

## Time and Immortality in William Shakespeare's Sonnets

Dr. Leila Bellour

Abdelhafid Boussouf University Center of Mila

### Abstract:

This paper probes into the notion of time in William Shakespeare's sonnets that are addressed to a young man who is accorded a high prestige in the first 126 sonnets. Time, for the poet, is the arch-enemy that breaks the unifying force of love. It is the chief devourer of beauty that brings about alternations, decay, and the tragic event of death. Out of his immense friendly and Platonic love for the youth, as the paper evinces, the poet tries to find means of achieving immortality to combat the destructive power of time which devastates and dilapidates everything. My humble paper shows Shakespeare's responsiveness to time and how he makes it possible for the youth to leave records of his resplendent qualities, including beauty, and how he enables him to remain alive in others' minds and hearts even after death.

**Keywords :** Time, immortality, William Shakespeare, sonnets, art, procreation.

### Résumé:

Cet article examine la notion de temps dans les sonnets de William Shakespeare qui s'adressent à un jeune homme qui jouit d'un haut prestige dans les 126 premiers sonnets. Le temps, pour le poète, est l'archi-ennemi qui brise la force fédératrice de l'amour. C'est le principal dévoreur de la beauté qui apporte des alternances, de la désintégration et l'événement tragique de la mort. De son immense amour amical et platonicien pour la jeunesse, comme le montre le document, le poète essaie de trouver des moyens d'obtenir l'immortalité pour combattre le pouvoir destructeur du temps qui détruit et dilapide tout. Mon humble article montre la réactivité de Shakespeare au temps et comment il permet aux jeunes de laisser des traces de ses qualités resplendissantes, y compris la beauté, et comment il lui permet de rester vivant dans les esprits et les cœurs d'autrui, même après la mort.

**Mots Clés:** temps, William Shakespeare, sonnets, l'art, procréation.

### الملخص:

يعالج هذا المقال مفهوم الزمن في القصائد السونيتية لوليام شكسبير التي تخاطب الشاب الصغير و الذي منحه مكانة عالية في القصائد 126 الأولى. الوقت بالنسبة للشاعر هو العدو اللدود الذي يكسر قوة الحب الموحدة. إنه يُعتبر الملتهم الأكبر للجمال الذي يؤدي إلى التغيير و الاضمحلال و مأساة الموت. يحاول الشاعر انطلاقاً من حب الصداقة الجم و الأفلاطوني الذي يكنه للشباب أن يجد وسيلة لتحقيق الخلود و مكافحة قوة الوقت المدمرة و المبيدة لكل شيء. يبين هذا المقال استجابة شكسبير للوقت و كيف مكن الشاب أن يترك آثار و سجلات من صفاته المتألئة، بما في ذلك الجمال، و كيف استطاع أن يجعله على قيد الحياة في أذهان الآخرين و قلوبهم حتى بعد الموت.

**الكلمات المفتاحية:** الزمن، وليام شكسبير، القصائد السونيتية، الفن، الانجاب.

### Introduction

The first 126 sonnets express the poet's intense love for the young man. Shakespeare's sonnets violate assumed love conventions. The nature of this love remains controversial. The language is sometimes erotic but the thought is not. Though there are many speculations about homosexuality in the sonnets (See Judith Butler's *Between Men*), love in these poems is a friendly and Platonic love. Maurice Charney writes: "Male homoerotic discourse is much more common in Shakespeare and in Elizabethan/Jacobean literature than female because friendship, especially male friendship, was conventionally taken to be of higher spiritual value than heterosexual love"(167). Platonic love finds

its full expression in Shakespeare's sonnets. For the poet, spiritual love is more important than the sensual one.

The depth of his love for his friend pushed him to search for ways to immortalize this glamorous figure. In his sonnets addressed to the youth, the poet is in a battle against time, which is the spoiler of youth, beauty, and love. He fears that time, the formidable antagonist which destroys everything, might vanquish the resplendent qualities of the youth, including beauty that is often downrated in literature.

In the first 126 sonnets, which are addressed to the youth, Shakespeare is obsessed with time which might drive him and his friend ashore. In sonnet 64, he fears "That time will come and take [his] love away" (239). For Shakespeare, time is equated with death and loss. It leads to his absentness from him. In the sonnets, time is described as thief, tyrant, devourer, and harvester. For Shakespeare, the youth will never age despite the passage of time. In sonnet 104, he says, "To me, fair friend, you never can be old,/For as you were when first your eye I eyed/Such seems your beauty still" (319).

The bard has two main strategies for combating time: procreation and art. Because of the lack of space, I will discuss only the following sonnets: sonnet 2, sonnet 3, sonnet 9, sonnet 13, sonnet 17, sonnet 15, sonnet 18, sonnet 19, sonnet 55, and sonnet 63.

