

Love is not Love: A Critical Evaluation of the Theme of Love in Shakespeare's Sonnets

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Abstract

William Shakespeare, arguably one of the world's most renowned dramatists and poets, compiled a sonnet sequence comprising 154 poems based on the theme of love. His depictions of the various emotions of love are often presented in either an evocative or meditative manner in these sonnets. This study critically evaluates Shakespeare's treatment of love in the popular sonnets, whereby it focuses on their emotional, philosophical, and literary dimensions on the theme of love. The sonnets of his most poignant expressions of love were selected through the purposive sampling method and textually analyzed. Through the analysis, it can be noted that Shakespeare presents a highly nuanced understanding of the concept of love in its myriad forms: romantic, platonic, and carnal, all of which depict the enduring appeal of love as being an indefinable and mysterious expression that cannot be defined in standard terms. The enduring appeal of these sonnets, with their radical dismantling of socially expected notions of love, is invariably appealing to the contemporary world, giving them a timeless value. Further studies exploring the historical context in which the sonnets were written and their hidden and broader implications within Renaissance literature and even beyond could shed more light on this dense literary sonnet sequence.

Keywords

Dark Lady, Fair Youth, Love, Shakespeare, Sonnets

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Background

According to literary scholars, William Shakespeare wrote his sonnet sequence, comprising of 154 sonnets, in the 1590s, and they are said to be addressed to a “Fair Youth”. Shakespearean scholars like Duncan-Jones (1997) argue that the third Earl of Pembroke – William Herbert - could be the fair youth that is the addressee of these sonnets mainly for the reason that they were dedicated to a “Mr. W.H.”, the initials of which they argued were the Earl’s with the two initials inverted intentionally to grant him anonymity. Also, it is said to be a known fact that at the time, Herbert had been resistant to the notion of entering into marriage, although he was pressured to bring an heir. On the contrary, another school of scholars proposes Henry Wriothesley, the third Earl of Southampton, as the individual referred to as the “fair youth”. Muir (1979) argues that since Shakespeare had dedicated two of his narrative poems “Venus & Adonis” (Shakespeare, 1593) and “The Rape of Lucrece” (Shakespeare, 1594) to Wriothesley, there is considerable evidence to equate him with the Fair Youth. According to the scholar, the poet had been well acquainted with the earl at the time of writing the sonnet sequence.

Although the majority of his sonnets refer to a young gentleman from a noble upbringing, often referred to as the “Fair Youth”, his later sonnets, from sonnet 127 onward, address a “Dark Lady”. There are several candidates named as being the Dark Lady, although to this date, there has been no conclusive premise regarding her true identity. Two female figures known to Shakespeare and said to have been in love relationships with him have been regarded as possible addressees. One was Mary Filton, a Lady-in-Waiting to Queen Elizabeth. She was said to have had a relationship with the poet while having several other affairs (Duncan, 1997; Chambers, 1930). Lucia Morgan was also a woman who had enamored Shakespeare with her unusual appearance and seductive mannerisms, which apparently had made her popular with men (Wisecarver, 1962). Nonetheless, some scholars have argued that the Dark Lady could be a fictional character imagined by the poet: one who is sensual, unfaithful, and unconventionally attractive.

Considering the two protagonists at the center of the sonnets, there is a clear difference between the evocations of love expressed and the poet’s tone when considering them as two separate categories. On the one hand, the Fair Youth sonnets mostly convey affection, beauty, and

mortality of life, and the poet adopts a tone of veneration, admiration, idealism, and even melancholia. On the other hand, expressions of lust, frustration, unrequited desires, and infidelity dominate the themes of the Dark Lady sonnets, in which there is a sense of desperation and frustration on the part of the poet.

1. *For thy sweet love remember'd such wealth brings: Fair Youth Sonnets*

In the sonnets dedicated to a young man, Shakespeare places him on a pedestal, at times elevating him to divine status. This can be well explicated in Sonnet 105, whereby the bard identifies the young man as fair, kind, and true: all three virtuous qualities that he asserts are rare to be found in one person.

