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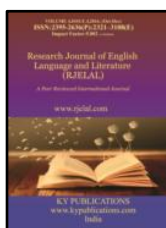
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## TREATMENT OF TIME IN SHAKESPEARE'S SONNETS

ISHFAQ HUSSAIN BHAT

Ex Student, Department of English, University of Kashmir, Thune, Kangan, Ganderbal, Jammu and Kashmir.

[Eshfaqbhat786@gmail.com](mailto:Eshfaqbhat786@gmail.com)



### ABSTRACT

William Shakespeare occupies a central and unique position in the world literature. His works earned him an international acclaim and acceptance as the best playwright in the history of English literature. Shakespeare's Sonnets have become very popular with the passage of time. His sonnets deal with themes like, time, love, beauty, mortality, rivalry, procreation, etc. However, time and its destruction is the most predominant theme of his Sonnets. Throughout the Sonnets, Shakespeare portrays Time as a destructive force that destroys everything, even the strongest things decay with the passage of time. Shakespeare states that there is no power that can arrest the fleeting course of Time and, thus, stop it from destruction. The paper focuses on the theme of Time in Shakespeare's Sonnets and also tries to suggest some ways to defy the "swift-footed" Time.

**Keywords:** Time, beauty, marriage, love, destruction, mortality, immortality.

"So long as amen can breathe or eyes can see,  
So long lives this and this gives life to thee."

(Sonnet 18, line 13-14)

### Background

"Elizabethan mind was much influenced by the philosophy of Plato who assured it that there was a permanent and eternal Being which was the reality; on the other hand, the change, mutability, was only phenomenal, illusory and unreal. The *daimonic* Plato told the Elizabethan poets of the permanence, but they saw only mutability all around. Therefore, they questioned themselves: could mutable things be mad eternal? And they found the answer: only in art could beings be eternal...Shakespeare was also certainly and morbidly aware of the destructiveness of Time. In Sonnets 12, 15-19, 39, 60, 63-65, 100, 115-116, 123-124 and 126, and some other sonnets, he has expressed his utter concern over the corroding action of Time over the beauty of his friend, the Fair Youth." (Sarkar, 78-79)

Shakespeare's Sonnets comprise a collection of 154 poems replete with themes like love, beauty, mortality, time and its destructiveness. Scholars have classified these Sonnets into three categories. Sonnet 1-126 are addressed to a young man, the Fair Youth; 126-152 to a mysterious lady probably, Shakespeare's mistress, popularly known as the Dark Lady of Shakespeare's Sonnets; and the last two sonnets are fairly free adaptations of two classical Greek poems. The Sonnets addressed to the Fair Youth have further been divided on the basis of the recurring theme: the poet urging his friend to marry and have children. These sonnets are 17 in number and have been classified as Procreation Sonnets. In these sonnets, the poet urges his friend to marry and have children, thereby passing on his exceptional beauty to the coming generations. Sonnets 18-126 express poet's love for the Fair Youth.

G. W. Knight found that Time and Death are recurrent themes both of the plays and the Sonnets

of Shakespeare. In his *The Mutual Flame*, Knight wrote: 'The Sonnets approach time in the manner of Troilus and Cressida, where...it is a recurring concept. Throughout Shakespeare's later works...'Time' and 'Death' are central problems, pushing towards solution in Anthony and Cleopatra and the Final plays...This whole progress is adumbrated in the Sonnets." (Sarkar, 82)

Shakespeare's Sonnets are replete with the theme of Time. As we go through the sonnets it seems to us that the narrator is haughtily preoccupied with the passing of time and everything that it entails, including mortality, memory, inevitability, and change. He is distressed over such things that he has no control over time, but still he tries to conquer the time. At times it seems that the speaker is fighting a futile battle against *time* itself. 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. Shakespeare describes time as "bloody tyrant" (Sonnet 16), "devouring" and "swift-footed" (Sonnet 19). And time will eventually rob the beauty of the young man. This treatment of time is prevalent throughout the Sonnets, and it takes many forms, sometimes referring to the destructive power of time in general, sometimes focusing on the effects of time on a specific character in the Sonnets.<sup>1</sup>

#### SONNET 12

Theme of the destructiveness of time gets artistic manifestation in Sonnet 12. As this sonnet is a part of the Procreation Sonnet sequence, the poet asks his friend to conquer time by getting married. The poet comments on the sterility of bachelorhood and recommends marriage and children as a means of immortality. The poet states that time destroys everything, he gives various examples of the destructiveness of time, "lofty trees barren of leaves," "sable curls all silver'd with white."

"When I do count the clock that tells the time,  
And see the brave day sunk in hideous night;  
When I behold the violet past prime,  
And sable curls all silver'd with white;  
When lofty trees I see barren of leaves  
Which erst from heat did canopy the herd,  
And summer's green all girded up in sheaves  
Borne on the bier with white and bristly beard,

Then of thy beauty do I question make,  
That thou among the wastes of time must go,  
Since sweets and beauties do themselves  
forsake  
And die as fast as they see others grow;  
And nothing 'gainst Time's scythe can make  
defence  
Save breed, to brave him when he takes thee  
hence."

