

Mila University Center

Course: English Literature (Second Year BA)

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An Introduction to the Shakespearean Sonnet

Historical Background,

Of all poetic forms, the sonnet seems to occupy the most influential place in history. The Renaissance is a period of time in which William Shakespeare lived and wrote his works. The Renaissance period witnessed a drastic change at different levels, political, cultural, Artistic and social. The influence of the Catholic Church which had dominated all aspects of life throughout Europe during the Medieval period was replaced by more political and religious freedom. The Renaissance is also known as the era of new ideas. For example, Medieval poetry used to focus on sacred and religious themes mainly, while in the Renaissance, poets sought to explore new themes that reflect human concerns such as love, honor and physical beauty. In this light, Shakespeare's sonnets were written in a period of rapid and unsettling change. Often, his sonnets, tend to express feelings of uncertainty towards change, fading and decay. Stylistically, Shakespeare was following a tradition of sonnet that dates back to the fourteenth-century sonnet of the Italian poet Petrarch. Although the English writers borrowed many poetic conventions already established by Petrarch such as adopting the fourteen-line format of the sonnet, they altered the rhyme scheme from "abba abba cdc dcd" or "abba abba cde cde" to "abab cdcd efef gg". After each quatrain the poet can continue to develop a certain idea or shift to expressing another.

Difference between the English Sonnet and Petrarchan Sonnet

The term derives from the Italian *sonnetto* which means a 'little sound' or 'song'. It was Petrarch, more than anyone, who established the sonnet as one of the major poetic forms. The sonnet consists of fourteen lines, usually in iambic pentameters with considerable variations in rhyme scheme. The two basic sonnet forms are (a) the Petrarchan sonnet, which comprises an octave rhyming abbaabba and a sestet, rhyming cdecde or cdcdce

In Shakespeare's sonnets, the rhyme pattern is *abab cdcd efef gg*, with the final couplet used to summarize the previous 12 lines or present a surprise ending. The rhythmic pattern of the sonnets is the iambic pentameter. An *iamb* is a metrical foot consisting of one stressed syllable and one unstressed syllable—as in dah-DUM, dah-DUM dah-DUM dah-DUM dah-DUM. Shakespeare uses five of these in each line, which makes it a pentameter.

Petrarchan/Italian Sonnet Example ↓

When I consider how my light is spent by John Milton

1. When I consider how my light is spent, **a**
 2. Ere half my days, in this dark world and wide, **b**
 3. And that one Talent which is death to hide **b**
 4. Lodged with me useless, though my Soul more bent **a**
 5. To serve therewith my Maker, and present **a**
 6. My true account, lest he returning chide; **b**
 7. "Doth God exact day-labour, light denied?" **b**
 8. I fondly ask. But patience, to prevent **a**
- } **Octave**
9. That murmur, soon replies, "God doth not need **c**
 10. Either man's work or his own gifts; who best **d**
 11. Bear his mild yoke, they serve him best. His state **e**
 12. Is Kingly. Thousands at his bidding speed **c**.
 13. And post o'er Land and Ocean without rest: **d**
 14. They also serve who only stand and wait." **e**
- } **Sestet**

English/Shakespearean Sonnet Example ↓

Sonnet 13 by William Shakespeare

1. O, that you were yourself! but, love, you are. **a**
 2. No longer yours than you yourself here live: **b**
 3. Against this coming end you should prepare, **a**
 4. And your sweet semblance to some other give. **b**
- } **Quatrain 1**
5. So should that beauty which you hold in lease **c**
 6. Find no determination: then you were **d**
 7. Yourself again after yourself's decease, **c**
 8. When your sweet issue your sweet form should bear. **d**
- } **Quatrain 2**
9. Who lets so fair a house fall to decay, **e**
 10. Which husbandry in honour might uphold **f**
 11. Against the stormy gusts of winter's day **e**
 12. And barren rage of death's eternal cold? **f**
- } **Quatrain 3**
13. O, none but unthrifths! Dear my love, you know **g**
 14. You had a father: let your son say so. **g**
- } **Couplet**

Sonnet 13 Analysis

Sonnet 13 is one of the procreation sonnets. Sonnets from 1 to 17 are called procreation sonnets because the speaker encourages the young man to have children who would inherit his beauty. In this sonnet, the speaker is concerned about the possibility that death will conquer the beauty of the recipient who we might refer to as the young man. Hence, the speaker urges the young man to procreate and leave an image of himself through fathering a child.

Quatrain one:

The speaker begins by addressing the young man saying “O that you were yourself” which suggests that the young man is not in charge of his life and that eventually he must prepare for his death by leaving a child behind after his death and transferring his beauty “sweet semblance” to them. It can be suggested that this quatrain acts as a piece of advice from the speaker to the young man, asking him to have children before he dies. Also, it can be noticed that the verbs in the first quatrain are postponed, meaning they are placed in the end of the four verses. This postponement of verbs “are, live, prepare and give” signifies an emphasis of advice that the young man should hurry and get married.

Quatrain two:

In this Quatrain, the speaker furthers his plea to the young man, stating that his beauty will be vanquished by death if he dies without leaving a child. As he extends his advice to the young man, the speaker uses a metaphor which appears in his use of the term “lease”. This term refers to owning a property for a temporary period of time. Hence, the speaker tends to remind the young man that his beauty which he possesses now is leased to him for a short period of time. Therefore, in order for this beauty to find no “determination” which means “end”, the young man is urged to replicate his beauty in a child since his “sweet issue” that means his “child” is expected to inherit the “sweet form” of his father. In short, this quatrain extends the advice of the poet to the young man that he should prepare himself for death by begetting a child in order for his beauty to survive.

Quatrain Three:

In this quatrain, the poet uses another metaphor, in that he compares the beauty of the young man to a house. In the first line of this quatrain, he questions what sort of man would let his beautiful house to “fall to decay” and destruction. Further to this, a well-maintained house is supposed to offer warmth and protection to its inhabitants from the ravages of winter. Similarly, the young man should maintain his beauty and protect it against aging and death. The second line of the quatrain “which husbandry in honour might uphold” indicates that this beautiful house which refers to the beauty of the young man can only be well managed and can resist against the destruction of time which is symbolised in the “stormy gusts of winter’s day” by making an honourable marriage. So, through this marriage, the young man will leave children behind who will represent his beauty.

Couplet,

In Shakespeare’s sonnets, the couplet usually offers us a solution to a problem discussed in the previous quatrains or an answer to a question. In sonnet 13, The poet gives an answer to the

question asked in the third quatrain “O, none but unthrifths!” which implies that no one is likely to let his beauty die apart from selfish and narcissistic people. In this line, the poet uses another metaphor by comparing the selfishness of the young man to extravagant people who are reckless in spending their wealth. In the following expression “Dear my love, you know you had a father let your son say so” the speaker uses a persuasive tool by attempting to insert some guilt in the young man asking him why he would deny a son the pleasure of having him as a father since the young man himself had a chance to call someone father.

Theme of Sonnet 13:

The general themes of Shakespeare’s sonnets are love and beauty. In this sonnet, the apparent theme is procreation and narcissism. The poet in this sonnet urges the young man to get married and have children so that his beauty is replicated in succeeding generations. His plea, however, is met by a narcissistic response from the young man. Narcissism is a recurrent motif in Shakespeare’s sonnets 1-17 because the young man seems to regard that his beauty, perhaps, should not be shared with others. He seems to prefer preserving his beauty, which will eventually be consumed by time and go to waste, rather than sharing it with future generations.