

A New Essay on the Motif of Shakespeare's Sonnets

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Abstract

About the motif of Shakespeare's Sonnets, what prevails is that they were mainly written for Shakespeare's friend and a dark lady. But this view is an misinterpretation of Shakespeare's sonnets. In fact, Shakespeare's sonnets express love and ode to truthfulness, benevolence and beauty, and eulogizes the plainness, loyalty and philanthropy derived from them by the way of personification. Besides, they castigate the falsehood, wickedness and ugliness, and enlighten the readers to identify good and evil and guide the common people to tend towards sublimity and holiness. Shakespeare's sonnets imitate the nature and reflect the life. They are full of wisdom and philosophy, greatly enlightening and are of epoch-making significance.

Key words: Shakespeare; Sonnets; Motif

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1. INTRODUCTION

Shakespeare is not only the greatest playwright in the history of human literature, but also an outstanding poet. He established the Shakespearian sonnet, and the earliest version published by London publisher Thomas Thorpe in 1609 included a total of 154 sonnets by Shakespeare.

There has always been controversy over Shakespeare's sonnets, and there is no consensus. The words "you"

and "I" in Shakespeare's sonnets appear multiple times, and many critics simply assume that "I" in the sonnets is Shakespeare himself, while "you" is either simply assumed to be Shakespeare's friend, the Earl of Southampton, or simply assumed to be a dark-skinned woman. In fact, poetry can have its own protagonist, just like other literary genres such as dramas and novels. "I" in poetry may not necessarily refer to the author himself, but can be related to literary fiction. The word "I" in poetry can refer to a certain person or a certain type of person. The word "you" (or "he" or "she") in poetry can also be literary fiction. There are various possibilities, such as being a reader, a real character from the author's contemporaries, a fictional character created by the author, an abstract object endowed with human images, and so on. The practice of guessing without roots or evidence is not only irresponsible but also detrimental to Shakespeare's reputation.

At present, the world of letters generally believes that Shakespeare's poetic themes are: "The first to the 126th poems are written for a beautiful young man, who is generally believed to be the Earl of Southampton, Shakespeare's protector. Shakespeare established a deep friendship with this protector. The 127th to the 154th poems are about a 'dark-skinned woman'. The poet has a deep affection for this woman, and remains steadfast in his pursuit of beautiful love." (Li, 2006, P.186)

This view adopts the "friend theory" and "dark-skinned girl theory" proposed by British scholars Malone and Stevens in 1870.

However, in reality, Shakespeare's poetry does not praise one or two people. The true theme of his poetry is not to praise the beautiful man or the dark-skinned woman, but to use personification techniques to praise truth, goodness, and beauty.

2. THE THEME OF SHAKESPEARE'S SONNETS

In *Hamlet* Act 3 Scene 2, Shakespeare uses Hamlet's words to clearly express his artistic views: "...the purpose of playing, whose end, both at the first and now, was and is, to hold, as 'twere, the mirror up to nature; to show virtue her own feature, scorn her own image, and the very age and body of the time his form and pressure." (Shakespeare, 2009, p.145)

His 127th sonnet also expresses this artistic view. Shakespeare believes that art should imitate nature and express its beauty, rather than pretending to imitate "nature" and using so-called art that distorts the true nature of "nature" to beautify ugliness. This not only desecrates art, but also makes the importance of natural beauty unable to stop in people's minds, resulting in a series of negative consequences:

For since each hand hath put on nature's power,
Fairing the foul with art's false borrow'd face,
Sweet beauty hath no name, no holy bower,
But is profaned, if not lives in disgrace. (Shakespeare, 2008, p.254)

It can be seen that Shakespeare inherited Aristotle's theory of "imitation" (Aristotle, 1996, p.27), using art as a tool to reflect nature, reveal truth, and thus enlighten the world and readers.

It is under the guidance of this artistic view that Shakespeare wrote many popular plays and even created many immortal poetry works. The praise and love for truth, goodness, and beauty, the exposure and criticism of falsehood, evil, and ugliness, and the hope and enlightenment for readers and the world are the themes that run through his sonnets.

2.1 Praise and love for truth, goodness, and beauty

Shakespeare expresses the true theme of his poetry in his 105th sonnet:

...
Therefore my verse, to constancy confined,
One thing expressing, leaves out difference.
'Fair, kind, and true' is all my argument,
'Fair, kind, and true' varying to other words,
And in this change is my invention spent,
Three themes in one, which wondrous scope affords.
Fair, kind, and true have often lived alone,
Which three till now never kept seat in one. (Shakespeare, 2008, p.210)

It can be said that Shakespeare truly praises the virtues of truth and goodness in humanity, as well as the beauty derived from the virtues of truth and goodness.