Sunil Kumar Sarkar in his book *Shakespeare's Sonnets* comments on the theme of time in this sonnet: "In this sonnet Shakespeare for the first time speaks of time. In all such sonnets, he mediates on the destructiveness of time. The present sonnet is, as if, the prologue to all such sonnets. In the first eight lines of the sonnet, the poet beautifully draws the images of the slow and imperceptible passage of time...As the time passes, the greenness of the inchoate summer is not to be found any more, because then the cultivators reap the corn and bind it into sheaves. And then these 'girded'; sheaves are carried home on carts, like a corpse is carried on a bier – the corpse of an old man ('with white and bristly beard') whose beard is white due to aging, and whose hair is unkempt due to negligence. The poet says that there is no defence against the inroad of time, save only through one strategy; getting married and have issues. With all these instances, the poet tries to persuade the Fair Youth to get married." (Sarkar,145)

#### SONNET 19

Sonnet 19 is one of the best sonnets written by Shakespeare. In this sonnet, Shakespeare again talks about the ravages of time. Shakespeare expresses his intense fear of time. In the first quatrain of the sonnet, the speaker chides Time, saying go ahead and do whatever it wishes: "blunt thou the lion's paws," (line 1) "make the earth devour her own sweet brood," (line 2) "pluck the keen teeth from the fierce tiger's jaws," (line 3) "and burn the long-lived phoenix." (line 4). He portrays time as destructive, which destroys the fiercest as well as the mildest things. Time spares none, even the most dangerous and strongest creatures like tiger, lion, etc cannot conquer time, and get destroyed with the passage of time. He calls time "swift-footed" (line 6). Since, the poet feels that it is

impossible to hold back Time, he encourages it to do whatever it wishes:

“Make glad and sorry seasons as thou fleets,  
And do whate’er thou wilt, swift-footed Time,  
To the wide world and all her fading sweets.”

Since the poet is worried about the beauty of his friend and wants to preserve it, he forbids Time to touch the mortal beauty of his friend: “But I forbid thee one most heinous crime.” (line 8). He goes on to command Time not to destroy the beauty of the Fair Youth. He forbids it to carve and draw lines (wrinkles) upon the forehead of his friend with its pen which is extremely destructive: “O carve not with thy hours my love’s fair brow/ Nor draw no lines there with thine antique pen.” (lines 9-10). He demands that time should let go his love “untainted” and unharmed so that the coming generations would be able to appreciate the beauty of the Fair Youth: “Him in thy course untainted do allow/ For beauty’s pattern to succeeding men.” (lines 11-12). As the speaker realizes that it is impossible to stop time, he, therefore, confidently encourages Time to do whatever it wishes for he has eventually found a way to withstand the ravages of time: “Yet, do thy worst, old Time: despite thy wrong,/ My love shall in my verse ever live young.” (line 13-14). The poet has finally realized that it is not possible to hold the “swift foot” of the Time back, but he can conquer it by writing poetry. Like many other poems of Shakespeare, this Sonnet claims that art is superior to real life. His poetry will ensure the Fair Youth’s immortality. By writing these verses, not only will his love live forever, but he will be eternally young and the “swift-footed,” “devouring,” and “bloody tyrant” Time will not touch and destroy him.

Coleridge, acknowledging the merit of Shakespeare’s Sonnets, states: “These sonnets, like the Venus and Adonis, and the Rape of Lucrece, are characterized by boundless fertility and laboured condensation of thought, with perfection of sweetness in rhythm and meter. These are the essentials in building of a great poet.” (Sarkar, 116)

#### **SONNET 13**

Sonnet 13 is another poem that deals with the theme of time. In this Sonnet the poet, due to the fear of death and destructive assault of Time,

urges his love to marry so that his beauty may become immortal: “O, that you were yourself! But, love, you are / No longer yours than you yourself here live: / Against this coming end you should prepare, / And your sweet semblance to some other give.” (line 1-4). And goes on to persuade his friend by saying: “Who lets so fair a house fall to decay,/ Which husbandry in honour might uphold/ Against the stormy gusts of winter’s day / And Barren rage of death’s eternal cold?” (line 9-12). And the concluding couplet presents the resolution to the proposition: “O, none but unthrifths! Dear my love, you know / You had a father: let your son say so.” (line 13-14). In this context, Ingram and Redpath comment:

“Obscure at first sight through the apparently complex play on pronouns, this sonnet becomes clearer when the continuity of the image is apprehended. The ‘you’ of line 1 is either the body and its beauty, as opposed to the ‘self’ or soul, or the composite of soul and body. If the bodily beauty (or the composite) and the soul were identical, the former, like the latter, would be immortal. Shakespeare embodies what he considers the actual relationship in the image of the eternal soul inhabiting a temporal house (cf. line 9). As long as the occupier remains heirless, this house is held on a lease determined by death. Provident economy would not allow ‘so fair a house’ to fall into decay through age and occupancy; but by ‘husbandry’ (line 10, with an obvious play on the word) would produce an heir who would maintain the house both during the friend’s (the Fair Youth’s) old age (line 11) and after his death (line 12). (Sarkar, 147)

