

Shakespearean poetry: an analysis of two sonnets – LXXI – CXLIV

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Abstract^o

The purpose of this paper is to confirm Shakespeare's relevance to universal literary studies as "the most dramatic of Elizabethan playwrights" and also as "the most poetic"¹, through an analysis of two sonnets written by him. These two sonnets – LXXI and CXLIV – will be analyzed in order to illustrate the most evident features of Shakespeare's style in poetry. Although Shakespeare's skills have been considered especially in terms of drama and he himself has been known as "the greatest dramatist that England ever produced", he also has been admitted as "the greatest creative poet the world has ever known".² Something related to Shakespeare's life as well as his literary production is going to be mentioned before the analysis of those two sonnets in order to make Shakespearean poetry easier to understanding.

Resumo

O presente trabalho tem como objetivo demonstrar a relevância de Shakespeare para a literatura universal, como sendo o mais dramático e também o mais poético dramaturgo inglês, a partir da análise de dois de seus sonetos. Os sonetos LXXI e CXLIV serão analisados sob o ponto de vista semântico, com o propósito de explicitar conceitos recorrentes no estilo poético do escritor, poeta e dramaturgo inglês. Shakespeare, cujas habilidades estilísticas têm sido verificadas, basicamente, em função de seu estilo dramático, é considerado o maior dramaturgo já existente na Inglaterra. Contudo, Shakespeare tem sido identificado também como o maior poeta "criativo" já existente no universo. Previamente à análise, alguns aspectos relacionados à vida e ao estilo de Shakespeare serão mencionados a fim de auxiliar na compreensão de ambos os sonetos.

According to theoreticians, William Shakespeare is recognized in much of the world as the greatest of all dramatists. Shakespeare's plays communicate a profound knowledge of the wellsprings of human

behavior, revealed through representations of a wide variety of characters. That is why many of his dramas are still analyzed and interpreted nowadays. Although Shakespeare's plays were written around four centuries ago, their themes can be applied to every man from different historical periods because they are based on existential conflicts which pervade man's soul.

Besides, Shakespearean poetry presents some metaphysical characteristics that will be mentioned here through the interpretation of these sonnets. Shakespeare wrote a kind of poetry full with "conceits" (metaphors), whose themes are universal. One can also find through his sonnets some ideas taken from Scriptures, usually expressed in a twisted way. What is more, "strong lines" are evident in his sonnets thus readers are challenged to interpret them. Shakespeare also proclaimed human degradation – the ephemeral condition of men and their certain annihilation – in contrast to religious concepts about eternal life (transcendentalism).

Previously, however, something about Shakespeare's life will be mentioned as well as "The Age of Shakespeare", from 1550 to 1610 in England. Then, some considerations about the way by which Shakespeare has been portrayed by some literary critics will be provided. Besides, it will be discussed why most of Shakespeare's literary productions – dramas, comedies, lyrical poetry – call the readers' attention and promote investigations upon their themes and characters' attitudes even today.

William Shakespeare – Biography and Literary Works

William Shakespeare was born in 1564 in Stratford-upon-Avon, a country village in Warwickshire, some hundred miles from London, and he was the son of John Shakespeare, a businessman who held various municipal offices. As a child he attended the local free grammar school. At the age of eighteen, Shakespeare married Anne Hathaway, but there is no register of their marriage. When Shakespeare left Stratford, he left his wife and three

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¹ BRADBROOK, M. C. *Elizabethan Stage Conditions*. 1968

² HULL, M. S. & SILVA, Machado da. *English Literature*. 1945

young children, Susanna, Judith and Hamnet. In 1586 he went to London, hoping to get employment at either the Theater or the Curtain.

Shakespeare met Lord Southampton in London, and became a member of his company of players. By 1592, he had become a successful dramatist and two years later was a member of the Lord Chamberlain's company of players. Shakespeare prospered in his profession, and became an owner of stock in his company and part owner of the Globe theater. When his ambitions to become an actor, dramatist, and man of property had been realized in a very full measure, Shakespeare seems to have entered upon the unhappiest years of his life.