The praise and love for truth, goodness, and beauty are the themes that run through Shakespeare's sonnets. In the 76th sonnet, the author writes:

O know, sweet love, I always write of you,
And you and love are still my argument (Shakespeare, 2008, p.152)

In Shakespeare's view, the need for truth, goodness, and beauty is "as food to life". In the 75th sonnet, the author writes:

So are you to my thoughts as food to life,
Or as sweet-seasoned showers are to the ground (Shakespeare, 2008, p.150)

It is the author's pursuit of truth, goodness, and beauty that has inspired his poetry creation. The author believes that all of his masterpieces are bestowed by truth, goodness, and beauty:

Yet be most proud of that which I compile,
Whose influence is thine, and born of thee:
...
But thou art all my art, and dost advance
As high as learning my rude ignorance. (Shakespeare, 2008, p.156)

As long as truth, goodness, and beauty accompany him, the author has nothing else to ask for. The author's family background, intelligence, wealth, and attire are not worth mentioning. "And having thee, of all men's pride I boast". (Shakespeare, 2008, p.182)

However, time is inevitably the sickle that cuts away beautiful things, and no strong hand can "hold his swift foot back":

Or what strong hand can hold his swift foot back?
Or who his spoil of beauty can forbid?
O, none, unless this miracle have might:
That in black ink my love may still shine bright. (Shakespeare, 2008, p.130)

The author intends to use poetry and art to praise truth, goodness, and beauty, so that truth, goodness, and beauty can shine for thousands of years and remain in the world forever. In the author's opinion, both truth and beauty rely on love for survival. "Both truth and beauty on my love depends". (Shakespeare, 2008, p.202) Therefore, it is necessary to use poetry full of love to praise truth and beauty, so that they can survive under the love of the world, so that they are "to be praised of ages yet to be". (Shakespeare, 2008, p.202)

In this poem, "he" refers to the use of personification techniques, referring to the "fragrant appearance" exhibited by "truth, goodness, and beauty" in the human world.

Here, "truth, goodness, and beauty" are regarded as One.

In the 98th poem, the author also praises "truth, goodness, and beauty" by using personification style:

Nor did I wonder at the lily's white,
Nor praise the deep vermilion in the rose.
They were but sweet, but figures of delight
Drawn after you, you pattern of all those (Shakespeare, 2008, p.196)

The 18th poem in Shakespeare's collection of sonnets is a representative masterpiece that praises truth, goodness, and beauty. In this world, although "every fair from fair sometimes declines", yet "thy eternal summer shall not fade" because poetry can retain truth, goodness, and beauty, pass them on, and promote them, making the tree of poetry art evergreen, so that truth, goodness, and beauty can flourish forever:

So long as men can breathe or eyes can see,
So long lives this, and this gives life to thee. (Shakespeare, 2008, p.36)

Shakespeare's 130th sonnet praises simplicity, a human virtue that should be attributed to the virtues of truth and goodness, rather than being an "unconventional love poem" as some critics believe or heralding that the "a mysterious dark-skinned girl appears, who is like a goddess, walking light-footedly towards the poet." (Zhang, 2009, p.28)

...
My mistress' eyes are nothing like the sun;
Coral is far more red than her lips' red;
If snow be white, why then her breasts are dun;
If hairs be wires, black wires grow on her head,
I have seen roses damask't, red and white,
But no such roses see I in her cheeks;
And in some perfumes is there more delight
Than in the breath that from my mistress reeks.
I love to hear her speak, yet well I know
That music hath a far more pleasing sound:
I grant I never saw a goddess go,
My mistress, when she walks, treads on the ground.
And yet, by heaven, I think my love as rare
As any she belied with false compare. (Shakespeare, 2008, p.260)

In this poem, Shakespeare uses personification to depict the virtue of simplicity through a series of comparisons. Although "my mistress" does not have all these gorgeous appearances, in the author's eyes, her beauty is not inferior to superficial beauty. From this, it can be inferred that the author praises another kind of beauty here, a virtue of simplicity that is extraordinary in beauty even though it does not have a gorgeous appearance. Simple beauty is not something on the surface, but a kind of inner beauty. It is not superficial, but a profound and enduring beauty. Although simplicity does not have a glamorous appearance, it has a true beauty that cannot be achieved solely by a glamorous appearance, a lasting beauty, a beauty that cannot be cut away by the sickle of time, and thus wins the author's admiration and love. The sun is sometimes obscured by dark clouds, and roses are also eroded and withered by the insects of time. Only simple natural beauty never fades, emitting a dazzling light from the world forever.

