

# A Thematic Study of Shakespeare's Sonnets

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## Abstract

Shakespeare's sonnets are a summit in terms of their thematic profundity as well as their rhetorical beauty and emotional exquisiteness. This paper attempts to make an exploration of the thematic uniqueness of Shakespeare's sonnets through analyzing the themes of time, beauty, and love in the cultural context of the Renaissance. These sonnets show that men should conquer time through offspring, poetry and true love to procure eternal beauty and life, and thus reflect Shakespeare's humanistic consciousness and his philosophical thoughts.

**Keywords:** Shakespeare, sonnets, theme

## 1. Introduction

Sonnet is "a lyric poem comprising 14 rhyming lines of equal length: iambic pentameters in English" (Baldick, 2004, p. 207). It originated in Italy, and Petrarch was the most renowned Italian sonneteer of that time. Sonnet was introduced to England by Henry Howard & Thomas Wyatt in the early 16th century. By the end of the 16th century, sonnet has become the most popular genre of poetry in Britain, and it was in full flourish through artistic endeavors of some eminent poets such as Edmund Spenser, Philip Sidney, and so forth. As regards the literary accomplishment of composing sonnets throughout the world, Shakespeare's sonnets are a summit. Shakespeare's sonnets are usually pentameter in each line. The sonnets can be divided into four parts, which are the first four lines, the middle four lines, the back four lines and the final two lines, and the rhyme is "abab, cdcd, efef, gg", which is later known as the "Shakespearian form". Shakespeare totally wrote 154 sonnets throughout his lifetime. His sonnets break the restriction of Petrarch's sonnets, in that he did not merely praise the love to a beauty, in actuality, most of his sonnets are devoted to his male friend. There are many themes in Shakespeare's sonnets that were popular in the Renaissance works such as time, friendship, love, beauty and so on. The themes of Shakespeare's sonnets are of rich implications. They not only reflect the humanistic spirit of that era, but also contain some philosophical value that transcends the era.

In 1609, the first academically acknowledged edition of Shakespeare's sonnets came into being. Yet over the next two centuries, these sonnets were not duly appreciated in the literary arena due to their unconventionality. They came to be eulogized by some romanticists as Coleridge, Shelley, Wordsworth, and Goethe with the rise of Romanticism at the end of the 18th century and the early 19th century. It is from the end of the 19th century that Shakespeare's sonnets have attracted extensive attention, and literary critics mainly concentrated on the complex feelings therein, diverse images, exquisite poetics, and some controversial issues as the archetype of the "dark lady", the real identity of Mr. W. H to whom the sonnets were dedicated, and the original sequence of all the 154 sonnets, etc. These sonnets have been analyzed in both form and content. In terms of content, thematic studies of the sonnets are fundamental, and fruitful: Horst Breuer maintains that the "golden lad" theme is alike in the story lines of both Shakespeare's sonnets and Oscar Wilde's *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, which underlines that selfishness and debauchery will collusively ruin a person's charm (Breuer, 2004, p. 66). Ronald Levaio penetrates into the theme of futility through meditation on Shakespeare's philosophical thinking of "nothing will come of nothing" (Levaio, 2010, p. 275). Sean Keilen penetrates into the truth-and-doubt theme, and suggests that "Shakespeare comes to imagine poetry not as a method for establishing new certainties but as an art of coping with the downfall of tradition" (Keilen, 2009, p. 235). Malabika Sarkar draws attention to the themes of love and time through analyzing the image of "magic" (Sarkar, 1998, p. 251). Michael Mccanles penetrates into the larger theme of "losing oneself by keeping oneself" (Mccanles, 1971, p. 392). These above interpretations inspire readers to gain new insights into the themes of Shakespeare's sonnets. Apart from these thematic studies, the prominent themes of time, beauty, and love have drawn constant attention of critics, but there's still room for

rendering a more detailed and comprehensive interpretation based on textual reading and the historical context of the Renaissance.

