

# ***The Uniqueness and Innovation of Shakespeare's Sonnets and Their Influence on Society: The Eighteenth Sonnet as an Example***

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**Abstract:** Through the study and exploration of the themes, meter, and imagery of Shakespeare's sonnets, this paper analyzes the similarities and differences between Shakespeare's sonnets and traditional Italian sonnets, as well as the ideological core and main theme of it, focusing on the innovations in meter and imagery and the differences between different schools of thought on the themes of the sonnets. The paper also analyzes Shakespeare's multiple identities and past experiences in his poetry in the context of the times. The relevant conclusions are that the themes of the poems favor natural and timeless laws rather than mere adoration. Shakespeare's identity as a merchant and his employment relationship deeply influence the imagery and themes. In modern times, Shakespeare's works are heavily videoed, which is inextricably linked to the shaping of imagery and the ambiguity of themes.

**Keywords:** Uniqueness, Innovation, Sonnet, Shakespeare, Society

## **1. Introduction**

Shakespeare was a great playwright of the Renaissance and a great poet. Under the impact of the new capitalist system, both the comedy *The Merchant of Venice*, which exposes the dark relationship of pecuniary exchange and the sonnets, which criticize the male-dominated society, reflect the impact of the commodity economy and the old and new systems on the mainstream thinking.

In the second half of the 16th century, when English cities became increasingly prosperous, and the commodity economy developed rapidly, merchants, as a new class, were able to accumulate wealth internally and expand plunder externally. Shakespeare, having handled such businesses as lending and buying and selling real estate, was well versed in business profitability and applied this model to theatres. As a result, Shakespeare's works contain a large number of commercial phrases and portray a variety of businessmen. For example, "treasure" in *Procreation Sonnets* and the repeated references to "gold" are examples of the influence of merchants on Shakespeare's work [1]. This is how Shakespeare was influenced by his identity. At the same time, the greedy and plundering nature of the bourgeoisie also became the object of Shakespeare's satire; he deeply feels the conflict between the idea of a free and equal society as well as the ugly reality of materialistic desires and emphasizes that people should have the dignity of being human in the face of interests.

For example, the use of eternal and innocent feelings to set off the ugliness of the “moneyed”: “Thou are more lovely and more temperate” [2].

In addition to the commodity economy, the Renaissance also gave rise to humanist ideas. The concept of “man-centeredness” impacted religious theology, which led to a change in the status of women [3]. The medieval asceticism of “chastity”, a sexual, cultural hegemony that privileged only men under the double standard of the sexes, was broken. The first line of the poem (Sonnet 130), “My mistress’ eyes are nothing like the sun,” for example, overturns the norms and established aesthetic standards of the time, and what we see in front of us is not at all a fair-skinned, gaze Shakespeare’s muse has a darker complexion and a more lustrous appearance. His muse is dark-skinned, secretive, fierce, soul-stirring, and, like the forbidden fruit of Eden, dangerous and aggressive. The traditional image of women is deconstructed, women’s lips can look pale instead of red like coral, and their hair can be rough and wire-like [3]. Shakespeare subverts the standard while creating a new one, a unique beauty that needs no comparison. “And yet, by heaven, I think my love as rare” (line 13). Even though still not free from the male gaze, female beauty is finally no longer the product of an assembly line; individual differences and characteristics can be discovered. Under the influence of Shakespeare’s poetry, people became aware of the tedium and pallor of a single aesthetic. This laid the foundation for the search for equal and harmonious gender relations. This study aims to explore the innovations of Shakespeare’s sonnets, compared to the traditional Italian sonnets, by analyzing the content of the poems themselves, such as meter, rhyme, theme, and the influence on later society. It also explores the contradictions in Shakespeare’s poems and the connection between the use of imagery and his identity.