In the 125th poem, the author praises the loyalty derived from the virtues of truth and goodness:

...
No, let me be obsequious in thy heart,
And take thou my oblation, poor but free,

Which is not mixed with seconds, knows no art,
But mutual render, only me for thee. (Shakespeare, 2008, p.250)

Love shouldn't be merchandised. True love is as impregnable as a rock and can stand the test of time. In the 116th poem, the author relates what true love is:

...
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 is unknown, although his height be taken.
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. (Shakespeare, 2008, p.232)

In the 124th poem, the author praises the universal love derived from the virtues of truth and goodness: "it was builded far from accident" and "it fears not policy, that heretic, which works on leases of short-number'd hours".

Emerson says in an article entitled "Shakespeare; or, the Poet" in his works *Representative Men*: "One more royal trait properly belongs to the poet. I mean his cheerfulness, without which no man can be a poet,- for beauty is his aim. He loves virtue, not for its obligation but for its grace...Beauty, the spirit of joy and hilarity, he sheds over the universe...Not less sovereign and cheerful,- much more sovereign and cheerful, is the tone of Shakespeare. His name suggests joy and emancipation to the heart of men. If he should appear in any company of human souls, who would not march in his troop? He touches nothing that does not borrow health and longevity from his festal style." (Emerson, 2008, p.313). This passage by Emerson effectively summarizes an important characteristic of Shakespeare as a poet, which is his love for the virtues of truth and goodness, as well as his pursuit of the beauty derived from these virtues.

The famous French literary theorist, known as the legislator and spokesperson of classicism, Nicolas Boileau-Despréaux (1636-1711), proposed in the 1675 poem "Épître IX. Au marquis de Seignelay" preceded by "Rien n'est beau que le vrai" that "nothing is really beautiful but truth: only truth is respectable." (Boileau-Despréaux, 2009, p.103) Voltaire believed that Boileau was the first person to discover this law. In fact, Shakespeare proposed this principle more than 70 years earlier than Boileau. Shakespeare not only imitated nature to express and praise this truth, but also unified truth and goodness, praising goodness, and praising the beauty itself (the original form of beauty) derived from truth and goodness. It can be said that Shakespeare was the first person to propose the principles of truth, goodness, and beauty, not only as a principle of conduct, but also as an artistic principle, and made the praise of truth, goodness, and beauty an important theme in his poetry creation.

The artistic views proposed by many famous British

and American poets in later generations are closely related to truth, goodness, and beauty. The famous British Romantic poet John Keats put forward the famous statement "Beauty is truth, truth beauty" (Hu, 2008, p.259) in his famous poem "Ode on the Greek Urn". Shelley says in his *A Defence of Poetry*, "And to be a poet is to apprehend the true and the beautiful, in a word, the good which exists in the relation, subsisting, first between existence and perception, and secondly between perception and expression." (Compilation Committee, 1961, p.69) In "*I Died for Beauty*", one of Emily Dickinson's representative poems, there is such a poetic line about Truth and Beauty: "the two are one." (Dickinson, 2005, p.180)

2.2 Exposing and castigating falsehood, evil, and ugliness

While praising the virtues of truth and goodness and the beauty derived from them, Shakespeare also criticized falsehood, evil, and ugliness.

In his 66th sonnet, Shakespeare writes:

Tired with all these, for restful death I cry:
As, to behold desert a beggar born,
And needy nothing trimmed in jollity,
And purest faith unhappily forsworn,
And gilded honour shamefully misplaced,
And maiden virtue rudely strumpeted,
And right perfection wrongfully disgraced,
And strength by limping sway disabled,
And art made tongue-tied by authority,
And folly, doctor-like, controlling skill,
And simple truth miscalled simplicity,
And captive good attending captain ill.

