

# Venus and adonis essay



**ASSIGN  
BUSTER**

but while you are waiting for the answer, sex raises some pretty good questions." Throughout his plays and poetry Shakespeare imbeds numerous and diverse themes, many of them relating to love, sexuality, life, death, religion and countless others. In his poem Venus and Adonis Shakespeare tackles the theme of sexuality as a representation of love, and a function of Nature. The characters of Venus and Adonis, often times reminiscent of an Elizabethan fallen Adam and Eve, create a sexually charged poem that lends much of the power and influence of love and life and death to Nature. Shakespeare creates a natural phenomenon that physically links the love and actions of these two characters to the forces, both positive and destructive, to Nature herself. The poem allows Venus and Adonis a certain power or authority over the forces that lie within the powers of Nature, but Shakespeare's creation of this sexual narrative as a depiction of erotic desire as a tragic event leads the characters to inevitable misfortune, and a complete loss of control over their circumstances.

Shakespeare's text can be broadly divided into three sections. The first being Venus' expressions of love for Adonis, the second involving Adonis' death and the hunt, and the third and final section focuses on Venus' reaction to the loss of Adonis. In the first third, Venus tries with increasing desperation to entice Adonis into sex. The pastoral setting on the primrose bank is ideal for the sexually charged analogies she creates. She bombards him with oxymorons involving hot ice, showers him with floral metaphors, launches into an extended variation on the old carpe diem theme, and cracks familiar puns on words such as harts and deer. Venus seems to have inspired control over her own body, and wondrously metamorphosizes her form to suit her

purpose, making it heavy enough to need trees to support it, then giving the violets she lies on the strength of trees (152). For all its desperation, the first section is energetic and hopeful, emphasizing Adonis' youth and Venus' constantly self-renewing flesh. The descriptions of love found here are wholly sexual and physically based, but there is a desperate strength in Venus' repeated attempts and persistence.

However, at the center of the poem Adonis announces that he intends to hunt the boar the next day. Venus collapses with the boy on top of her, and follows what ought to be the sexual climax of Venus' attempts to lure Adonis into her bed, but all Venus gets from the encounter is frustration: 'all is imaginary she doth prove' (597). In this next section of the poem, which takes place in the forest, Venus speaks of fear, the fear of the boar and the terror of the hunted hare. Death, which has been a veiled presence throughout the first half, becomes the controlling factor of the second. Instead of urging Adonis to beget, Venus warns him that he will be murdering his own posterity if he fails to make love (757-60). The youthfulness of Adonis, which had been described in such vital terms in the first section, able to 'drive infection from the dangerous year' (508), suddenly finds itself subjected to more infections than it can hope to cure: As burning fevers, agues pale and faint, Life-poisoning pestilence and frenzies wood, The marrow-eating sickness whose attaint Disorder breeds by heating of the blood (739-42).

At the same time Venus loses control over her body. As she hurries through the woods after the sound of Adonis' horn, her body is subjected to the intrusive gropings of bushes: "Some catch her by the neck, some kiss her

face, / Some twine about her thigh to make her stay" (872-3). This attack on Venus' physical body, and her inability to stop it renders her even more powerless, and her dominating sexuality is turned to frightened reserve as she searches for Adonis. Her efforts to entice Adonis through her pastoral metaphors have failed, even after she evidences her love through the tangible elements of Nature.

In the first half of Shakespeare's poem Venus struggles to create a poetic Eden out of the substance of Adonis' body and her own. She tells him that he is the 'field's chief flower' (8), and urges him to join her on a bank of flowers, an enchanted circle from which serpents and other vermin are banned. She then proceeds to transform her own flesh into a metaphorical Paradise. Her cheeks become gardens (65), she assures him that 'My beauty as the spring doth yearly grow' (141), and offers herself to him as a protective enclosure where he can shelter from the savage environment: 'I'll be a park, and thou shalt be my deer:/ Feed where thou wilt, on mountain or in dale' (231-2). But, as the central stanzas of the poem warn us, 'all is imaginary she doth prove'. The landscape of the poem only ever becomes Eden-like in the rhetoric of Venus. We move further through the poem, her rhetoric loses its persuasiveness, and a very different landscape emerges. Always present on the fringes of Venus' imaginary Eden, is the possibility of danger and the threat of a wilderness outside of her beautiful primrose bank, and picturesque flowers. As this wilderness emerges in the second and into the third parts of the poem, the similarities to Eden are quickly destroyed by the realistic dangers they encounter. In the first section, Venus compares Adonis' breath to 'heavenly moisture', a dew like

the one God used to water the plants before he invented rain (62-6). And as the surrounding climate of the area changes, so we follow the emotional and sexual changes within Venus and Adonis. But the alternating weather conditions generated by the lovers' bodies grow steadily less moderate, passing from rain to parching heat and back again to rain in a bewildering flurry of changes. In the second section of the poem these changes become wholly violent, hurrying through the ' wild waves' of the night (819) towards the tempest signaled by the ' red morn' of Adonis' open mouth (453-6). The storm breaks during Venus' search for the him (' Like a stormy day, now wind, now rain, / Sighs dry her tears, wind makes them wet again' 965-6), and her discovery of his body unleashes a climactic earthquake: ' As when the wind imprison'd in the ground, / Struggling for passage, earth's foundation shakes' (1046-7). Venus' final prophecy bequeaths the same turbulent climate to future societies, whose sexual alliances will ' bud, and be blasted in a breathing while'The final division of the poem contains only the final stanza (1189-1194) and concludes with Venus secluding herself from the outside world, but not without first giving final credit to Nature as a controlling and distinctively powerful force of both creation as well as destruction.

By this, the boy that by her side lay kill'dWas melted like a vapour from her sight, And in his blood that on the ground lay spill'd, Here Nature attempts to replace what was lost, and gives reassurance to the suffering Venus by leaving her with a remembrance of Adonis in the form of a beautiful flower.

Shakespeare's themes of sexuality, life, death, and the overall pervading presence of Nature are strongly evinced throughout the text, and create for

the reader a greater sense of the lack of control that exists between man and Nature, as well as man and his desires. The fate of Adonis, as well as such a wholly sexual creature such as Venus, and the understanding of love within the poem as primarily a sexual force, affirms the power that Shakespeare imbues Nature with in the fates of these two characters. Nature is both the sexual depiction of their desires as well as the defining force that destroys them both.

Bibliography: