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Shakespeare's sonnets

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Symbols

posted Aug 10, 2013, 8:29 AM by alaa hagag [**updated Aug 10, 2013, 8:29 AM**]

Flowers and Trees

Flowers and trees appear throughout the sonnets to illustrate the passage of time, the transience of life, the aging process, and beauty. Rich, lush foliage symbolizes youth, whereas barren trees symbolize old age and death, often in the same poem, as in Sonnet 12. Traditionally, roses signify romantic love, a symbol Shakespeare employs in the sonnets, discussing their attractiveness and fragrance in relation to the young man. Sometimes Shakespeare compares flowers and weeds to contrast beauty and ugliness. In these comparisons, marred, rotten flowers are worse than weeds—that is, beauty that turns rotten from bad character is worse than initial ugliness. Giddy with love, elsewhere the speaker compares blooming flowers to the beauty of the young man, concluding in Sonnets 98 and 99 that flowers received their bloom and smell from him. The sheer ridiculousness of this statement—flowers smell sweet for chemical and biological reasons—underscores the hyperbole and exaggeration that plague typical sonnets.

Stars

Shakespeare uses stars to stand in for fate, a common poetic **trope**, but also to explore the nature of free will. Many sonneteers resort to employing fate, symbolized by the stars, to prove that their love is permanent and predestined. In contrast, Shakespeare's speaker claims that he relies on his eyes, rather than on the hands of fate, to make decisions. Using his eyes, the speaker "reads" that the young man's good fortune and beauty shall pass to his children, should he have them. During Shakespeare's time, people generally believed in astrology, even as scholars were making great gains in astronomy and cosmology, a metaphysical system for ordering the universe. According to Elizabethan astrology, a cosmic order determined the place of everything in the universe, from planets and stars to people. Although humans had some free

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will, the heavenly spheres, with the help of God, predetermined fate. In Shakespeare's Sonnet 25, the speaker acknowledges that he has been unlucky in the stars but lucky in love, thereby removing his happiness from the heavenly bodies and transposing it onto the human body of his beloved.

Weather and the Seasons

Shakespeare employed the **pathetic fallacy**, or the attribution of human characteristics or emotions to elements in nature or inanimate objects, throughout his plays. In the sonnets, the speaker frequently employs the pathetic fallacy, associating his absence from the young man to the freezing days of December and the promise of their reunion to a pregnant spring. Weather and the seasons also stand in for human emotions: the speaker conveys his sense of foreboding about death by likening himself to autumn, a time in which nature's objects begin to decay and ready themselves for winter, or death. Similarly, despite the arrival of "proud-pied April" (2) in Sonnet 98, the speaker still feels as if it were winter because he and the young man are apart. The speaker in Sonnet 18, one of Shakespeare's most famous poems, begins by rhetorically asking the young man, "Shall I compare thee to a summer's day?" (1). He spends the remainder of the poem explaining the multiple ways in which the young man is superior to a summer day, ultimately concluding that while summer ends, the young man's beauty lives on in the permanence of poetry.

Motifs

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Art vs. Time

Shakespeare, like many sonneteers, portrays time as an enemy of love. Time destroys love because time causes beauty to fade, people to age, and life to end. One common convention of sonnets in general is to flatter either a beloved or a patron by promising immortality through verse. As long as readers read the poem, the object of the poem's love will remain alive. In Shakespeare's Sonnet 15, the speaker talks of being "in war with time" (13): time causes the young man's beauty to fade, but the speaker's verse shall entomb the young man and keep him beautiful. The speaker begins by pleading with time in another sonnet, yet he ends by taunting time, confidently asserting that his verse will counteract time's ravages. From our contemporary vantage point, the speaker was correct, and art has beaten time: the young man remains young since we continue to read of his youth in Shakespeare's sonnets.

