

The use of sonnets through the ages essay sample



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Sonnets became a popular form of poetry from the sixteenth century onwards in Elizabethan England. Although the sonnet originated from Sicily sometime in the thirteenth century, over time it developed into three types, Petrarchan, Spenserian and Shakespearian. The sonnet can always be recognised by its fourteen lines, traditionally of iambic pentameter with a clear rhyme. Sonnets often discuss different themes and attitudes of the periods of time they were written in.

Many sonnets of Elizabethan England, were written by perhaps the most famous poet of that time, William Shakespeare, hence the English sonnet was named after him. Sonnets proved very popular around this time. The Shakespearian sonnet can be described as a romantic, dramatic and often clichéd portrayal of love.

Sir Philip Sidney's sonnet 'with how sad steps, O moon thou climb'st the skies!' is a depressing story of a young man's heartbreaking experience with the person he loves. He considers that everything in the surrounding area is joining him in his mourning and he even begins to consult the moon about his recent troubles. He speaks harshly of women and how they do not want to love someone but yet want to be loved. This sonnet is typical of the era in which it was written because it shows us an exaggeration of love and a mourning of lost love.. The atmosphere being created at the start of the sonnet is one of despair; this is created by language and imagery, by the description of the moon and the speaker's problems. The poetic voice speaks in a severe tone as he feels that Cupid is responsible for his suffering. The sonnet states,

“ That busy archer his sharp arrow tries?”

The fact that the poet uses the violent word ‘ sharp’ shows us that he is angry with Cupid. This can also be seen because he blames his troubles of love on him. The poetic voice despises the fact that Cupid is trying in vain to make people fall in love. This shows us the pain that he is experiencing because of Cupid’s attempt to make people fall in love but not him. The atmosphere of despair is further suggested by the poet’s use of strong vocabulary to get across how hurt he is. Words like ‘ proud’, ‘ scorn’, ‘ ungratefulness’, ‘ wan’, ‘ sharp’, ‘ sad’, and languisit’ are used. These words emphasise just how dramatic and life changing the speaker’s experience of love has been. These strong words help to build up the atmosphere that illustrates the speaker’s frustration at the beginning of the poem.

The poet uses several literary devices to express his message of heartache. He uses personification to further emphasise his heartache. He personifies the moon by saying that it has ‘ wan a face!’. Here he uses exclamatory language to get across the magnitude of what he is feeling.

The poet uses assonance to further portray his sadness and heartache. The open vowel sounds drag out phrases such as ‘ long-with-love’. This shows us just how upset he really is. This slows the pace down dragging these words out and creating a depressing atmosphere. He also uses alliteration to sharpen the tone of the sonnet in phrases such as ‘ want of wit’. The ‘ w’ sound makes it sound as it is said with contempt. By speeding up the pace this shows anger and frustration.

The poet also uses sibilance to get across sadness and confusion. Sibilance can be seen in the final couplet in the words ' possess' and ' ungratefulness'. The ' s' in the words creates a hissing sound that lends a harsh and bitter tone.

The two questions in the rhyming couplet portray the confusion of the speaker. In the first question the speaker's question is general to all women. This question ties in with the way he speaks harshly about women, this can be shown when he states,

“ Those lovers scorn whom that love doth possess?”

The word “ scorn” here emphasises the dislike of women because the question simply means if you love them they will scorn you, because they do not want to love someone yet they want to be loved. This can demonstrate why the speaker dislikes women; they look down at you for loving them.

The second question also portrays confusion in the speaker. The question that the poet asks is to the moon, he wants to know if women on the moon act the same way as the women here. The question that is asked is,

“ Do they call virtue there ungratefulness?”

The word “ ungratefulness” is emphasised by placing a comma before the word and a question mark at the end of the word. This word is stressed and again brings out the confusion the poetic voice has with women. He is asking the moon do the women on the moon want to be loved but not to love anyone.

The poet also uses structure, rhythm and rhyme. The rhythm is iambic pentameter. The structure of the sonnet is made up of an octave at the start and these first eight lines describe the heartache of the poet and how everyone else is in love except him and how people are in love with the idea of being in love. After the octave there is a turn, at this turn the poet looks to the moon for advice. In the third quatrain the poet asks the moon if the women here act the same as the women here do. In the rhyming couplet at the end of the sonnet, the poet portrays just how confused he is. He wants to know if there is a place where love is equal.

The sonnet 'with how sad steps, O moon, thou climb'st the skies!' shows us an exaggeration of true love and a mourning of this love that he has lost. The poetic voice seeks advice from the moon asking the moon if love up there is the same and speaks harshly about women.

In the Renaissance period the focus of sonnets was open to include religious and political themes. This is a period of turmoil not only politically but also religiously. As a result of this the sonnets have a wider topic scope and tend to be personal. One of the poets at this time is John Milton.

