

Tragic victims,
masterpiece poems:
a comparison of
"venus and adonis"
and "the ra...



**ASSIGN
BUSTER**

Shakespeare and Sex How do Venus and Adonis and Rape of Lucrece together serve as an interrogation of sexuality? What's the message? The only works Shakespeare personally published, Venus and Adonis and Rape of Lucrece, were written and published in dedication to Henry Wriothesley, the Earl of Southampton. The extended narrative poems may be read as commentary on the Renaissance and Monarchy, as well as an interrogation of sexuality. Through his two poems, Venus and Adonis and Rape of Lucrece, Shakespeare intends to illustrate the beauty of love and advise against acting on lustful desires when love is not present. Ultimately, while art and literature grew more erotic in response to the revival of the Renaissance, both poems serve to admonish lust and warn about the dangers of impulsive and lustful action.

Interestingly, this warning lacked gender specificity. Both males and females were cast as the victims of a lustful pursuant in the two poems. More important than the gender, is the physical appearance of the victims. In both poems, the victims of a lustful pursuant were blamed for being too beautiful. Both Adonis and Lucrece are desired for their beauty and seemingly nothing more. Beauty itself doth of itself persuade The eyes of men without an orator; What needeth then apologies be made, To set forth that which is so singular? Or why is Collatine the publisher Of that rich jewel he should keep unknown From thievish ears, because it is his own? (Luc 29-35). Within this statement, Tarquin blames his desires for Lucrece on Collatine's foolish bragging of his beautiful wife, referring to her as a jewel to be stolen, and seemingly praising her for only her beauty. Similarly, Venus states that Adonis is three times as beautiful as she is; thus, praising him only for his

beauty. Shakespeare's description of people who are desired only for their beauty are consequently punished for that beauty by ultimately becoming the victim of lust. This description occurs in order to communicate the fact that love can not be developed based upon only physical beauty, but must be developed based on qualities such as honor, kindness, honesty, and wisdom. Above all, Shakespeare warns that innocence will be lost when an individual is taken advantage of because of the lust of another.

Interestingly, it seems as though those who have already lost their innocence are no longer in danger of being hurt directly by lust. Venus attempts to seduce Adonis, despite his obvious lack of sexual maturity and blatant innocence. Over one arm the lusty courser's rein, Under her other was the tender boy, Who blush'd and pouted in a dull disdain, With leaden appetite, unapt to toy; She red and hot as coals of glowing fire, He red for shame, but frosty in desire. (Ven., 31-36) Despite her hot desire for the boy, Adonis finds shame in her lust and completely lacks desire for the goddess, despite her beauty. The kiss she manages to steal from Adonis is relative to the rape of Lucrece due to each character's levels of innocence. Lucrece, a wife who clearly had sexual experience, was robbed of her innocence due to rape. Adonis, who completely lacked sexual experience, had some innocence taken by Venus's kiss. Both characters have their innocence taken from them as a direct consequence of their harasses acting on lustful desires. Thus, Shakespeare is attempting to communicate the idea that innocence is a necessary prerequisite of love and that one who acts without innocence cannot be acting with love.

In the final moments of each poem, the victims of lust die a horrible and bloody death. The Rape of Lucrece is far more blatant in its accusal of lust as the cause of the innocent victim's demise. Lucrece is devastated by her and her husband's loss of honor and regains this honor through her suicide. Her final stand of strength is her admittal that Tarquin was her rapist. Here with a sigh, as if her heart would break, She throws forth Tarquin's name; ' He, he,' she says, But more than ' he' her poor tongue could not speak; Till after many accents and delays, Untimely breathings, sick and short assays, She utters this, ' He, he, fair lords, 'tis he, That guides this hand to give this wound to me.' (Luc. 1767-73). This accusal is Lucrece's retaliation for the rape which Tarquin has committed and, unfortunately, the best way for her to regain her family's honor. Lucrece's suicide is obviously a direct consequence of Tarquin's selfish lust. In contrast, Venus believes that Adonis's death was a result of the boar's lust. She states that the boar attempted to kiss beautiful Adonis and nuzzle him lovingly, but without meaning to, killed him with her tusk. This transition of lust from Venus to the boar, as Venus describes, was Shakespeare's poetic illustration of the death that once again results from impulsive lustful actions. Henceforth, Shakespeare wishes to use hyperbole to illustrate the dangers of lust.

Shakespeare's two poems, Venus and Adonis and Rape of Lucrece, serve as interrogations of sexuality through their illustration of the beauty of love and advice against acting on lustful desires when love is not present. Ultimately, both poems serve to admonish lust and warn about the dangers of impulsive and lustful action. In a time when eroticism was becoming more popular, art and literature were becoming more vibrant, and people were beginning to

test the boundaries of society through the revival of the Renaissance, it is curious that Shakespeare would create two pieces which favored honest love over passionate lust so heavily. Despite the tragic endings of these victims, Shakespeare's descriptions of the human body, flora and fauna, and sexuality created two beautiful and everlasting poems.