**Introduction to Shakespeare's Sonnets**

The Sonnets are Shakespeare's most popular works, and a few of them, such as [Sonnet 18](http://shakespeare-online.com/sonnets/18.html) (*Shall I compare thee to a summer's day*), [Sonnet 116](http://shakespeare-online.com/sonnets/116.html) (*Let me not to the marriage of true minds*), and [Sonnet 73](http://shakespeare-online.com/sonnets/73.html) (*That time of year thou mayst in me behold*), have become the most widely-read poems in all of English literature.

**Composition Date of the Sonnets**

Shakespeare wrote 154 sonnets, likely composed over an extended period from 1592 to 1598, the year in which Francis Meres referred to Shakespeare's "sugred sonnets":

The witty soul of Ovid lives in mellifluous & honey-tongued Shakespeare, witness his Venus and Adonis, his Lucrece, his sugared sonnets among his private friends, &c. (*Palladis Tamia: Wit's Treasury*)

In 1609 Thomas Thorpe published Shakespeare's sonnets, no doubt without the author's permission, in quarto format, along with Shakespeare's long poem, *The Passionate Pilgrim*. The sonnets were dedicated to a W. H., whose identity remains a mystery, although William Herbert, the Earl of Pembroke, is frequently suggested because Shakespeare's First Folio (1623) was also dedicated to him.

**Narrative of the Sonnets**

The majority of the sonnets (1-126) are addressed to a young man, with whom the poet has an intense romantic relationship. The poet spends the first seventeen sonnets trying to convince the young man to marry and have children; beautiful children that will look just like their father, ensuring his immortality. Many of the remaining sonnets in the young man sequence focus on the power of poetry and pure love to defeat death and "all oblivious enmity" (55.9).

The final sonnets (127-154) are addressed to a promiscuous and scheming woman known to modern readers as the *dark lady*. Both the poet and his young man have become obsessed with the raven-haired temptress in these sonnets, and the poet's whole being is at odds with his insatiable "sickly appetite" (147.4). The tone is distressing, with language of sensual feasting, uncontrollable urges, and sinful consumption.

* For a closer look at the negative aspects of the poet's relationship with the young man and his mistress, please see [Sonnet 75](http://shakespeare-online.com/sonnets/75.html) and [Sonnet 147](http://shakespeare-online.com/sonnets/147.html).
* For a celebration of the love between the young man and the poet, see [Sonnet 18](http://shakespeare-online.com/sonnets/18.html) and [Sonnet 29](http://shakespeare-online.com/sonnets/29.html).
* For the poet's views on the mortality of the young man, see [Sonnet 73](http://shakespeare-online.com/sonnets/73.html).
* For the poet’s description of his mistress, see [Sonnet 130](http://shakespeare-online.com/sonnets/130.html).

The question remains whether the poet is expressing Shakespeare's personal feelings. Since we know next to nothing about Shakespeare's personal life, we have little reason or right not to read the collected sonnets as a work of fiction, just as we would read his plays or long poems.

**How to Analyze a Shakespearean Sonnet**

Writing an essay on a Shakespearean sonnet can be quite a challenge. The following are a few tips to help you start the process:

**1. Find the Theme**

Although love is the overarching theme of the sonnets, there are three specific underlying themes: (1) the brevity of life, (2) the transience of beauty, and (3) the trappings of desire. The first two of these underlying themes are the focus of the early sonnets addressed to the young man (in particular Sonnets 1-17) where the poet argues that having children to carry on one's beauty is the only way to conquer the ravages of time. In the middle sonnets of the young man sequence the poet tries to immortalize the young man through his own poetry (the most famous examples being [Sonnet 18](http://shakespeare-online.com/sonnets/18detail.html) and [Sonnet 55](http://shakespeare-online.com/sonnets/55detail.html)). In the late sonnets of the young man sequence there is a shift to *pure love* as the solution to mortality (as in [Sonnet 116](http://shakespeare-online.com/sonnets/116detail.html)). When choosing a sonnet to analyze it is beneficial to explore the theme as it relates to the sonnets around it.

[Sonnet 127](http://shakespeare-online.com/sonnets/127.html) marks a shift to the third theme and the poet's intense sexual affair with a woman known as the *dark lady*. The mood of the sonnets in this sequence is dark and love as a sickness is a prominent motif (exemplified in [Sonnet 147](http://shakespeare-online.com/sonnets/147detail.html)). Often students will be asked to choose one sonnet addressed to the young man and one addressed to his mistress and analyze the differences in tone, imagery, and theme. Comparing Sonnet 116, with the theme of ideal, healthy love, to Sonnet 147, with the theme of diseased love, would be a great choice.

For a complete guide to the theme of each group of sonnets, please see the article [The Outline of the Themes in Shakespeare's Sonnets](http://shakespeare-online.com/sonnets/sonnetthemes.html).

**2. Examine the Literary Devices**

Shakespeare likely did not write his sonnets with a conscious emphasis on literary devices, and early editors of the sonnets paid little attention to such devices (with the exception of metaphor and allusion). However, in the era of postmodern literary theory and close reading, much weight is given to the construction or *deconstruction* of the sonnets and Shakespeare's use of figures of speech such as [alliteration](http://shakespeare-online.com/literaryterms/alliteration.html), [assonance](http://shakespeare-online.com/literaryterms/assonance.html), [antithesis](http://shakespeare-online.com/literaryterms/antithesis.html), [enjambment](http://shakespeare-online.com/literaryterms/enjambement.html), [metonymy](http://shakespeare-online.com/literaryterms/metonymy.html), [synecdoche](http://shakespeare-online.com/literaryterms/synecdoche.html), [oxymoron](http://shakespeare-online.com/literaryterms/oxymoron.html), personification, and internal rhyme. Much modern criticism1 also places heavy emphasis on the sexual puns and double entendres in the sonnets (*blood warm* (2.14) being both blood *and* semen, etc). For more on this please see the commentary for [Sonnet 75](http://shakespeare-online.com/sonnets/75detail.html).

For examples of Shakespeare's use of antithesis and synecdoche, please see the commentary for [Sonnet 12](http://shakespeare-online.com/sonnets/12.html) and [Sonnet 116](http://shakespeare-online.com/sonnets/116detail.html).

For examples of Shakespeare's use of metonymy, please see the commentary for [Sonnet 59](http://shakespeare-online.com/sonnets/59.html).

For an example of Shakespeare's use of partial alliteration, please see the commentary for [Sonnet 30](http://shakespeare-online.com/sonnets/30detail.html). Notice the attention to alliteration and assonance in [Sonnet 55](http://shakespeare-online.com/sonnets/55detail.html).

For examples of Shakespeare's use of personification and extended metaphor, please see the commentary for [Sonnet 55](http://shakespeare-online.com/sonnets/55detail.html), [Sonnet 65](http://shakespeare-online.com/sonnets/65detail.html), [Sonnet 73](http://shakespeare-online.com/sonnets/73detail.html), [Sonnet 2](http://shakespeare-online.com/sonnets/2.html), and [Sonnet 59](http://shakespeare-online.com/sonnets/59.html).

For an example of Shakespeare's use of an elaborate metaphor known as a *conceit*, please see [Sonnet 46](http://shakespeare-online.com/sonnets/46.html).

For an example of what many consider to be one of Shakespeare's rare failed metaphors, please see the commentary for [Sonnet 47](http://shakespeare-online.com/sonnets/47detail.html).

Once you have identified such literary devices you can explore both how they contribute to a greater understanding of the theme and how they serve to give the sonnet movement, intensity, and structure.

