

Themes of some Natural Elements in Shakespearean Sonnets

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Abstract

The aim of research is to explain the relationship between an author and the imagery he or she uses. It sheds light on the rhetorical nature of Shakespeare's references to birds, trees, the mountains, the sea and sky, will reveal a fundamental approach to order and the universe. These images are also related to what Shakespeare and the Elizabethans called nature, and the distinction between nature and art. The distinction was much debated in the poet's own time. Our study argues that, while Shakespeare acknowledged what he saw as innate and natural tendencies, nature is subject to the human will, and must be perfected by art. This affects his imaginary representations of the natural world in the sonnets. This world cannot be separated from the linguistic and literary conventions of his day, and is related to the already disappearing Renaissance world view.

In this research the emphasis of some authors on Shakespeare's Imagery as a poet of the countryside is corrected. Not all the instances of nature imagery in the sonnets will be addressed. Nature images, whether of the sun, the sea, the seasons, or flowers, etc., are central to about 11 of the 154 poems published in 1609.

Chapter one

1. Introduction

Sonnets were brought in England as a form of poetry by Sir Thomas Wyatt. Initially sonnets appeared in Italy traditionally as love poems written by Dante. Later on the sonnet was written by many eminent writers like Petrarch, Spenser, Milton and Shakespeare. Each writer has his own style and forms. Petrarch developed the sonnet to one of its highest levels during early Renaissance Italy, but it wasn't translated into English until the sixteenth century.

From there, Shakespeare made the sonnet famous in England and others followed his lead. Shakespearean or English Sonnet has its style and rhyme scheme which is different than other forms of sonnets. The rhyme scheme of Shakespearean sonnets is abab, cdcd, efef, gg. This means that the sonnet consists of three quatrains (four-line stanzas) with a rhyme scheme of ABAB CDCD EFEF, followed by a concluding couplet

(two-line stanza) with a rhyme scheme of GG. although this form was first employed by Surrey and Wyatt, it got the perfection on Shakespeare's hand. He uses the ending couplet to make the central theme in the preceding quatrain obvious. In Shakespearean form the split into the octave and sestet no longer exist. Among, many forms Shakespearean form is proved a favorite because of his sequence.

The sonnet can be thematically divided into two sections: the first consists of three quatrains and presents the theme and raises an issue or doubt, and the second part which is the couplet answers the question, resolves the problem, or drives home the poem's point. This change in the poem is called the turn and helps move forward the emotional action of the poem quickly, as fourteen lines can become too short too fast.

Chapter two

2. Shakespearean Sonnets

Although Shakespeare's sonnets can be divided into different sections with numerous ways, the most apparent division involves Sonnets 1-126, in which the poet strikes up a relationship with a young man, and Sonnets 127-154, which are concerned with the poet's relationship with a woman, variously referred to as the Dark Lady, or as his mistress. In the first large division, in the Sonnets 1 to 126, the poet addresses an alluring young man with whom he has struck up a relationship. In Sonnets 1–17, he tries to convince the handsome young man to marry and beget children so that the youth's incredible beauty will not die when the youth dies. Starting in Sonnet 18, when the youth appears to reject this argument for procreation, the poet glories in the young man's beauty and takes consolation in the fact that his sonnets will preserve the youth's beauty, much like the youth's children would.

2.1 The Natural Elements in Shakespeare's Sonnets

Nature imagery is one of the most productive sources from which Shakespeare draws. The nature of the English countryside, to Shakespeare, is a series of impressions of beautiful scenes the mountains , rivers, skies, seasons and storms. Shakespeare used many natural elements in his sonnets, which he considered as his inspiration. In most of his sonnets, the language he uses in talking about those element is rhetorical including figures of speech like metaphor, metonymy, personification, apostrophe, etc. What follows are examples of Shakespeare's symbolic use of natural elements employed metaphorically in which excerpts from different sonnets are provided.