Before 1600 he wrote most of his famous comedies and historical plays. Shakespeare's first known play, *Love's Labor's Lost*, was composed around 1590. Like *The Comedy of Errors* (1591) and *The Two Gentlemen of Verona* (1592), it was an almost literal imitation of Latin and Italian comedy. In *Richard III* and *Romeo and Juliet*, both written in 1593, Shakespeare first tried his hand at tragic drama, and, in spite of flaws in the treatment of scene and character, these plays still hold the attention of audiences.

It was through the experience of writing such historical plays as *Richard II*, *Richard III*, *Henry IV*, and *Henry V* that Shakespeare achieved supremacy over both tragic and comic drama and was able to write not only *Julius Caesar* (1599) and *As You Like It* (1600), but also *Macbeth* and *Antony and Cleopatra*. Critics say that *Twelfth Night*, his most acclaimed comedy, was written probably in 1600 and the best of his rhymed poems are his *Sonnets*, printed in 1609.

After 1600 Shakespeare's wit became ironic, and his main interest centered in tragic situation. In the first years of James's reign, Shakespeare reached "dramatic maturity" and wrote *Hamlet* in 1603, *Othello* in 1604, *Lear* probably in 1605, *Macbeth* in 1606, and *Antony and Cleopatra* in 1607.

In 1611, at the age of forty-seven, Shakespeare disposed of his shares in the Globe theater and retired to his native town, where he died in 1616, beloved by every one who knew him.

Shakespeare's Poetry

Though the reputation of Shakespeare rests on his dramatic works, he has been considered a prominent poet. According to M. C. Bradbrook,

The writer of poetic drama is using a medium which is different from and more complex than either poetry or drama. The most dramatic of Elizabethan playwrights is also the most poetic. (...) Shakespeare's dramatic skill, though recognized, is recognized as a thing apart from

*his poetry; it apparently makes its effects separately, and its results can be analyzed in isolation. (...) and that Shakespeare the dramatist was absolutely inseparable from Shakespeare the poet.*³

His two narrative poems, *Venus and Adonis* (1593) and *The Rape of Lucrece* (1594), both deal with physical passion. The study of passion in *Venus* and shame in *Lucrece* are reminiscent of the treatment of these other themes in the sonnets, which Shakespeare was composing at this time.

Shakespeare did not merely deal with themes of Petrarchan convention, such as the "cruel mistress", "the immortality the poet's verse will bestow upon the name of the beloved", "the pain of separation", but he also achieved a depth of reflection and an ability of metaphor not attained in the sonnet sequences of other Elizabethan poets.

In the best of these sonnets, the despair of a sensitive poet is expressed in the first twelve lines, and some hope, conviction or solution to distress appears in the last two. It represents the "two waves of thoughts" which one can find in the most popular form of lyrical poetry used during the Elizabethan period – the sonnet.

Through the development of this analysis, one can observe the presentation of a conflict and the resolution to the problem in the final lines. Though other poets before and after Shakespeare had used this form effectively, it is called appropriately the Shakespearean sonnet.

The Age of Shakespeare – from 1550 to 1610

The period during the sixty-seven years between the accession of Queen Elizabeth and the death of James I was one of the greatest in the literature of the world, and especially of England. The Revival or the Renaissance of learning had made itself felt in countless translations, which were multiplied by the newly-invented printing-press. It carried the treasures of wisdom of the ancients to a wide public avid for the new knowledge.

Under the stimulus of the Renaissance, the feelings were excited, the imagination was fed, the intellect was aroused and the aesthetic faculties were nourished; and at the same time men's higher nature was awakened by the Reformation. A unique source of culture was put into the hands of the common people, the English Bible, destined to be the inspiration and spiritual education of millions. Besides, tales of

³ BRADBROOK, M. C. *Elizabethan Stage Conditions – A study of their place in the interpretation of Shakespeare's plays*. 1968

adventure and discovery beyond the seas enlarged the horizons of the people's imaginations.

As a result of these events, much has been written about the "spacious days of great Elizabeth" – the time when men lived "intensely, thought intensely and wrote intensely". However, the final proof of the amplitude of that life is the flowering of the genius of Shakespeare, admitted as the greatest creative poet the world has ever known. According to Hull and Silva (1945:19): "Only a great age could have given birth to such a prodigy".

How Shakespeare's style has been portrayed

Although the precise date of many of Shakespeare's plays uncertain, his dramatic career is generally divided into four periods: the period up to 1594; the years from 1594 to 1600; the years from 1600 to 1608, and the period after 1608.