**Shakespearean Sonnet Basics: Iambic Pentameter and the English Sonnet Style**

Shakespeare’s sonnets are written predominantly in a meter called iambic pentameter, a rhyme scheme in which each sonnet line consists of ten syllables. The syllables are divided into five pairs called iambs or iambic feet. An iamb is a metrical unit made up of one unstressed syllable followed by one stressed syllable. An example of an iamb would be good BYE. A line of iambic pentameter flows like this:

**baBOOM / baBOOM / baBOOM / baBOOM / baBOOM.**

Here are some examples from the sonnets:

**When I / do COUNT / the CLOCK / that TELLS / the TIME (**[**Sonnet 12**](http://www.shakespeare-online.com/sonnets/12.html)**)**

**When IN / dis GRACE / with FOR / tune AND / men’s EYES  
I ALL / a LONE / be WEEP / my OUT/ cast STATE (**[**Sonnet 29**](http://www.shakespeare-online.com/sonnets/29detail.html)**)**

**Shall I / com PARE/ thee TO / a SUM / mer’s DAY?   
Thou ART / more LOVE / ly AND / more TEM / per ATE (**[**Sonnet 18**](http://www.shakespeare-online.com/sonnets/18detail.html)**)**

Shakespeare’s plays are also written primarily in iambic pentameter, but the lines are unrhymed and not grouped into stanzas. Unrhymed iambic pentameter is called [blank verse](http://www.shakespeare-online.com/faq/writingstyle.html). It should be noted that there are also many prose passages in Shakespeare’s plays and some lines of [trochaic tetrameter](http://www.shakespeare-online.com/faq/macbethfaq/witchmetre.html), such as the [Witches' speeches in *Macbeth*](http://www.shakespeare-online.com/plays/witcheschants.html).

**Sonnet Structure**

There are fourteen lines in a Shakespearean sonnet. The first twelve lines are divided into three quatrains with four lines each. In the three quatrains the poet establishes a theme or problem and then resolves it in the final two lines, called the couplet. The rhyme scheme of the quatrains is abab cdcd efef. The couplet has the rhyme scheme gg. This sonnet structure is commonly called the English sonnet or the Shakespearean sonnet, to distinguish it from the Italian Petrarchan sonnet form which has two parts: a rhyming octave (abbaabba) and a rhyming sestet (cdcdcd). The Petrarchan sonnet style was extremely popular with Elizabethan sonneteers, much to Shakespeare's disdain (he mocks the conventional and excessive [Petrarchan style in Sonnet 130](http://www.shakespeare-online.com/sonnets/130detail.html)).

Only three of Shakespeare's 154 sonnets do not conform to this structure: [Sonnet 99](http://www.shakespeare-online.com/sonnets/99.html), which has 15 lines; [Sonnet 126](http://www.shakespeare-online.com/sonnets/126.html), which has 12 lines; and [Sonnet 145](http://www.shakespeare-online.com/sonnets/145detail.html), which is written in iambic tetrameter.

**Shakespeare's Sonnets: Q & A**

**Which literary devices does Shakespeare use in the sonnets?**

We see many examples of literary devices in Shakespeare's poetry, such as alliteration, assonance, antithesis, enjambment, metonymy, metaphor, synecdoche, oxymoron, and personification. For a discussion of Shakespeare's use of figures of speech and specific examples from the sonnets, please see the article [How to Analyze a Shakespearean Sonnet](http://shakespeare-online.com/sonnets/sonnetanalyze.html).

**Do we know how true the 1609 Quarto is to Shakespeare's sonnets?**

We will never know for sure how "true" the 1609 Quarto is to Shakespeare's originals. Some scholars doubt Shakespeare's authorship of sonnets 145, 153, and 154, which are considered poorer in quality than the others. But this is likely simply due to Shakespeare's lack of poetic inspiration (he was human, after all).

**Can you tell me the form of a sonnet?**

A sonnet is in verse form and has fourteen lines of iambic pentameter. Shakespeare's sonnets follow the pattern "abab cdcd efef gg", and Petrarch's sonnets follow the pattern "abba abba cdecde." All the lines in iambic pentameter have five feet, consisting of an unstressed syllable followed by a stressed one. For a more detailed look at iambic pentameter with examples, please [click here](http://shakespeare-online.com/sonnets/sonnetstyle.html).

**I was wondering if we know the specific time period in which Shakespeare wrote his sonnets.**

The sonnets were composed over an unknown period of time, probably between 1591 and 1598. Scholars have tried to date the sonnets by looking at hints within the poems themselves, but there is no consensus. For a detailed examination of this topic, please see the article, [The Date of the Sonnets](http://shakespeare-online.com/sonnets/sonnetdate.html).

**Who is Shakespeare's dark lady?**

Twenty-four of Shakespeare's sonnets are addressed to a woman. We have little information about this woman, except for a description the poet gives of her over the course of the poems. Shakespeare describes her as 'a woman color'd ill', with black eyes and coarse black hair. Thus, she has come to be known as the "dark lady." There are scholars who believe that the dark lady could be one of three historical women: Mary Fitton, a lady in waiting to Queen Elizabeth; Lucy Morgan, a brothel owner and former maid to Queen Elizabeth; and Emilia Lanier, the mistress of Lord Hunsdon, patron of the arts. Some also consider William Davenant's mother to be the dark lady, but only because Davenant claimed to be Shakespeare's illegitimate son. To find out what the poet thinks about the dark lady, please see the analysis of [Sonnet 130](http://shakespeare-online.com/sonnets/130detail.html), [Sonnet 144](http://shakespeare-online.com/sonnets/144detail.html), and [Sonnet 147](http://shakespeare-online.com/sonnets/147detail.html).

**Were Shakespeare's sonnets about his love for another man?**

Shakespeare's early sonnets are indeed about his love for another man. But whether this means without a doubt that Shakespeare was gay is a different matter. It was not uncommon for men in Elizabethan England to express their deep love and affection for male friends. Moreover, the only sexual relations mentioned in the sonnets are between the poet and his mistress (for more on this please see the commentary for [Sonnet 138](http://shakespeare-online.com/sonnets/138detail.html)). Of course, it is just as likely the poet could not express overtly his sexual desire for the young man due to societal stigma. For a look at the nature of the poet's feelings for the young man, please see the commentary for Sonnets 1-29 and, in particular, the analysis of the hotly-debated [Sonnet 20](http://shakespeare-online.com/sonnets/20detail.html), in which the poet refers to the young man as "master-mistress of my passion."

**Do we know the order in which Shakespeare wrote his sonnets?**

Many scholars have tried to find a logical order in the sonnets but none of them have been completely successful. The events in the sonnets are barely outlined. We can make an educated guess, but we will likely never know for sure. For a detailed examination of this topic, please see the article, [The Order of the Sonnets](http://shakespeare-online.com/sonnets/sonnetorder.html).

**What were the two long narrative poems Shakespeare wrote that were published between 1592 and 1594?**

During those years *Venus and Adonis* and the *Rape of Lucrece* were published.

**Are Shakespeare's Sonnets Autobiographical?**

An excerpt from *Shakespeare's Sonnets*. Ed. W. J. Rolfe. New York: American Book Company, 1905.

Are the *Sonnets*, wholly or in part, autobiographical, or are they merely "poetical exercises" dealing with imaginary persons and experiences? This is the question to which all others relating to the poems are secondary and subordinate.

For myself, I firmly believe that the great majority of the *Sonnets*, to quote what Wordsworth says of them, "express Shakespeare's own feelings in his own person;" or, as he says in his sonnet on the sonnet, "with this same key Shakespeare unlocked his heart." Browning, quoting this, asks: "Did Shakespeare? If so, the less Shakespeare he!" to which Swinburne replies, "No whit the less like Shakespeare, but undoubtedly the less like Browning."

The theory that the *Sonnets* are mere exercises of fancy, "the free outcome of a poetic imagination," as Delius phrases it, is easy and specious at first, but lands us at last among worse perplexities than it evades. That Shakespeare, for example, should write seventeen sonnets urging a young man to marry and perpetuate his family is strange enough, but that he should select such a theme as the fictitious basis for seventeen sonnets is stranger yet; and the same may be said of the story or stories apparently underlying other of the poems. Some critics, indeed, who take them to be thus artificially inspired, have been compelled to regard them as "satirical" — intended to ridicule the sonneteers of the time, especially Drayton and Sir John Davies of Hereford. Others, like Professor Minto, who believe the first 126 to be personal, regard the rest as "exercises of skill, undertaken in a spirit of wanton defiance and derision of commonplace." The poems, to quote Dowden, "are in the taste of the time; less extravagant and less full of conceits than many other Elizabethan collections, more distinguished by exquisite imagination and all that betokens genuine feeling. . . . All that is quaint or contorted or 'conceited' in them can be paralleled from passages of early plays of Shakespeare, such as *Romeo and Juliet*, and the *Two Gentlemen of Verona*, where assuredly no satirical intention is discoverable."