Tired with all these, from these would I be gone,
Save that to die I leave my Love alone. (Shakespeare, 2008, p.132)

In this poem, the author expresses strong indignation towards various false, evil, and ugly behaviors in society, thus we can say this poem has a distinct color of critical realism. In the poem, we can see a society where black and white are reversed. Here, evil runs rampant, foolishness reigns, goodness is insulted, purity is defiled, simplicity is destroyed, culture is constrained, and the entire society lacks justice. It is simply a picture of hell on earth. In such a society, the protagonist "I" in the poem develops a deep sense of disgust towards the world, which inevitably reminds people of Tao Yuanming's integrity of "not bending the back for five bushes of rice" and preferring to escape and "pick chrysanthemums under the eastern fence". However, in "my" eyes, there is no peach blossom paradise in the vast world, and there is no place for those who do not want to associate with the world. Therefore, "I" is tired of death. Perhaps in the eyes of the protagonist of this poem, only by completely leaving this filthy world can one live a clean life, but he cannot let go of his lover. This poem portrays the image of a righteous person who does not want to be vulgar, does not want to associate with evil, wants to escape, but cannot rest assured of his lover,

and his contradictory psychology. Shakespeare mentions in this poem that art is "made tongue-tied by authority", about which Shakespeare himself suffers a keenly-felt pain.

In England during Shakespeare's era, actors and plays were looked down upon, and playwrights had no free speech. Emerson mentioned in his article "Shakespeare; or, the Poet" that "Shakespeare's youth fell in a time when the English people were importunate for dramatic entertainments. The court took offence easily at political allusions and attempted to suppress them." (Emerson, 2008, p.299)

As for the ideas expressed by Shakespeare in this poem, we can also see similar expressions in his famous tragedy "Hamlet" through Hamlet's mouth:

For who would bear the whips and scorns of time,
The oppressor's wrong, the proud man's contumely,
The pangs of despised love, the law's delay,
The insolence of office, and the spurns
That patient merit of the unworthy takes,
When he himself might his quietus make
With a bare bodkin? Who would fardels bear,
To grunt and sweat under a weary life,
But that the dread of something after death,
The undiscovered country, from whose bourn
No traveller returns, puzzles the will
And makes us rather bear those ills we have
Than fly to others that we know not of? (Shakespeare, 2009, p.141).

The 66th poem has received high praise in the field of Western criticism and is regarded by Kellner as a pearl in Shakespeare's sonnets. In Kellner's eyes, there is no word in this poem that does not have rich meaning today; the entire poem is so universal in meaning, so free from the limitations of time.

Shakespeare criticized various evils in many of his poems. In addition to the above one, there are also some representative poems, such as the 121st poem and the 129th poem. The 121st poem criticizes those who ignore the emotions of others and hurl insults at those who are as clean as ice and as pure as jade, criticizes those who maliciously speculate about others and judge others with their own dirty thoughts, and criticizes those who Judge a gentleman's stomach by the heart of a villain:

No, I am that I am; and they that level
At my abuses reckon up their own:
I may be straight, though they themselves be bevel;
By their rank thoughts my deeds must not be shown
(Shakespeare, 2008, p.242)

From this poem, it can be seen that the author is like a lotus, growing out of the mud but remaining pure and untainted, and tries to prevent the essence that is as clean as ice and as pure as jade from being polluted.

The 129th poem warns the world of the harm and terror of lust. It lists some demonic behaviors of those who are controlled by lust and points out the terrifying consequences that lust brings:

Th' expense of spirit in a waste of shame
Is lust in action; and till action, lust
Is perjured, murd'rous, bloody, full of blame,
Savage, extreme, rude, cruel, not to trust,
Enjoyed no sooner but despised straight,
Past reason hunted, and no sooner had
Past reason hated as a swallowed bait
On purpose laid to make the taker mad;
Mad in pursuit and in possession so,
Had, having, and in quest to have, extreme;
A bliss in proof and proved, a very woe;
Before, a joy proposed; behind, a dream.
All this the world well knows, yet none knows well
To shun the heaven that leads men to this hell. (Shakespeare,
2008, p.258)

Lust cannot bring people real happiness, on the contrary, the series of evil deeds resulted from lust will only push people towards hell, and many people understand this truth but tend to be induced by lust and walk towards hell. If a person indulges in lust and cannot resist the temptation of lust, he will have to bear the terrifying consequences it brings.

