



TREATMENT OF TIME AND LOVE IN SHAKESPEARE'S SONNETS

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ABSTRACT

“And yet to times in hope my verse shall stand,
Praising thy worth, despite his cruel hand” (Sonnet No.-60)¹

William Shakespeare is the light house of English Literature. He is the greatest of all the dramatists and poets of English literature in the world. His sonnets, one hundred and fifty four in number, are written after the prevailing Elizabethan fashion, in sequence and having the theme of love revolving around a beautiful lady love or loved ones.

Shakespeare sonnets are mostly autobiographical and addressed to his male patron friend, Mr. W.H, the Earl of Southampton and a nobleman of splendid beauty and accomplishments. And last 26 sonnets of Shakespeare have been addressed to a lady, mostly Mary Fiton, called as dark lady, not conspicuous for her fidelity and purely opportunist betraying the poet and later transferred her affections from him to his friend who too thus betrayed Shakespeare's trust in him.

Shakespeare ...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”....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.

“In spite of the welter of emotions that the sonnets represent, Shakespeare is never deficient in his artistry. He is too much of a real poet for that for that. His art is an intuition, where idea and expression are born simultaneously each fitting the other precisely. The mellow and rounded melody of his verse, the pensive sweetness of his lines, the mellifluous felicity of his diction-proclaim him to be the master artist.”^{1A}

Now present paper will present the theme of time and love in Shakespearean sonnets that are prevailing in most of his sonnets.

Shakespearean sonnets have the great Elizabethan theme-the omnipotence of verse and its capacity to face and stop the ravages of time:

“So long as men can breathe or eyes can see,
So long lives this, this gives life to thee.” (Sonnet no.-18)³

KEYWORDS: Omnipotence, ravage, affection, invincible, shattered, predominant, destruction, immortalize, nobility, beauty, disappointed, destroyer, bloody-tyrant etc.

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Shakespeare believes that the time is a very destructive force. It is so powerful that it can decay and destroy every mortal things of the world. Nothing is out from the clutch of time and its shadow.

“And every fair from fair sometimes declines,

By chance or nature’s changing course untrimmed.”⁴ (Sonnet No.-18)

But at the same time he also asserts the omnipotence and invincible power of love. He has the opinion that love has permanent and strong power to combat the ravages of time. Love is never shaken or shattered by adverse forces or under the pressure of circumstances. True love always remains devoted and steady and is the inspiration of life.

“.....Love is not love,

Which alters when it alteration finds,

Or bends with the remover to remove.” (Sonnet no.-116)⁵

In this scenario, Saraswathy R. Murthy rightly said, “The theme of love is certainly the predominant theme of the sonnets of Shakespeare. This theme is basic spirit of all sonnets of him. His treatment of love has something divine quality”. His love is ideal love and surpasses the love of Dante for his Beatrice and the love of Petrarch for his Laura. Nor could Mrs. Browning, in her sonnets, written much later and addressed to her husband, equal Shakespeare’s ardor and fervor.”⁵

It is classical as well as Elizabethan concept that the poetry or verse preserves against the ravages or destruction of time. Shakespeare has used this concept at a new height even for his male patron friend. He dedicates and addresses his loving friend, Mr. W.H, and praises his goodness, nobility and beauty. It is the firm belief of the poet that his sonnets have inspirational and immortalizing power so he is trying to immortalize the glory of his friend as well as love in a mortal world which is constantly threatened with the wrecks of time. “With utmost poetic earnestness, he brings out in such sonnets the conflict between the invincible power of time and the unchanging devotion to love and vindicates the power of his art to stand against the blow of time.”⁶

Even Spenser, the poets’ poet, sings the same melody-

“My verse your virtues rare shall eternize

And in the heavens write your glorious name,

Where when as death shall all the world subdue

Our love shall live, and later life renew.”⁷

The poet admits the strength of time as well as he also accepts the predominance of love and its beautiful experience in life-

“To give away yourself, keep yourself still.” (Sonnet no. - 16)⁸

“One of the characteristics of Shakespeare’s treatment of love in his sonnets is that he has mostly refrained from the conventional and extreme sanctification of the sentiment of love into a sort of dim abstraction. He has his feet firmly planted on the earth, through his vision soars for above the clouds.”⁹

The concept of praising masculine beauty in verse was derived from Greek and Latin literature. Later it became a fashion in Europe particularly England in the Renaissance. The poet compares the beauty of his friend with the transient beauty of nature. The poet opines that verse is eternal and poetry will immortalize his friend. This is superb handling of Platonic Idea of love.

This idea of immortality for their verse was a commonplace with the sonnet writer of the time of Elizabethan age.