If the *Sonnets* were mostly written before 1598 when Meres refers to them, or 1599 when Jaggard printed two of them, or in 1593 and 1594, as Sidney Lee assumes, and if most of them, as the same critic believes, were "little more than professional trials of skill, often of superlative merit, to which the poet deemed himself challenged by the efforts of contemporary practitioners," it is passing strange that Shakespeare should not have published them ten or fifteen years before they were brought out by the pirate Thorpe. He must have written them for publication if that was their character, and the extraordinary popularity of his earlier poems would have assured them a favourable reception with the public. His fellow-townsman and friend, Richard Field, who had published the *Venus and Adonis* in 1593 and *the Lucrece* in 1594, and who must have known of the circulation of the sonnets in manuscript, would have urged him to publish them; or, if the author had declined to have them printed, some pirate, like Jaggard or Thorpe, would have done it long before 1609. Mr. Lee tells us that Sidney, Watson, Daniel, and Constable circulated their sonnets for a time in manuscript, but he tells us also that the pirates generally got hold of them and published them within a few years if the authors did not do it. But the history of *The Passionate Pilgrim* shows that it was not so easy to obtain copies of Shakespeare's sonnets for publication. It was the success of *Venus and Adonis* and *Lucrece* (the fourth edition of the former being issued in 1599, and the second of the latter in 1598) which prompted Jaggard to compile *The Passionate Pilgrim* in 1599; and it is a significant fact that he was able to rake together only ten poems which can possibly be Shakespeare's, and three of these were from *Love's Labour's Lost*, which had been published in 1598. To these ten pieces he added ten others (eleven, as ordinarily printed) which he impudently called Shakespeare's, though we know that most of them were stolen and can trace some of them to the authors.

His book bears evidence in its very make-up that he was hard pushed to fill the pages and give the purchaser a tolerable sixpence-worth. The matter is printed on but one side of the leaf, and is further spun out by putting a head-piece and tail-piece on every page, so that a dozen lines of text sandwiched between these convenient pictorial devices make as fair a show as double the quantity would ordinarily present.

Note, however, that, with all his pickings and stealings, Jaggard managed to secure but two of the sonnets, though a considerable number of them were probably in existence among the author's "private friends," as Meres expressed it a year before. The pirate Newman, in 1591, was able to print one hundred and eight sonnets by Sidney which had been circulated in manuscript, and to add to them twenty-eight by Daniel without the author's knowledge ; and sonnets by Watson and Constable, as Mr. Lee tells us, were similarly circulated and pirated. How, then, are we to explain the fact that Jaggard could obtain only two of Shakespeare's sonnets, five years or more after they had been circulating among his friends ? Is it not evident that the poems must have been carefully guarded by these friends on account of their personal and private character? A dozen more of those sonnets would have filled out Jaggard's "larcenous bundle of verse," and have obviated the necessity of pilfering from Barnfield, Griffin, Marlowe, and the rest; but at the time they were in such close confidential keeping that he could get no copies of them. In the course of years they were shown to a larger and larger number of "private friends," and with the multiplication of copies the chances of their getting outside of that confidential circle were proportionally increased. We need not be surprised, then, that a decade later somebody had succeeded in obtaining copies of them all, and sold the collection to Thorpe.

Even if we suppose that the Sonnets had been impersonal, and that Shakespeare for some reason that we cannot guess had wished to withhold them from the press, we may be sure that he could not have done it in that day of imperfect copyright restrictions. Nothing could have kept a hundred and fifty poems by so popular an author out of print if there had not been strong personal reasons for maintaining their privacy. At least seven editions of the *Venus and Adonis* and four of the *Lucrece* appeared before Thorpe was able to secure "copy" for his edition of the *Sonnets*.

, as Mr. Lee asserts, Southampton was the patron to whom twenty that may be called "dedicatory" sonnets (23, 26, 32, 37, 38, 69, 77-86, 100, 101, 103, and 106) are addressed, it is all the more remarkable that Shakespeare should not have published them, or, if he hesitated to do it, that his noble patron should not have urged it. He had already dedicated both the *Venus and Adonis* and the *Lucrece* to Southampton; and Mr. Lee says that "three of the twenty dedicatory sonnets [26, 32, 38] merely translate into the language of poetry the expressions of devotion which had already done duty in the dedicatory epistle in verse that precedes Lucrece." Other sonnet-sequences of the time (including the four mentioned by Mr. Lee as pirated while circulated in manuscript, except Sidney's, which were not thus published until after his death) were brought out by their authors, with dedications to noble lords or ladies. Shakespeare's *Sonnets*, so far as I am aware, are the only exception to the rule.

Mr. Lee himself admits that "at a first glance a far larger proportion of Shakespeare's sonnets give the reader the illusion of personal confessions than those of any contemporary;" and elsewhere he recognizes in them more "intensity" than appears in the earlier poems except in "occasional utterances" of *Lucrece*; but, for all that, he would have us believe that they are not personal, and that their "superior and more evenly sustained energy is to be attributed, not to the accession of power that comes with increase of years, but to the innate principles of the poetic form, and to metrical exigencies which impelled the sonneteer to aim at a uniform condensation of thought and language." I cannot help agreeing with those who regard their personal character as no "illusion," and who believe that they clearly show the increase of power which comes with years, their true date probably being 1597-98 rather than 1593-94.

For myself, I could as soon believe the penitential psalms of David to be purely rhetorical and fictitious as the 129th Sonnet, than which no more remorseful utterance was ever wrung from a soul that had tasted the ashes to which the Sodom-apples of illicit love are turned in the end. Have we there nothing but the "admirable fooling" of the actor masquerading in the garb of the penitent, or the satirist mimicking the conceits and affectations of the sonneteers of the time? If this is supposed to be the counterfeit of feeling, I can only exclaim with Leonato in *Much Ado*, "O God! Counterfeit! There was never counterfeit of passion came so near the life of passion!"

**How to cite this article:**

Rolfe, W. J. Ed. *Are Shakespeare's Sonnets Autobiographical?* From *Shakespeare's Sonnets*. New York: American Book Company, 1905. Shakespeare Online. 20 Aug. 2009. (date when you accessed the information) < http://www.shakespeare-online.com/sonnets/sonnetsautobio.html >.

**Concerning the Order of the Sonnets**

An excerpt from *Shakespeare's Sonnets*. Ed. W. J. Rolfe. New York: American Book Company.

Certain sonnets in the first group appear to be out of place, though many of the editors attempt to prove that the order of the series is Shakespeare's own. But if the 70th Sonnet is addressed to the same person as 33-35 (to say nothing of 40-42) it seems to be clearly out of place. Here the poet says: —

"That thou art blam'd shall not be thy defect,   
For *slander's mark was ever yet the fair*;   
The ornament of beauty is suspect,  
A crow that flies in heaven"s sweetest air.   
So thou be good, slander doth but approve   
Thy worth the greater, being woo'd of time;   
For canker vice the sweetest buds doth love,   
And thou present'st a pure *unstained prime*.   
Thou hast pass'd by the ambush of young days,  
*Either not assail'd or victor being charged*;   
Yet this thy praise cannot be so thy praise   
To tie up envy evermore enlarg'd."

His friend has been charged with yielding to the seductions of vice, but the accusations are declared to he' false and slanderous. He is said to present "a pure unstained prime," having passed through the temptations of youth either "not assailed" by them or "victor being charged;" but in 33-35 we learn that he has been assailed and has not come off victorious. There the "stain" and "disgrace" of his "sensual fault" are clearly set forth, though they are excused and forgiven. Here the young man is the victim of slander, but has in no wise deserved it. If he is the same young man who is so plainly, though sadly and tenderly, reproved in 33-35, this sonnet must have been written before those. One broken link spoils the chain; if the order of the poems is wrong here, it may be so elsewhere.

