proves false. Reading them through in sequence offers an awesome emotional experience.

The last two sonnets seem inconsequential. They are imitations of Greek epigrams devoted to Cupid, a young votress of the goddess Diana, and a hot therapeutic spring. At first glance they seem separate from the dark lady sonnets but they form a poetic summing up of the poet's relationship with her and the reflections on love that are dealt with in detail in the other sonnets.

### **Sonnet 18**

Shall I compare you to a summer's day? You are more lovely and more moderate: Harsh winds disturb the delicate buds of May, and summer doesn't last long enough. Sometimes the sun is too hot, and its golden face is often dimmed by clouds. All beautiful things eventually become less beautiful, either by the experiences of life or by the passing of time. But your eternal beauty won't fade, nor lose any of its quality. And you will never die, as you will live on in my enduring poetry. As long as there are people still alive to read poems this sonnet will live, and you will live in it.

### **Sonnet 60**

Just as the waves push toward the pebbled shore, our minutes hasten toward their end, each moment replacing the one that went before, straining against each other to move forward in successive effort. Once born, creatures crawl from that pre-birth ocean of light to maturity, facing cruel eclipses that obstruct their glory, and Time, that gives, begins to destroy its own gifts. Time pierces the flowering cast of youth and digs deep lines in beauty's forehead: feeds on the most exquisite of nature's specimens, and there's nothing that its scythe won't mow. And yet my verses will last to be read by future generations, praising your worth in spite of Time's cruel hand.

### **Sonnet 121**

It's better to be vile than to be thought vile when not being so gets the same response as it would if you were, and you don't even have the pleasure of doing the thing that evokes the criticism from those who think you're vile, even though you don't consider yourself to be. For why should others' hypocritical corruption be allowed to wink knowingly at my lustful tendencies? Or those weaker than I am comment on my weaknesses, presuming to judge what I think is good, bad? No, I am what I am and those who condemn me are only revealing their own corruptness. I may be the straight one and they the ones out of line. You can't judge my actions in terms of their vile thoughts, unless they're prepared to maintain this general dictum: all men are bad and thrive in their badness.

### **Shakespeare's Sonnets in Context**

The sonnet was originally a love poem developed by the Renaissance Italian poet, Francesco Petrarch. It is always the case with immortal writers that they invent forms in response to their strong need to **express ideas and emotions** for which they cannot find an existing form. Petrarch had an overwhelming need for a new way of expressing the various aspects of his love for his Laura. He adapted **a mediaeval song form** to his purpose and the sonnet was born. He squeezed everything he wanted to express on a particular single aspect of the love he felt into a fourteen line structure that was very concentrated and in which the rhythm and rhyme and metaphorical pattern produced a significant amount of the meaning.

The sonnet became popular with poets and the Elizabethans took it up with great enthusiasm after it was introduced into English poetry by Wyatt and Surrey. The Elizabethan poets used it to woo their mistresses and to display their poetic skills. Notable among those poets were Edmund Spenser, Sir Philip Sidney and, of course, William Shakespeare. Shakespeare was very conscious of his skill in writing sonnets and referred to it constantly in the sonnets themselves, although in a joking manner. He also referred ironically to his skills as poor, as part of his development of complex arguments. He seemed to understand, however, that his sonnets would last for as long as human beings were able to read.

The sonnet is still very much alive. John Donne, catching the spirit of the Jacobean age, with its taste for strong, logical, rational argument, found the sonnet perfect for his intellectual style, for his need to express his love for his wife, Anne, for his expression of religious passion, and for his reflections on death. As a result the sonnet came to be the obvious form for short statements on the great emotional themes, like love, death, war and religion. Poets use it to express their deepest feelings on those matters. The Victorian Jesuit priest, Gerard Manley Hopkins, wrote several sonnets expressing the numerous facets of his Christian faith. The Victorians liked the sonnet as much as the Elizabethans did and other great practitioners were Elizabeth Barrett Browning, the Rossettis, and George Meredith. The sonnet is still in use today for powerful short poetic statements about particular aspects of those great themes. It hasn't changed all that much and the 'Shakespearean' sonnet is still recognisable in modern poetry. American poets noted for their sonnets include Longfellow, E. A. Robinson, Elinor Wylie, and Edna St. Vincent Millay.

### Shakespeare's Love Sonnets

Shakespeare love sonnets are intensely personal and address the deep issues of life. Love is dealt with most comprehensively. Critics over the centuries have been fascinated by the two main subjects of the love sentiments – the 'fair young man' and the 'dark lady.' Scholars have explored the Elizabethan times and Shakespeare's sonnets to try and identify these two figures and there are several theories, although there is some consensus around the identity of the young man. He seems to have been the Earl of Southampton, Shakespeare's patron between 1592 and 1595.