“Eternal numbers to outlive long tale.” (Sonnet No. 38)¹⁰

Shakespeare, the lover of ideal beauty, thinks that his friend is incomparable to any earthly things. He opines that his friend’s beauty is eternal so Time will be unable to engulf the originality of his friend. These will gladden and console human heart to think that love is noble and beauty is as exquisite as the poet has depicted. Therefore, the beauty of his friend, his nobility, goodness, virtuousness, his name and fame will grow with time though his mortal body will die.

“Nor lose possession of that fair thou ow’st,

Nor shall death brag thou wand'rst in his shade,
When in eternal lines to time thou grow'st," (Sonnet No.-18)¹¹

Shakespeare uses the word "Time" seventy-eight times in the sonnets from 1 to 126. The poet is disappointed that he has no control over as the time entails mortality, memory, inevitability and change. But the poet is hopeful due to his verse and tries to conquer the time. At times it seems that the speaker is fighting a futile battle against time as:

"And every fair from fair sometimes declines'
By chance or nature's changing course untrimmed" (Sonnet No.-18)¹²

"Shakespeare often personifies time. It is said that Time is the fourth character in his sonnets. But the time is the great villain in Shakespeare's sonnets-drama. He describes time as a "bloody tyrant" (Sonnet No.-16), "devouring" and "swift-footed" (Sonnet No.-19). Time is making Shakespeare old and near "hideous night" (Sonnet No.-12) or death. And time will eventually rob the beauty of the young friend and noble patron. This treatment of time is prevalent throughout the sonnets, and it takes many different forms, sometimes referring to the destructive power of time in general, other times focusing on the effects of time on a specific character in the sonnets such as the narrator or the fair lord."⁸

The same power of Time has been manifested in the poem "To His Coy Mistress" by Andrew Marvell who says that he can hear the sound of the chariot-wheels of approaching of death or time which will take him into a region of infinite and dead silence where everything like beauty, love, vigor and honor etc will be reduced to dust.

"But at my back I always hear
Time's winged chariot hurrying near;
And yonder all before us lie
Desert of vast eternity
Thy beauty shall no more be found,
Nor, in thy marble vault, shall sound
My echoing song: then worms shall try
That long preserved virginity:
And your quaint honor turns to dust;
And into ashes all my lust."¹³

Time has been presented as a great destroyer in Shakespeare sonnets. Time is very strong. It is the greatest enemy of man and nature. Many of his sonnets clearly exhibit the power of time that kills all worldly things. Everything- the youth, beauty of human beings or beauty of natural things comes under the shadow of "bloody tyrant time"

In sonnet no.-15, Shakespeare says that Time would change his friend's day of youth to night which is dark. According to the poet, his poetry is at war with time because of his love for his friend, and that what Time would take from his friend his poetry would restore to his friend.

"And all in war with Time for love of you,
As he takes from you, I engraft you new." (Sonnet No.-15)¹⁴

Shakespeare affirms that Time is very powerful but have also believes that love is more powerful than time. He foretells that his verse would forever continue to be read and recited and would thus renew the name, fame, beauty and nobility of friend in spite of the cruel hand of time:

"And yet to times in hope, my verse shall stand,
Praising thy worth, despite his cruel hand." (Sonnet No.-60)¹⁵

The power of time can be seen in the sonnet "Shall I Compare Thee to a summer's Day" (No. 18). The sonnet starts with an interrogative sentence. The poet thinks that the beauty of his friend is more pleasant and temperate than summer's beauty. But here the time hangs on each action, things and events. In the sonnet the poet clearly states the power of time.

"Rough winds do shake the darling buds of May."

And summer's lease hath all too short a date:"

The season of summer is momentary and unpredictable. In summer season, rough winds blow and shake the much-loved buds of May. The image displays at the most delicate and tender care for the fragility of beauty, not just the beauty of buds. Here the time in form of rough winds destroys the beautiful buds and wins over nature.

At times the sun, the eye of heaven, shines very brightly and often it is overcast in the morning. But as the time passes, it is also dimmed of its gold complexion. Therefore, we can see that everything-'darling buds of May', 'summer's lease' and 'golden complexion' of the sun are subjected to decay in the powerful hands of time.

"And every fair from fair sometimes declines;

By chance or nature's changing course untrimmed" (Sonnet No.-18)¹⁶

Harsh and strong winds of summer spoil the blossoms of May. Summer's span is too short. The use of the word 'lease' reminds us of the fact that every beautiful thing remains so for a limited period of time only. After some time beauty of things will be forcibly taken away by chance or nature's changing course. So, here the 'gold complexion' of the sun even dims and "every fair from fair sometimes declines."