“Fair, kind and true” is all my argument,
“Fair, kind, and true,” varying to other words;
And in this change is my invention spent,
Three themes in one, which wondrous scope affords.
(Shakespeare, Sonnet 105, lines 9–12)

The sense of veneration at the virtuousness of the addressee is a common theme during the Elizabethan Era when such concepts were held as the ultimate objectives a woman needs to achieve. During this period, courtly love, as the term suggests, refers to the expressions of love felt typically by noblemen to women bearing high stature in society. Lewis (1936) defines courtly love as “love of a highly specialized sort, whose characteristics may be enumerated as Humility, Courtesy, Adultery, and the Religion of Love” (p.2). The following aspects characterize courtly love: (a) humility, courtesy, adultery and the religion of love; (b) love is desire; (c) it is an ennobling and dynamic force; (d) it generates a cult of the beloved” (Cuddon, 1977, as cited in Ma, 2014, p. 918). What is radical about the Shakespearean sonnets is that there is a deconstruction of the rigidly dichotomized gendered male versus female identities as in the majority of his sonnets the addressee is a male which, in itself, is conspicuous departure from the norm.

Often, Shakespearean scholars have become involved in the debate as to whether the love expressed for the youth is either platonic or homoerotic. Although there is no certainty in deciding for or against these claims, as in most poetic interpretations, the following textual analysis of two of the most quoted sonnets supports the notion that the love expressed to the youth is presented in such an ambiguous manner that one cannot convincingly premise whether the poetic persona expresses platonic or carnal love for the Fair Youth:

A woman's face with nature's own hand-painted

Hast thou, the master-mistress of my passion;
A woman's gentle heart, but not acquainted
With shifting change as is false women's fashion;
An eye more bright than theirs, less false in rolling,
Gilding the object whereupon it gazeth;
A man in hue, all hues in his controlling,
Which steals men's eyes and women's souls amazeth.
And for a woman wert thou first created,
Till nature as she wrought thee fell a-doting,
And by addition me of thee defeated
By adding one thing to my purpose nothing.
But since she pricked thee out for women's pleasure,
Mine be thy love and thy love's use their treasure.
(Shakespeare, Sonnet 20)

The physical attributes of the addressee appear to be appealing to the poet. For instance, we are told that although he has an effeminate face, it is naturally beautiful, unlike the enhanced features of women covered by makeup. In the subsequent line, there is a conscious punning when using an oxymoron “master-mistress” to depict the extent of the poet’s “passion”. The juxtaposition of the two opposing gendered terms is a challenge to the socially rigid dichotomization of gender. The reference to “passion” is also vague and could refer to intense feelings of love in the spiritual or sexual sense. Throughout the sonnet, there is the constant collocation of opposing traits as the poet compares the young man to the expectations ascribed to women but insists that he is even better than the expectations.

The fact that the youth is extremely good-looking appears to draw the male gaze towards him while attracting women to be emotionally and physically snared by him. Then we are told that “nature” although initially intending the human creation to be a female decided to add the one organ that would convert him to a man; i.e., that of the penis. Thus, including this “one thing”, according to the poet, “adds nothing” to his “purpose”. This line refutes the claims of homoeroticism in these sonnets as the male organ has no use for the poet, who appears to be in love with the man for his virtues rather than for carnal intentions. The last two lines further elaborate on this point, stating that although the young man can sexually please his female partner, the love shared by the poet and the sonnet’s protagonist is spiritually oriented.

In possibly the most cited Shakespearean sonnet, the poet once again extols the love he has for his male muse:

Shall I compare thee to a summer's day?
Thou art more lovely and more temperate:
Rough winds do shake the darling buds of May,
And summer's lease hath all too short a date:

(Shakespeare, Sonnet 18)

Once again, this sonnet affirms the premise that the love expressed for the male addressee is platonic and transgresses sexual attraction. The muse is presented as a consistent, reliable, and trustworthy individual whose impressive qualities have contributed to him being immortalized in the literary canon. Indeed, it is interesting to note how convinced Shakespeare was of his artistic prowess and that his work would continue to be read by people for generations due to its timeless value and relatable themes.

Were an all-eating shame, and thriftless praise.

How much more praise deserv'd thy beauty's use,
If thou couldst answer 'This fair child of mine
Shall sum my count, and make my old excuse,'
Proving his beauty by succession thine!