### **Procreation as a means of achieving immortality**

In the first 17 sonnets, which are known as the procreation sonnets, the poet is in war against the bellicose time. In sonnet 15, for instance, time is described as wasteful; while in sonnet 16, it is viewed as a "bloody tyrant". The best weapon in this endless battle against time is procreation. According to Plato, "procreation is the nearest thing to perpetuity and immortality that a mortal thing can attain" (Qtd in Carol Collier 36).

In sonnet 2, time is depicted as a ravager of the young man's beauty. The opening lines read: "When forty winters shall besiege thy brow/And dig deep trenches in thy beauty's field." Old age, which is symbolized by forty winters, will dig wrinkles in his beautiful face and turn his bright eyes into "deep-sunken eyes" (115). If he gets old without having an offspring in whom his beauty will be renewed, he will be worthless very much like a torn garment. The "tottered weed" in the sonnet refers to the destruction of the young man's outward beauty. Old age makes his beauty and charm vanish, and this in turn diminishes his power of attraction. Hence, he will be consumed by a deep feeling of shame for remaining single.

At the end of the sonnet, the poet insists that the youth can escape the clutches of the rapacious time by getting married. For him, this is the best way to convey an image of his beauty to the future generations. The sonnet concludes:

This were to be new made when thou art old,  
And see thy blood warm when thou feel'st it cold (115).

The youth, who is completely wrapped up in himself, rejects the poet's exhortation to him to get married.

In sonnet 3, the poet beseeches the youth to contemplate his image in a mirror, which should remind him that time is passing fast. Thus, he must fight against time by getting an offspring; otherwise, he will perish. The sonnet opens with the following lines:

Look in thy glass and tell the face thou viewest,  
Now is the time that face should form another (117).

The sight of his image reflected in a mirror is likely to make this troublesome figure awakened to the sobering reality of old age and the imminent death. If he doesn't get married, his beauty will fade away with the passage of time. But his child will bear his beauty when the marks of time will do their worst to him. As his mother's beauty is imaged in him, his beauty will be reflected in his offspring. Thus, he will re-experience his golden age of youth through his child. In the couplet, he

warns the youth that if he rejects the idea of marriage, he will leave no record of his beauty after death. The last line of the sonnet reads:

Die single and thine image dies with thee (117).

The youth is not responding to the requirement of achieving immortality. He is not interested in getting married but in singleness which is a self-destruction.

In sonnet 9, the poet who is so bothered with time, never tires of persuading the young man to save his beauty. In the opening lines, the poet asks if the youth remains single for fear of dying and leaving a widow shedding tears for his eternal departure. The first lines read:

Is it for fear to wet a widow's eye

That thou consum'st thyself in single life? (129)

For the poet, remaining single is a form of self-destruction or auto-cannibalism. The youth's refusal to put an end to his celibacy and to be fruitful and multiply is probably due to his narcissism which makes it impossible for him to love someone else. In another sonnet, he also describes him as emotionally cold, showing no concern or affection towards others. In sonnet 94, he says that the youth has "power to hurt [...]moving others" with his beauty, but himself is "as stone, /Unmoved, cold, and to temptation slow"(209) The youth is reminiscent of the Greek mythical figure Narcissus. According to Ovid's version of the myth, when he reached the age of sixteenth, Narcissus's dazzling beauty became unbelievable. Both young men and women were allured and hypnotized by his perfect beauty. They vied to win his heart, but they failed. Ovid writes: "For when Narcissus reached/His sixteen year he seemed to be a boy/As much as man; both boys and girls looked to him/To make love, and yet that slender figure/Of proud Narcissus had little feeling/For either boys or girls"(Ovid 75).Narcissus, the cynosure of erotic attraction, feels a supreme superiority, and he refuses to acknowledge any Other beyond his confined self. One of Narcissus's lovers, whom he rejected, asked the gods to punish him for not reciprocating others' love. As a result, he fell in love with his own image, which he one day saw in the water. Ignorant of the fact that what he saw was his own reflection and not a real male body, Narcissus could not resist the image's seductive power. Overcome by the beauty of his own reflection in the water, he bent down to kiss himself and he died.

If the youth dies without sharing his beauty with a child, the entire world will lament his demise, because he is the cynosure of all eyes. The poet says:

Ah, if thou issueless shalt hap to die,

The world will wail thee like a makeless wife;

The world will be thy widow and still weep,

That thou no form of thee hast left behind (209).

The poet compares the youth's squandering of his beauty, by his resistance to procreate, to an unthrifty person. While the latter's treasure will circulate around the world and others will benefit from it, the youth's beauty shall wither if he dies without an issue. In the couplet, the poet blames the youth for not reciprocating others' love, which is downgraded in preference to selfishness. It's vastly inferior to it. The poet says:

No love toward others in that bosom sits

That on himself such murd'rous shame commits (209).

