

This paper is the summarizing component of a semester-long honors project. The project consisted of a reading of the full text of Shakespeare's sonnets, and writing a Sonnet of the Week every week. Currently there are fifteen such sonnets.

The purpose of this paper is to explore the evolution of Shakespeare's sonnets and my own, compare these, explore themes in Shakespeare's sonnets, and discuss what can be learned from such an undertaking. We will begin by discussing the themes in Shakespeare's sonnets to provide a background for an exploration of their evolution and significance.

Of the 154 Shakespearean sonnets, the vast majority concern love in some form, whether platonic or romantic. In these sonnets, friendship and romance are often indistinguishable. Within the broader category of love, there are subdivisions. I noticed them easily when I first read the Sonnets, and found information on them with almost no effort; whether or not these classes were intended by Shakespeare, they are, and have been historically, easily identifiable. The first batch of sonnets are known as the "procreation sonnets", encouraging someone to have children. When I read them at first, I thought they were addressed to a woman, but historically they have been viewed as to a man. The identity of this man, as of the other characters in the sonnets, is unknown, although, like pretty much everything surrounding Shakespeare, there is a heated debate. This, however, was not germane to my project, so I largely bypassed it. After the procreation sonnets, there is a middle section expressing love. This is another case where my first impression was different than the conventional belief; I again thought these were to a woman, but they are classically regarded as being written to a man, perhaps the same one as in the procreation sonnets. There then follows a section that is decidedly romantic, and the last two sonnets are complete oddballs; they're both about Cupid.

After reading the sonnets, I had some very strong impressions which I think are unavoidable. First of all, the sheer breadth of the work is astounding. The effort Shakespeare must have put in to produce such a volume of work that deals with such a volume of issues is tremendous. To be sure, not all the sonnets are masterpieces. Some are decidedly shoddy. Take, for instance, the first stanza of Sonnet #127: "In the old age black was not counted fair, / Or if it were, it bore not beauty's name; / But now is black beauty's successive heir, / And beauty slandered with a bastard shame:". The meter is forced and unnatural, and the imagery is rather lackluster. Not Shakespeare's best work.

Here is sonnet #106, one of my personal favorites: "When in the chronicle of wasted time / I see descriptions of the fairest wights, / And beauty making beautiful old rhyme / In praise of ladies dead and lovely knights; / Then in the blazon of sweet beauty's best, / Of hand, of foot, of lip, of eye, of brow, / I see their antique pen would have expressed / Even such a beauty as you master now. / So all their praises are but prophecies / Of this our time, all you prefiguring, / And for the looked but with divining eyes / They had not skill enough your worth to sing; / For we which now behold these present days / Have eyes to wonder, but lack tongues to praise." From the very beginning of this sonnet, the imagery is intense. The idea of a "chronicle of wasted time" brings to mind a huge book of all of the things that should have ever been done, or a recounting of every moment up until now. Equally important in this poem is the acknowledgment of past writers' labors. "I see their antique pen would have expressed / Even such a beauty as you master now." The idea here is clear; people have been trying to write about beauty forever. This sonnet is almost a salutation to past and future generations of poets and readers of poetry.

So there is great deal of variation in terms of quality within the works. Even taking this into account, though, the work as a whole has a remarkable amount of integrity; I gained a lot of respect for Shakespeare by reading it. The sonnets give a closer picture of the way he thought than any of the plays I've read, or any other area of my studies. One interesting phenomenon I observed was that often two adjacent sonnets would be very similar. Clearly Shakespeare had a definite procedure for creating the themes of these poems. Perhaps for some of them he was unsatisfied with his first attempt, even after revision and finalization, and wrote another. Perhaps he simply wanted another sonnet on the same topic. For instance, sonnets #135 and 136 are the only ones where Shakespeare refers to himself by name; he repeatedly references "Will". In #136, he makes a great deal of puns on his name: "Will will fulfill the treasure of they love, / Ay, fill it full with wills, and my will one." This might be an example of his desire to more fully expand upon a certain theme (in this case he talks about possession and richness); #136 really pushes the prominence of the word "will" even more than #135.

As we read through the sonnets, the purposes of their themes evolve. In the beginning, especially with the first few procreation sonnets, the sonnets are somewhat indistinguishable. The theme seems to be controlling the way the sonnet sounds, and it becomes rather monotonous. Although the verse is still of good quality, it is almost recycled good quality. Further on in the sonnets, the themes take less of a dictatorial role. The general transition can be described as going from monotonous to unifying. Shakespeare seems to have developed an understanding of how to explore themes without being bound to them in predictable manners.