#### **SONNET 65**

In this Sonnet, the poet admits the invincible power of time that destroys all and triumphs over all. There is nothing in this world that can withstand the destructive onslaught of Time. Time spares none and destroys everything ruthlessly. The poet opens the sonnet by admitting that even the strongest things are destroyed by the “swift-footed” Time. The poet feels that there is no power that can arrest the fleeting course of time or withstand its destructive onslaughts. He mentions many strong things which, despite having strength and vastness, are over-powered by “bloody tyrant”

time and get destroyed: "Since brass, nor stone, nor earth, nor boundless sea,/But sad mortality o'er-sways their power (line 1-2) The poet goes on to say that since Time destroys everything, even the strongest things like brass, stone, earth and sea cannot overpower Time, how shall the more delicate things like beauty survive?: "How with this rage shall beauty hold a plea,/ Whose action is no stronger than a flower? / O, how shall summer's honey breath hold out/ Against the wreckful siege of battering days,/ When rocks impregnable are not so stout, / Nor gates of steel so strong, but Time decays? / O fearful meditation! Where, alack, / Shall Time's best jewel from Time's chest lie hid? /Or what strong hand can hold his swift foot back? / Or who his spoil of beauty can forbid? (line 3-12) The poet says that time destroys even the strongest things, even the impregnable rocks and the gates made of steel which symbolize strength, are not strong enough to stand firm against the destructive power of Time. No one can stop the ever-moving "swift foot" of Time. Until the last two lines of the poem, the poet's tone seems to be pessimistic. But in the closing couplet he again provides a solution. Since no one can arrest the fleeting course of time, only a miracle can prevent Time from doing its work of destruction. It is through these sonnets that the delicate things like beauty can be preserved: "O, none, unless this miracle have might, / That in black ink my love may still shine bright." (line 13-14)

**SONNET 116**

In this sonnet, Shakespeare suggests another remedy for conquering Time. He says that love is "an ever-fixed mark" (line 5). Though beauty fades within Time's "blending sickle's compass," (line 10) love does not change: "Love alters not with his brief hours and weeks, / But bears it out even to the edge of doom." (line 11-12) The poet is confident that Time is impotent to destroy love though it can destroy beauty. "rosy lips and cheeks" (line 9) symbolize mortal beauty. Time's sickle cuts them and thus destroys them. In the concluding couplet, he suggests a way to defy Time. He says that love lasts forever, and thus withstands the ravages of time. He claims that if his statements can be proved to be wrong, he must never have written a word, and no man can ever have been in love:

"If this be error and upon me prov'd,  
I never writ, nor no man ever lov'd." (line 13-14)

Thus the poet says that though Time is very powerful and it spares none, true love can withstand its destructiveness like a pole star.

Time is the most predominant theme in most of Shakespeare's Sonnets. In Sonnet 2, he urges his friend to marry and arrest the fleeting course of Time. Shakespeare here artistically portrays the destruction that time may cause to his friend's beauty.: "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 tatter'd weed, of small worth held." (line 1-4). Sonnet 60 best illustrates the ravages of Time. It deals with the universal concern of time and its passing: "Like the waves make towards the pebbled shore, / So do our minutes hasten to their end." (line 1-2). The poet goes on to say that Time both gives the gift of life and eventually takes it away: "And Time that gave doth now his gift confound." (line 8) In Sonnet 63 he uses expressions like "Time's injurious hand," (line 2) and "age's cruel knife" (line 10) to highlight the destructiveness of Time. In Sonnet 104, Shakespeare says: "To me, fair friend, you never can be old." (line 1) .

L. C. Knights states: "An essay might well be written on the Time theme in Shakespeare...Whenever we look, Shakespeare is concerned merely with the effects of Time on animate and inanimate beings, persons and personal relationships." (Sarkar, 78)

Thus Time is a recurring theme in Shakespeare's Sonnets. Throughout the Sonnets, Shakespeare portrays the destructive assault of Time. Time spares none, and even the strongest things are destroyed by "Time's injurious hand". Impregnable rocks, steel gates, brass, earth, and "boundless sea" all are overpowered by "swift-footed" time. However, Shakespeare does suggest some ways for people to defy Time. By urging the Fair Youth to marry and have children, he suggests that his friend's beauty can be appreciated by coming generations in the form of his children. Thus having children is a way of arresting the fleeting course of Time. According to Shakespeare, people

can also defy Time through love. The poet is confident that though Time can destroy beauty, it can never destroy love. Love can live forever and Time is impotent to destroy it. Another way, and the most remarkable way, of conquering Time is art: throughout the Sonnets, Shakespeare claims that art is superior to real/temporal life. Though his friend may die, but he may live forever in the form of his poetry. Shakespeare has certainly preserved the beauty of his friend by writing Sonnets. Shakespeare wrote the Sonnets some 400 years ago, but we still read his sonnets and appreciate the beauty of his friend.

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