

## UNDERSTANDING THE ESSENCE AND SIGNIFICANCE OF THE 1<sup>st</sup>, 18<sup>th</sup>, 116<sup>th</sup>, AND 127<sup>th</sup> SONNETS OF WILLIAM SHAKESPEARE

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### Abstract

*One of the most prominent poem sequences of all times, sonnets of William Shakespeare show us that poetry can be a great way to express feelings from diverse aspects and points of focus that range from frustration to lust. We can find a physical aspect of love and spiritual side of it while reading the sonnets. Shakespeare used more than one character in his sonnets to make the sequence more comprehensive and piquant. Through four characters, the sonnets capture the attention of readers. In this paper, the 1<sup>st</sup>, 18<sup>th</sup>, 116<sup>th</sup> and 127<sup>th</sup> sonnets of Shakespeare will be analyzed and interpreted from the aspect of meaning, theme, and structure in order to comprehend the essence of the sequence better. These four sonnets are selected and analyzed on purpose; they are the four pillars of the sonnets through which the flow of the whole sequence is changed. There are 154 sonnets in the sequence. As a whole, sonnets tell us a love journey between four characters: a speaker, a blonde young man, a dark lady, and a rival speaker. Even though love is the main foci in the sequence, other sentiments that foster love will be elaborated in this paper.*

**Keywords:** Poetry, William Shakespeare, Sonnet

### Öz

*Tüm zamanların en ünlü şiir dizilerinden birisi olan William Shakespeare'in soneleri bize, şiirin, hüsrandan şehvete kadar uzanan farklı yönlerinden ve odak noktalarından, duyguları ifade etmek için mükemmel bir yol olduğunu göstermiştir. Soneleri okurken, aşkın fiziksel yönünü de ruhsal yönünü de bulabiliriz. Shakespeare, dizisini daha kapsamlı ve etkileyici kılmak için, sonelerde birden fazla karakter kullanmıştır. Dört karakter aracılığıyla, soneler, okuyucunun ilgisini çekmektedir. Bu çalışmada, bu dizinin önemini daha iyi anlamak için, Shakespeare'in 1, 18, 116 ve 127inci soneleri, anlam, tema ve yapı yönünden incelenip yorumlanacaktır. Bu soneler, özellikle seçilip incelenmiştir; çünkü, dizinin akışını değiştiren, bu dört şiirdir. Dizide, 154 sone bulunmaktadır. Bütününde, soneler bize dört karakter arasındaki aşk yolculuğunu anlatmaktadır -Şair, genç sarışın adam, esmer kadın ve rakip şair-. Aşk, soneler dizinin odak noktası olsa da, aşkı besleyen diğer duygular da bu çalışmada incelenecektir.*

**Anahtar kelimeler:** Şiir, William Shakespeare, Sone

## Introduction

Though the importance of sonnets couldn't be understood when they were published, they have been one of the primary focus of poetry for more than 400 years. Many critics, poets, and scholars have proposed lots of different ideas and have connected sonnets with many issues ranging from love, homosexuality, religion, psychology, social decorum, and cultural elements. It would be an essential idea to study poetry under the light of Shakespeare's sonnets as they sharply broaden our understanding of human sentiments and poetry.

Considering the variations of comparisons of the sonnets, the sequence gives us plenty of different connections and ways of handling them. In the first sonnets, the speaker, with passionate love, is dedicated to a young man from the aristocracy class. Later, this speaker is disappointed as another speaker attracts the young man's attention. Last sonnets tell us a sexual love for a dark lady.

As understood from this summary, the sonnets are sort of a story of a speaker who experiences different aspects of love ranging from a pure love to sexual love. Many claims have been made about whether Shakespeare reflects his personal life experiences and his private feelings about love in the sonnets. Some say that he solely creates an artistic definition of love whereas sonnets possess a lot of elements and clues about Shakespeare's own life.

"It is in the Shakespeare of the sonnets that we receive our most intimate glimpse of the man himself. Through them, we enter deeply into the inner life of our poet: not only that inner life which yields philosophy and great thoughts." (Proser, *Shakespeare of the Sonnets*, pp. 243)

As Shakespeare writes the sonnets from such a wide range of feelings that it is not an easy to draw a line between what is real and what is not. Similarly, his figures of speech sometimes impede us from understanding what he refers to. This circumstance creates vague questions on our minds. That is why Shakespeare's sonnets are a deep and bottomless area of studying poetry.