## 2. Discussion about the Theme

Shakespeare’s sonnets are generally considered to be divided into two parts: the first part is from the first poem to the 126th; the second part is from the 127th to the 152nd. The former is addressed to juveniles; the latter is dedicated to dark-skinned women. These poems are all related to friendship and love, with Sonnet 18 being a particular classic. The common controversy over the theme of the poem focuses on whether the ritual of praising love is the main theme or whether Shakespeare’s eternal quest for poetry is its central idea. The former is generally considered to be the opening of the poem, using explicit metaphors, directly comparing “friend” to a summer day [4], which represents vitality, mild and warm, and beginning with praise of the friend’s appearance and character, and placing him above the beauty of the summer day. The longevity of friendship is then reflected in lines three to eight by the fleeting fate of summer, which cannot escape the cycle of the seasons. The end of the poem directly names the beauty of “thou” that will not disappear, implying Shakespeare’s eternity and loyalty to his friend, so some scholars believe that the theme of the poem revolves around eternal friendship and even homosexual infatuation.

However, the latter, Shakespeare’s celebration of the timelessness of nature and poetry, is more in line with the main theme of the poem. Looking through the entire collection, all the imagery related to the seasons appears in the first 104 poems, where Shakespeare gives different emotions to spring, summer, autumn, and winter; for example, in the 104th, “three summers proud” and “three beautiful springs”. The four seasons are symbols of the years, implying inevitability, and Shakespeare’s reverence for nature is also hidden in these natural images [5]. In the 18th poem, “summer” can be derived from nature, and Shakespeare, after amplifying the qualities of summer, immediately takes a sharp turn, pointing out mercilessly its quasi-immediate qualities, and the two sides of summer come to the fore: on the one hand, it is the most comfortable season in the English climate, and on the other hand, this comfort will soon disappear. Also, Shakespeare uses this to advise his friends that human life is also like the rotation of the seasons so that although the

appearance and emotions are as fleeting as each summer, the next rotation always comes. The inherent operation of the ecological order makes poetry eternal.

In addition, Shao Hua points out in his article *Ecological Interpretation of Shakespeare's Sonnets* that the words "eves, breathe, and face" in the eighteenth poem all refer to the head metaphorically [6]. In this way, Shakespeare highly praises not only his friends but also human beings. The human being is also a part of the natural session, and through this metaphor, his friend is elevated in his mind and his poetry, as well as being a tribute to the incarnation of the individual microcosm. This idea is in line with humanism, in which Shakespeare incorporates a reflection on man and nature, exploring the nature of man from an ecological perspective while returning to the basis of "man".

In the first part of his poems, apart from expressing his emotions, the passage of time is also one of the central ideas. He points out several times that death and old age are the final destinations of everyone; for example, "darling buds" (the third line) implies that it will eventually wither [7]. However, this theme and "eternity" seem to contradict each other but are two narrative lines. Shakespeare uses the images of "sythe" and "glass" in the 126th pome to describe the negative and destructive nature of time, a metaphor that reminds the reader of the image of death holding a scythe in Western culture. This metaphor reminds the reader of the image of death holding a scythe in Western culture, thus showing the two sides of time - its powerful creativity and destructive power. It is also through constant destruction and regeneration that time creates eternity for the life of nature [8]. This is in line with the attitude of the Renaissance towards nature, where people were in awe of self-heating but tried to master it, and Shakespeare was no exception.

Shakespeare sees humans as part of nature, and through materialization, he incorporates the qualities of other creatures into humans [9]. Thus, Shakespeare uses all of nature's beautiful creatures to compare with his friend so that the beauty of nature is all focused on his friend. Shakespeare describes his friend as being like a flower bud, but all creatures in the world will grow old and die with time, thus in addition to the praise of his friend, there is also an exhortation to him, advising him not to care about the inevitable result of the passage of time - the aging of his face - but to pursue spiritual immortality.

### 3. Mater, Rhyme, and Logic

Shakespeare's sonnets differ from traditional Petrarch in that the verse part is increased from the traditional eight lines to twelve lines, which can be divided into three quatrains, while the second part is reduced from the traditional six lines to two lines and rhymes separately, while Shakespeare has not only formal justice but also emphasizes the inner emotions by recurring in the same rhyme. He creates a Shakespearean sonnet structure [10].

