

Mila University Center
Course: English Literature (Second Year BA)
Lesson Two: Sonnet 17 Analysis
Lecturer: Dr. Nihad LAOUAR
Academic Year: 2022/2023

Sonnet 17 Analysis

Who will believe my verse in time to come, a
If it were filled with your most high deserts? b
Though yet heaven knows it is but as a tomb a
Which hides your life, and shows not half your parts. b

If I could write the beauty of your eyes, c
And in fresh numbers number all your graces, d
The age to come would say 'This poet lies; c
Such heavenly touches ne'er touched earthly faces.' d

So should my papers, yellowed with their age, e
Be scorned, like old men of less truth than tongue, f
And your true rights be termed a poet's rage e
And stretched metre of an antique song: f

But were some child of yours alive that time, g
You should live twice, in it, and in my rhyme. g

I. Sonnet 17 Summary:

This is the last sonnet of the procreation sonnets in which the speaker attempts to persuade the young man to get married and bear offspring. In this sonnet, the speaker asserts that the power of art to describe the merits of the young man is insufficient and that it can show only few of his true virtues. The speaker fears that the future generations may not believe in these virtues. This means that future generations might find his poems full of hyperbolic praise and lies. Thus, the poet finishes his sonnet by begging the youth to leave something which will make people recognize his worth, hence, believe his verse.

Analysis of Quatrain one

This quatrain opens with a rhetorical question where the speaker asks who would believe his claims about the youth's beauty in the future if his poetry is filled with the youth's finest qualities. Shakespeare uses a simile in which he compares his poetic verses to a tomb that hides the young man's life despite the fact that he tried to fully describe his beauty and handsome qualities. In other words, the tomb would veil the life of the young man and shroud his true beauty. The last line of this quatrain indicates that, the speaker's poetry, in addition to being as a tomb, does not do justice to effectively express the true qualities of the young man.

Analysis of Quatrain two:

The poet continues to question the legitimacy and genuineness of his verses that he dedicated to immortalize the beauty of the young man. He states that if he is to write the beauty of the youth in his fresh verses or sonnets and make a list of all his good qualities, the future generation would say that this poet lies, they would make fun of him and scorn him as well as his creativity. The last line means that future generations would think that human beings would never be blessed with such divine qualities and as a result they would not believe the poet.

Analysis of quatrain three

The poet continues to express his fear of failing to immortalize the beauty of the young man. He says that his poems will become old and discolored with age and that they will be forgotten as future generations would not take his poems seriously. He even likens his verses that are filled with various praises of the young man to old men who talk too much in their old age and brag about their past achievements and experiences. This implies that his poems that are devoted to immortalizing the young man would be regarded just like old men who are not taken seriously. Hence, the "true rights"(true qualities) of the young man would be identified as merely a poet's burst of enthusiasm "poet's rage" and "stretched meter of an antique song". The last line shows further the poet's concern about the perception of future generations towards his description of the young man's beauty. Future generations might consider that his poems are poetic exaggerations of an old-fashioned poem.

Couplet Analysis

This is considered as the last procreation sonnet. The first three quatrains are not about procreation but the last couplet offers a turn or volta in which the poet resorts to encourage the youth to leave a child. His last plea indicates that despite the poet's attempt to immortalize the beauty of the young man, it is by no means guaranteed that he will be remembered because future generations would not take his poems seriously. Hence, the situation would be different if the young man got married and got himself a child, it is only then that he would have a chance to live twice in his sonnets and in his child.

Figures of Speech:

Alliteration occurs when there is a repetition of a consonant sound in two or more words in one line. For example, “rights” and “rage” in line eleven.

Consonance is the repetition of consonant sounds in the same line such as the sound of /r/ in “And your true rights be termed a poet's rage,” and the sound of /h/ in “Which hides your life, and shows not half your parts.”

Assonance is the repetition of vowel sounds in the same line such as the sound of /e/ in “Who will believe my verse in time to come” and the sound of /i/ in “*You should live twice, in it, and in my rhyme.*”

Imagery is used to make readers perceive things involving their five senses. Shakespeare has used imagery in this poem such as “So should my papers, yellowed with their age,” which is an image that helps readers visualize the antiquity of his pages which as at the same time metaphorical of his poems growing old.

Personification: “Heaven knows”, here the poet personifies “heaven” by giving it a human characteristic of “knowing”

Theme:

Since this sonnet is the last of the procreation sonnets, its general theme can be immortality of beauty through procreation. However, initially, the poet in this sonnet tends to resort to another means of immortalization which is through his poetry although he demonstrates a sense of reluctance in doing so because he is afraid that future generations would question the legitimacy of his poems. Hence, the poet makes one last plea to the young man urging him to have a child so that his poetry will be legitimate.