Mr. Tyler's attempt to show that this sonnet is not out of place is a good illustration of the "tricks of desperation" to which a critic may be driven in defence of his theory: "Slander ever fastens on the purest characters. His friend's prime was unstained, such an affair as that with the poet's mistress not being regarded, apparently, as involving serious moral blemish. Moreover, there had been forgiveness; and the special reference here may be to some charge of which Mr. W. H. was innocent." Whatever this charge may be. the "pure unstained prime" covers the period referred to in Sonnets 33-35 and 40-42; and the young man's conduct then appeared a "trespass" and a "sin," a "shame" and a "disgrace," to the friend who now, according to Mr. Tyler, sees no "serious moral blemish" in it. Let the reader compare the poems for himself, and draw his own conclusions. Mr. Tyler has the grace to add to what is quoted above: "But (as in 79) Shakespeare can scarcely escape the charge of adulation." Rather than believe William Shakespeare guilty of "adulation" so ineffably base and sycophantic, I could suppose, as some do, that Bacon wrote the *Sonnets*.

Both Furnivall and Dowden, in their exposition of the relation of each sonnet to the story involved in the series, fail to explain this 70th Sonnet satisfactorily. Furnival's comment, in his analysis of Sonnets 67-70, is this : "Will has mixed with bad company, but Shakespeare is sure he is pure, and excuses him." At this stage of the friendship, then, Shakespeare is "sure" that the young man is "pure;" but in the analysis of Sonnets 33-35, we read: "Will's sensual fault blamed, repented, and forgiven;" and this "fault," as the context explains, is taking away Shakespeare's mistress. There can be no doubt as to the fact and the nature of the sin mourned and condemned in the earlier sonnets; nor can there be any question that the later sonnet congratulates the youth to whom it is addressed, not on having repented after yielding to temptation, but on having either escaped or resisted all such temptations. If this youth and the other youth are one and the same, the sonnets cannot be in chronological order.

Dowden, in like manner, infers from the earlier sonnets that "Will" has been "false to friendship," and that the only excuse that Shakespeare can offer for him is that "he is but a boy whom a woman has beguiled;" but in the 70th Sonnet the poet says that the charges of loose living brought against his friend "must be slanders." Dowden cannot mean that this sonnet is a friendly attempt to apologize for Will's disgrace after the poet has forgiven him. We have that in Sonnets 35, 36, 40, 41, and 42, where Elizabethan conceits are racked to the uttermost to excuse both his friend and his mistress for playing him false; but, in 70 his friend is "pure," though he cannot escape slander, "unstained," though envy would fain besmirch him.

Mr. Gollancz, in the "Temple" edition of the *Sonnets*, after quoting what I say in my former edition (as here) to prove that 70 is out of place, simply repeats Tyler's attempt to prove the contrary. "Surely," he says, "the faults referred to in the earlier sonnets are not only forgiven, but here [in 70] iHow lightly such lapses were regarded in the olden time we all know; but in this case the treason to friendship was added, and the earlier sonnets show that Shakespeare did not regard the double sin as "involving no serious moral blemish."

The critics who believe the *Sonnets* to be autobiographical generally agree in assuming that all of them (or all but two) are either addressed to one man and one woman, or connected with the poet's relations with those two persons. Is it not probable, on the face of it, that a poet who "unlocked his heart" to such an extent in this form of verse would occasionally, if not often, have employed it in expressing his feelings towards other friends or with reference to other experiences? Is it likely that the two Cupid sonnets (153, 154) and the Venus and Adonis sonnets in *The Passionate Pilgrim* (if we believe those to be Shakespeare's — which is extremely improbable) and the sonnets in *Love's Labour's Lost* are his only efforts in this kind of composition outside of this great series? Is it not far more probable that some sonnets in this series really have no connection with the persons and events supposed to be directly connected with the series?

### Who was "Mr. W. H."?

An excerpt from *Shakespeare's Sonnets*. Ed. W. J. Rolfe. New York: American Book Company, 1905.

If we assume that the Sonnets are autobiographical, and that all, or nearly all, are addressed to two persons — a young man beloved of the poet, and the "dark lady," with whom they were both entangled — can these persons be identified? The majority of the critics who accept the personal theory assume that the "Mr. W. H." of the dedication was this young man, rather than the collector or editor of the poems.

The only theories concerning the young man (whether "Mr. W. H." or not) that are worthy of serious consideration are that he was William Herbert, Earl of Pembroke, or that he was Henry Wriothesley, Earl of Southampton.

As early as 1819 Mr. B. H. Bright suggested that Herbert was the man, and this theory has steadily gained favour with biographers and critics. The editor of the "Temple" edition, who accepts the Southampton theory, writing a few years ago, believed that the Herbert theory was "in the ascendant." He added: "Many a former ally of Southampton has rallied round the banner unfurled by Herbert's redoubtable champion, Mr. Thomas Tyler." But more recently (in 1897) Sidney Lee, who had been on the side of Herbert, has now (in his article on Shakespeare in the *Dictionary of National Biography*, and in his *Life of Shakespeare*) gone over to the Southampton party; and Mrs. Stopes and one or two other recent writers have also joined that faction.

William Herbert was born April 8th, 1580; and in the spring of 1598 he came to reside in London. He was brilliant, accomplished, and licentious; "the most universally beloved and esteemed of any man in London" (Clarendon). To him and his brother Philip, Earl of Montgomery, as two patrons of the dramatist, Heminge and Condell dedicated the folio of 1623. The "Herbertists" assign the *Sonnets* to the years 1597—1601. The most serious objection to regarding him as "Mr. W. H." (or the person addressed in the Sonnets) was the improbability that the poet would write seventeen sonnets to urge a youth of seventeen or eighteen to marry; but Mr. Tyler discovered, from letters preserved in the Record Office, that in 1597 the parents of William Herbert were engaged in negotiations for his marriage to Bridget Vere, daughter of the Earl of Oxford. The course of the parental match-making ran smooth for a while, but was soon checked by obstacles not clearly explained in the correspondence. Shakespeare may have written the seventeen sonnets at the request of Herbert's mother, the Countess of Pembroke.

It is a curious fact that Grant White, in his first edition of Shakespeare (1865) had said of Sonnets 1 — 17: "There seems to be no imaginable reason for seventeen such poetical petitions. But that a mother should be thus solicitous is not strange, or that she should long to see the beautiful children of her own beautiful offspring. The desire for grandchildren, and the love of them, seem sometimes even stronger than parental yearning. But I hazard this conjecture with little confidence."

Mr. Tyler also attempted to prove that the "dark lady" was Mary Fitton, maid of honour to Queen Elizabeth, and mistress of Herbert, by whom she had a child in 1601. The Queen could not overlook the offence, and sent the father to the Fleet Prison. He was soon released, but appears never to have regained the royal favour.

There is no direct evidence to connect Shakespeare with Mistress Fitton; but we find that she was on somewhat intimate terms with a member of his theatrical company, that is, the Lord Chamberlain's Company, and was probably acquainted with other members of it. In 1600 William Kemp, the clown in the company, dedicated his *Nine daies wonder* to "Mistris Anne Fitton, Mayde of Honour to most sacred Mayde, Royal Queene Elizabeth." As Elizabeth certainly had no maid of honour named Anne Fitton in 1600, while Mary Fitton held such office from 1595 to 1601, either Kemp or his printer probably made a mistake in the lady's Christian name in the dedication. As Mr. Tyler suggests, the form "Marie" might be so written as to be easily mistaken for "Anne." Mary had a sister Anne, who was married to John Newdigate on the 30th of April, 1587, and who could not, therefore, have been maid of honour in 1600.

A statue of Mary Fitton exists as a part of the family monument in Gawsworth Church, Cheshire; and the remnants of colour upon it were thought by Mr. Tyler (as by others who have seen it) to indicate that she was of dark complexion, with black hair and eyes, like the lady of the second series of the *Sonnets*. But Lady Newdigate-Newdegate (*Gossip from a Muniment Room*, 1898) states that two portraits of Mary represent her as of fair complexion, with brown hair and gray eyes.