In the first seventeen sonnets which are called the procreation sonnets, Shakespeare makes an earnest request to his beloved fair lord to find a woman to bear his child so that his beauty might be preserved for posterity. In all these seventeen sonnets, he presents the time as a powerful instrument and force. He establishes this fact through much imagery like military winter and the sun. In sonnets no. 2, the poet urges his friend to get married and beget a child who would inherit his beauty and keep it alive. If the friend does not marry, the time will snatch his beauty and in due course his traces of beauty will be vanished.

"When forty winters shall besiege thy brow,

And dig deep trenches in thy beauty's field,

Thy youth's proud livery so gazed on now,

Will be a tattered weed of small worth held." (Sonnet No.-02)¹⁷

Again in sonnet no.-5, the poet is following the same trait and establishes the supremacy of time. He says that time which operating gently, brings beauty into existence, and performs also as a destroyer of that beauty. So, flowers fade away and lose their beauty in due time. But the beauty of flowers can be preserved by extracting their essence in a liquid form in a glass of wall of glass, i.e-bottle.

In sonnet no.-13, the poet, once again, displays that time will overtake the life of man and puts an end to a man's course of life in this world.

"Against the stormy gusts of winter's day'

And barren rage of death's eternal cold?" (Sonnet No.-13)¹⁸

The supremacy of time, once again, is established in sonnet no.-60. The sonnet opens up with a kind of understanding of the Renaissance idea of the power time possesses-"Like as waves make towards the pebbled shore, so do our minutes hasten to their end."

This sonnet," Like as the waves..." (No.60) is resonant with the poet's presentation of the devastating power of time to change the phenomenal world and its beauty. The time tramples under its foot everything of the world. The time is armed with a scythe that cuts down everything in a merciless manner. The cruel hand of time allows nothing to stand against "his scythe to mow".

"Time doth transfix the flourish set on youth,

And delves the parallels in beauty's brow;

Feeds on the rarities of nature's truth,

And nothing stands but for his scythe to mow." (Sonnet No.-60)¹⁹

Sonnet no. 60 is considered as one of Shakespeare's masterpiece because it displays the universal fact that time is creator as well as destroyer. Every minute of our lives, we are close to our end that is our ultimate destination. In the sonnet, time is symbolized by concrete images.

"Like as the waves make towards the pebbled shore'

So do our minutes hasten to their end,
Each changing place with that, which goes before,
In sequent toil all forwards do contend." (Sonnet no.-60) ²⁰

It seems that the poet is inspired by **SPENSER'S** "One Day Wrote Her Name" where he says that time as a sea waves come and wash away the mortal things even the name of his lady-love written on the sea-beach. Nothing stands permanent before the time.

"One day I wrote her name upon the strand,
But came the waves and washed it away:
Again I wrote it with a second hand,
But came the tide and made my pains his pray." ²¹

In sonnet no.-64, Shakespeare is very disappointed to see the damaged and dilapidated monuments and tombs of famous people. Those tombs and monuments have suffered heavily damage with due course of time. Even the hungry ocean devours the sea land and brass monuments is subjected to decay by the destructive fury of death. The poet is afraid to loss his friend also because nothing stands permanent before time or death.

"Ruin hath taught me thus to ruminare,
That Time will come and take my love away.
This thought is as a death which cannot choose
But weep to have, that which it fears to lose." (Sonnet No.-64) ²²

Shakespeare also inter-related the old age and death in line of theme of time. He believes that the old age will have ruinous effect even on his friend's beauty and charm. He assumes that his face which was most "gracious" in the past, will be "beated and chopt with tanned centiquity." The poet says that his friend will be crushed by time's "injurious hand" and his friend's brow will be filled with "lines and wrinkles."

In the sonnets no. 65 the poet also says that nothing withstands time's ravages. Even brass status and memorials, marble tombs and other monuments are subjected to decay and even extinction. Nor is the boundless sea exempted from the ravages of time and rocks and steel gates are not too strong to withstand the destructive blow of time.

"Since brass, nor stone, nor earth, nor boundless sea,
But sad mortality o'ersways their power," (Sonnet no.-65) ²³

The time also has ruinous effect on the personal life of the poet. As the time passes, he became old. The poet speaks sorrowfully to his fair noble lord friend that one day he will be an old man. It is as if he will be in the autumn of life. Autumn is the season of sadness and desolation. The sight of autumnal decay reminds the poet of the ruined cathedrals where once the priests, choirs and birds used to visit and sing as well as performed the church services. So, the time will snatch beauty, strength and music from his life. He will be in twilight of his life that comes after the sunset and gradually loses himself in the darkness of the night, death's second self.

"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 ruined choirs, where late the sweet birds sang,
In me thou seest the twilight of such day,
As after sunset fadeth in the west."