2.1.1 Flowers and Roses

To begin with, one of nature's elements that Shakespeare use in many sonnet, a number of images cluster round flowers. The use of flower-imagery was a fashion of the times, but Shakespeare's flower images are startling, and even though conventional, show the hand of the master. In Sonnet 94 we get,

The Summer's flower is to the summer sweet,
Though to itself it only live and die.

Shakespeare was extremely sensitive to fragrant smell. He loved "the sweet smell of different flowers". So rose and lily occur frequently. In Sonnet 54 he pays homage to the 'rose', the symbol of youth and beauty, and says that, unlike other flowers, roses even when faded never give an offensive smell:

"Of the sweets deaths are sweetest odours made".

The poet hates flowers which are so beautiful and fragrant while alive and give a foul smell like that of weeds when dead. In sonnet 69 he says:

"To thy fair flower add the rank smell of weeds". (Raghukul, 1991)

Again in Sonnet 94, Shakespeare compares the Dark Lady to a festering Lily:

For sweetest things sourest by their deeds,
Lilies that fester smell far worse than weeds".

In Shakespeare's sonnets, the rose imagery is placed in a dominant position among all the other flower imagery. In general, rose is one of the most conventional images in the sonnet. But in addition to the traditional symbol of beauty and love, rose in the sonnet shows more symbolic meanings: a symbol of vitality and reproduction, a symbol of friendship and devotion, and a symbol of fidelity and immortality. The symbolic rose, to a great extent, reflects the Renaissance humanist Shakespeare's values and ideals of humanism. By successfully employing the rose imagery, Shakespeare extols the virtues of reproduction, displays his faith in the immortality of his verse, and conveys the message of appreciating and cherishing the beauty, goodness, and truth.

2.1.2 Trees and weeds

Trees appear throughout the sonnets to illustrate the passage of time, the transience of life, the aging process, and beauty. Rich, lush foliage symbolizes youth, whereas barren trees symbolize old age and death, often in the same poem, as in Sonnet 12.

When I behold the violet past prime,
And sable curls all silver'd o'er with white,
When lofty trees I see barren of leaves

Which erst from heat did canopy the herd,

Traditionally, roses signify romantic love, a symbol Shakespeare employs in the sonnets, discussing their attractiveness and fragrance in relation to the young man. Sometimes Shakespeare compares flowers and weeds to contrast beauty and ugliness. In these comparisons, marred, rotten flowers are worse than weeds—that is, beauty that turns rotten from bad character is worse than initial ugliness. Giddy with love, elsewhere the speaker compares blooming flowers to the beauty of the young man, concluding in Sonnets 98 and 99 that flowers received their bloom and smell from him. The sheer ridiculousness of this statement—flowers smell sweet for chemical and biological reasons—underscores the hyperbole and exaggeration that plague typical sonnets. In Sonnet 54 provides a classic text for understanding of Shakespeare's rose imagery. Very often the rose occurs in poetry where contrasting pairs of the flower's characteristics are presented, for example the flower and the thorn, the beautiful outside and the worm, etc. Similarly, Shakespeare here pairs the beautiful appearance of the rose with its scent. The visible flower is the code for 'beauty', the scent becomes the metaphor for truth'. First Shakespeare offers the relation between 'beauty' and 'truth'. In the first quatrain Shakespeare finds that the unseen adornment 'truth' is what gives beautiful things their value, in which he says, like Keats, "Beauty is truth, truth is beauty".

O how much more doth beauty beauteous seem,
By that sweet ornament which truth doth give!
The rose looks fair, but fairer we it deem
For that sweet odour which doth in it live.

In Sonnet 67, where the poet finds that the beauty of the young man is true compared with the false. "Why should poor beauty indirectly seek / Roses of shadow, since his rose is true". Thus it is important to consider the connections of roses for the Elizabethan reader. Roses were known to be distilled for perfume, but could also strew the marriage bed' (as Gertrude says of Ophelia's flowers), or be wrapped in winding sheets. In the second quatrain, the poet speaks about the two kinds of flowers, one being the wild rose, that has the same color and thorns. This, however, has no scent. The second one is the **cultivated roses**. In the case of the **canker-bloom**, or the **dog-rose**, its only merit is its show: "Shakespeare explores the characteristic relationship between the rose and the canker. In addition to naming a type of rose the **Dog rose** or **Brier rose** '**Rosacanina**', the most common rose in the south of England and one that flowers only in June and July in Elizabethan English."