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Through art, nature and beauty overcome time. Several sonnets use the seasons to symbolize the passage of time and to show that everything in nature—from plants to people—is mortal. But nature creates beauty, which poets capture and render immortal in their verse. Sonnet 106 portrays the speaker reading poems from the past and recognizing his beloved's beauty portrayed therein. The speaker then suggests that these earlier poets were prophesizing the future beauty of the young man by describing the beauty of their contemporaries. In other words, past poets described the beautiful people of their day and, like Shakespeare's speaker, perhaps urged these beautiful people to procreate and so on, through the poetic ages, until the birth of the young man portrayed in Shakespeare's sonnets. In this way—that is, as beautiful people of one generation produce more beautiful people in the subsequent generation and as all this beauty is written about by poets—nature, art, and beauty triumph over time.

Stopping the March Toward Death

Growing older and dying are inescapable aspects of the human condition, but Shakespeare's sonnets give suggestions for halting the progress toward death. Shakespeare's speaker spends a lot of time trying to convince the young man to cheat death by having children. In Sonnets 1–17, the speaker argues that the young man is too beautiful to die without leaving behind his replica, and the idea that the young man has a duty to procreate becomes the dominant motif of the first several sonnets. In Sonnet 3, the speaker continues his urgent prodding and concludes, “Die single and thine image dies with thee” (14). The speaker's words aren't just the flirtatious ramblings of a smitten man: Elizabethan England was rife with disease, and early death was common. Producing children guaranteed the continuation of the species. Therefore, falling in love has a social benefit, a benefit indirectly stressed by Shakespeare's sonnets. We might die, but our children—and the human race—shall live on.

The Significance of Sight

Shakespeare used images of eyes throughout the sonnets to emphasize other themes and motifs, including children as an antidote to death, art's struggle to overcome time, and the painfulness of love. For instance, in several poems, the speaker urges the young man to admire himself in the mirror. Noticing and admiring his own beauty, the speaker argues, will encourage the young man to father a child. Other sonnets link writing and painting with sight: in Sonnet 24, the speaker's eye becomes a pen or paintbrush that captures the young man's beauty and imprints it on the blank page of the speaker's heart. But our loving eyes can also distort our sight, causing us to misperceive reality. In the sonnets addressed to the dark lady, the speaker criticizes his eyes for causing him to fall in love with a beautiful but duplicitous woman. Ultimately, Shakespeare uses eyes to act as a warning: while our eyes allow us to perceive beauty, they sometimes get so captivated by beauty that they cause us to misjudge character and other attributes not visible to the naked eye.

Readers' eyes are as significant in the sonnets as the speaker's eyes. Shakespeare encourages his

readers to see by providing vivid visual descriptions. One sonnet compares the young man's beauty to the glory of the rising sun, while another uses the image of clouds obscuring the sun as a metaphor for the young man's faithlessness and still another contrasts the beauty of a rose with one rotten spot to warn the young man to cease his sinning ways. Other poems describe bare trees to symbolize aging. The sonnets devoted to the dark lady emphasize her coloring, noting in particular her black eyes and hair, and Sonnet 130 describes her by noting all the colors she does not possess. Stressing the visual helps Shakespeare to heighten our experience of the poems by giving us the precise tools with which to imagine the metaphors, similes, and descriptions contained therein.

themes

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Different Types of Romantic Love

Modern readers associate the sonnet form with romantic love and with good reason: the first sonnets written in thirteenth- and fourteenth-century Italy celebrated the poets' feelings for their beloveds and their patrons. These sonnets were addressed to stylized, lionized women and dedicated to wealthy noblemen, who supported poets with money and other gifts, usually in return for lofty praise in print. Shakespeare dedicated his sonnets to "Mr. W. H.," and the identity of this man remains unknown. He dedicated an earlier set of poems, *Venus and Adonis* and *Rape of Lucrece*, to Henry Wriothesly, earl of Southampton, but it's not known what Wriothesly gave him for this honor. In contrast to tradition, Shakespeare addressed most of his sonnets to an unnamed young man, possibly Wriothesly. Addressing sonnets to a young man was unique in Elizabethan England. Furthermore, Shakespeare used his sonnets to explore different types of love between the young man and the speaker, the young man and the dark lady, and the dark lady and the speaker. In his sequence, the speaker expresses passionate concern for the young man, praises his beauty, and articulates what we would now call homosexual desire. The woman of Shakespeare's sonnets, the so-called dark lady, is earthy, sexual, and faithless—characteristics in direct opposition to lovers described in other sonnet sequences, including *Astrophil and Stella*, by Sir Philip Sidney, a contemporary of Shakespeare, who were praised for their angelic demeanor, virginity, and steadfastness. Several sonnets also probe the nature of love, comparing the idealized love found in poems with the messy, complicated love found in real life.