Structurally, these poems consist of 14 lines, divided into an octave and a sestet; the octave group has two quatrains, and the sestet group has a quatrain and a couplet. The poem rhymes with "abab cdcd efef gg" and is written in iambic pentameter. According to the traditional distribution of structural functions in Shakespeare's sonnets, the first quatrain generally begins with a title, giving a topic for discussion and an explanation or argument; the second quatrain takes up the previous topic and further discusses or argues it; the third quatrain transition; it no longer follows the previous topic, but either offers new ideas about it or concludes it; the last two lines of the couplet are the synecdoche, such as a summary of the whole piece or a new idea to the previous question. Furthermore, the aphorism is the most concentrated and concise summary of the theme. In other words, the four structural groups of traditional Shakespearean sonnets generally function in the order of beginning, continuation, transition, and conjunction. Crockett Bryan also mentioned his conclusion about the structure of Shakespeare's sonnets in Table 1 [11].

Table 1: Numbers of syntactic breaks after each position, main bodies and couplets

Main Bodies										
Strong	32	52	23	149	55	92	20	17	1	822
Medium	109	371	143	442	253	366	263	330	122	363
Weak	26	150	281	100	146	87	158	172	289	16
Total	167	573	447	691	454	545	441	519	412	1201
	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
Couplets										
Strong	5	10	3	58	22	24	3	3	0	175
Medium	21	87	25	73	21	79	30	95	20	25
Weak	10	25	41	13	16	19	26	33	45	0
Total	36	122	69	144	59	122	59	131	65	200

As shown in Table 1, the regular can be found that there is some sort of syntactic break after every line. The majority of these breaks are strong ones: 82 of 1,201 or 68.4% in the main bodies, 175 out of 200 or 87.5% in couplets [11].

The internal logic of the eighteenth poem is also in line with its tradition. The poem begins with a question, but the second line contradicts it: the comparative “more” indicates that even though summer is beautiful, it is still less beautiful than his best friend, which is actually a negation of the previous line. Lines 3-8 argue against the assertion in the second line. Thus, three examples are given: the wind destroys the flowers, the fleeting nature of summer, and the fact that “The eye of heaven” can sometimes be dim. The poet then concludes in lines 7-8, lamenting the laws of nature and the constancy of time. For the sake of meter and rhyme, Shakespeare adjusts the order of these two lines to their normal order, which is “And every fair sometime declines from fair/ Untrimm’d by chance or nature’s changing course”. In the phrase “every fair from fair”, the first fair refers to a beautiful person or thing, and the second fair refers to beauty itself. However, in line 9, this paradox is self-evident. The “summer day” here is not an ordinary summer day but an eternal summer day. So, the actual meaning of the first line is: *I want to compare thee to an eternal summer’s day*. Lines 10-11 continue to use two negations; however, the “when” in line 12 introduces a subordinate clause that indicates that the prerequisite for immortality is that “you” are immortalized in my poem. What is more, the last two lines conclude the poem and indicate another condition for immortality, namely, “...eyes can see” (line 14).

Although Shakespeare’s Sonnet 18 has a standard traditional structure, its structural function is different from the traditional one and shows its peculiarities. The first quatrain is titled “Shall I compare thee to a summer’s day” and compares “summer” with “thee”. The second quatrain follows the previous question and continues to compare the object (the sun) and the image (beauty) of summer with “you”. Moreover, the third quatrain is a repetition and a summary. Its first three lines are in line with the traditional function of rephrasing, but the last line concludes, “Nor shall death brag thou wand’rest in his shade”, which is not in line with the traditional function. It is not a logical conclusion to the theme of the poem’s first line: “Shall I compare thee to a summer’s day”, but an additional focus on the role of poetic lines, which is a diversion from the original logical track. This is a departure from the original logic. Therefore, it can be said that the third quatrain begins to deviate from the traditional structural function.