And steal dead seeing of his living hue?
Why should poor beauty indirectly seek
Roses of shadow, since his rose is true?

Why should he live, now Nature bankrupt is,

In nature a beautiful rose can stand out among the brush in a forest, or in a garden a rose can be the most beautiful flower, just the way that man's beauty will stand out among a crowd. This metaphor is used to explain to the reader that reproduction is necessary to pass on those genes that allow one man to stand out among others in a crowd. According to the speaker, this personal beauty will live on past death through reproduction. But this beauty is ephemeral therefore poet urging his friend to get married and have children to spread his friend's beauty , in sonnet 1

From fairest creatures we desire increase,
That thereby beauty's rose might never die,
Then in Sonnet 2,

When forty winters shall beseige thy brow,
And dig deep trenches in thy beauty's field,
Thy youth's proud livery, so gazed on now,
Will be a tatter'd weed, of small worth held:

we find subtle nature pictures where poet again urging his friend to get married and have child. Time is a great enemy it will devour his friend's beauty and it's a natural process our beauty is ephemeral it will decay by the time therefore poet attempts to warn his friend to marry and have children by showing him his future. When the youth is forty years old, he will be nothing but a "tottered weed", because he will be alone and childless. The only thing the young man will have to look back on is his self-absorbed "lusty days," empty because he created nothing namely, no children. This barrenness of old age is symbolized in the sonnet's last line, This were to be new made when thou art old,
And see thy blood warm when thou feel'st it cold.

poet's friend got such beauty from nature and he should endow the nature with his beauty namely his offsprings otherwise nature will absorb poet friend's beauty. This is how nature is playing with our beauty and poet staring our mind up to use time when are on our prime.

2.1.3 Stars

Stars are mentioned several times in many of Shakespeare's sonnets, where each time they are mentioned they symbolize something specific. In sonnet 14 Shakespeare used the Stars to symbolizes the young man's eyes because the stars are often associated with beauty, brightness, and brilliance, just like the eyes of the young man. The use of stars as a metaphor for the young man's eyes emphasizes their luminosity and captivating qualities.

Not from the stars do I my judgment pluck;
And yet methinks I have astronomy,

But not to tell of good or evil luck,
Of plagues, of dearths, or seasons' quality;
Nor can I fortune to brief minutes tell,
Pointing to each his thunder, rain and wind,
Or say with princes if it shall go well,
By oft predict that I in heaven find:
But from thine eyes my knowledge I derive
from which the poet attains his knowledge. Stylistically, this sonnet is a good example of a typical Shakespearean sonnet: The first eight lines establish an argument, and then line 9 turns this argument upside down with its first word, "But." The concluding couplet, lines 13 and 14, declares some outcome or effect of the young man's behavior. Typically, this concluding image is of death, as in Sonnet 14's "Thy end is truth's and beauty's doom and date."

In other words, should the young man die without fathering a son, not only will he suffer from the lack of an heir, but the world, too, will suffer from the youth's selfishness.

Also, in sonnet 25 which is known as 'Let those who are in favour with their stars' is number twenty-five of one hundred fifty-four sonnets that Shakespeare wrote over his lifetime. It is part of the well-loved Fair Youth sequence of sonnets. In this particular poem, the poet makes references to the stars. Those which are physical and metaphorical, tapping into themes of the fleeting nature of fame and the strength of love. The speaker addresses the Fair Youth telling him that the love they have is far more important than who the stars or sun are shining on at any one time. Those who have awards, power, and many friends only have them temporarily. Like a marigold flower, these people will die when the sun no longer shines on them. The love the Fair Youth and the speaker share is going to last forever. No one can take it away from them.