The Dangers of Lust and Love

In Shakespeare's sonnets, falling in love can have painful emotional and physical consequences. Sonnets 127–152, addressed to the so-called dark lady, express a more overtly erotic and physical love than the sonnets addressed to the young man. But many sonnets warn readers about the dangers of lust and love. According to some poems, lust causes us to mistake sexual desire for true love, and love itself causes us to lose our powers of perception. Several sonnets warn about the dangers of lust, claiming that it turns humans “savage, extreme, rude, cruel” (4), as in Sonnet 129. The final two sonnets of Shakespeare's sequence obliquely imply that lust leads to venereal disease. According to the conventions of romance, the sexual act, or “making love,” expresses the deep feeling between two people. In his sonnets, however, Shakespeare portrays making love not as a romantic expression of sentiment but as a base physical need with the potential for horrible consequences.

Several sonnets equate being in love with being in a pitiful state: as demonstrated by the poems, love causes fear, alienation, despair, and physical discomfort, not the pleasant emotions or euphoria we usually associate with romantic feelings. The speaker alternates between professing great love and professing great worry as he speculates about the young man's misbehavior and the dark lady's multiple sexual partners. As the young man and the dark lady begin an affair, the speaker imagines himself caught in a love triangle, mourning the loss of his friendship with the man and love with the woman, and he laments having fallen in love with the woman in the first place. In Sonnet 137, the speaker personifies love, calls him a simpleton, and criticizes him for removing his powers of perception. It was love that caused the speaker to make mistakes and poor judgments. Elsewhere the speaker calls love a disease as a way of demonstrating the physical pain of emotional wounds. Throughout his sonnets, Shakespeare clearly implies that love hurts. Yet despite the emotional and physical pain, like the speaker, we continue falling in love. Shakespeare shows that falling in love is an inescapable aspect of the human condition—indeed, expressing love is part of what makes us human.

Real Beauty vs. Clichéd Beauty

To express the depth of their feelings, poets frequently employ hyperbolic terms to describe the objects of their affections. Traditionally, sonnets transform women into the most glorious creatures to walk the earth, whereas patrons become the noblest and bravest men the world has ever known. Shakespeare makes fun of the convention by contrasting an idealized woman with a real woman. In Sonnet 130, Shakespeare directly engages—and skewers—clichéd concepts of beauty. The speaker explains that his lover, the dark lady, has wires for hair, bad breath, dull cleavage, a heavy step, and pale lips. He concludes by saying that he loves her all the more precisely because he loves *her* and not some idealized, false version. Real love, the sonnet implies, begins when we accept our lovers for what they are as well as what they are not. Other sonnets explain that because anyone can use artful means to make himself or herself more

attractive, no one is really beautiful anymore. Thus, since anyone can become beautiful, calling someone beautiful is no longer much of a compliment.

The Responsibilities of Being Beautiful

Shakespeare portrays beauty as conveying a great responsibility in the sonnets addressed to the young man, Sonnets 1–126. Here the speaker urges the young man to make his beauty immortal by having children, a theme that appears repeatedly throughout the poems: as an attractive person, the young man has a responsibility to procreate. Later sonnets demonstrate the speaker, angry at being cuckolded, lashing out at the young man and accusing him of using his beauty to hide immoral acts. Sonnet 95 compares the young man's behavior to a "canker in the fragrant rose" (2) or a rotten spot on an otherwise beautiful flower. In other words, the young man's beauty allows him to get away with bad behavior, but this bad behavior will eventually distort his beauty, much like a rotten spot eventually spreads. Nature gave the young man a beautiful face, but it is the young man's responsibility to make sure that his soul is worthy of such a visage.

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