(Shakespeare, Sonnet 2, lines 8–12)

The recurring theme of the ravages of time on an individual is highlighted in the above lines, whereby the poet reminds the youth of the transience of life. It is almost a harsh reprimand as the addressee is reminded of getting a successor to his earldom. Also, it is not just about finding a progenitor as Shakespeare, in a considerable number of his initial sonnets, stresses on the need to ensure that as the young man ages, his beauty and virtues should remain through his son whom the bard assumes would be equally good looking and with impressive character. There is a sense of urgency and frustration in the poet's tone.

This theme recurs as the bard advises him to get married so that the youth can perpetuate his beauty from one generation to the next. There are well-crafted arguments presented by Shakespeare, one of which is that if the youth does not leave a “copy” of himself, he will deny himself “himself.” Moreover, he insists that “Nature” has only “lent” him this extraordinary gift of looking fabulous, only to pass it down to the next generation.

Unthrifty loveliness, why dost thou spend
Upon thyself thy beauty's legacy?
Nature's bequest gives nothing, but doth lend,
And being frank she lends to those are free:
Then, beauteous niggard, why dost thou abuse
The bounteous largess given thee to give?
Profitless usurer, why dost thou use
So great a sum of sums, yet canst not live?
For having traffic with thyself alone,
Thou of thyself thy sweet self dost deceive:
Then how when nature calls thee to be gone,
What acceptable audit canst thou leave?
Thy unused beauty must be tomb'd with thee,
Which, used, lives th' executor to be.

(Shakespeare, Sonnet 4)

The concern that the poet feels is obvious regarding the young man's reluctance to settle down, and the various arguments and questions posed indicate the effort taken to convince him of doing the appropriate things. Just as a father advises his son in a patient yet convincing manner, the poetic muse is constantly reminded that his celibacy is self-indulgent and irrational.

However, like most relationships, based on the unfolding of the sonnets addressed to the fair youth, the love sentiments keep shifting. What seems at first to be a man who appears perfect

appears to have disappointed the speaker as the sonnets evolve. This situation is apparent in Sonnet 33. Here, Shakespeare effectively manipulates the word “sun” giving it two meanings: firstly, “suns of the world,” meaning human beings, and secondly, “heaven’s sun” which refers to the heat-generating, all-powerful sun.

In this sonnet, the tone is bitter, disappointed, and chiding, although he does not directly blame his addressee who has dropped from his pedestal and is now regarded as a mere ordinary human being who has fallen from grace. The speaker tries to shroud this “lapse” of the youth by arguing that

Yet him for this my love no whit disdaineth;
Suns of the world may stain when heaven’s sun staineth.
(Shakespeare, Sonnet 33, lines 13–14)

Despite the disappointments of the lover’s actions, the speaker testifies to the constancy of his love. The point is that “true love” is sustained despite one of the partners' transgressing. Love as being all-forgiving even when betrayed is the message presented. The poet seems not just to soothe the receiver’s hurt but also his own wounds as he argues that if the mighty sun can be overshadowed and obscured by clouds, a mere mortal can falter, staining his glory.

The Fair Youth sonnet sequence displays deeply meditative and moving expressions of the multitude of emotions resulting in love towards another person; one moment, elevating a person to a sublime blissful feeling of heavenliness, and the next moment taking one to the depths of despair. There are ample instances of supreme expressions of love throughout the sonnet addressed to the Fair Youth. Unlike the other sonneteers of this time, such as Sir Philip Sidney, Samuel Daniel, and Edmund Spenser, Shakespeare's sonnets do not simply idealize love since he presents a pragmatic and realistic attitude toward it.

When considering the sonnets for the young man, one of Shakespeare’s most profound and moving treatise on the theme of love is the seventy-third sonnet. It is a powerful, poignant testimony of enduring love, capable of creating a strong emotional impact on most readers by his masterful use of language and imagery.

