

Love in sonnet 29



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Shakespeare's iconic sonnet 29 is a sonnet that embodies the superficial nature of humanity, both intrinsically and extrinsically. The sonnet begins with the speaker denouncing his current state, which is quite unfavorable, as he "beweep[s] [his] outcast state" (line 2). However, the speaker continues to exalt his lover as the only reason he is able to carry on through his unfortunate circumstances. This serves as a bold endorsement of both love and intrinsic values over extrinsic materialism. All in all, this sonnet appears to speak to the value of love in maintaining one's sanity when faced with dire circumstances. However, a more detailed reading of the sonnet reveals that this is not the case at all and the sonnet lends itself to an entirely different theme. In a casual reading, the reader experiences a more jubilant poem in which the speaker overcomes his material poverty through his love. Shakespeare, through, traditional sonnet structure and blatant tone shifts, creates the impression that this sonnet speaks to the theme of the overcoming power of love. However, this is not an accurate reading of the sonnet. In fact, the speaker is not to be taken for his word, and Shakespeare's speaker is not as noble as he appears to be. Shakespeare, through simile, imagery, traditional Shakespearean sonnet structure, characterization of the speaker, and apostrophe, creates a speaker that appears, on the whole, very inept and manic depressive. This, in turn, creates an atmosphere in which the reader is to be inherently suspicious of the speaker's account. By doing this, Shakespeare provides commentary that links love to both madness and depression, thereby suggesting that these are inherent qualities of love itself. Due to this, Shakespeare speaks to the unnecessary nature of love in terms of human success.

In a casual reading of this sonnet, one may note that Shakespeare uses rudimentary stylistic and literary devices that coyly mask the sonnet's true meaning. Through the use of traditional sonnet structure, Shakespeare creates obvious shifts in tone that are detectable by even the most basic reader. The initial eight lines, the octave, are devoted to creating a scene void of happiness and wealth. Shakespeare writes, "When, in disgrace with Fortune and men's eyes, / I all alone beweep my outcast state" (lines 1-2). Right away the reader is keen to the speaker's material poverty and social outcast, as well as the distressed state this causes him. Shakespeare continues, "Wishing me like to one more rich in hope, / featured like him, like him with friends possessed" (lines 5-6). Here, the reader is made aware of the speaker's desire for material possessions and success. However, the final six lines shift the tone and theme of the poem dramatically in order to portray the seeming power of love as Shakespeare writes, "For thy sweet love remembered such wealth brings / That then I scorn to change my state with kings" (lines 13-14). These lines contain the apparent meaning of the poem. While he is distressed and poor, the speaker, expressly because of his love, tells the reader that he would not change his position with a king. This is hard to believe seeing as the speaker was only just exclaiming his want for material success. However, because the speaker has love, all else is semantic and irrelevant to the speaker's state of happiness. Author James Winny describes this as, "the poet's sudden exhilaration of spirit as he recalls the friendship that outweighs his discontent" (78). Because of this blatant shift in tone from cursing his misfortune to praising his love's redemptive powers, Shakespeare emphasizes the apparent celebratory

nature of his love. Therefore, the sonnet appears to speak to the idea that love is far more powerful than any extrinsic possession.

Also, the characterization of the speaker is essential in unpacking the poem. Shakespeare's speaker "surmounts envy and self-contempt" (Stirling 64). Because the speaker is so shamefully aware of his state, the reader naturally feels empathy and pity for the speaker. However, while the speaker is a depressing character, the reader cannot help but feel envy for him due to the happiness he derives from love. This most undesirable character has seemed to capture the most intrinsically elusive quality that is craved by all men: love. Therefore, despite his material disparities, the speaker becomes an enviable character that embodies the best side of love.

However, this is not an accurate depiction of the speaker. There exists in the sonnet grammatical and stylistic abnormalities that point to a speaker who is manic-depressive rather than driven by love. An analysis of lines 10-12, which reads "Haply I think on thee, and then my state, / Like to the lark at break of day arising / From sullen earth, sings hymns at heaven's gate," reveals this insanity. Originally, the verse is written so that the reader naturally thinks that the lark is the object doing the singing, which creates a "liberating" and "celebratory" simile (Hammond 31). In this reading, the lark succeeds in his song, which corresponds with the speaker succeeding in his love. However, a closer reading reveals that it is not the lark that is singing; rather, it is the reader's state that is doing the singing (Bernhard 2). In this line, the speaker's state refers to his mindset. Shakespeare has made the speaker's mindset, which despises his current state, abundantly clear to

the reader. This simile actually reads “ Haply I think on thee, and then my state, / ... sings hymns at heaven’s gate.” (lines 10, 12).