## The 1<sup>st</sup>, 18<sup>th</sup>, 116<sup>th</sup>, and 127<sup>th</sup> Sonnets

The first 17 sonnets are about marrying and procreation. The speaker begs the young man to marry and have a child for maintaining his beauty. Time and death are the primary enemies of beauty for the speaker. Sonnet 1 is very crucial as it gives an overall idea of sonnets in brief. For instance, in the first four lines of the sonnet 1:

"From fairest creatures we desire increase,  
That thereby beauty's rose might never die,  
But as the ripener should by time decease  
His tender heir might bear his memory" (1.1-4)

Here, the word "increase" refers to procreation. Through it, beauty can be timeless and without it, the beauty withers away. Another point that should be mentioned for the first line is the word "we". In Shakespeare's era, it was a common belief that one should marry and have a proper family life rather than sustaining his or her life alone. So, Shakespeare might have used the word "we" to show the expectation of people in society.

The second quatrain seems like a warning of the speaker to the young man about the dangers of being on his own and how harmful this can be for him. What may harm him can be

himself. If he does not realize that he has to give up loving and caring about himself that much, he will lose what makes him precious and beautiful:

“But thou, contracted to thine own bright eyes,  
Feed’st thy light’s flame with self-substantial fuel,  
Making a famine where abundance lies,  
Thyself thy foe, to thy sweet self too cruel” (1.5-8)

The speaker tries to show the young man that his entity is the source of his happiness. “Contracted to thine own bright eyes” can be paraphrased as “being on your own without marrying”. Yet, with the word “self-substantial fuel”, it is implied that his entity will pose a great danger to himself, which can drag him to a catastrophe. Kenneth C. Bennett comments on these lines as such: “The speaker warns him that he is using up his own reserves of energy to feed his life’s flame. Where he had an abundance of procreative power, he is creating a famine.” (Bennett, *Threading Shakespeare’s Sonnets*, pp. 2)

The last two lines signify that death will bury the beauty of the young man if he does not do what he is told in previous lines (Procreation)

“Pity the world, or else this glutton be,  
To eat the world’s due, by the grave and thee” (1.13-14)

Sonnet 18 is probably one of the most admired sonnets of the sequence. The language of Shakespeare in the sonnets is not as complex as his other works. Maybe this is for the purpose that the emotions of the sonnets can clearly be understood by the reader and partially so that the rhythm of the poems can be beautifully done. However, in sonnet 18, there are some personifications and some words that may create some ambiguities. Sonnet 18 is the part of the sequence that begins to introduce the speaker’s inner feeling of necessity to write poems and through these poems, the beauty of young man can live forever:

“Shall I compare thee to a summer’s day?  
Thou art more lovely and more temperate.  
Rough winds do shake the darling buds of May,  
And summer’s lease hath all too short a date” (18.1-4)

In these lines, the reason why the speaker thinks that comparing the young man to a summer day would be illogical is that summer ends too quickly, but his love will live forever through the poems. The word “temperate” actually can be interpreted as “moderate”. Therefore, the word temperate embraces the perception of time in this sonnet. In the second quatrain, Shakespeare plays on some words, which makes readers think a bit on the lines:

“Sometime too hot the eye of heaven shines,  
And often is his gold complexion dimmed,  
And every fair from fair sometimes declines,  
By chance or nature’s changing course untrimmed” (18.5-8)

The word “eye of heaven” means “The sun”. The speaker complains about the instability of summer here, which constitutes one of the reasons why he cannot compare him to a summer’s day. Here we can see a figure of speech of Shakespeare with the words “eye of

heaven” and “the sun”. It can be understood that the beauty of the young man is such that even things which seem perfect, like summer, cannot reflect his beauty.

Another word that is debatable in sonnet 18 is “fair”. In this sonnet, this word is generally accepted as “beauty”. The speaker claims that every beauty will fade one day one way or another. Colin Burrow explains this with his clarification: “fair from . . . declines: every beautiful thing loses its beauty; playing on the “fairness” of the sun’s *gold complexion*.” (Burrows, *The Complete Sonnets and Poems*, pp 416). Falling off of beauty over time here. Trim has a strong meaning in the last line. Trim also means “adorn”. “Nature’s changing course untrimmed” has the meaning of nature loses its beauty, which makes a strong connection with the relation of time and beauty.

“But thy eternal summer shall not fade,  
Nor lose possession of that fair thou ow’st,  
Nor shall Death brag thou wander’st in his shade,  
When in eternal lines to time thou grow’st” (18.9-12)

In the third quatrain, the speaker is talking about the permanence of the young man’s beauty. Shakespeare applies to personification on the words “Death and brag”. If we think the time is a stream (eternal lines), young man’s beauty will be timeless if he gets into the same stream of time. In that way, his beauty will be preserved forever.