For these reasons, the Sonnets offer an unusual insight into Shakespeare's life and work. I gained insights of similar magnitude during the process of writing my own sonnets. I gained an

understanding of how one composes such poetry, and a deeper appreciation for the work Shakespeare must have done in composing his.

Although I've only written fifteen sonnets, I've made some interesting observations. It's hard to articulate a legitimate progression theme-wise, but as I grew more comfortable with the medium, I began to more fully take advantage of the poetic tools inherent within it. For example, elision and the volta are two important aspects of sonnets; elision being the removal of syllables in words to fit a meter (in this case iambic pentameter). Take #148 "O cunning love, with tears thou **keep'st** me blind". Shakespeare uses elision here to preserve the meter. The volta is the traditional shift in perspective after the first two stanzas of a sonnet, often using words such as "yet", "but", or "so". For example, Sonnet # 138 illustrates this very nicely: "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 untutored youth / Unlearnéd 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 flattered be." The almost monumental shift in the poet's perspective is what makes this an interesting poem. He starts off talking about the way he and his love lie to each other, opening the door for a sonnet of repentance or of condemning one's own behavior, something this type of poetry seems to do a lot. Yet, by use of the volta, we see the other side of the issue. This is one of the sonnet's advantages, as a form; the structure of

discrete stanzas allows the poet to choose when to continue a thought and when to flip it over and run the other direction with it. I've yet to see another form of poetry do this quite so neatly.

My sonnet #11, "A Sonnet of Thanksgiving Feasts and Thoughts", uses the volta particularly well, if I do say so myself. "Give thanks today for all allotted to / Ourselves and those we love, for here we pray / That henceforth them for whom such gifts are due / May with these blessings be endowed someday. / Though food and drink may dominate the mind, / With comfort, warmth, and light our bodies eased, / On this Thanksgiving day, be not we blind / To those of us who are with woes diseased. / **And yet**, let not these cares your joy deny. / But keep them in your thoughts as you rejoice. / Now eat your turkey, now your pumpkin pie. / With those you love, in song now lift your voice. / So pass the day and night in revelry. / May those yet not so lucky quickly be." My intention in this sonnet was to present a complicated issue – the idea of privilege, guilt, and a desire to help others – in an effective and condensed manner. I felt that the volta was a particularly applicable concept for this purpose, as I could use the first two stanzas to talk about privilege and how others might not be privileged, and then turn right back around and remind the reader not to feel guilty for what they have, only grateful, and to apply that gratitude to helping others. In my opinion, the volta accomplished this purpose well.

But enough about technicalities. What did I learn from writing my own sonnets, aside from a lot of fancy poetic terminology? What will I take away from this project? Indeed, what is that that has inspired me to continue writing a Sonnet of the Week for who knows how long?

These are tough questions. It's difficult to pinpoint what it is this project has taught me. I've gained a deep appreciation for the subtleties of the sonnet as a poetic structure, subtleties I have yet to fully master, or, in some cases, even touch upon in my own writing.

Correspondingly, I've gained a great deal of respect for someone like Shakespeare who seemed to know these nuances of poetic style so thoroughly. When we read the best sonnets, we feel as though there's almost nothing between us and Shakespeare's thoughts. It is almost as if the sonnet is a perfect representation of Shakespeare's brain.

Why? Did Shakespeare just happen to think in sonnet form? I think not. He must have spent uncountable hours training himself to work so well within this medium. Perhaps, then, the greatest evidence of his sonneteering prowess is in his failures. In every sonnet with forced rhymes, broken meter, and repetitive structures, we see Shakespeare (whoever he was) sitting at a desk (wherever he was), trying over and over to put his thoughts to the page. Whether or not his final product was in perfect iambic pentameter and kept to the rhyme scheme perfectly, it was the closest he could get. Ultimately, that's all anyone can do, in poetry or otherwise.

So by reading Shakespeare's sonnets, we gain a better understanding of how to write poetry, how to read poetry, and how to live like a poet. A poet is just someone who can take an existing structure and make it their own. Whether they're writing sonnets, limericks, or epics, they're taking the concepts of language, rhythm, and form, and turning them into something uniquely original.

Shakespeare was not a perfect poet. But, when reading the sonnets, we see how hard he tried. We see how much he changed. And we see that we can do the same.