According to Shakespearean critics, the author's first period was one of experimentation. His early plays, unlike his more mature work, are characterized, to a certain degree, by formal and rather obvious construction and by stylized verse.

Shakespeare's second period includes his most important plays concerned with English history, his so-called joyous comedies, and two of his major tragedies (*Romeo and Juliet* and *Julius Caesar*). In this period, his style and approach became highly individualized.

Shakespeare's third period includes his greatest tragedies and his so-called dark or bitter comedies. The tragedies of this period are considered the most profound of his works. Through them he used his poetic idiom as an extremely supple dramatic instrument, capable of recording human thought and the many dimensions of given dramatic situations.

The fourth period of Shakespeare's work includes his principal romantic tragicomedies. Towards the end of his career, Shakespeare created several plays that, through the intervention of magic, art, compassion, or grace, often suggest redemptive hope for the human condition. These plays are written with a grave quality differing considerably from Shakespeare's earlier comedies, but they end happily with reunions or final reconciliation.

Shakespeare's works reveals the deepest of human beings. Humanity is portrayed through its existential conflicts. Shakespeare was able to reach the human soul and depict its feelings, vices and virtues.

No plays in the history of drama have shown a deeper knowledge of human psychology, of the

mental and emotional problems of individuals involved in tragic situations.⁴

Shakespearean dramas and sonnets present emotional states: love and hate are usually portrayed. He also developed themes related to ambition, madness, guilt, treason, jealousy, degradation of the body (matter) and corruption of the soul (spirit), which are part of the human condition. According to Harold Bloom (1973) – a professor and literary critic – *Shakespeare taught us through deep psychological analysis of his characters to see ourselves and apprehend others.*

Shakespeare's relevance is based on the fact that, in Bloom's words, we may recognize ourselves in Shakespeare's women and men, because, to a certain extent, they are our origin.

Some theoreticians assert that Shakespeare showed an incomparable humanism, an understanding of the motives and feelings of men and women in high stations, and expressed their loves, hates, ambitions, and despairs in a poetry whose erudition and power have never been excelled in the literature of the world, without revealing a personal religion or philosophy. Harold Bloom states that

Shakespeare is the dominant maker of English language in every sense of a maker. No other writer has achieved so well the miracle of creating utterly different characters whose voices are self-consistent.⁵

Analysis of two sonnets

First: Sonnet LXXI

*No longer mourn for me when I am dead
Than you shall hear the surly sullen bell
Give warning to the world that I am fled
From this vile world, with vilest worms to dwell:
Nay, if you read this line, remember not
The hand that writ it; for I love you so,
That in your sweet thoughts would be forgot
If thinking on me then should make you woe.
O, if, I say, you look upon this verse,
When I perhaps compounded am with clay,
Do not so much as my poor name rehearse,
But let your love even with my life decay;
Lest the wise world should look into your moan
And mock you with me after I am gone.*

Through a critical reading of the sonnet LXXI, some reflections can be done considering the persona's existential condition. At the same time that the persona announces his affection towards his beloved woman, revealing his truest love to her, he

⁴WEATHERLY, E. H. et al. *The English Heritage*. 1945

⁵ BLOOM, Harold. *The Anxiety of Influence: A Theory of Poetry*. 1973

mentions something related to the human race's ephemeral state of being.

Considering the sonnet as a whole, it is possible to detect the "two waves of thought", which characterize lyrical poetry. Firstly, the persona presents the problem – understood as the probable sore consequences of his death to his beloved woman- and then he suggests a kind of resolution to this dilemma. The persona recommends his sweetheart not to pity him after his death ("No longer mourn for me when I am dead") in order to avoid mockery from the "wise world" ("Lest the wise world should look into your moan; And mock you with me after I am gone").

Based on the persona's warning, one can consider three distinct assumptions. The first one is that the persona loves his sweetheart too much to cause her the smallest discomfort ("for I love you so"). Therefore, he prefers to lose her care forever, telling her that she must forget him, to perceive sadness through her attitudes.

The second idea is related to the way the persona defines the world as a "vile" space where people live in. In a way, the persona identifies humanity to the "vilest worms" because he states he will leave this "vile world" to live with "vilest worms". Using a bitter and sarcastic tone, the persona refers to the vices of humankind. The concept of humanity is associated to corruption and degradation of both body and soul.