It is a point in favour of the Herbert theory that Sonnets 135, 136, and 143 indicate that the person to whom the poems in the other series were addressed was called "Will;" but Mr. Lee considers that "Will" in these sonnets is only a play on Shakespeare's own name and the lady's "will." It is true that such quibbles on "Will" are found elsewhere in his works, but it is doubtful whether anyone but a "Southamptonite " would see them in these sonnets.

Henry Wriothesley was born October 6th, 1573. As we have seen, the *Venus and Adonis* and the *Lucrece* were both dedicated to him, and tradition says that he was a generous patron of the poet. In September, 1595, he fell in love with Elizabeth Vernon, a cousin of the Earl of Essex. This lost him the favour of the Queen and involved him in serious troubles. In 1598 he secretly married Elizabeth Vernon. On account of his connection with the rebellion of Essex he was condemned to death, but the sentence was commuted to imprisonment for life. He was pardoned in 1603 when James came to the throne, and the 107th Sonnet is supposed by Mr. Gerald Massey to be Shakespeare's congratulation upon his release from prison and restoration to royal favour. The initials in "Mr. W. H.," according to some of the critics who identify him with Southampton, arc those of Henry Wriothesley transposed as a "blind."

When Southampton was seventeen (1590) he was urged by Burghley to marry his granddaughter, Lady Elizabeth Vere, a daughter of the Earl of Oxford, but the youth declined the alliance. If the *Sonnets* were addressed to him, the first seventeen could hardly have been written at this time (which is earlier than any date assumed for the poems), but the efforts of his friends to find him a wife continued for several years afterwards.

e latter sonnet says that the sin was never committed, and it therefore needed no forgiveness.

While Mr. Lee believes that such of the *Sonnets* as are personal in their character are addressed to Southampton, he does not understand that nobleman to be the "Mr. W. H." of the dedication. He says: "No peer of the day bore a name that could be represented by the initials 'Mr. W. H.' . . . The Earl of Pembroke was, from his birth to the date of his succession to the earldom in 1601, known by the courtesy title of Lord Herbert, and by no other name, and he could not have been designated at any period of his life by the symbols 'Mr. W. H.'" This may be admitted, but it does not prove that the "Mr. W. H." of the dedication was not meant to refer ambiguously to him. If Thorpe knew the history of the Sonnets, and that both the author and the person to whom they were addressed did not wish to have them printed, he certainly would not venture to inscribe the book in distinct terms to the Earl of Pembroke; but he might be inclined to give an indirect hint to those who were acquainted with the story underlying the poems that he also knew of the Earl's connection with it. He could do this with perfect safety by using the initials "W. H." which, as Mr. Lee elsewhere remarks, were common to many names, and which therefore could not he *proved* to be meant to suggest "William Herbert."

But after all it matters little whether "W. H." was meant for "William Herbert" or "Henry Wriothesley," so far as either the Herbert or the Southampton theory is concerned. In either case they might refer to the "begetter" of the poems as the collector or editor, though the other interpretation of "begetter" seems to accord better with the rest of the dedication. Mr. Lee thinks that Mr. W. H. is "best identified with a stationer's assistant, William Hall, who was professionally engaged, like Thorpe, in procuring 'copy,'" and who, in 1606, "won a conspicuous success in that direction, and conducted his operations under cover of the familiar initials." Thorpe "gave Hall's initials only because he was an intimate associate who was known by those initials to their common circle of friends." But, though Thorpe was "bombastic" in his dedications, and might wish to Hall "all happiness" and even "eternitie," it is unlikely that he would wish him that "eternitie promised by our ever-living poet." Promised to whom? Mr. Lee refers it to the eternity that Shakespeare in the *Sonnets* "conventionally foretold for his own verse," but this interpretation is a desperate attempt to force the expression into consistency with his theory. The words plainly mean "promised in the *Sonnets* to the person to whom they are addressed." This promise is far more prominent in the *Sonnets* than that of their own immortality, which, indeed, is made dependent on the enduring fame of the youth who is their theme and inspirer.

If it were proved beyond a doubt that "Mr. W. H." was William Hall, or some other person who secured the *Sonnets* for Thorpe, I should none the less believe that Herbert rather than Southampton was their "patron " and subject. The only facts worth mentioning in favour of Southampton are that the earlier poems were dedicated to him, and that certain personal allusions in the *Sonnets* can be made to refer to him if we suppose them to have been written some four years before their more probable date. But Mr. Lee himself admits that these allusions are equally applicable to Herbert. "Both," he says," enjoyed wealth and rank, both were regarded by admirers as cultivated, both were self-indulgent in their relations with women, and both in early manhood were indisposed to marry, owing to habits of gallantry." It may be added that both were noted for personal beauty, though Mr. Lee thinks that Francis Davison's reference to the beauty of Herbert in a sonnet addressed to him in 1602 is "cautiously qualified" in the lines : —

"[His] outward shape, though it most lovely be,   
Doth in fair robes a fairer soul attire."

Anybody who had not a theory to defend would see that the eulogy of the "fairer soul" enhances instead of "qualifying" the compliment to the "most lovely" person. This is a good illustration of Mr. Lee's perverse twisting of quotations for the purposes of his argument. He even finds a reference to Southampton's longhair (shown in his portrait) in the 68th Sonnet, where Shakespeare "points to the youth's face as a map of what beauty was ' without all ornament, itself and true,' before fashion sanctioned the use of artificial 'golden tresses'" — though this is only one out of several illustrations of the poet's antipathy to false hair. See *Love's Labour's Lost*, iv. 3. 258, *Merchant of Venice*, iii. 2. 95, and *Timon of Athens*, iv. 3. 144.

**Are all the Sonnets addressed to two Persons?**

An excerpt from *Shakespeare's Sonnets*. Ed. W. J. Rolfe. New York: American Book Company, 1905.

It is hardly possible that certain of the sonnets in the second group (127-152) were really addressed to the "dark lady," — 129, for instance, though it may have been suggested by his relations with her, and 146, which seems to be entirely independent of that entanglement.

It is also very doubtful whether certain sonnets in the first group (1-126) properly belong there. Some of them appear to have been addressed to a woman rather than a man — for instance, 97, 98, 99, etc. Of course everybody familiar with the literature of that time knows, as Dyce remarks, that "it was then not uncommon for one man to write verses to another in a strain of such tender affection as fully warrants us in terming them amatory." Many of Shakespeare's sonnets which he addressed to his young friend are of this character, and were it not for internal evidence to the contrary might be supposed to be addressed to a woman. But Sonnets 97, 98, and 99 could hardly have been written to a male friend even in that day. Look at 99, for example:—

"The forward violet thus did I chide:   
Sweet thief, whence didst thou steal thy sweet that smells,   
If not from my *love's breath*? The purple pride   
Which on thy soft cheek for complexion dwells   
In my love's veins thou hast too grossly dyed.   
*The lily I condemned for thy hand*,   
And buds of marjoram had stolen thy hair;   
The roses fearfully on thorns did stand,   
One blushing shame, another white despair;   
A third, nor red nor white, had stolen of both,   
And to his robbery had annex'd thy *breath*;   
But, for his theft, in pride of all his growth   
A vengeful canker eat him up to death.   
   More flowers I noted, yet I none could see   
   Hut sweet or colour it had stolen from thee."

If this sonnet were met with where we had no external evidence that it was addressed to a man, could we have a moment's hesitation in deciding that it must be addressed to a woman? Even in Elizabethan times, when extravagant eulogies of manly beauty were so common, do we find the poet dwelling upon his "love's breath" or the "lily " whiteness of his hand? From first to last, the sweetness and loveliness described in the verses are unmistakably feminine.