That time of year thou mayst in me behold
When yellow leaves, or none, or few, do hang
Upon those boughs which shake against the cold,
Bare ruin’d choirs, where late the sweet birds sang.
In me thou see’st the twilight of such day
As after sunset fadeth in the west;
Which by and by black night doth take away,

Death's second self, that seals up all in rest.
In me thou see'st the glowing of such fire,
That on the ashes of his youth doth lie,
As the death-bed, whereon it must expire,
Consum'd with that which it was nourish'd by.
This thou perceiv'st, which makes thy love more strong,
To love that well, which thou must leave ere long.
(Shakespeare, Sonnet 73)

The poet compares himself to the Autumn season, also considered the twilight period of a person's life, when aging shows its visible signs. Moreover, Autumn is a time that symbolizes the approach of winter, associated with old age and dying in literature. As the speaker feels that he is gradually getting closer to his deathbed, as ominous as the implications are, the metaphors of twilight, black night, glowing fire, and fading sunset all carry an awesome and almost sublime sense of beauty. It also seems as if the Bard is consumed by his love for the youth to such an extent that he is withering away from the effort exerted to sustain the love. Love is an all-consuming human emotion that can impact a person to such an extent that it can rejuvenate one to grant a metaphorical rebirth or lead one to the point of death due to the overwhelming negative impact it has. The power of love is thus truly healing or utterly devastating with the myriad of intangible feelings it creates.

Sadly, in these sonnets, we are reminded that love does expire along with a lover's death. As such, despite triumphantly asserting that time is a slave to love in some of his other sonnets, here, the reality of human bonds is stripped bare as even love is susceptible to the transcendent forces of nature, and no matter what, nature finally triumphs over human beings. Nonetheless, the final rhyming couplet, despite the bittersweet note emanating from the verse, asserts that despite being fully aware of this reality of life and love, and possibly, because of this very fact, mature love between two adults grows with time and gets stronger until the time of permanent parting.

Love, especially in the face of a ravaged lover, is quietly heroic. Indeed, this can be called a universal experience, for it shows us the risk of mortal attachment. Shakespeare's sonnets constantly remind us of our mortality and the inevitability of loss in a relationship, either through aging or death. The transience of life accentuates rather than weakens true love.

However, although one gets the notion that the two lovers will only part when one of them dies, Sonnet 87 relates a sudden breach in the relationship. There is an implication that the lovers have separated:

Farewell! thou art too dear for my possessing,
And like enough thou know'st thy estimate.

(Shakespeare, Sonnet 87, lines 1–2)

Here, the speaker employs an imperative, admonitory tone. The language of law and commerce is used with words such as estimate, charter, bonds, determinate, patent, and wrath used ironically. It is almost as if the poetic persona has assigned a monetary value to their love. Unlike the earlier sonnets, he appears to be more detached and impersonal. This expression depicts the selfish nature of love and its materialistic element. Love is not always an equal give and take between partners, there is imbalance and consequently resentment which could lead to the end of an affair such as this.

The last two lines indicate how the poet feels that the love they shared had been a mere illusion, where both were in a dreamlike state; however, upon waking, the truth dawns upon him that his lover had truly not belonged to him. In fact, he was like a charter that the poet had been given temporarily, but now it is time to return the love to his owner. The love shared which appeared as a spiritually strong connection, is now reduced to a business partnership that has expired.

Sonnet 105 encapsulates significant claims regarding the poets' perspectives of love.

Let not my love be call'd idolatry,
Nor my beloved as an idol show,
Since all alike my songs and praises be
To one, of one, still such, and ever so.
Kind is my love to-day, to-morrow kind,
Still constant in a wondrous excellence;
Therefore my verse to constancy confin'd,
One thing expressing, leaves out difference.
'Fair, kind, and true,' is all my argument,
'Fair, kind, and true,' varying to other words;
And in this change is my invention spent,
Three themes in one, which wondrous scope affords.
Fair, kind, and true, have often liv'd alone,
Which three till now, never kept seat in one.

(Shakespeare, Sonnet 105)

This sonnet highlights three qualities the poet cherishes in a lover: "Fair," meaning attractive; "kind", meaning virtuous; and "true", indicating faithfulness. He says that these qualities are all that matters in a love that is constant and true. It seems that as a writer, it is rare to find all three aspects mentioned in a single human being, but the Fair Youth seems to be a rare individual who holds them.

