

Tudor and elizabethan love poetry

[Profession](#), [Poet](#)



This period in history, which was approximately between the years of 1540 and 1600, saw an explosion of literature, particularly in the genres of drama and poetry. Shakespeare, the dominant and most famous writer of this period, is regarded by many as the greatest ever writer in the English language. Although the period is recognised for its great dramatic works, poetry experienced a certain renaissance. This provided an outlet for the fantastic growth of the language as a whole.

The Elizabethans, much like their society, favoured structure, order and decoration. Indeed as Puttnam put it in his "The Art of Poesy", "Our vulgar poesy cannot show itself either gallant or gorgeous if anything be left naked and bare." As well as describing the then reigning monarch's dress sense, this provides an important insight into how the Elizabethans saw themselves as poets. This attitude is certainly in agreement with the Elizabethan fervour for the sonnet.

A precise structure is adhered to. It was Shakespeare who was the leading exponent of the form writing 154 of them. As with the majority of other Elizabethan poetry, the poetic efforts were centred primarily on the sentiments and expressions of life. Since the response is focused on Tudor and Elizabethan love poetry, the Shakespearian sonnets numbers 116 and 130 are worthy of examination. Shakespeare's 116th sonnet examines the love of "true minds".

As is typical of the Elizabethan and more specifically the Shakespearian sonnet, the imagery is intricate and Shakespeare makes use of the conceited metaphor. Love is compared to a guiding star, steering ships to safety. This

continued comparison is quite unlike the typical metaphors associated with love and therefore seems thoughtful and authentic. The innovation exhibited here is characteristic of the sonnets of Shakespeare.

Though we have some ideas as to whom Shakespeare aimed his sonnets, the avoidance of gender-specific pronouns give the piece a universality. This renders the poem relevant to a wide audience and so we can deduce that though there may have been a specific audience, the implied audience is much wider, and it is understood that Shakespeare circulated his sonnets, prior to their eventual publishing. All of the poems here are understandably of a literary tradition, and as I will describe, the sonnet is an accepted literary poetic form, which originated in Italy. Therefore, the absence of any spoken features of English is unsurprising. The tone in this sonnet is formal and literary and follows the rhythmic structure of the form. However, the exclamation " Oh, no! " whilst remaining constant to the rhythm, separates the poem and marks the natural break which is the start of the second quatrain.

It also provides emphasis to the following statement in addition to subtly marking the quatrain of the nautical quatrain. The language is primarily concrete, in spite of its examination of an abstract emotion. This is typical of Elizabethan love poetry in general and is evident of their attempts to define and compare love to something that is relatable. This is evident in the 73rd sonnet, where a long-standing devotion to someone is related to in terms of night and day, old and new and warmth and coldness. These poetic

comparisons are used to such an extent as to render the poem of the highly decorated sort so favoured by the Elizabethans.

This polished, highly literary language is unlike the simple, ballads of the oral tradition. There is no narration in any of these sonnets, only the description of time, relationships and love. However, the aim was not just to discuss or illustrate love. The 130th sonnet from Shakespeare is a direct parody of the torrent of love sonnets, which were exceedingly common during the period.

Here, the language is used clumsily and unsubtly. This is interesting since by looking conversely at this, the type of poetry favoured by the Elizabethans can be deduced. The imagery, language and lexis are much simpler. In contrast to the conceited, sustained metaphors, each line is an individual metaphor. Additionally, each of these metaphors is, in effect, a 'negative metaphor'.

A concrete object is used to liken something to a concrete area of the body that is then stated to be unlike that, insulting the person to whom this is addressed. An example of this is in line two, "Coral is far more red than her lips' red" followed by a completely separate comparison of snow with breasts. This likening of one concrete object to another is unlike that of the previous sonnet, and therefore provides an illustration of, in the Elizabethans' eyes, the accepted comparison. As previously, Shakespeare has addressed one person, though once again the expected audience is much larger. Though this person is insulted, there is a reversal typical of the Shakespearian love sonnet in the final couplet.

This completes the parody in a style infinitely more controlled than the rest. Shakespeare interestingly berates the “ false compare” typical in other sonnets; this indicates to us the poor quality and importantly the contemporary attitudes towards poetic comparisons. It is important to note here the direct addressing of a person. We know the sex, and relationship to the voice of the poem, which is incidentally always presumed to be Shakespeare’s. This intensifies the effect of parody; only one person is spoken to and Shakespeare emphasises that it is not we, the readers, at least in a specific sense.

As I mentioned previously, it was this period that saw the English language entering new heights of sophistication. The language grew at an incredible rate, both in terms of its vocabulary and literature as a whole. This maturing of the language could be seen as linguistic renaissance, comparable to the renaissance of the arts, throughout Europe. Indeed the sonnet, as a poetic structure, originated in its Petrarchian form in Italy; this borrowing of language from other parts of Europe was commonplace. However, the sonnet was not only borrowed: Thomas Wyatt and Henry Howard offered an anglicised version.

They changed the structure and rhyme scheme. This was important for two reasons; linguistically, the Petrarchian form relied on a repetitive rhyme scheme, which was much harder in English, though additionally, it indicates the boldness on behalf of the English writers to change freely an accepted poetic form. I feel that this, in response to the question, is important as it shows the flexibility of the poets, and the language that is used in these

poems. Though the Tudor and Elizabethan poets were clearly possessed by the sonnet as a structure, it is important to realise that poetry of other forms were still being produced.

The genre of pastoral poetry, which returned to the country and its emotions, flourished and was developed to its potential. Writing in this genre, Christopher Marlowe, contemporary of Shakespeare, playwright, poet and secret agent, produced “The Passionate Shepherd to his Love”. As suggested by its title it was written fictionally to a young love in a persuasive tone, though still intended for public consumption. Characteristic of the pastoral genre, Marlowe adopts a contrived, lyrical simplicity, illustrated in the opening line “Come live with me and be my love”. The language is monosyllabic and the imperative in “be my love” is characteristic of the persuasive tone.

The images are simple and concrete and have the intention of imitating ‘country life’. The somewhat used image of “bed of roses” is evidence to the typical type of comparison, which is used. In this way, the pastoral tone of this poem may be seen as patronising, and in fact provides ample opportunity for satire, which Sir Walter Raleigh takes with aplomb. (Conversely, it is unfair to view the entire genre from this one viewpoint, pastoral poetry was capable of satire itself and was often directed at city life).

Befitting of Elizabethan poetry as a whole, the poem is in a rigid iambic tetrameter, four lines to each stanza. So, the way in which love is presented here is markedly different from the sonnets examined before. Here, the tone

is simple, descriptive and informal. The language though still literary is concentrated more on the informalities of spoken English; this is exhibited in its simplicity. In spite of this, it is important to separate the portrayal of love and the genre in which it is set.

Though this does at least show the ways in which the Elizabethans and Tudors were willing to illustrate love in their poetry.