I find a curious parallel to this sonnet in one of Constable's (9th of 1st Decade), published in 1594:—

"My Lady's presence makes the Roses red,   
Because to see her lips they blush for shame.   
The Lily's leaves, for envy, pale became,   
And her white hands in them this envy bred.   
The Marigold the leaves abroad doth spread;   
Because the sun's and her power is the same.   
The Violet of purple colour came,   
Dyed in the blood she made my heart to shed;   
In brief. All flowers from her their virtue take;   
From her sweet breath, their sweet smells do proceed;   
The living heat which her eyebeams doth make   
Warmeth the ground, and quickeneth the seed.   
The rain, wherewith she watereth the flowers,   
Falls from mine eyes, which she dissolves in showers."

Reference to the lily hands and sweet breath of women are frequent in the Elizabethan sonnets, but I have noted nothing of the kind in the sonnets addressed to men.

There are several other of Shakespeare's sonnets in this group (1-126) which may or may not be addressed to women; the internal evidence does not settle the question beyond a doubt. Our editor, if he thought of the question (which is unlikely, as it does not appear to have occurred to him in connection with the 99th), gave them the benefit of the doubt and included them in this group.

**Shakespeare's Influence on Other Artists**

Shakespeare influenced every generation of writers since his death and he continues to have an enormous impact on contemporary plays, movies, and poems. The Romantic poet John Keats (1795-1821) was so influenced by Shakespeare that he kept a bust of the Bard beside him while he wrote, hoping that Shakespeare would spark his creativity. Keats's poems duplicate Shakespeare's style and are full of Shakespearean imagery.

In a letter to Benjamin Robert Haydon, dated 10 May 1817, Keats writes:

I remember your saying that you had notions of a good Genius presiding over you. I have of late had the same thought - for things which I do half at Random are afterwards confirmed by my judgment in a dozen features of Propriety. Is it too daring to fancy Shakespeare this Presider?

It is interesting to note that George Bernard Shaw (1865-1950), who ridiculed those who worshipped Shakespeare (inventing an insulting term to denote the study of Shakespeare - *bardolatry*), secretly admired Shakespeare a great deal and often told his close friends that he thought the Bard had an unsurpassed command of the language.

Shakespeare's influence is summarized nicely by Thomas Carlyle (albeit a bit over the top):

This King Shakespeare does he not shine, in crowned sovereignty, over us all, as the noblest, gentlest, yet strongest of rallying-signs; indestructible; really more valuable in that point of view than any other means or appliance whatsoever? We can fancy him as radiant aloft over all Nations of Englishmen, thousand years hence. From Paramatta, from New York, wheresoever, under what sort of Parish-Constable soever, English men and women are, they will say to one another, 'Yes, this Shakespeare is ours; we produced him, we speak and think by him; we are of one blood and kind with him. (Thomas Carlyle, *The Hero as Poet*, 1841).

Many authors have used phrases from Shakespeare's works as titles for their own novels. Here is a list of just a few:

* *Brave New World* by Aldous Huxley (*The Tempest*, 5.1)
* *The Dogs of War* by Robert Stone (*Julius Caesar* 3.1)
* *The Winter of our Discontent* by John Steinbeck (*Richard III*, 1.1)
* *The Undiscovered Country* by Auther Schnitzer (*Hamlet*, 3.1)
* *Something Wicked this Way Comes* by Ray Bradbury (*Macbeth*, 4.1)
* *Bell, Book, and Candle* by John van Druten (*King John*, 3.3)

In 1899, Sir Herbert Beerbohm-Tree produced *King John*, the first movie based on a play by Shakespeare, and since then there have been dozens of movies and adaptations loosely based on Shakespeare's work, including:

* *The Boys from Syracuse* (1940) - *The Two Gentlemen of Verona*
* *Joe Macbeth* (1953) - *Macbeth*
* *Kiss Me Kate* (1953) - *The Taming of the Shrew*
* *Forbidden Planet* (1956) - *The Tempest*
* *Throne of Blood* (1957) - *Macbeth*
* *West Side Story* (1961) - *Romeo and Juliet*
* *Chimes at Midnight* (1967) - various plays
* *Ran* (1985) - *King Lear*
* *My Own Private Idaho* (1991) - *1 Henry IV*
* *A Thousand Acres* (1997) - *King Lear*
* *10 Things I Hate About You* (1999) - *The Taming of the Shrew*
* *Scotland, Pa.* (2001) - *Macbeth*
* *O* (2001) - *Othello*

The English group Mumford & Sons, nominated this year for two Grammy awards, borrowed the title of their debut album, *Sigh No More* from Shakespeare's [*Much Ado About Nothing*](http://www.shakespeare-online.com/plays/much_2_3.html).

### Life in Shakespeare's London

From *Shakespeare's London* by Henry Thew Stephenson. New York: H. Holt.   
  
This people, in a sense, was an ignorant people. Those of the highest rank were well and laboriously educated according to the contemporary standard; but the rank and file paid no attention to learning. They neither read, wrote, nor thought. One today is astonished at the ignorance of the then common people concerning public affairs. Compare a history like Holinshed's with a history like Fronde's or Grardiner's. You find in the former no exposition of principles, no attempt to sift tradition from fact, no sense whatever of the dignity of a thousand page folio in black letter. On the other hand, we read in Holinshed of a terrible storm that killed a dog in Essex, or of a cow that gave birth to a five-legged calf in Kent. Street parades, tiltings, trivial and momentous events alternately, mere gossip, above all, inspired utterances in the form of public proclamations from the crown — this is the sum and substance of Holinshed and Stow — and the people were well satisfied.   
  
The matter-of-fact critic of today is too apt to condemn the Elizabethan dramatists for the credulity evinced by their characters. But such criticism is often misplaced. The Elizabethans were credulous people. The opening chapter of Kingsley's *Westward Ho!* relates a number of foolish inducements held out by Salvation Yeo and John Oxenham, two prospective sailors of the South Seas. But the inducements were not considered foolish then. Kingsley, in his charming way, points a little pleasantly at the inconsistency of English inscriptions upon the wondrous horn of ivory that had been picked up in the land of the Incas. Even here, the amusing sarcasm is slightly misplaced. The Elizabethans would not allow themselves to be troubled by such trifles. The golden city of Monoa was as real to them as Paradise or Hell. The chapter, in fact, is almost a literal transcript of a contemporary pamphlet, doubtless produced in perfect faith. Even Shakespeare, judged by our modern standards, may not have been a really sophisticated man; the ring of truth in Othello's tales to Desdemona may be due to a believing heart.   
  
There was going on all the time a rapid change in the social scale. The middle class was rising into prominence. It was no longer necessary to be born a peer in order to become a man of wealth and position. The story of Whittington was repeating itself every day; and, what is more to the point, the people were daily growing more and more proud of the fact.   
  
As the age of Elizabeth was the golden time of literature, so it was the golden time of superstition. There was one Banks, a hanger-on of the Earl of Essex, who lived in the Old Bailey and who possessed a wonderful horse named Morocco shod with shoes of silver. This horse could dance to music, count, make answer to questions; do a thousand and one other tricks, among which was his reputed ascent of St. Paul's steeple. London looked upon Banks and his horse as little short of the supernatural; and in later years all London wept at the news from Italy, where both master and horse were burned to death on the charge of sorcery.   
  
With this execution the Londoners could heartily sympathize, for they were superstitious to a degree incomprehensible at the present day. None was so ready as Sir Walter Scott himself to acknowledge that the fatal flaw in *The Monastery* was the demand put upon the credulity of an incredulous people by the introduction of the White Lady of Ayenal. Nothing so well illustrates this difference between the time of Shakespeare and our own as a comparison of the failure of *The Monastery* and of the success of *Hamlet*. A serious tragedy based upon a trivial motive is likely to degenerate into out and out farce. Had the audience of Shakespeare believed as we do in regard to superstition, both *Hamlet* and *Macbeth* would have probably missed the public approbation. We should certainly think a logic-loving philosopher or an iron-nerved general tainted in his wits, if he allowed his reason to be swayed by a shadowy apparition, or his intrigues to be governed by a trio of vanishing witches; yet Shakespeare was making use of the most powerful motive at his command. Doubtless every person in The Globe play-house shuddered at the appearance of Hamlet's ghost, for it was true, actually true to them, that this might be either Denmark's spirit or the very devil in a pleasing shape.