Also, in sonnet 116 Shakespeare uses a metaphor to compare love to a star that's always present and never changes, It is real and permanent. He is so confident in this opinion that he asserts no man has ever loved before if he's wrong. Shakespeare also brings elements of time into the poem. He emphasizes the fact that time knows no boundaries, and even if the people in the relationship change, the love doesn't.

In the last two lines in second quatrain,

It is the star to every wand'ring bark,

Whose worth's unknown, although his height be taken.

Here to Shakespeare, love is the star that guides every bark, or ship, on the water, and while it is priceless, it can be measured. These two lines are interesting and worth noting. Shakespeare concedes that love's worth is not known, but he says it can be measured. How he neglects to tell his

reader, but perhaps he is assuming the reader will understand the different ways in which one can measure love: through time and actions. With that thought, the second quatrain ends.

Sonnet 60, L. -8). It seems that once the prime of life passes, the days, minutes and seconds pass by much faster than life before the prime. This shows that life is quickly changing and that those days of reproduction are in the past. The tone of the Sonnets has changed from being urgent to calm and peaceful just the way listening to waves crashing is peaceful. This tone allows the speaker to accept the maturity that man faces as life passes its prime. Death seems to be rapidly drawing nearer.

2.1.4 The Sun

Shakespeare used the sun in several sonnets and it is employed in various forms for example in sonnet 130 Shakespeare employs some beautiful imagery and the sonnet start with praising poet's mistress. He uses simile to describe the eyes of the woman he loves, noting that they are not like the sun.

My mistress' eyes are nothing like the sun;

Shakespeare's Sonnet 7 uses personification to describe the sun rising and then falling in the sky as a metaphor for the beginning of the Fair Youth's own life,

Lo, in the orient when the gracious light

Lifts up his burning head, each under eye

In reference to the sunrise when the sun rises in the east of a morning, everyone living under it ('each under eye') pays homage to this blazing eye in the sky by looking up and admiring it. The sun is described in regal terms – 'gracious', 'majesty' – but also holy ones even when the sun is at its highest point, at noon, and is technically then in what we might call its 'middle age', people still admire it for its beauty. The phrase 'golden pilgrimage' reinforces the religious connotations of the sun in the 'heavenly' sky'. The implication to all this, of course, is that the Fair Youth, even if he leaves it to early middle age to marry and have a son, will still find many women to admire (and marry) him then. But when the sun begins to set and is on its way down, like a man crawling towards 'feeble [old] age', those admirers, which were loyal to him until now, start to look elsewhere for things to admire. The implication here is that if the Fair Youth leaves it until he's past his prime to choose a wife and have children, he may find it difficult to attract a mate, as he'll have lost his youthful strength and beauty.

Sonnet 7 is about the trajectory of the sun, but this word never appears in the sonnet, with Shakespeare instead using the word 'light' to

describe it. This makes the appearance of the homophone ‘son’ right at the end of the sonnet all the more powerful, as if the word has suddenly been released, in punning form, like a blaze of light. It is this withholding of the very word that is the theme of the sonnet until the end of the poem, when it is release in punning splendour, that makes this a technically accomplished poem.

Once the sun sets people stop admiring it as much, just the same way man won’t be admired if kin isn’t produced. Once the sunset reaches its peak, or the point where it finally disappears, it consistently turns darker, this closely relates the way that once life reaches a certain age, it moves faster and faster towards the end. The tone and theme of the Sonnets begin to change from this point on, focusing on the fact that life passes just as quickly as a sunset fades. After a sunset fades the sky suddenly becomes darker; and the darkness progresses as time passes through the night.

The sunset is used as a metaphor for the way that a life fades after the peak, or the prime of life. ‘Sonnet 15’ uses a metaphor similar to that of a sunset fading, but this metaphor compares man’s declining quality of life after the prime to that of a plant once it reaches its full potential,

“When I consider everything that grows
Holds in perfection but a little moment,
That this huge stage presenteth naught but shows
Whereon the stars in secret influence comment;
When I perceive that men as plants increase,
Cheered and checked even by the selfsame sky,
Vaunt in their youthful sap, at height decrease” (Sonnet 15).