"On his deceased wife", was written by John Milton in the seventeenth century. This sonnet is about the elevation of his deceased wife, it is about how he dreamt he was with her, then when he awoke he realised she was not there. He compares his wife to a saint and throughout the sonnet he elevates her by comparing her to things that are pure and innocent. This sonnet is a celebration of true love for his wife and how much he misses her.

The poet uses language and imagery to get across how much he admires and loves his wife. The poet elevates the characteristics of his wife clearly in the first line of the poem by his use of a metaphor, this can be seen,

“ Methought I saw my late espoused saint”

The poet compares his deceased wife to a saint. The connotations of this comparison implies that the lady has characteristics such as innocence, purity and honesty. This comparison shows his profound love for his wife.

Another way the poetic voice gets across how much he loves his wife is through the clever use of a simile. This can be seen in the second line as the text states,

“ Brought to me like Alcestis from the grave”

By using this comparison we again see how pure and selfless his wife is because Alcestis is from Greek mythology, she was pure and she gave up her life to save her baby, the shows that she is selfless.

The poet uses words to get across how much he thinks of his wife. The poetic voice uses words that liken her to a saint. He uses words like “ pale, heaven, goodness, love, white and sweetness.” These words and many more show us how much he is trying to get across the message that he loves her. Through these words we build up an image of his wife and we get the sense that she is almost angelic

The poetic voice uses literary devices to further portray his true love for this woman. He uses consonance to give a soft angelic tone. This can be seen in

the text when the poetic voice uses the words, "sweetness, goodness" these two words both end in 'ness' and because there is a double s at the end of both words this gives a soft hissing which makes the tone seem angelic. The words themselves give a quiet feel to the line and this also helps show how much like a saint she is.

The poet also uses structure, rhyme and rhythm throughout this sonnet. The form of this sonnet is iambic pentameter. The structure of the sonnet is made up of an octave at the start and these first eight lines are split up into two quatrains. In these two quatrains he elevates his deceased wife by comparing her to a saint and Alcestis. Then in the last six lines there is another quatrain and a final couplet. In the third quatrain the poetic voice speaks about his wife's appearance as she walks towards him in his dream. The turn occurs here in the sonnet because before this turn he believed he was with his wife and it was only after this turn that he realises that in fact she is not there. In the final couplet he realises that his wife is not really with him but that she is only in his dream.

The sonnet "On his deceased wife" shows us that the speaker loves his wife so much and he misses her. This is a celebration of true love in marriage. Throughout the first three quatrains there is a sense of happiness and contentment. This is because the poet believes he sees his wife and it is only in the final couplet that he realises that she is not there. This is where the tone changes and becomes full of sadness.

This writers of the Romantic period were often very focussed on the natural world. A writer at this time was William Wordsworth.

William Wordsworth wrote the sonnet 'The world is too much with us' in the 18th Century. This poem is about how we have turned our back on nature and the poetic voice is not impressed by how we have become so materialistic and no longer appreciate the natural world. The natural world is elevated and by turning our back on it the speaker tell us we are missing so much.

The poetic voice uses language and imagery to get across how much we don't appreciate the natural world and what we are missing. This can be seen when the text states,

"The world is too much with us".

This opening line is so quick and harsh but straight to the point and is over before you realise you have read it. He fills the first quatrain with short conflicting ideas. One of these ideas is seen in the first line when the text states, "late and soon". These two words are conflicting and the word late is a negative word. These three words come after a semi colon and they finish the line. The word 'late' is stressed and this also shows us how much the poet wants to get across how angry he is with the world for turning its back on nature.

Another example of the conflicting idea is in the second line of the poem. It continues to portray the anger that the poetic voice feels. This can be seen when the text states, "Getting and spending". These two words reflect how the poetic voice views us as being self-absorbed on a daily basis. These words are connected to the material world. This also portrays the idea that we are uninterested in the natural world.

The poet uses imagery to show us what we are missing in the natural world. The personification of the sea creates a sensual image. This can be seen in, “ This sea that bares her bosom to the moon”. This is a beautiful image because it creates a calm feeling. This image is used to show us what we are missing.

Another way that the poetic voice shows the beauty and power of the natural world is through personification. The poetic voice personifies the wind by saying that it will be howling. This can be seen in the text when “ The winds that will be howling at all hours,”. The poetic voice wants us to see the strength of the natural world. He personifies the wind to show us that the wind is strong.

The poetic voice uses a simile to show the beauty of. This is shown when the text states “ And are up-gathered now like sleeping flowers”. This simile makes us feel that everything in nature is like sleeping flowers. This shows us that the poetic voice is trying to show us how great the natural world is and exactly what we are missing.

In the third quatrain the poetic voice begins to wish he lived in the time of the pagans because they loved and embraced nature in its entirety. In the final couplet the poetic voice starts talking about pagan sea gods.