John Stow, the annalist of England and author of the *Survey of London* was, next to Camden, the most famous antiquarian student of the age; yet this man, whose *Survey* is the great store- house of knowledge about Elizabethan London — learned, careful, and methodical — thus interprets the effect of a church struck by lightning:

"And here a note of this steeple: as I have oft heard my father report, upon St. James's night, certain men in the loft next under the bells, ringing of a peel, a tempest of lightning and thunder did arise, an ugly-shapen sight appeared to them, coming in at the south window, and lighted on the north, for fear whereof they all fell down, and lay as dead for the time, letting the bells ring and cease of their own accord; when the ringers came to themselves, they found certain stones of the north window to be razed and scratched, as if they had been so much butter, printed with a lion's claw; the same stones were fastened there again and so remain until this day. I have seen them oft, and have put a feather or small stick into the holes where the daws had entered three or four inches deep. At the same time certain main timber posts at Queen-hithe were scratched and cleft from the top to the bottom; and the pulpit cross in Paul's churchyard was likewise scratched, cleft, and overturned. One of the ringers lived in my youth, whom I have often heard to verify the same to be true."

The people not only believed in ghosts and witches, but in magic of every sort. Alchemy was a common hobby, and many a man of brain wasted his time and ruined his fortune in the vain search for the philosopher's stone long after the practice had been held up to ridicule upon the stage by Ben Jonson.   
  
Astrology, or astronomical fortune-telling, was so thoroughly a factor of the age that every one desired the casting of his horoscope. Leicester consulted Doctor Dee, the astrologer, to discover a propitious date for the Queen's coronation. The great Queen herself consulted him upon an occasion, instead of her family physician, in order to charm away the tooth-ache. Again, a waxen image of Elizabeth was picked up in one of the fields near London. Doctor Dee was immediately sent for to counteract by his charms the evil effect of this familiar kind of sorcery.   
  
People, one and all, believed in fairies. The usual critical opinion, that the opening scenes of *A Midsummer Night's Dream* owe their arrangement to a desire to lead gradually from the real to the unreal, would have caused an Elizabethan to laugh, if not outwardly, in his sleeve. There is nothing unreal about the fairies of that delightful comedy except their size. Any one might not only have seen the pleasant fairies, but also the wicked, and might have become blind by the sight, if he did not take care to protect himself by charms. A grown man did not feel foolish in those days if when in the neighbourhood of a lonely and ghost-haunted wood at night he wore his coat inside out. There were innumerable superstitious rites performed at births, christenings, weddings, on certain days of the year, and in certain places; as, the churchyard, the cross-roads, etc. Every hour in the day, every article in the world — stone, plant, or animal — had its cluster of superstitions.   
  
The time was further characterised by a general freedom of manners. We often find personal ridicule and abuse, as well as praise, levelled at individuals from the stage. Different companies and rival play-wrights fought out their private battles on the public boards. A play of ancient setting, such as *Hamlet*, does not scruple to allude to current events of interest to Londoners. The mob in *Romeo and Juliet* rallies to the cry of the London 'prentice lads. The actors talked to people in the pit, who in turn pelted an unpopular player from the stage. There existed, likewise, a coarseness of speech in every-day talk that would be quite intolerable to-day. Queen Elizabeth swore like a trooper, spat at her favourites, or threw her slipper at the head of an obdurate councillor. The artificial refinement of our age requires the lines of many of Shakespeare's heroines to be curtailed; yet Beatrice and the like talk no more broadly than did that paragon of female excellence, "Sidney's sister, Pembroke's mother."   
  
The great popularity of the stage at once suggests the chief characteristic of the age: artificiality. About the middle of the century appeared Lyly's *Euphues*. This book, a kind of tale, owed its great vogue to its quaintness of phrase, its antitheses, and its elaborate conceits. The book sold by wholesale. No one was considered fit to appear in public unless he could talk the fustian fashion of the *Euphues*. The book is intolerably dull to most of us, but the perusal of a few pages will repay the curious, as an object-lesson in the rubbish spoken by the cultivated Elizabethan courtier.   
  
Part of the Euphuistic training was the art of compliment. This habit was fostered by the vanity of the Queen. Elizabeth, so some of the foreigners who saw her tell us, possessed several undesirable characteristics, among others a hooked nose and black teeth, and there is no doubt that her skin wrinkled as she grew near seventy. Yet, to the very end of the great Queen's life, the obsequious courtier was welcome who would assure her that he is like to die if he is debarred the sight of that alabaster brow, of those cheeks of rose covered with the bloom of peaches, of those teeth of pearl. Besides the elaborate compliments to the Queen that were frequently introduced into plays and masques, a common custom was to set up a tablet to her honour in the parish church. Here is an example of their inscriptions:

"Spain's rod, Rome's ruin, Netherland's relief, Heaven's gem, Barth's joy. World's wonder. Nature's chief. Britain's blessing, England's splendour. Religion's nurse and Faith's Defender."

Gossiping was one of the favourite pastimes of the Elizabethans, and London was not yet too large for the practice to be thoroughly effective. Gossip started from the barber-shop and the tavern-table — the Elizabethan equivalent of the afternoon tea — and spread thence in every direction. Space prevents the enumeration of many of the indications of freedom of manner that are to be discovered in every direction. Grossip led to frequent quarrels, that were more hot and bitter because side arms were worn upon all occasions. The fine woman of the time would jostle with the rudest peasants in the pit of the bull-ring and the theatre. Wakes and fairs were of daily occurrence, in which every one joined, irrespective of previous acquaintance. During the yule-tide festivities all distinctions of class were considered as temporarily non-existent. Elizabeth showed herself so often and so intimately to the common people that they considered the acquaintance almost personal. So much for the happy-go-lucky spirit that characterised the time.

The extent of gaming is lamented by all the contemporary writers who have a leaning towards reform. Dicing, card playing, and racing, though to a less extent than the others, were practised upon every hand; while cheating was but too common. In former times it was considered almost a crime to take interest for money loaned, but by the reign of Elizabeth, this prejudice was so completely overborne that usury was practised by all the money lenders, who did not scruple to turn the screws upon the least occasion.   
  
The people were greatly addicted to showy dress, but show in dress was a mere bagatelle. Pageants of all sorts were planned upon the least occasion. Coronations, funerals, and progresses were always got up upon the most spectacular basis. The riding watches, the parades of civic officials in their gaudy robes of state, the Livery Companies upon the river in their brilliant barges, manned by oars-men in full livery, the Queen coming to St. Paul's in 1588, to render thanks for the victory over Spain — all such spectacles were provided with gorgeous pageants, triumphal arches, side-shows, and so forth, that would be weeks preparing.

**How to cite this article:**   
Stephenson, Henry Thew. *Life in Shakespeare's London* From *Shakespeare's London*. New York: H. Holt, 1905. Shakespeare Online. 20 Aug. 2009. (date when you accessed the information) < http://www.shakespeare-online.com/biography/londonlife.html >.

**Portraits of Shakespeare**

There are several portraits and miniatures of Shakespeare. Here is some information about the most important:

**1)** [**Chandos Portrait.**](http://shakespeare-online.com/biography/chandos.html) The Chandos portrait of Shakespeare is named after its owners, the Dukes of Chandos. Some believe that Shakespeare's friend and fellow actor Richard Burbage painted it and gave it to Joseph Taylor, an actor with the King's Men. Taylor then left the painting to William Davenant, the man who claimed to be Shakespeare's illegitimate son. However, this theory cannot be supported with historical evidence. The Chandos portrait was no doubt painted when Shakespeare was alive, unlike the posthumous painting, the Droeshout. Some critics argue that the painting cannot be of Shakespeare. In 1856 it became the property of Britain's National Portrait Gallery.

**2)** [**The Droeshout Portrait.**](http://shakespeare-online.com/biography/droeshout.html) Created by the English engraver Martin Droeshout, this picture appears on the cover of the [First Folio](http://shakespeare-online.com/biography/shakespeareinprint.html), and is one of only two images of the Bard considered genuine (the other being the Stratford Monument also called the [Bust of Shakespeare](http://shakespeare-online.com/biography/bust.html)). It is unlikely that Shakespeare posed for Droeshout and the artist probably worked from another painting that has long since disappeared.