The poet reproaches the young man who prefers to immure himself in a world of his own. He considers his narcissism as a shameful act that leads to his self-destruction. Sadly, the fair youth is hardly thinking of begetting children.

Sonnet 13 is another procreation sonnet in which he urges him to reproduce in order to defeat time, the invincible antagonist. This sonnet, which is a combination of warning and compliment, opens with the poet's vows of love and his wish that the youth would remain the same despite this malicious time. But he reminds him that he cannot avoid time's irresistible onslaught. Hence, he wheedles him into getting married to transfer his ephemeral beauty to his child. He says:

Against this coming end you should prepare,

And your sweet semblance to some other give.  
 So should that beauty which you hold in lease  
     Find no determination; then you were  
     Yourself again after yourself's decease,  
     When your sweet issue your sweet form should bear (137).

So, procreation is a counter attack to the inveterate enemy which is death. It saves and reveals his beauty in his child.

In the last quatrain, the poet tries to convince the youth to procreate. He compares his beauty to a fair house that shall be prey to decay because of the ravages of time which is symbolized by winter. Because only unthrifths, as he argues, damage their properties, the youth should become a husband to ensure immortality and protect himself against the wintry process of aging.

In the couplet, in which he expresses his oceanic emotions for the fair youth, the poet urges him to have a child as he is the son of his father. By rejecting the idea of marriage, he will be cruel not just to himself, but also to the future generations. If he gets married, his beauty will be passed on to his son, and his image shall always be lodged in the minds and hearts of people. Unfortunately, the young man rejects the poet's proposal, and he remains self-enclosed and self-involved.

In another sonnet, 17, the poet uses a rhetorical language full of expressions of endearment and luxuriant imagery to elevate him above all creatures. The first lines of the sonnet read:

Who will believe my verse in time to come  
 If it were filled with your most high deserts?  
 Though yet heav'n knows it is but as a tomb  
 Which hides your life and shows not half your parts.  
 If I could write the beauty of your eyes  
 And in fresh numbers number all your graces (145).

In this sonnet, the poet asserts that the power of art to describe his merits is insufficient and that it can show only few of his true virtues. In this sonnet, the poet fears that the future generations won't believe in the virtues of the youth, which the poet feels unable to express in the form of verse. Despite his hypnotizing style, people might find his poems full of hyperbolic praise and lies. Thus, the poet begs the youth to leave something which will make people recognize his worth.

### **Art as a means of achieving immortality**

When the poet fails to nudge the youth into the possibility of getting married, he finds that eternity can be achieved not just through progeny but also through art. The poet believes that poetry can defeat time, which is the antagonist of life and beauty.

Shakespeare endorses Ovid's view that art might create an equivalent for life. Ovid, who asserts that works of art are able to achieve immortality, writes:

And now my work is done, which neither the wrath of love, nor fire,  
 nor sword, nor the gnawing tooth of time shall ever be able to undo  
 [...] I shall be borne immortal far beyond the lofty stars and I shall  
 have an undying name [...] I shall have mention on men's lips, and, if  
 the prophecies of bards have any truth, through all the ages shall I live  
 in fame (263).

In fact, life endures only if it is immortalized in art, because the latter is strong enough to battle the destructive forces of time. Art does not only depict an accurate likeness of reality; it is even capable of transcending life. According to Malcolm Bradbury, "The word, reality, is discontinuous till art comes along"(25). In his poem, "To the Memory of my Beloved Author Mr. William Shakespeare," Ben Jonson writes:

Thou art a monument,  
 Without a tomb,

And art alive still, while thy book doth live  
 And we have wits to read, and praise to give  
 The poet promises to create copies of his beloved through verse. In sonnet 15, he writes:  
 And all in war for love of you,  
 As he takes from you, I engraft you new (141).

Despite the incipient mortality, the youth will rise anew. Alan Singer points out the ability of art to stave off time. He states that “does not reproduce the forms of the world but rather participates in the production of new forms”(36).

This sonnet opens with the following question “Shall I compare thee to a summer’s day?”(147). The poet argues in the quatrains that the youth’s beauty transcends that of summer’s day. The young man’s beauty is eternal whereas summer has a short leasehold on nature. It is also full of extremes, while the youth is temperate.

In sonnet 18, the poet, whose spirit refuses to be crushed by the reality of death, says that though all things in the world are subject to age and decay, the young man’s beauty shall never wither. He writes:

And every fair from fair sometime declines,  
 By chance or nature’s changing course untrimmed.  
 But thy eternal summer shall not fade,  
 Nor lose possession of that fair thou ow’st (147).