The idea that the speaker’s discontented state would be singing to heaven is a most peculiar simile that requires further analysis. The term “ heaven” is used multiple times in the sonnet, and analyzing both instances is required for a complete understanding their meaning. The first occurrence of heaven imagery occurs when Shakespeare writes “ And trouble deaf heaven with my bootless cries” (line 3). Here heaven is personified as “ deaf” and subsequently cannot answer, much less hear, the speaker’s desperate cries. This use of auditory imagery is perplexing when it is paired with the second use of heaven imagery in which the speaker’s state “ sings hymns at heaven’s gate” (Line 12). These two examples create a dichotomy that destroys the speaker’s credibility. The speaker describes heaven as “ deaf” but also sings hymns to it. This represents a wild change in the speaker’s mood that is completely unwarranted because there has been no change in his circumstances (Bernhard). This sudden and abrupt change in attitude is suspicious in nature simply because nothing has happened. The speaker’s mood has changed without the appearance of any stimulus, which is most unusual. Seeing this to be true, the reader can reasonably assume that the speaker’s state of unhappiness is purely mental, that is, the speaker “ wills his misery” (Bernhard). The speaker’s state is still unfavorable; however, the speaker’s attitude towards his unfortunate state is exaggerated, which suggests a self-deprecating, manic depressive state.

Continuing with this theme it is odd to note the speaker’s love’s complete absence from the sonnet. This is odd because of the “ almost religious

nature of his beloved” (Mcrae). By using the term ‘ heaven’ twice in the poem, Shakespeare creates a religious undertone that relies on the religious connotation of the term ‘ heaven.’ This description applies directly to the speaker’s lover, since it is she who answers the speaker’s cries for meaning and glory. However, by assuming a religious presence, the lover also assumes a ubiquitous nature caused by further connotation of religious deities. Because she is characterized as god-like, the reader naturally expects her to be present in every situation, which she is not. This use of apostrophe begs the question of where the speaker’s loved one is during the speaker’s continual mood swings. It is likely, at this point, that the loved one is simply a manifestation of the speaker’s manic depressive state and is oblivious to the speaker. Considering the speaker’s state of poverty, it is entirely possible that the loved one is imagined in order to aid the speaker in coping with his harsh reality. At this point, the speaker has lost all credibility with the reader and cannot be trusted. It can therefore be assumed that the speaker does not have the love that he claims to have and is simply a completely pitiful character who is unable to cope with his circumstances.

At this point, the deconstruction of the speaker’s testimony is complete and the sonnet’s true meaning can be analyzed. Shakespeare’s speaker has proven his ineptness in providing credible testimony. In terms of love, this reading of the poem pairs love with madness and depression where the first reading pairs love with jubilation and triumph. Seeing as the speaker is, at this point, an untrustworthy character, the reader cannot take his words as truth. The speaker has been exposed as manic depressive in his claims of love. Therefore, Shakespeare’s poem pairs love with depression and insanity,

thereby suggesting that these are inherent qualities of love. Furthermore, this sonnet provides commentary on the manic depressive cycle, which is described as self-deprecating and exaggerating. Consider how the speaker's condition might have changed had he not exaggerated his circumstances. It is reasonable to assume that a proper perspective on his situation would have enabled him to better cope with his adversity (Bernhard 3). This, in turn, would have made it more likely that he would have been able to escape the poverty that was his own. However, because the speaker was manic depressive, he created a situation that was insurmountable and impossible for him to confront. This drove him to create an insipid love that does not actually exist. In this way, Shakespeare also compares love to an inability to cope with one's problems. The first reading of this poem suggested that love enabled the speaker to overcome his material poverty and live a life of meaning and purpose. Once this is proven to be invalid, the reader must consider the true role of love in life. Seeing as love has already been compared to depression and insanity, it can be stated that love holds no merit in overcoming one's obstacles. Certainly one would not argue that depression and madness are essential qualities to being successful in life. Therefore, due to the fact that depression and madness are characteristics of love, it can be said that love is not a component of success in life. This gives credence to a broader, more cynical interpretation of love. If one's aim in life is to be successful, either intrinsically or extrinsically, then love should be of no importance to that person. In modern culture, individuals seek to be successful in numerous ways, and love is often at the center of individuals' subjective definition of success. However, Shakespeare makes the argument in this poem that love is, in fact, not a component of success and therefore

humans should not pursue love to obtain success. This is done through creating a speaker who, on the surface, appears to have obtained the culturally accepted version of success. That is, the speaker has love, which holds great value in modern society. However, the speaker's words are the result of being manic depressive, and the reader soon discovers that the speaker does not actually have love. Love, according to Shakespeare, is an insipid construct invented by feeble minds in order to placate their own failures.