**3)The Flower Portrait.** Named for it owner, Sir Desmond Flower, who donated it to the Shakespeare Museum in 1911. This painting is probably a copy of the Droeshout portrait. Most scholars classify the Flower portrait as a forgery made in the 18th century.

**4)** [**The Faithorne Portrait**](http://shakespeare-online.com/biography/faithorne.html)**.** The Droeshout engraving was copied by William Faithorne for the frontispiece of the 1655 edition of the "Rape of Lucrece", and the **5) Marshall Portrait** was an imitation of the Droeshout portrait for the cover of the 1640 edition of Shakespeare's Sonnets. Both of these portraits embellished on the Droeshout, introducing unrealistic details.

**6)** [**The Soest Portrait**](http://shakespeare-online.com/biography/zoust.html)**.** the Soest or Zoust portrait was owned by Thomas Wright of Covent Garden in 1725 when it was engraved by John Simon. The painting was created by Soest some 21 years after Shakespeare's death and is primarily based on his imagination as an artist.

**7)** [**The Hilliard Miniature**](http://shakespeare-online.com/biography/hilliard.html)**.** This is the most popular of the Shakespeare miniatures and was owned successively by the poet William Somerville, Sir James Bland Burges, and Lord Nothcote. It is a wonderful work of art, but it is not of much value as an authoritative representation of Shakespeare.

For an in-depth examination of the images mentioned above and more, please see the article [Physiognomy and Portraits of Shakespeare](http://www.shakespeare-online.com/biography/portraitsfull.html).

**How to cite this article:**  
Mabillard, Amanda. *Portraits of Shakespeare*. Shakespeare Online. 20 Aug. 2000. (date when you accessed the information) < http://www.shakespeare-online.com/faq/imagesofshakespeare.html

**Petrarch's Influence on Shakespeare**

An excerpt from *Petrarch and his influence on English literature* by Pietro Borghesi. Bologna: N. Zanichelli.

Shakespeare, even the great Shakespeare, could not escape the influence of the Petrarchists and therefore of Petrarch himself, but, as we do not want to be misunderstood, we say at once just what we said about Spenser: Shakespeare is not a Petrarchist and perhaps his poetical vein is more akin to Dante's than to Petrarch's.

In order to show that he is not a Petrarchist it is enough to compare his sonnets with those of Watson, Barnes, Fletcher, Daniel, Drayton and other contemporaries: their superiority is seen at once with the certainty that they do not come from the same source of inspiration. Besides, Shakespeare did not follow all the rules which Petrarch constantly applied, although perhaps he may have read, if not all, at least some of Petrarch's sonnets. We say so because we are of the opinion of those who think that Shakespeare knew Italian, if not to perfection, doubtless in such a degree as to be able to discern the drift of an Italian poem or novel. Were it otherwise it would be very difficult to explain how he could found not less than fourteen of his dramas on Italian fiction.

But of course it is not of his dramas we are going to speak, although the lyrical element peculiar to his time is to be seen in all his plays: it is of his sonnets that we wish to say something.

Certainly there is some relation between his sonnets and Petrarch's. The dominant idea of his 21st sonnet is taken from the 3rd sonnet in Sidney's *Astrophel and Stella*, and we have seen that Sidney was Petrarchist. The thought developed in his 23rd sonnet, namely the inability of love to express itself in words occurs over and over again in Provencal poets, and is found in Petrarch's 41st sonnet, which, as we have seen, was translated also by Wyatt. There is also some connection between his 26th sonnet and that of Petrarch beginning "Amor, che nel pensier mio vive e regna."

We could say that the sonnet urging a friend to marry and the other which expresses a complaint about the robbery of a mistress are probably fictions in the Italian style.

In fact at first Shakespeare was very fond of the Italian sonnet although afterwards he [ridiculed it](http://shakespeare-online.com/sonnets/130detail.html). He adhered to the simple form introduced by Surrey and we have seen that he studied Watson's sonnets which came chiefly from Petrarch. Again, as Petrarch wrote about his own feelings for the lady he loved, so perhaps Shakespeare derived the subject-matter of his sonnets from his personal relations with the men and women at court. Therefore, as the inward life of Petrarch is mostly given by his sonnets to Laura, so Shakespeare's sonnets bear to his biography a relation wholly different from that borne by the rest of his literary works.

It appears to us that it is impossible to deny the influence of Petrarch and the Petrarchists on Shakespeare. The Elizabethan love-poets made use of the Platonic idealism of the Petrarchan school, and Shakespeare adopted its phraseology in his sonnets where we find much which is common to the other sonneteers of the day: his expressions are conventional, his thoughts are usually more condensed than anywhere else and obscure conceits are more numerous than in all his other works. In a word his language is so figurative that it becomes difficult to understand and it is even quite unintelligible here and there.

But is there any real emotion in Shakespeare's sonnets? Before answering this question we think it useful to mention that only just at that time did the sonnet begin to emancipate itself from the tendency to sing the praises of woman as a perfect being according to the poet's ideal, and from the tendency to joining to his earthly love some vague ideas of spiritual love. It is therefore easy to see that the sonnet was limited to a particular subject, and if to that we add that the spirit of the chivalry of the Middle Ages was decaying, we can easily guess that the language to use in this kind of composition could only be cold, mechanical and conventional. Consider the great difference which exists between the enthusiasm of Petrarch for Laura and that of Fletcher for Licia and also perhaps that of Surrey for the Fair Geraldine and the truthfulness of our statement will be at once admitted.

As every artist is, to a certain extent, the product of his own time, so Shakespeare could not escape this universal law, therefore his critics are divided into two parties. Thomas Tyler, Courthope and many others say that his sonnets are sincere; several others, among whom we find Lee, do not agree with this opinion. Karl Elze and E. Stengel say that perhaps Shakespeare wrote his sonnets to exercise his fancy and to amuse his friends, which leads us to the opinion that his sentiment was fictitious. But, to express our modest opinion, we think that as Dante and Petrarch could not have written so well if their feelings had not been genuine, so Shakespeare could not have presented mankind with his beautiful sonnets had he not really felt what he wrote, and we really think that his passion was born of the heart and not of the head.

But by whom were these sonnets inspired? To whom were they addressed? They were first published in 1609 and dedicated to a person whose name began with the initials W. H., which, for about seventy years afterwards, were believed to stand for a woman's name. Critics have now changed their opinion and they are inclined to think they were addressed to a male friend, and this is not improbable when we consider the Platonism of the time. But then, why did not Shakespeare write the name in full? The fact of using initials only might cause even the least carping mind to think of a woman rather than of a man. However that may be, the fact remains that the woman of Shakespeare's sonnets is not like Laura, nor is she like any lady of the Petrarchists. She is not a perfect beauty, or a beauty womanly perfect, but she has the power of fascinating the poet almost in spite of himself. It may be that Shakespeare never sympathized with any Laura, and, as he wrote his sonnets at different periods of his life, perhaps they were, as we have already suggested, inspired by several persons, both male and female, although they were dedicated only to one.

If Shakespeare had no Laura, or, at least, if he did not know how to love his lady and sing of her after the manner of the Petrarchists, he also did not know the somewhat complex system of rhyme adopted by Petrarch in his sonnets and by nearly all the best English sonneteers. Only rarely does a single sonnet form an independent poem, and, as in the sonnets of of Sidney, Spenser and Drayton, the same thought is pursued continuously through two or more.

It is needless to say that Shakespeare's lyrics do not form his principal glory, but they outshine all those of other authors. It has been said that the sonnet writers of the Shakespearean age have left little really memorable work, nevertheless that little, in our opinion, cannot be neglected by a conscientious student of English literature.

**How to cite this article:**

Borghesi, Pietro. *Petrarch and his influence on English literature*. Bologna: N. Zanichelli, 1906. Shakespeare Online. 20 Feb. 2010. (date when you accessed the information) < http://www.shakespeare-online.com/sonnets/shakespearepetrarch.html >.

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