Finally, it is possible to infer that the persona is against the religious "life after death" precepts because he asks his beloved woman to avoid suffering after his death. In a way, the persona suggests men are just matter and, similar to the "vilest worms", will be inevitably annihilated by time. For that reason, any sort of agony after death does not make sense ("No longer mourn for me when I am dead (...) But let your love even with my life decay").

However, one could deduce, through the first line, that the persona claims for consideration. In a way, the poet desires his sweetheart's attention, but it must be brief. The persona claims for regard just while the "surly sullen bell" announces his death to the world ("Than you shall hear the surly sullen bell / Give warning to the world that I am fled"). It is important to mention the way the persona characterizes the "world". He defines the "world" as a "vile" and "wise" place. This contradiction intensifies the persona's sarcastic tone as he considers the "world" in two different ways at the same time. The "world" represents mankind which is considered "vile" due to its corruption and degradation and "wise" because it is able to promote wickedness or "mockery".

The persona loves his sweetheart in a singular manner, for he really wishes she would be able to

extinguish her affection with his "life decay". Due to this fact, the persona demands his beloved woman to forget her truest feelings in relation to him even before his "life decay", that is, before his death ("But let your love even with my life decay"). It would be a kind of solution to the problem presented by the persona from beginning to end of this sonnet.

The persona strengthens his purest affection to his sweetheart when he states that he prefers to be forgotten forever to notice grief or agony in her countenance. He begs her to avoid any memory that could bring her torment. Even the hand which had written this sonnet should not be remembered if she would read it in order to avoid affliction ("Nay, if you read this line, remember not / The hand that writ it, for I love you so, / That I in your sweet thoughts would be forgot / If thinking on me then should make you woe".)

Besides, the persona warns his beloved woman not to mention his name if she would look upon this poem because it would cause no effect. The persona himself is conscious about his inferior condition as human being ("O if, I say, you look upon this verse, / When I perhaps compounded am with clay, / Do not so much as my poor name rehearse,"). Through this passage, it is noticeable the way the persona treats humankind, considering his own fleeting situation.

That thought can be inferred even from the third and fourth lines of the sonnet when the persona declares that, after his death, he will leave this "vile world" to live in companion to repulsive creatures, in a place even more unpleasant than this, with "vilest worms" ("Give warning to the world that I am fled / From this vile world with vilest worms to dwell:"). The persona clarifies the precariousness of human race, its temporary existence when he imagines himself "compounded" with clay ("When I perhaps compounded am with clay,") and due to this fact he appeals his beloved woman to "let her love even with his life decay".

If she followed the persona's advice, she would avoid being a victim of the scoff from the "wise world" and the persona himself would not be the motive of her "moan" ("Lest the wise world should look into your moan; / And mock you with me after I am gone."). In conclusion, the persona evokes his beloved woman mainly to make her aware of the ephemeral condition of mankind – degradation of the body and reveals her the "vices" which pervade this world – the corruption of human soul. The persona also declares his truest love to his sweetheart and teaches her how to avoid future suffering because of man's inevitable consummation.

Second: Sonnet CXLV

*Two loves I have of comfort and despair,
Which like two spirits do suggest me still:*

*The better angel is a man right fair,
 The worser spirit a woman colour' d ill.
 To win me soon to hell, my female evil
 Tempteth my better my better angel from my side,
 And would corrupt my saint to be a devil,
 Wooing his purity with her foul pride.
 And whether that my angel be turn' d fiend
 Suspect I may, yet not directly tell;
 But being both from me, both to each friend,
 I guess one angel in another's hell:
 Yet this shall I ne'er know, but live in doubt,
 Till my bad angel fire my good one out.*

After reading that sonnet, one can infer it reveals the persona's paradoxical emotional state, that is, his inner turmoil. He declares he has two loves inside him – "comfort" and "despair" – which guide his attitudes. The following verses emphasize these ideas: "Two loves I have of comfort and despair, / Which like two spirits do suggest me still". These "loves" are very similar to two antagonistic spirits, and despite the fact that the nature of their energy (positive x negative) is different they influence the persona's behavior in equal proportion.