It is natural for the imagination to roam over these two living, breathing figures, who Shakespeare knew so intimately, but it is just as interesting to look at the whole body of sonnets to see what insights Shakespeare offers us about the role of love in life. As usual, through personal messages, humour, observations of the everyday, and so on, Shakespeare reaches depths in bits of language that have become quotable truths about human life, including love. When we look at it that way we can see descriptions of three different contexts in which love operates. In doing so he depicts a multi-faceted image of love.

Love in Shakespeare's sonnets does not have a single definition, but rather, an intangible collection of characteristics that, together, make up a powerful force that defeats all obstacles. Taking just three of the sonnets - 116, 130, and 147 - love is depicted as an overwhelming force that triumphs over time, the physical world, and reason, respectively. In sonnet 116, love is given an identity as an immortal force, which overcomes age, death, and time itself. Love is depicted as an invincible force that defies time as well as time's effects on beauty and youth, changes such as wrinkles and old age. Love's not Time's fool, though rosy lips and cheeks/Within his bending sickle's compass come (Lines 9 and 10). Love, unlike the physical being, is not subject to decay. In sonnet 130 the force of love is displayed through physical beauty. In that sonnet Shakespeare expands his definition of love to include an image of love as a force that overcomes social pressures. In sonnet 147, the speaker's reasonable mind is overridden by emotions which arise from his love and desire for his absent partner.

Returning to the fair young man and the dark lady, we see the depiction of different types of personal love. Sonnets 1-126 seem to be addressed to an unnamed male friend, younger than Shakespeare. The intensity of feeling and the language imply a sexual love, but that is to impose our modern perceptions of sexuality on the poems. Even the most masculine of men were not afraid to express a view of their feelings for other men and admiration of their beauty, unlike the fear modern men have of being thought to be homosexual if they did that. Speculation about Shakespeare's sexuality is a red herring (irrelevant, beside the point). In those sonnets, 1-126, we see a growing friendship with the young man and the development of an intensity of feeling. In sonnets 1-17 Shakespeare seems concerned with the desire to urge the young man to marry and reproduce. Then, as the friendship develops and the poet comes to love the young man intensely, we see feelings of grief caused by the poet's separation from him. They live in different worlds: the young man is a nobleman and that, in itself, is cause for a certain kind of separation. Moreover, the young man is idle (lazy, passive) and wanton (undisciplined, spoilt), whereas Shakespeare is a hard-working actor, writer and businessman, and that, too, is a major difference in lifestyle and another level of separation. However,

these sonnets reveal a deep love for the young man, an admiration of his exceptional physical beauty, and, perhaps, the payment of dues (to give money in exchange for services) to a benefactor. Whatever the reasons are, the sonnets provide us with some of the finest expressions of love in the English language.

Then there is the dark lady, referred to as 'black.' Here again, the word is often taken literally to mean black, as in African. But it is likely that she is a non-blonde – perhaps an English brunette or a Mediterranean woman. Some scholars have suggested that she never existed but that Shakespeare invented her to express sexual emotions ranging from intense sexual passion to sexual distaste in sonnets 127-152. It seems that we will never know the truth. The sonnets depict a painful and erotic relationship in which the poet remains attached to his mistress through a combination of love, and even stronger lust. But he is often revolted by her. Sonnets 127, 128 and 130 give taunting (derisive, mocking) compliments to the Dark Lady. And in sonnets 129, 146, 147 and 152 he bitterly rejects her.

Whatever the scholarly speculations about the love sonnets are, the fact remains that a reading of them offers the most comprehensive and universal treatment of love in the English language.

### The Marriage Of True Minds (Sonnet 116)

*Let me not to the marriage of true minds  
Admit impediments. Love is not love  
Which alters when it alteration finds,  
Or bends with the remover to remove:  
O, no! 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.  
Love's not Time's fool, though rosy lips and cheeks  
Within his bending sickle's compass come;  
Love alters not with his brief hours and weeks,  
But bears it out even to the edge of doom.  
If this be error and upon me proved,  
I never writ, nor no man ever loved.*

### Sonnet 116: Translation to modern English

I would not admit that anything could interfere with the union of two people who love each other. Love that alters with changing circumstances is not love, nor if it bends from its firm state when someone tries to destroy it. Oh no, it's an eternally fixed point that watches storms but is never itself shaken by them. It is the star by which every lost ship can be guided: one can calculate its distance but not gauge its quality. Love doesn't depend on Time, although the rosy lips and cheeks of youth eventually come within the compass of Time's sickle. Love doesn't alter as the days and weeks go by but endures until death. If I'm wrong about this then I've never written anything and no man has ever loved.

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