There is a serious tone adopted throughout the verse, like a justification for any accusation targeted at the poet for idolizing his lover or the emotion of love itself. The poetic persona claims that he has not falsely worshipped his partner or the concept of love, but he does maintain that true love is consistent. Ironically, he breaks his own argument since when considering the sonnets from 1 to 126, we observe the multitude of emotions stemming from love leading to contentment or dissatisfaction. It is this very fact that makes the sonnets so fascinating as they poignantly capture the complexities of human love relationships and the bittersweet nature of the multitude of emotions stemming from love, making it the strongest human sentiment.

The fact that the Fair Youth sonnets are addressed to a man by another man makes their meanings all the more elusive as to this day, scholars argue if there are erotic elements to them or whether this relationship is purely based on a spiritual connection that transcends sexual intimacy. What can be fathomed based on this critical evaluation is that this set of sonnets presents an intricate investigation of love in its broad spectrum of emotions, and as the poet himself states, love is not just depicted as idealized. Shakespeare uses complex and dense language, signifying love in its purest form as in its most devastating form; it is these contradictions and overtones that make these sonnets so fascinating and worthy of study despite it having been written centuries ago and studied extensively by literary scholars.

Not only are these Fair Youth sonnets an innovative and unique treatise on love, but they also serve to deconstruct rigid sexual and gender norms perpetuated during his time. The fact that the male poetic persona addresses a male “lover” is in itself a radical and unconventional move by the poet, which, to this day, appears to put forth different interpretations of gendered identities. This premise alone highlights the geniusness of the poet’s capacity to evade fixed definitions and categorizations of his creative work.

Indeed, the sonnets addressed to a male counterpart are a radical deconstruction of the societal expectations of women living during the Elizabethan era as ones placed on a pedestal due to their ethereal beauty and virtuousness that transcend worldly love infused with lust and volatile sentiments. The fact that the poet seems to think that these prescriptive gender roles are questionable implies a writer capable of transcending societal expectations of gendered roles. The inversion of women’s gendered subjectivity is inverted as the sonnets’ addressee, who is expected to be a female, in this case, turns out to be a male, and notions of feminine beauty are

imbibed in him, in addition to assigning Fair Youth with female virtues such as kindness, fidelity, patience and consistency.

2. *Conscience is born of love: The Dark Lady Sonnets*

When comparing Shakespeare's sonnets directed to a young man as opposed to those he wrote for a "Dark Lady", there is a shift from themes of conventional beauty, immortality and spiritual, idealized love to unconventional attractiveness, mortality and morally complex, sexualized love. In this sonnet collection, there are notable instances of radical diversions from socially accepted artistic conventions and expressions, which will be critically evaluated in the subsequent section of this paper.

The sonnets titled the Dark Lady Sonnets are directed towards a female lover. However, there are noteworthy subversions of the endorsed artistic practices and societal expectations of European-led standards during this period. At the time, Shakespeare's innovative works redefined the literary canon as they were laden with deep psychological complexity that questioned and transgressed male-centric notions of gender and sexuality. These Dark Lady sonnets stand as testimony to this claim. The verses are unlike the religiously oriented, morally themed literature as they are secular and dense with the complexities of the lives that both men and women lead. By refusing to stereotype either men or women, Shakespeare would have stimulated the intellectually alert individuals to think deeper about the patriarchal system that dichotomizes individuals based on socially prescribed norms. The irrationality of doing so, given the complex human temperament, is well captured in the sonnets whether they are addressed to a male or female counterpart.

The sonnets addressed to a woman challenge the Puritan view of women as attractive to men, given their physical appearance and behavior. Physically, women were regarded as beautiful, shaped by Renaissance virtues and social hierarchy that painted a different picture of women of high-ranking positions. These depictions were influenced by Queen Elizabeth I herself. These Elizabethan conceptualizations of female beauty were subverted in the sonnets addressed to the Dark Lady. The most often cited sonnet presented below supports this premise:

My mistress' eyes are nothing like the sun;
Coral is far more red than her lips' red;
If snow be white, why then her breasts are dun;
If hairs be wires, black wires grow on her head.
I have seen roses damasked, red and white,
But no such roses see I in her cheeks;
And in some perfumes is there more delight
Than in the breath that from my mistress reeks.
I love to hear her speak, yet well I know
That music hath a far more pleasing sound;
I grant I never saw a goddess go;
My mistress, when she walks, treads on the ground.
And yet, by heaven, I think my love as rare
As any she belied with false compare.
(Shakespeare, Sonnet 130)

Here, the bard skillfully deconstructs the glorification of the female lover by presenting her as any human being endowed with imperfections. The clichéd and unrealistic standards of female beauty upheld at the time were that a good-looking woman should be fair with blonde hair, eyes that sparkle like the sun, and lips as red as cherries. Instead, the poet's female lover has "black wiry hair" and a "black complexion" (Shakespeare, Sonnet 132).