2.1.5 Seasons

Shakespeare, like many sonneteers, portrays time as an enemy of love. Time destroys love because time causes beauty to fade, people to age and life to end. One common convention of sonnets in general is to flatter either a beloved or a patron by promising immortality through verse. As long as readers read the poem, the object of the poem’s love will remain alive. In Shakespeare’s Sonnet 15, the speaker talks of being “in war with time” time causes the young man’s beauty to fade, but the speaker’s verse shall entomb the young man and keep him beautiful. The speaker begins by pleading with time in another sonnet, yet he ends by taunting time, confidently asserting that his verse will counteract time’s ravages. From the contemporary point of view the speaker was correct, and art has beaten time: the young man remains young since we continue to read of his youth in Shakespeare’s sonnets.

Through art, nature and beauty overcome time. Several sonnets use the seasons to symbolize the passage of time and to show that everything

in nature—from plants to people—is mortal. But nature creates beauty, which poets capture and render immortal in their verse. Sonnet 106 portrays the speaker reading poems from the past and recognizing his beloved's beauty portrayed therein. The speaker then suggests that these earlier poets were prophesizing the future beauty of the young man by describing the beauty of their contemporaries. In other words, past poets described the beautiful people of their day and, like Shakespeare's speaker, perhaps urged these beautiful people to procreate and so on, through the poetic ages, till the birth of the young man portrayed in Shakespeare's sonnets. In this way, as beautiful people of one generation produce more beautiful people in the subsequent generation and as all this beauty is written about by poets nature, art, and beauty triumph over time.

In Sonnet 5 the poet compares nature's four seasons with the stages of the young man's life. Although the seasons are cyclical, his life is linear, and hours become tyrants that oppress him because he cannot escape time's grasp.

Those hours, that with gentle work did frame
The lovely gaze where every eye doth dwell,
meaning that everyone notices the youth's beauty, but time's "never-resting" progress ensures that this beauty will eventually fade.

In an extended metaphor, the poet argues that because flowers provide perfume to console people during the winter, it is natural for the youth to have a child to console him during his old age. Without perfume from summer's flowers, people would not remember previous summers during the long, hard winters; Childless, the young man will grow old alone and have nothing to remind him of his younger days.

Winter, an image of old age, is regarded with horror:
Sap checked with frost, and lusty leaves quite gone,
Beauty o'ersnowed and bareness every where:
The "lusty leaves" imagery recalls the "lusty days" from Sonnet 2 and reemphasizes the barrenness of the youth's old age, in which he will look back longingly on his younger days but will have nothing to remember them by. However, in the final couplet,
This were to be new made when thou art old,
And see thy blood warm when thou feel'st it cold.

the poet evokes a comforting tone, suggesting that immortality is attainable for the young man, just as it is for summer's flowers when they are transformed into perfume, if only the young man would father a child. Also in sonnet 73 the speaker invokes a series of metaphors to characterize the nature of what he perceives to be his old age. In the first quatrain, he tells the beloved that his age is like a "time of year," late autumn, when the leaves have almost completely fallen from the trees, and the weather

has grown cold, and the birds have left their branches. In the second quatrain, he then says that his age is like late twilight, “As after sunset fadeth in the west,” and the remaining light is slowly extinguished in the darkness, which the speaker likens to “Death’s second self.” In the third quatrain, the speaker compares himself to the glowing remnants of a fire, which lies “on the ashes of his youth” that is, on the ashes of the logs that once enabled it to burn and which will soon be consumed “by that which it was nourished by” that is, it will be extinguished as it sinks into the ashes, which its own burning created. In the couplet, the speaker tells the young man that he must perceive these things, and that his love must be strengthened by the knowledge that he will soon be parted from the speaker when the speaker, like the fire, is extinguished by time