This kind of deviation is more obvious in the closing couplet. As a rule, the concluding couplet should be a summary or distillation of the theme from the first line of the poem rather than divergence, but the last two lines of the poem are a full affirmation of the poem’s role in enhancing beauty to eternity, which is different from the “I”, “you” and “summer” discussed in the previous

eleven lines, merely taking up the subject of line 12 [2]. Therefore, the concluding couplet completely deviated from the traditional structural function of the concluding couplet of Shakespeare's sonnets. Thus, in terms of structural function, the poem deviates from its usual functional behavior in the last two structural groups, and thus the theme of love presented at the beginning of the poem is not summarized and sublimated all the way to the end of the poem, which also self-denies the theme of love in this poem and turns it into a poem that promotes the function of poetry. The last three lines of the poem thus form a logical argument. First, *I* will write the poem in praise of *you*. Meanwhile, humanity has to be born and multiply, and generation after generation will read *my* poetry. Then here comes the conclusion: "You" can (through poetry) live on for all time.

#### 4. Role and Aesthetic

The defamiliarization of language is reflected in Shakespeare's sonnets [12]. The Russian formalist literary theorist Viktor Shklovsky, in explaining the literary term "defamiliarization," argued that poetic language is a confrontation and rebellion against the "defamiliarization" of people's everyday feelings in language. Through it, Shakespeare changed the natural form of language to conform to poetic aesthetic needs and increase the circulation of his works. This deformation is the essential characteristic of art and the charm of literature. The uniqueness of poetry creation is precisely through this "complication" process, which strengthens the aesthetic experience of readers, makes it more difficult for them to empathize and analyze the text, increases the novelty of the work, and thus increases its literary character.

For example, in Sonnet 2, "forty winters" enhances the intensity of time imagery, and at the same time, it is used in conjunction with words with military significance, such as "besiege", "trenches" and "field" [13]. The use of "field" and other words with military significance brings the relentlessness of time and the helplessness of life to the reader in an exaggerated and anthropomorphic way, and the reader seems to be able to feel this cruel battle between youth and time deeply. The end of this battle is described as "proud livery" and "tattered weed of small worth" these images can create a very impactful image so that readers feel a strong visual impact through the destructive nature of time in the tattered clothes and the youthful vigor no longer, side depiction of the traces left by the years on the body and mind [14]. Shakespeare's defamiliarization treatment of the robe and time is a powerful and tense association. What is more, in Sonnet 97, winter is "bareness everywhere", and Shakespeare imposes the pain of separation from his friend on the image of "winter". Thus the natural phenomenon of dying trees in winter is given the pain of separation and longing. The image of "winter" has lost its meaning and has a strong metaphorical meaning, referring to the poet's cold and gloomy emotions like winter. Then, as in the 18th poem, a twist (yet) is used to point out that the poet is separated from his friend in the "heat of summer" and that the cold and lonely winter and the hot summer are both the two poles of the seasons and the two extremes of Shakespeare's heart [2]. This twist and contrast also allow the reader to appreciate the poet's huge psychological difference deeply. In this way, Shakespeare succeeds in creating a tension of conflicting and harmoniously balanced imagery in both connotation and extension.

The concept of "superimposed poetics" proposed by Zhang Qiong complements "defamiliarization," in which Shakespeare creates unique poetics in the sonnets, namely, the superimposition of exaggerated rhetorical discourse and solemn discourse [2]. Serious poetics, like tragedy, is predicated on the essential self, pointing to the inner and psychological, insisting that the poet believes in the experience of imagination, whether real or unreal, and delivers this imagination for sharing; rhetorical poetics is predicated on the social self, pointing to the external political and national, allowing for all kinds of even ugly motives, such as money, irritability, aggrandizement,



and narcissism, and is thus purely playful. With the double poetics superimposed, Shakespeare's readers enjoy the uniqueness of the experience.