In the 125th poem, the author at the end of the poem lashes out at the evils of false accusation and slander, in stark contrast to the praise of sincerity:

Hence, thou suborn'd informer! A true soul
When most impeached stands least in thy control. (Shakespeare,
2008, p.250)

2.3 Hopes and Enlightenment for Readers and the World

Many of the verses in *Shakespeare's Sonnets* reflect his views on being a good person, his earnest teachings to readers, and a genuine sentiment: "As, thou being mine, mine is thy good report." (Shakespeare, 2008, p.192) Shakespeare hopes that his beloved readers will behave upright and do well, if so,

That tongue that tells the story of thy days,
Making lascivious comments on the report,
Cannot dispraise but in a kind of praise (Shakespeare, 2008,
p.190)

If Shakespeare's beloved readers do not cherish the reputation, what would happen? From some poetic lines in the 94th poem, we can see the consequence:

But if that flower with base infection meet,
The basest weed outbraves his dignity:
For sweetest things turn sourest by their deeds;
Lilies that fester smell far worse than weeds. (Shakespeare,
2008, p.188)

Shakespeare hopes that readers can be the same outside and inside, valuing virtues:

How like Eve's apple doth thy beauty grow,
If thy sweet virtue answer not thy show! (Shakespeare, 2008,
p.186)

A person's time of life passes quickly. The 77th sonnet is a heartfelt conversation between the author and

the reader. The author reminds the reader and the world that time is fleeting, but one can use words to record the trajectory of the soul, observe his own words and actions, constantly remind and urge himself, so as not to waste time, making life meaningful:

Thy glass will show thee how thy beauties wear,
Thy dial how thy precious minutes waste;
The vacant leaves thy mind's imprint will bear,
And of this book this learning mayst thou taste.
...
Look what thy memory cannot contain,
Commit to these waste blanks, and thou shalt find
Those children nursed, deliver'd from thy brain
To take a new acquaintance of thy mind.
These offices, so oft as thou wilt look,
Shall profit thee, and much enrich thy book. (Shakespeare, 2008,
p.154)

Reading this poem, people can't help but think of the earnest teachings of the ancient Chinese sage Confucius: "If I reflect on myself three times a day, then I will have no mistakes." And this also reminds one of the famous saying of Tang Taizong: "With copper as the mirror, I can straighten my clothes and crown; with history as the mirror, I can know the rise and fall; with people as the mirror, I can see gains and losses." There are similarities in both. In the 104th sonnet, the author also urges future readers to cherish their youth:

For fear of which, hear this, thou age unbred:
Ere you were born was beauty's summer dead. (Shakespeare,
2008, p.208)

This line reminds people of the words of the great national hero of our country, Yue Fei: "Should youthful heads in vain turn grey, we would regret for aye."

Shakespeare's 144th sonnet mentions two elves, one bringing comfort and the other "making me despair". These two elves actually symbolize the two sides of good and evil that exist in human beings, or rather, the two aspects of Buddha nature and demon nature that Buddhism refers to. Shakespeare writes in this poem:

The better angel is a man right fair,
The worser spirit a woman coloured ill,
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. (Shakespeare, 2008, p.288)

The evil side of people constantly tries to destroy their own good side, turning them into demons and dragging them to hell, attempting to destroy their innocence with dirty and filthy flesh desires, just like Satan who once tempted Adam and Eve to commit the original sin in the Garden of Eden. Life is constantly in a struggle between good and evil, with each passing moment. Faced with the attack of evil, once one cannot resist the temptation, he will lose their good nature and slide into the abyss of evil. As a person, one should strive to maintain and preserve his own good side, because only good can bring

beauty and comfort to people, and if the evil side cannot be suppressed and eliminated, it will only bring despair to people. Shakespeare's sonnet vividly depicts the constant struggle between good and evil within oneself, which undoubtedly serves as a profound warning and enlightenment for readers and the world.

Shakespeare, in his sonnets, praises truth, goodness, and beauty with full passion, praises noble virtues, and lashes out at various evils. He raises a bright lamp to illuminate the path of darkness for humanity, who yearns to move towards light and civilization in the darkness, guiding people to transcend lowliness and vulgarity and march towards nobility and holiness. These sonnets provide enlightenment to the world and have extraordinary enlightenment value.

3. CONCLUSION

Shakespeare had an extraordinary insight of truth. He was able to perceive truthfulness from ordinary things and had the ability to express the inner truth of things through poetry. "This power of expression, or of transferring the inmost truth of things into music and verse, makes him the type of the poet... Things were mirrored in his poetry without loss or blur: he could paint the fine with precision, the great with compass, the tragic and the comic indifferently and without any distortion or favor." (Emerson, 2008, 311)

Shakespeare utilizes poetic art to praise truth, goodness, and beauty, and to criticize falsehood, evil, and ugliness. Shakespeare's poetic lines full of wisdom and philosophy have enlightened the world who longs to move

towards civilization. His sonnets provide profound life enlightenment and endless enjoyment of beauty to people of various eras and have extraordinary enlightenment value and trans-historical significance. As Ben Jonson, a playwright of Shakespeare's time, once appraised Shakespeare: "Not of an age but for all time".

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