“So long as man can breathe or eyes can see,  
So long lives this, and this gives life to thee.” (18.13-14)

In the last two lines, the speaker emphasizes that the young man’s love and beauty will live forever in the poems. These two lines give us the conclusion that the idea of procreation from sonnet 1 to 17 ends and it can be replaced by poems. There is a striking progression in the sonnet 18. The progression of the sun can be seen respectively: “shines”, “dimmed”, “declines”, “fade”, “shade”. Shakespeare hides these words in the poem in the sequence. This progression might have been used maybe for making resembling of the progression of the sun with the progression of life. In that way, it can be said that sonnet 18 is not just a poem of love but also it is the love of life.

Shakespeare maybe wants to show the significance of poems in that way and understanding the sonnets can be a way to understand the feelings of Shakespeare.

Sonnet 116 has a unique place among all the sonnets in the sequence. Because it is not specifically focusing on any of the persons like in other sonnets. But rather, it is aimed at defining love and how it should be according to the speaker. He, as a matter of fact, intends to mention the subtle point that what makes it love and what does not. Therefore, it strengthens the speaker’s love to the Fair youth by letting him know what he thinks about love and how he will embrace his love. In that way, it is easier to make sense of why his passionate love is so firm and perennial.

Another importance of Sonnet 116 is that it is full of figures of speeches. Shakespeare applies many metaphors and mimesis in the sonnet, which will be explained thoroughly.

“Let me not to the marriage of the true minds  
Admit impediments; love is not love  
Which alters when it alteration finds,  
Or bends with the remover to remove” (116, 1-4)

Shakespeare applies a metonym on the first line by saying “marriage of true minds”. He makes the connection between “true minds” and “people” without directly referring to people. But we understand that it is the marriage of people who can understand each other well.

Shakespeare uses the word “mind” rather than “heart” maybe because of the fact that he thinks that it is the ideas and understandings that what makes love, it is not pure love. Namely, logic and mental connection are a bit on the emphasis. In the second line, when he says, “love is not love”, he actually means “love is not true love”. We can make the connection of true love with an arrow. True love goes straight and never changes its way no matter what happens. But in the last line of the first quatrain, Shakespeare makes an implicit contrast with the word “bend”. The contrast is between “true love” and “bend”. While the first one is always straight and direct, the other one is not. “Remover” can be any condition that can bend the love. It can be time or condition.

So, the speaker thinks that true love should not be affected by any sort of factors. Shakespeare uses the word “remove”. So, he might imply the meaning of “chancing a place”. He might intend to give the idea that love should remain where it is without changing places. The speaker emphasizes the permanence of true love in the first quatrain.

“O no, it is an ever-fixed mark  
That looks on tempests and is never shaken;  
It is the star to every wandering bark,  
Whose worth’s unknown although his height be taken.” (116.5-8)

The speaker firmly and sharply shows his definition of love on the first line of the second quatrain. “Ever-fixed mark” refers to “everlasting light”. Shakespeare uses this word as a metaphor. Just like marks are guides for the ships that are lost in the tempests, love is the guide for the people who are in search for happiness and salvation. “In both the “mark” and “star” metaphors, love is a guiding light, in tempests or at night, for travelers to chart their courses by. The “mark,” or “sea-mark,” is a fixed object whose unchanging position makes it reliable, even in “tempests,” as a guide.” (Roessner, *The Coherence and the Context of Shakespeare's Sonnet 116*, pp. 337).

“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” (116.9-12)

Perhaps, the third quatrain is the part that explains the general idea of the sonnet 116. It emphasizes the vitality and permanence of love. Another metonym is applied by Shakespeare on the word “Time’s fool”. By this figure of speech, he tries to tell that love is always higher and stronger than time.

The speaker is aware that Time cannot rule over love. With the word “fool” simile, Shakespeare refers to “fool of the palace” who makes jokes and makes people laugh Shakespeare’s time. So, love does not function as the fool functions. It is more serious and is not open to a joke. “Rosy lips and cheeks” refer to the temporary beauty or any sort of glamorous appearance, but not love. In other words, Time cannot kill love with its sickle.

“Love is not a fool because, regardless of what time does to people, it “alters not.” (Roessner, pp 340). It is crucial to mention that the word “bend” is used again that we see in the last line of the first quatrain so as to highlight the cruelty of sickle.

In the last line, the speaker claims that love is so powerful that it can endure against doom or death. No matter how much time passes that one can count and measure, love will be everlasting for him.

“If this be error and upon me proved,  
I never writ, nor no man ever loved.” (116. 12-14)

In the couplet at the end, the speaker is so sure with his understanding of love that he is ready and bold enough to ignore even his poetic identity. That clearly demonstrates how serious and confident lover he is. Shakespeare also indicates the seriousness of the lovers by using some words that are frequently used in “Law” such as error, writ and prove.

In law, if a writ of error is demanded, the court has to examine the case again. “a common-law writ directing an inferior court to remit the record of a legal action to the reviewing court in order that an error of law may be corrected if it exists” (Merriam Webster Dictionary). Therefore, with these words, Shakespeare implicitly shows how serious the speaker is about love.