(Sonnet no.-73) ²⁴

It is true that Shakespeare admits that the mighty and merciless power of time. It takes away all that humanity loves and possesses. But the poet is also optimist and believes that the impact of time can be averted by the love and power of his verse. He feels frenzy by the thought of love that sustains and raises his spirit. True love is like a fixed mark which stands firm against the assaults of storms and gales on the sea. True love is also like pole star which remains ever in its position, shedding its light for the guidance of the mariners

in the dark sea. Love is not Time's fool. Time which mercilessly destroys everything-rosy lips and cheeks etc in its triumphant march, cannot kill love. He is assured that love "alters not with his brief hours and weeks" but bears it out even to the "edge of doom."

"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." (Sonnet No.-116) ²⁵

Time's "hours and weeks" are brief compared to love's longevity.

"Ars Longa, Vita Brevis"- this famous saying highlights the thought "Art is long, life is short." Shakespeare knows that human life is as much subjected to mutability. But the fair friend of the poet will overcome the ravages of time as immortality will be conferred on him through verse. His friend has some best quality. His beauty is superior as his beauty is mixed up with profound love of the poet that will not be subjected to the decay.

"But thy eternal summer shall not fade,
Nor lose possession of that fair thou ow'st" (Sonnet No.-18) ²⁶

Shakespeare believes in the power of his verse to preserve his love for his friend. He assures that his eternal beauty shall never decay. The poet, following the Horatian and Ovidian theme of immortality through verse, presents his friend as metaphorical existence through his evergreen lines immortalizing his love in a mortal world by means of his great art.

"Nor shall death brag thou wand'rest in his shade,
When in eternal lines to time thou grow'st." (Sonnet No.-18) ²⁷

The poet accepts that his friend's beauty is superior to all natural elements-"a summer's day", "darlings buds of May" and even "the brightness of the Sun, i.e. the eye of heaven." He believes that his friend has an eternal summer which will never decay.

"But thy eternal summer shall not fade.
Nor lose possession of fair thou ow'st." (Sonnet No.-18) ²⁸

The same view is reflected in the sonnet 123 in which the poet directly addresses Time and vows to defeat it-

"No! Time, thou shall not boast that I do change
Thy pyramids built up with newer might" (Sonnet No.-123) ²⁹

The poet announces to be an ideal character that is not subjected to the changes which Time brings about. He assures to be loyal to his friend and remain faithful to him, despite the Time will devour each thing.

"This I do vow and this shall ever be,
I will be true despite thy scythe and thee." (Sonnet No.-123) ³⁰

Again in the Sonnet no.-60, Shakespeare expects that his sonnet will stand long along with the name of his friend in the times to come and preserve his beauty and his worth in spite of the cruel hand of time.

"And yet to times in hope my verse shall stand,
Praising thy worth, despite his cruel hand."
(Sonnet No.-60) ³¹

The poet beautifies and romanticizes his friend and feels confident due to deep love of friend for him that his friend's love will become stronger. Thus he will love the poet more and more.

"This thou perceiv'st, which makes thy love more strong." (Sonnet No.-73) ³²

The very hope that his old age and decadents will compel his friend to love him more has a positive and consolatory effect on him.

Again and again in many sonnets, Shakespeare brings a contrast between time and love. He establishes the universal fact that time is invincible, destructive and powerful as well as nothing is spare from the shadow of time. In the mean time, love is stronger than time because it can face the ravages of time and even triumphs over it.

Conclusion

The theme of love is certainly the predominant theme of Shakespeare's sonnets. His treatment of love that was inspired by the Renaissance poetic tradition was the mainly the product of a new orientation by Shakespeare to the conventional poetic tradition. He displays his love for his male friend in adoration and worship as his friend is "truth dyed in beauty." The poet wants that his friend should be ever fresh and evergreen in the minds and heart of people, so he makes his friend the nucleus of his sonnets to celebrate his nobility and beauty. He hopes that sonnets composed by him would preserve his friend's memory forever because they enshrine the friend's youth and beauty and would be read by coming generation.

"When in eternal lines to time thou grow'st
So long as men can breathe or eyes can see,
So long lives this, and this gives life to thee." (Sonnet no.-18) ³³

Or

"And yet to times in hope my verse shall stand,
Praising thy worth, despite his cruel hand." (Sonnet no.-60) ³⁴

Finally Shakespeare says, "If this be error and upon me proved, I never writ, nor no man ever loved." These strongly worded lines, which suggest that his belief in the poetry seems to have done here, by the recovery from the depths of depiction and by the final recognition of the true nature of love. Like all great understanding of the human being Shakespeare's conclusion are generalized and universal and verifiable with every new reading." ³⁵

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