In the eighteenth poem, the imagery of money is not fully exposed, but throughout the collection, it is easy to see that Shakespeare cannot escape from his former status as a merchant, revealing a "commodified" love in his words, constantly associating love and desire with money and wealth, equating time with eternity. This also hints at Shakespeare's complex state of mind. On the one hand, material possessions are synonymous with vulgarity; they cannot be as irreversible as the laws of nature or as eternal as literature and time, but at the same time, the most beautiful human emotions are indeed closely linked to wealth. As a patron, Shakespeare's work was heavily influenced by his patrons, and the repeated references to "bankruptcy" and "usury" in his poems suggest that his wealth was not optimistic. In this context, Shakespeare's poems are not entirely free and self-crafted but also contain a "workman's" mentality and a sense of insecurity about whether he would be worthy of continued investment. The persuasive poems are written by Shakespeare to meet the demands of his employer [2]. Shakespeare's feelings for his friends in the collection can also be seen as his passion for his patrons, which is why Shakespeare's feelings for his friends are sometimes confident and sometimes inferior. Take the eighteenth poem as an example, Shakespeare shows his confidence in his poetry, believing that it will live on, but in the seventy-sixth poem, he laments his lack of freshness.

## 5. Influence on society

The linguistic style of the sonnets and the innovations they made have made them endure and are a source of controversy among literary scholars [15]. Wilde, Bernard Shaw, and Harris, who were under the influence of Shakespeare's classics, chose Shakespeare's sonnets as their breakthrough from tradition to modernism. This approach reflects both their inheritance of the classics and their deconstruction of them. Wilde reads the emotions with friends in Shakespeare's works as a kind of homosexuality in focus. The Portrait of Mr. W.H. is modeled on the form of Shakespeare and his employer, and Wilde subtly brings his relationship with Douglas into this work, equating himself with Shakespeare and Douglas with the "friend".

Unlike Wilde, Bernard Shaw focuses on Shakespeare's muse, Lady Black. He borrows the identity of the Black Lady from the sonnets and turns her into Queen Elizabeth I, making a romantic comedy between the poet Shakespeare and the Queen. In Harris's writing, the love in the sonnet is personified as an emotional dispute between three historical figures, and Shakespeare becomes the loser in this jealous love triangle. Although the plot is fictional, both Harris and Bernard Shaw include real historical figures, placing Shakespeare in the historical context of his time and giving Shakespeare a greater sense of reality. Shakespeare's iconoclastic image is destroyed and replaced by a real person with present-day desires [15].

Today, Shakespeare's works have been heavily cinematographic, and although the sonnets were written long ago, the themes of love, friendship, and time have not changed with time. The strong intertextuality and graphic quality of Shakespeare's works give the film and television a great advantage. In film and television, there are many ways to integrate a poem into a scene by using fragments or whole poems. In *Dead Poets Society*, Charlie Dalton recites the first two lines of the eighteenth poem to a new girl, and the poem ferments in a cave under the dim light of a flashlight, with young boys and girls with hidden thoughts and leaps out of school, showing the atmosphere of youth and teenage affairs under the backdrop of the poem [16]. The influence of Shakespeare's sonnets on modern society can be seen in literature and the extensive use of film and television. Important elements in film and television narratives, such as color and light, scenes, and perspectives, also bring new vitality to the poetic texts, colliding and blending Renaissance ideas with modern civilization, thus making the emotional part of the sonnets more obvious and intense.

## 6. Conclusion

The sonnets, the only collection of Shakespeare's poetry, thematically incorporate the cosmology that was so popular during the Renaissance, exploring time and eternity, giving the poems the same timelessness that characterizes the workings of nature. In addition, the sonnets convey his ethical thoughts on man and nature, man and man, and man and society. By exploring the eternal nature of time, Shakespeare points out the two sides of time: cruelty and fairness. Meanwhile, Shakespeare's "rebellious" spirit is hidden in images, such as the imagery of the black girl, breaking the traditional mode of thinking of men, creating and setting the image of the female "other", condemning the phenomenon of women being subject to the male gaze for a long time, completely losing control of themselves, becoming the accompaniment and empty symbol of patriarchal society. The "male gaze" is embodied and broken. It is also clear from the collection of poems that Shakespeare is constrained by his patronage, inevitably pandering, jealousy and restlessness, and that his feelings for his "friend" are not purely loving. Such contradictions give the sonnets their ambiguity, variety, and complexity in content and theme.

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