Even death, which in the Bible boasts of its victory over life, will never take away the life of the youth. The latter will be immortalized in his verse. The couplet reads:

So long as men can breathe or eyes can see,  
 So long lives this, and this gives life to thee (147).

The couplet indicates that the youth will live forever because the poet’s verse will remain despite time’s haste and the inevitable change it brings about.

The poet, who won’t endure the youth’s bitter farewell to him and to life, asserts the power of verse to achieve immortality. Sonnet 19 opens with an apostrophe in which he addresses “Devouring time”(149), a description that recalls to mind the old adage “Time devours everything”. It is also reminiscent of Ovid’s metamorphosis. In it, Ovid writes: “O time, thou great devourer, and thou, envious Age, together you destroy all things; and, slowly gnawing with your teeth, you finally consume all things in lingering death”(381).

In this sonnet, the poet gives permission to time to devour everything in life except the young man, because this would be a horrendous and unforgivable crime. He says:

But I forbid thee one most heinous crime,  
 O carve not with thy hours my love’s fair brow,  
 Nor draw no lines there with thine antique pen (149).

He forbids him to draw wrinkles on the youth’s face. In the couplet, the poet challenges time, saying that whatever it does to the youth, he shall always remain young and immortal in his verse. The couplet reads: “Yet do thy worst Old Time; despite thy wrong,/My love shall in my verse ever live young”(149). These eternal lines of verse are capable of countering the lines of time. In them, the youth will survive on earth though the poet is rotten.

In Sonnet 55, which is a continuation of the poet’s joust with time, the poet believes wholeheartedly that

Not marble nor the gilded monuments  
 Of princes shall outlive this powerful rhyme (221).

Despite the tragedies time might bring out, his verse shall outlast what is thought to be eternal and indestructible. Thus, his deathless sonnets will make it possible for him to live beyond human life. Even wars, which ruin everything, shall never burn the “The living record of [his] memory”(221). The

poet asserts that the youth will triumph over time and that he will bstride the world through the poet's verse; the poet says:

'Gainst death and all-oblivious enmity  
Shall you pace forth; your praise shall still find room  
Even in the eyes of all posterity

That wear this world out to the ending doom (221).

Though time goes fast, the fair youth's beauty will never vanish. The poet concludes with his confident claim that:

till the Judgement that yourself arise,  
You live in this, and dwell in lovers' eyes (221).

So, by means of art, the youth can withstand time's inevitable onslaught. The fair youth will survive and thrive until the dooms day, and his beauty will continue to mesmerize readers of Shakespeare's sonnets.

Sonnet 60, in which the poet also tries to salvage immortality through poetry, ends with the following couplet:

And yet to times in hope my verse shall stand,  
Praising thy worth, despite his cruel hand (221).

In sonnet 63, the poet is competing with time to win immortality. The poet imagines a time to come when the youth will be old as the poet now. He rails against "time's injurious hands" and its bleak hours. He says:

When hours have drained his blood and filled his brow  
With lines and wrinkles; when his youthful morn [...]
   
Are vanishing or vanished out of sight,  
Stealing away the treasure of his spring;  
For such a time do I now fortify (237).

Time, here, is described as a vampire which absorbs the blood of its victims. Its "scythe and crooked knife"(311), as he describes it in sonnet 100, shall excavate and stain his beautiful face Time, for the poet, is the thief of youth that turns the young man's spring of life into cold winter The poet, after showing the evil nature of time, prepares his weapons to defeat its "cruel knife" He says:

For such a time do I now fortify  
Against confounding age's cruel knife,  
That he shall never cut from memory  
My sweet love's beauty, though my lover's life (237).

Though time will take away his beloved friend from him, the poet continues his exorbitant claim that poetry will make it impossible for time to cut the youth from human memory In the couplet, the poet vigorously asserts that his immortalizing verse will never let the youth and his beauty vanish He says:

His beauty shall in these black lines be seen,  
And they shall live, and he in them still green (237).

## Conclusion

In Shakespeare's sonnets, which are addressed to the young man, there is a quest to achieve immortality. In these sonnets, the poet expresses his intense fear of the might of time and its destruction of the youth's life, beauty, and his intimate relationship with him. In his grappling with the problem of time, the poet urges the fair youth to procreate to counter the erosive movement of time. Sadly, the poet's arguments and his eloquent words, in the procreation sonnets, fall on deaf ears. However, the poet is unable to accept the sorrow destiny of the fair youth's death and the terrible fact that he will exit the life stage. Despite the youth's adamant rejection of biological reproduction as a means to fight against time, the poet lives with the hopeful thought that his poetry will achieve immortality and, thus, realize his dream of the young man's lastingness.

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