The coming of the Victorian period had brought about many changes, in all aspects of life including **. Many claim that sonnets of this period are over-sentimental. One of the sonnet writers at this time was Christina Georgiana Rossetti.

One of the sonnets written by Rossetti at this time is called “ Remember”. This sonnet is about a woman who wants her partner to remember her so much but realises that it would hurt him more to remember her so she tells him to forget about her and not to think of her. This is about a celebration of the love they did have.

The poetic voice uses language and imagery to get across how much she wants her partner to remember her. Firstly, the poet uses powerful and dramatic language to emphasise how much she does not want to leave, some of the words used are ‘ gone, late, darkness, corruption and grieve’ these powerful words are also negative showing us that she is upset and regrets having to leave. The negative words show that she is sad and implies she would rather be writing something else. These words bring a sombre tone into the sonnet.

Another way that this can be seen is when the poetic voice talks about death, this furthers the build up of a sombre and regretful tone. One of the phrases used is “ Gone far away into the silent land”. This line had a depressing theme to it, the reference to the silent land is about death or separation from a loved one, another phrase used to show that she wishes for him to forget her is “ Better by far that you should and smile”. This line is sad because she does not want him to forget her, but thinks of him and feels that it would be more appropriate for him to forget about her.

Another way the poetic voice tries to get across how sad she is about leaving him is by using literary devices, the main device used in the sonnet is assonance, this can be seen when the text states, “ No more hold”. The use

of the vowel sound in the words slows down the pace of the line, stressing these words and also the rest of the words in the line. This implies that the poetic voice is starting to have second thoughts about leaving.

The sonnet "Remember" is atypical sonnet from this time and is about separation and loss, the poetic voice is sad and tries to reassure herself that it would cause him too much pain to remember her.

The 20th is known by its experimentation. This was a time when people experimented with art, music and literature. The sonnet had now completely changed, there were no strict boundaries and this led to poets experimenting with rhyme and rhythm, Seamus Heaney was one of those poets.

Seamus Heaney wrote "The Skylight" in the 20th Century. This sonnet is about a skylight being placed in an attic room. Firstly the poetic voice is opposed to the idea but gradually realised that he liked the change. This sonnet is about the celebration of change and new life.

The poet uses language and imagery to get across how much he disagrees with the skylight being put in, this can be seen clearly as the first line of the text states, "You were the one for skylights, I opposed". This shows us how unhappy he is. "I opposed" is very important because although it happened he did not want it to. Another way this can be seen is when the poet says about the ceiling, "Cutting into the seasoned". The word cutting is quite a violent word and the poetic voice is trying to make it sound as bad as possible the word seasoned gives us the feeling like it has been there for a long time and was well liked. By using the word seasoned it further emphasises how much he didn't want the skylight.

The poet also uses literary devices to get across how he feels about the ceiling and the skylight. He uses assonance to get across the great like he has for the room; the first example of assonance is “ tongue and groove”. The open vowel sound drags out these three words, it shows us that there is a sense of admiration for the room and that it was peaceful. The poetic voice also uses a second example of assonance to describe why he liked this room, “ low and closed”. These words create a sense of security and belonging. The vowel sound in both words shows that the room was small and cosy. The poet also uses alliteration to further his admiration for his room by saying “ pitch pine” the sound quickens the pace up and shows excitement and love of his room.

The poet also uses internal rhyme in the sonnet to further show the security of the room “ hutch and hatch” These words remind us of rabbits huts because they are secure and safe and this can be compared to how he feels about the room.

The structure of the sonnet starts off with an octave and in the first eight lines he describes his admiration for his room and how he opposes to getting a skylight. The octave is about his point of view until the turn and we see the second side of the argument. In the sestet at the end of the sonnet his views completely change and he thinks that the skylight is the best thing that has ever happened. There is no set rhyme or rhythm in this sonnet as this was a time of experimentation.

The tone in the sonnet changes, at the start it is anger, hatred and sadness because he loves his room and doesn't want anything done to it. “ The

skylight” is a typical sonnet from this time because there is no set form. The poem is a celebration of change and new life.

The sonnets have changed a lot throughout the centuries. The sonnets have experienced influences from love, religion, politics and nature. These influences have changed the form of the sonnets. The sonnets follow a different rhyme path depending of the period in which they were written, for example this rhyme pattern is typical of the Elizabethan period i. e. AB/BA/AB/BA/CD/CD/EE. Most sonnets follow the form of iambic pentameter, which is a stressed syllable, followed by an unstressed syllable repeated five times in a line. The sonnets tend also to consist of an octave, a turn or Volta, a sestet. The sonnet consists of three quatrains and a final couplet. The final couplet can on occasion be rhyming. Since the 16th Century the use of sonnets has become widely popular among poets.