Several instances in the second sonnet group indicate that the dark lady may, in fact, be non-Caucasian and possibly of African origin. This could be a strong reason why the Bard is torn and frustrated in his depiction of love for the addressee since, at the time, history shows us that there was obvious racial prejudice against Black people. Nonetheless, the poet is drawn to the unconventional beauty of his lover, who is a far cry from the stereotypical standards of beauty that glorify female beauty as a tall, thin, blonde Caucasian woman whose facial features are accentuated by makeup that ensures a pale, powdered complexion and unnaturally red lips. Highlighting physical attractiveness as a noteworthy element in earthly love, the theme is on physical attraction, which, in a pragmatic sense, is also part of the act of falling in love. The last two lines of Sonnet 132 stress that the poetic muse's authentic beauty has enthralled the Bard rather than the idealized, patriarchal version of female beauty. Shakespeare masterfully uses hyperbole to mock the inflated praise instilled upon women who strive to change their appearance to fit the norm.

Apart from focusing on physical attributes leading to attraction, most of the Dark Lady sonnets are dense with sexual connotations and the dilemma faced by a man who yearns for sexual fulfillment but is at the same time tortured by feelings of guilt for engaging in intercourse.

The expense of spirit in a waste of shame
Is lust in action: and till action, lust
Is perjur'd, murderous, bloody, full of blame,
Savage, extreme, rude, cruel, not to trust;
Enjoy'd no sooner but despised straight;
Past reason hunted; and no sooner had,
Past reason hated, as a swallow'd bait,
On purpose laid to make the taker mad:
Mad in pursuit and in possession so;
Had, having, and in quest, to have extreme;
A bliss in proof, and proved, a very woe;
Before, a joy propos'd; behind a dream.
All this the world well knows; yet none knows well
To shun the heaven that leads men to this hell.
(Shakespeare, Sonnet 129)

The reference to lust, which is frowned upon by the Elizabethan society, is presented through the use of paradox. References to 'bliss' that "the action" provides, followed by feelings of 'woe'; the sensation of being in 'heaven' during the sexual intercourse followed by the sensation of being in 'hell' after the sexual act brilliantly juxtaposes the inevitable and biological need for sexual consummation and the socially imposed restrictions against sex outside the institution of marriage. Shakespeare effectively describes how strong sexual arousal can be and how blissful as well, but that these moments are temporary as opposed to the longer, more lasting periods of loathing and guilt that follow. The Dark Lady sonnets capture this contradictory position that places human beings in a state of fluctuation between joy and sorrow in a love that appears cyclic:

Or mine eyes, seeing this, say this is not,
To put fair truth upon so foul a face?
(Shakespeare, Sonnet 137, lines 10 – 11)

The age-old notion that "love is blind" is explained succinctly in the above rhyming couplet as the poet explains how a lover, despite seeing the imperfections of his/her lover, still continues to love the partner anyway. The following sonnet explains this dilemma well:

When my love swears that she is made of truth,
I do believe her though I know she lies,
That she might think me some untutor'd youth,
Unlearned in the world's false subtleties.
Thus vainly thinking that she thinks me young,
Although she knows my days are past the best,
Simply I credit her false-speaking tongue:
On both sides thus is simple truth suppressed:
But wherefore says she not she is unjust?
And wherefore say not I that I am old?
O! love's best habit is in seeming trust,
And age in love, loves not to have years told:
Therefore I lie with her, and she with me,
And in our faults by lies we flatter'd be.
(Shakespeare, Sonnet 138)

The above sonnet reflects on yet another aspect of love: that of deceit. Both lovers are deceitful in the sense that to sustain the relationship they refrain from acknowledging the actual circumstances of their love; the addressee is lying when she says that she is being faithful to her lover and the addresser is lying as he pretends to be a naive young man who does not know that she is straying. The relationship is based on falsehood as they suppress the 'simple truth' and, in spite of all 'lie' to each other as well as 'lie' with each other. By punning on the word

‘lie’, Shakespeare masterfully captures the carnal aspect of love, in which two lovers sacrifice honesty merely for sexual satiation. The sonnet is an eye-opener to other lovers whose relationships are sustained by lies to continue the benefits it offers. However, it also reflects the reality of such relationships that exist to this day.

Often, the Dark Lady is depicted as a seductress who has captured the poetic persona’s interest because she is unconventional not only in terms of her physical attributes that is an antithesis of the societal standards of beauty but also her behaviors are not on par with the normative expectations of the ideal woman who is faithful, passive and subservient. This femme fatale has had such an impact on the poet that he feels that he is dying of desire. In Sonnet 147, Shakespeare writes:

The uncertain sickly appetite to please.
My reason, the physician to my love,
Angry that his prescriptions are not kept,
Hath left me, and I desperate now approve
Desire is death, which physic did except.
(Shakespeare, Sonnet 147, lines 4 – 8)

There is a juxtaposition of reason versus desire. The lover is beyond redemption as he is sick with desire, thus capturing the almost animalistic aspect of sexual desire and the yearning for sexual intimacy that cannot see beyond that of sexual satiation. The mention of desire as ‘death’ figuratively implies that the sexual climax is a kind of death experienced by a person. The final rhyming couplet is accusatory in tone, a typical reaction by patriarchal society to accuse the woman of seducing a man to the point where he loses his senses. Hence, she becomes labeled as ‘dark’, i.e., evil. As Smith (1981) points out, “dark” also implies “moral corruption and unbridled sexuality” (p.50).

For I have sworn thee fair, and thought thee bright,
Who art as black as hell, as dark as night.
(Shakespeare, Sonnet 147, lines 13–14)

The dark lady persona is a far cry from the depiction of women at the time, who were often presented as elusive, elegant, and asexual. Instances of such depictions can be seen in Sidney’s Stella, Constable’s Diana, and Daniel’s Delia, all famous poets of the Elizabethan era. Instead, this relationship appears almost misogynistic as despite the obvious torture experienced by the speaker, he still keeps yearning for his lover knowing her dark nature, which could imply ‘dark’ deeds as well. Love itself is not painted as either white or black, as its multilayered representations cover its emotional and physical aspects. Clearly, love is not idealized in

Shakespeare's Dark Lady sonnets as in the puritan world of courtly love: evidently, it is too ephemeral and complex to be defined.

3. Concluding Remarks

The fact that the bard radically dismantles traditional notions of what 'true love' should be as opposed to what it is in real-life contexts is a radical move at the time. Not only that, these sonnets masterfully capture the emotional and physical aspects of adult love by establishing its fleeting nature, whereby at one moment what could be perceived as sublime emotions could turn into uncontrollable desire. Shakespeare also highlights how even in a single relationship between two lovers, the feelings change and that love brings emotions such as joy, pain, ecstasy, despair, anger, desire, contentment, jealousy, resignation, bewilderment, and the list goes on. The fact that Shakespeare captures all of these nuanced manifestations of love substantiates the claim that Shakespeare's sonnets are a rich, radical, honest, and thought-provoking treatise on the theme of love between two consenting adults. These sonnets capture timeless emotions and experiences perpetuated by this concept of love, thus giving his sonnets a relevance that transcends spatial and temporal restrictions of human existence.

Shakespeare, through his sonnets, presents a highly sophisticated understanding of the concept of love in its myriad forms: romantic, platonic, and carnal, all of which depict the enduring appeal of love as being an indefinable and mysterious expression that cannot be defined in standard terms. The lasting appeal of these sonnets, with their radical dismantling of socially expected notions of love, appeals even to the contemporary world, giving them a timeless value. Further studies exploring the historical context in which the sonnets were written and their hidden as well as broader implications within Renaissance literature and even beyond could shed more light on this dense literary sonnet sequence.

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