All in all, sonnet 116 has a very firm place among the sonnet sequence as the speaker shows how he sees love. So, his love toward the young man will be timeless and permanent not matter what he undergoes. This love will be the guide for his happiness regardless of place and time.

Sonnet 127 has a significant place in the sequence as it has the same function as sonnet 18. Both of these are the transitions between the themes. Shakespeare mentions “a dark lady” from sonnet 127 to 154. But he handles love from the sexual aspect. In the sonnets, the dark lady has other relationships with other men. The biggest treason of the dark lady is her preference of living with the Fair youth. Despite these, the dark lady has such a beauty that the speaker cannot help feeling passionate toward her. He cannot take her out of his heart. This is the power of lust. As it is known that in the Elizabethan era society, the beauty of blonde was more charming to people. However, Shakespeare flatters the beauty of the dark. Here, it is essential to mention that “black” doesn’t mean “African descent but “brunette”.

“In calling her black, we mustn't be confused into thinking that, as with our concept of Othello, she was of African descent, for black was the common term then for a brunette (as we still speak of the black Irish today). Based on Shakespeare’s repeated description, most scholars conclude that she was of Mediterranean descent, with the dark curly hair, olive skin and dark eyes of Spain, Italy, Southern France, and Greece.” (Hughes, *New Light on the Dark Lady*, pp 2).

In the sonnet 127, Shakespeare benefits from “End-stopped”, which means he finishes each line with punctuation. He does not use this structure in most of the sonnets in the sequence.

“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” (127, 1-4)

Shakespeare reflects the social prejudice at that time at the beginning of the sonnet 127. Black was not considered as even normal let alone its beauty. The speaker emphasizes the beauty of dark in such a manner that even the term “beauty” loses its own meaning. Another point to be mentioned here is that the word “fair” means both “beautiful’ and “blonde”.



Shakespeare uses a figure of speech on the word “fair”. There is an ambiguity here. In Fair youth sonnets, we cannot see a convincing portrayal of “A fair Youth”, but in dark lady sonnets, her description of the dark lady is sufficiently made by Shakespeare.

“For since each hand hath put on nature’s power,  
Fairing the foul with art’s false borrowed face,  
Sweet beauty hath no name, no holy bower,  
But is profaned, if not lives in disgrace.” (127, 5-8)

In the second quatrain, the speaker explains that it is not logical to regard the beauty of black as unfair. He tries to persuade us that the concept of beauty cannot be identified by only one feature of having a specific color.

Beauty has no particular shape or definition and its being underestimated can make people deprived of having a real understanding of love. He shows us that beauty is a beauty when it has grace.

“Therefore, my mistress’ eyes are raven black,  
Her brow so suited, and they mourners seem  
At such who not born fair no beauty lack,  
Slandering creation with a false esteem.” (127, 9-12)

In the third quatrain, the speaker tries to show us that the dark lady is actually no different than other ladies. She has the same beauty as them. She is discriminated because of her appearance. The speaker feels the necessity of connecting the dark lady and her destiny with his love toward her. He thinks that her unfairness causes her to be exposed to mourning. In the last two lines, the speaker flatters the dark lady in spite of her situation.

“Yet so they mourn becoming of their woe,  
That every tongue says beauty should look so.” (127, 12-14)

The speaker claims that the ones who have regarded the black as unfair will one way or another will see that real beauty is actually that of the dark lady. He praises his mistress’ beauty by making others wrong. As a figure of speech, Shakespeare makes the connection of black with the word “raven” so as to emphasize her difference.

All in all, sonnet 127 explicitly and convincingly lays off the love of the speaker to his mistress. The speaker shows the reasons why the dark lady is underestimated, and he expresses his eternal and passionate love. No matter how others see the dark lady, he will keep loving her with the idea that her beauty is more precious to himself. Shakespeare begins telling the love story of the speaker to the dark lady in this sonnet till the end of the sequence.

### **Conclusions**

In this paper, 4 sonnets of Shakespeare’s sonnet sequence are handled and analyzed, each of which has its own importance throughout the sequence. Shakespeare mentions love with different aspects such as spiritual love and lusty love. While he does that, he mentions the life and excitement. The speaker of the sonnets undergoes a series of feelings and express what he feels to persons to whom he feels the sentiment of love. To whom this sequence is written keeps its mystery. But it is true that Shakespeare is in the dexterity of love and what it makes one feel. Sonnet 1, 18, 116 and 127 show us the key connections of the poems with one

another. Perhaps, their connections can make us understand Shakespeare and his poems better. Still, no matter how much work is done or how long time passes, the sonnets of Shakespeare will always deserve more attention, appreciation, and work.

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