The persona distinguishes these two "loves", classifying them as the "better angel" and the "worser spirit". The "better angel" is compared to "a man right fair" and the "worser spirit" to "a woman colour' d ill". Although both "loves" are powerful because they control the persona's thoughts, the evil spirit seems to be stronger than the good one. In a way, the "worser spirit" symbolizes "temptation" and it is always trying to corrupt the virtuous "side" of every human being. In this case, the bad spirit is represented by a woman who does not have a good appearance ("a woman colour' d ill"), but she is still able to promote human degradation.

This wicked spirit has a purpose which consists on taking the persona to hell soon. In order to achieve her aim, the "female evil", as the persona himself calls the bad spirit, tries to seduce the "man right fair" through her own "skills". The "female evil" makes use of her "foul pride" in order to defame the persona's "purity" ("To win me soon to hell, my female evil / Tempteth my better angel from my side, / And would corrupt my saint to be a devil, / Wooing his purity with her foul pride.").

Considering this specific point, one could deduce there is an allusion ("an indirect reference to some person, place, or event with literary, historical, or geographical significance") in relation to what is presented in the Scripture. Eve, a character from the biblical story about the way the world was made, has been seen as the woman responsible for the corruption which pervades all humankind. In this sonnet, the "woman colour' d ill" is considered the cause of

persona's inner turmoil. She is also responsible for the persona's degradation – corruption of his soul.

The persona knows both "loves" pervade his own spirit, but he is in doubt whether his angel has assumed similar aspect to the sinister spirit ("And whether that my angel be turn' d fiend / Suspect I may, yet not directly tell;"). He thinks it is possible ("I guess one angel in another's hell") because they arose from the same source, that is, they both belong to the same body and they both dwell the same mind. Besides, being from the same person, they are friends ("But being both from me, both to each friend;"), and the evil spirit is always trying to tempt the good angel. Consequently, it is possible that the "man right fair" can assume similar attitudes to those practiced by the "female evil".

In the last two lines of this sonnet, the persona reveals he will be in doubt whether "one angel in another's hell" up to the "bad angel" banishes the good one. Based on this passage, one could infer that the persona believes the "bad angel" is more powerful than the "good angel" because he seems to be sure that wickedness will dominate goodness ("Till my bad angel fire my good one out."). That way, the conflict which dwells his soul will be reduced to just one energy (to a negative energy, that is, the evil spirit) and this sort of energy will conduct him to hell ("To win me soon to hell, ...").

In conclusion, the "two waves of thought" can also be found in this poem. Throughout this sonnet, the persona demonstrates his inner disorder as a result of the conflict between antagonistic forces. In the last verse, however, he presents the solution to the problem: when one of these hostile energies ("comfort: the man right fair" and "despair: the woman colour' d ill") goes out from his mind, the persona will live in peace.

Considering Shakespearean poetry, one can conclude that the themes presented in both sonnets are related to the human race's existential condition. Shakespeare explored human thoughts and attitudes in order to reveal what was out of sight. Through a metaphorical language, the English poet describes universal themes such as love, death, sorrow, wickedness (first sonnet), temptation, sin, punishment (second sonnet). For that reason, the use of Shakespeare's poetry within his own plays to express the deepest levels of human motivation in individual, social, and universal situations, is considered one of the greatest accomplishments in literary history.

The persona deals with universal themes, using a well-elaborated language. Love is portrayed as well as human natural annihilation. The persona's religious concepts are different from those presented in the Scriptures: he does not believe in eternal life ("Death"

represents the end of men for him). What is more, one could say that there is the idea of "Carpe Diem Philosophy" in this sonnet. The persona makes reference to the transitory condition of men. In a way, he suggests people should take advantage of the present time. After death, human beings become inanimate matter, "compound with clay". For that reason, the persona demands his beloved woman to stop loving him even with his life decay.

Through this analysis, one can infer that there are some metaphysical features also in the second sonnet. Universal themes are treated in this poem such as temptation, goodness x wickedness, God x Devil, corruption of the soul, that is, sin and punishment (hell). The "female evil" tempts the persona to take him to hell soon. Here, religious background is used in a traditional way: man is "put on probation" and "falls" in temptation.

Finally, it has to be mentioned that both sonnets present "strong lines", that is to say, they challenge readers to understand the message. Besides, language is usually used in a metaphorical way and describes the ephemeral and depraved condition of humanity: its behavior, thoughts and paradoxical feelings.

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