

Theme analysis of shakespeare's sonnet #29



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This sonnet is narrated by a man whose emotions are completely at the mercy of another. Its theme involves the vulnerability of the narrator's disposition and the power of love. Just when he reaches the lowest point of his depression, the addressee of the poem enters his mind and cures him of his misery. Shakespeare cleverly uses a recurring theme of heaven to help portray the broader theme of the poem. In describing his helplessness, he writes, " I trouble deaf heaven with my bootless cries. . ." Here, " bootless" is used to represent the futility of his " cries," or prayers to heaven. The diction, however, is extremely important in this context. The word " bootless" is also worthy of notice because it represents the hindrance of motion, since it literally means without boots, and without boots, it may become difficult to walk. This is contrasted later with an image in which the narrator likens his soul's uplifting to " the lark at break of day arising." Though the lark sings from " sullen earth," its song goes straight to heaven. The reader may interpret the word " sullen" as " a gloomy ill humor," " producing a dull, mournful tone," or " moody silence," as seen from the NED. The latter two definitions are more applicable to our discussion; they define the contrast between the mournful tone or the silence of the earth and the bright song of the lark. In the same way the lark's song is unfettered, when the narrator thinks about this person, his state " sings hymns to heaven's gate." Whereas before, in his dejected state, his prayers were futile and motionless, now his prayers are mobile, and, therefore answerable. The image of the lark is common in Shakespeare's works. Indeed, in act three, scene five of Shakespeare's Romeo and Juliet, the two lovers are speaking of whether the song they have just heard was that of the nightingale or that of the lark. Romeo replies to Juliet, " It was the lark, the herald of the morn. . ."

Therefore, the lark also signifies the coming of morning, an image which further enhances the narrator's spiritual ascent. The theme of the sonnet also emerges from a consistent motif of terms indicating affluence, which is suggested by the presence of words such as "rich," "possessed," "wealth," and "kings." The NED holds that the seventeenth-century meaning of the word "wealth" was spiritual well-being. Shakespeare uses this theme in an ironic setting, since these words are, in fact, used to help characterize the narrator's misfortune. The second quatrain focuses on how the narrator envies the strengths of other men. He is in such a dejected and "outcast state," that he desires ". . . this man's art and that man's scope. . ." The NED tells us that in the Elizabethan period, "art" meant any kind of skill, and that "scope" could be taken to mean "reach or range of mental activity." The line which reads, "With what I most enjoy contented least. . ." is the best indication that the narrator has reached a low point. He is literally saying that he is in such a bad disposition that he now hates what he once enjoyed most. As we read on, this image is contrasted with the statement in the last couplet which reads: "For thy sweet love rememb' red such wealth brings/ that then I scorn to change my state with kings." In other words, the thought of this person makes him so happy that he would not change his fortune with any other man not even the richest of kings. This beautiful language, especially pleasing to the ear because of the iambic pentameter, summarizes the theme in the last couplet, as is customary in Shakespeare's sonnets. The turning point between his state of depression and his uplifting realization is represented at the beginning of the third quatrain. He writes: "Yet in these thoughts myself almost despising, Haply I think on thee and then my state. . ." The diction in these lines is most likely not an accident.

The NED defines “haply” as “by chance or by accident.” When in the midst of his depression, the narrator only thinks of the person by chance. This is also visible when he writes, “For thy sweet love rememb’red . . .” because the word “rememb’red” suggests that he was not thinking of the person beforehand. This, to me, gives the impression that the addressee has been somehow temporarily removed from his life. For he never mentions the origin of his melancholy depicted in the first two quatrains, and the reader is left to conjecture what I have hereby mentioned. I also believe, however, that it is no mistake that “haply” is a close neighbor of “happily.” Thus, the diction allows the theme to be revealed through a turning point, or change in texture.