2.1.6 Birds

One should not beware of saying that this less usual image, based on the skylark's movement, shows that Shakespeare made the closest and most accurate observation of country scenes. Certainly the poet would be familiar with larks, like anyone who walks through a field in England but what is more important is the literary and cultural context. The whole poem has a religious tone. The word 'heaven' comes twice, first it is deaf", then it hears hymns of joy. Religious thought provides many examples of the lark as a symbol and this is what underlies the image of Sonnet 29. Primarily, because this brown bird lives on the ground and rises singing to the sky it has been a symbol of prayer and praise since the time of Tertullian. It is described as a favorite of Saint Francis. Literature and pious folklore linking the lark to praises.

Shakespeare was also very sensitive to sound. In Sonnet 102 he refers to the "wild music" that "burthens every bough" The songs of the birds, like the skylark and the nightingale, appeal to him. In Sonnets 29 and 102 he uses personification of the lark at break day arising" and the nightingale.

As Philomel in summer's front doth sing,
And stops her pipe in growth of riper days:

At the advent of the winter he gives a picture of desolation:

Bare ruin'd choirs, where late the sweet birds sang .(Sonnet 73)

Or, if they sing, 'tis with so dull a cheer, (Sonnet 97)

Sensitive to the charms of music, Shakespeare's love of music is seen in his Sonnets. For example in sonnet 8,

Mark how one string, sweet husband to another,

Strikes each by mutual ordering;

Resembling sire and child and happy mother

Who all, in one, pleasing note do sing

2.1.7 Reproduction

To begin with the Sonnet 1, we find that the sonnet sets the most excellent examples of natural “beings find hindrance to reproduce themselves.

"From fairest creatures we desire increase/
That thereby beauty's rose might never die/
But as the ripper should by time decease" (sonnet 1, line 13)

We know that rose is a symbol of youthful beauty; rose is also often associated with female's beauty as well. Here poet comparing the beauty of a rose to the beauty of man's ability to reproduce and pass on the 'fairest,' or beautiful, genes.

In nature a beautiful rose can stand out among the brush in a forest, or in a garden a rose can be the most beautiful flower, just the way that man's beauty will stand out among a crowd. This metaphor is used to explain to the reader that reproduction is necessary to pass on those genes that allow one man to stand out among others in a crowd. According to Shakespeare, this personal beauty will live on past death through reproduction. But this beauty is ephemeral therefore the poet urges his friend to get married and have children to spread and perpetuate his beauty. And the word ripper suggests fruit rather than flowers, indicating that speedy process of growth denotes "Soon ripe, soon rotten". So the poet's friend should not consume his own beauty and should not be like Narcissus; rather he should get married because the world and nature demand that the poet should propagate his beauty through his progeny. Then in Sonnet 2, we find subtle natural images with the poet again urging his friend to get married and have child. Time is a great enemy as it will devour his friend's beauty and it's a natural process our beauty is ephemeral it will decay by the time, therefore the poet attempts to advise his friend to marry and have children by showing him his future. When the youth is forty years old, he will be nothing but a "tottered weed", because he will be alone and childless. The only thing the young man will have to look back on is his self-absorbed "lusty days", empty because he created nothing — namely, no children. This barrenness of old age is symbolized in the sonnet's last line: the poet's friend got such beauty from nature and he should endow the nature with his beauty namely his offsprings; otherwise nature will absorb his beauty. This is how nature is playing with our beauty and how the poet steering our minds up to use time when we are in our prime of youth.

3. Conclusion

In the proceeding parts of this research, light has been shed on the way Shakespeare uses natural elements symbolically using figures of speech simile, personification, metaphor, etc. The main themes he tackles are youth, beauty, generation, old age and death. He uses those natural elements because they have aspects which are comparable, or indirectly to human characteristics such as beauty, ugliness and liveliness that exist in there cycle of life. The figure of speech he uses add on aesthetic flavor that when compled with the unique structure and musicality of his sonnets, render masterpieces of poems rarely composed by other poets.

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