

# Shakespeare

Literature



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As with any work of literature, reading and understanding Shakespeare requires above all a grasp of the socio-political and cultural temper of the author's time. That the Bard flourished and wrote in the Renaissance (i. e. Elizabethan and Jacobean England) automatically qualifies his creative output as containers of the prevailing world view of the period. One may argue of the so-called “ universality” of great literature. It should be kept in mind, however, that great literature does not exist in a vacuum; neither does it fall down from heaven.

Each work of art is always a significant piece in a unique ideological and historical jigsaw puzzle. For example, Sonnet 29 (“ When in disgrace with Fortune and men's eyes”) is not simply a love poem. It is essentially a Renaissance love poem. That Shakespeare chose to write using a particular poetic format is crucial—it provides a clue to a literary tradition. The sonnet, formerly an Italian poetic device (i. e. Petrarchan in honor of Francesco Petrarch) in this case has been appropriated by the English pen for an English audience.

Instead of the Petrarchan/ Italian rhyme scheme of abba abba cdecde/ cdcdcd (one octet and one sestet), the poem contains three quatrains and one couplet with the following rhyme scheme: abab cdcd efef gg. This rhyme scheme is also known as Elizabethan or Shakespearean. Sonnet 29 is originally part of a sonnet sequence, featuring, among countless controversies (indeed with Shakespeare the literary sleuth is never in want) the general plot of unrequited love. Sonnet 29 shows the initial phase of the lover's romantic saga.

The lover/poet, languishing in his “ outcast state” (line 2) turns to his beloved for consolation and comfort. Or better yet, he seeks emotional upliftment not so much with the beloved a. k. a “ dark lady’ per se as he does with his love toward her. Notice how the beloved occupies a relatively peripheral role in the poem. The object of poetic passion is indeed, an object. The entire sonnet practically centers on the poet/ lover’s voice. It revolves around his fate “ on top of the world and the depths of despair” as Goethe puts it.

Individualism, a characteristic motif of the Renaissance’s humanist credo, is a strong element in the poem. On the surface it seems as if the beloved is the one being enshrined and immortalized through the Bard’s flaming words. Remember that the Renaissance audience (modern readers no exception) do not even know exactly who the beloved is. What they and we do know is that the sonnet is signed “ William Shakespeare. ” What reader’s can only be certain of is the identity of the poet (and the lover he is identified with).

The poet who is simultaneously the lover is a personification of the Renaissance ideal—the Homo Universalis, the Renaissance Man. A man of creative and intellectual powers who is able to transform raw passion into a beautiful work of art. In the Renaissance context, the artist and his art are inseparable. One is made possible, given life, by the other. In Sonnet 29, the individual, that is, the poet/lover is in severe conflict with the cosmos and the social collective.

While “ in disgrace with Fortune and men’s eyes” (1) he “ all alone beweepe his outcast state” (2). His isolation is stressed throughout the poem. Though he remains a pariah (there is no hint of him reconciling with “ Fortune” and “

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men”), he does not end up as a helpless prey. He is empowered: “ Like the lark at break of day arising/ From sullen earth, sings hymns at heaven’s gates” (11-12). He is not to be perpetually defeated nor spat upon.

Resolution in the sonnet comes in the couplet (another typical characteristic of Elizabethan sonnets) when the I/poet/ lover “ rememb’red” (13), that is, reestablishes and somewhat reinforces his love and passion, and to some extent, his creativity. He continues in an elated tone: “ For thy sweet love rememb’red such wealth brings, / That then I scorn to change my state with kings” (13-14). What starts out as a rejection and negation of his self culminates in the delineation of it. The poem is replete with figurative expressions and images, which contributes to its multifaceted nature.

The poetic devices used exhibit multiple layers of meanings. Personification is evident in “ deaf heaven” (3) and “ Fortune” (1). “ Fortune” is capitalized to create a sense of invincibility. It serves as an emblem of that power which is beyond human control and perhaps, comprehension. The same rings true with “ deaf heaven,” which in shunning out the lover’s “ bootless cries” (3) heighten the outcast’s vulnerability and the irreparability of his dilemma. In this case, it is as if the lover/poet’s existence is nullified.

A stark dichotomy is constructed using the images of “ sullen earth” (12), that is, misery and celestial elements, which the lover associates with spiritual and intellectual elation. The ‘ lark...arising” (11) coupled with “ heaven’s gate” (12) show how the lover’s situation has risen above his former state, at least as far as his paradigm is concerned. At the end of the poem, the lover/ poet has regained control of his persona and life. Although

still subject to external juggernauts such as destiny and society, he is far from being their pawn.

He is his own master and creator. His life has become his magnum opus. Poems bear a whole spectrum of meanings. The Bard's sonnets are no exception to this rule. What is important, however, is for the reader to be able to locate a literary work against the proper background. Interpretations vary, at times clash, most especially with an artist as controversial as Shakespeare. Agreement comes with the construction of sound and stable arguments which eventually enters the larger discourse of the literary world.