## 2. The Theme of Time

The Renaissance plays an important role in the renewal and development of the culture of ancient Greece and Rome. Along with the research on a large number of ancient books, the problems of natural philosophy, movement, time and space discussed in *Physics* wrote by Aristotle have gotten great affirmation. Aristotle holds the belief that time has dual implications, because it is a unity of discontinuity and continuity. He thinks that time is as eternal as movement. And this has become a classical time theory that long reigns over Western thoughts. There is no doubt that almost all British poets of the Renaissance are influenced by this view of time, and Shakespeare is no exception.

Time is a major theme and keynote of Shakespeare's sonnets. Through the chain of time, Shakespeare expresses his attitude towards life, friendship, beauty and art, which is filled with philosophy and implications. Time is cruel and merciless. Man can only fight and conquer it through offspring, poetry and true love.

### 2.1 *The Ruthlessness of Time*

In Shakespeare's sonnets, time is a significant theme. The word "time" has totally occurred 79 times, along with many other words about time, such as hour, week, day, month, season, winter, spring and so on, frequently occurring in the sonnets. In Shakespeare's sonnets, time is kinetic.

When I do count the clock that tells the time,  
And see the brave day sunk in hideous night;  
When I behold the violet past prime,  
And sable curls ensilvered o'er with white. (Gu, 2008, p. 24)

Sonnet 12 shows that the poet witnesses the passing of time, the constant alternation of day and night, and the changes it brings about as violet has lost its color, black hair has turned white. The poet visualizes the change of time.

Time expressed in Shakespeare's sonnets is a linear movement, instead of circular motion, which shows the poet's pessimistic view of time. We can feel the pessimistic mood of Shakespeare from many adjectives modified time as follows: never-resting, devouring, swift-footed, sluttish, injurious, balmy, reckoning and so forth.

In Shakespeare's sonnets, time is cruel and destructive. Time is ever-lapsing, and everything in the world is leasing. These images like "Time's scythe/ sickle", "Time's fickle glass", "Time's tyranny", and "Time's injurious hand", can be found everywhere, which embody the ruthless lapse of destructive time. Faced with it, people are very tiny and insignificant, and they are incapable of conquering time. These images also embody the pessimistic consciousness.

According to Greek mythology, sickle is always the symbol of Cronus, one of the Titans, who is later mixed up with Chronos, an ancient Greek deity. When we mention the image of time, the most impressive is the running image of Cronus carrying a sickle on the shoulder. In Shakespeare's sonnets, the pessimistic image of sickle occurs many times. For instance, "nothing 'gainst time's scythe can make defense" in sonnet 12; "nothing stands but for his scythe to mow" in sonnet 60; "Give my love fame faster than time wastes life; So, thou prevent'st his scythe and crooked knife" in sonnet 100; and "who in thy power dost hold time's fickle glass, his sickle-hour" in sonnet 126. The sickle of mowing typically indicates the ruthlessness and terror of time. The sickle symbolizes the horrible time, and the grass symbolizes human body. Nothing can escape the resect of time's sickle. Similarly, the image of time's glass also symbolizes the destiny that man cannot be immortal and will finally be destroyed by time. It fully shows the powerfulness of time and vulnerability of human life faced with time. Human life is transitory and has a beginning and an end, and it is restricted by the ruthless time. Time always brings about numerous changes and even death. Everything can hardly escape from the claws of time. Life is just a helpless waiting for the final moment of the last grain of sand falling from the hourglass. Although time is ruthless, human desire for fighting against time always run throughout the sonnets, which fully affirms human's value and power, which is geared to the humanistic ethos.

### 2.2 *Human Desire to Conquer Time*

When forty winters shall besiege thy brow  
And dig deep trenches in thy beauty's field,

Thy youth's proud livery, so gazed on now,  
Will be a tattered weed, of small worth held. (p. 4)

In sonnet 2, with the vivid images of "beauty's field", "deep trenches", "youth's proud livery" and "a tattered weed", the poet describes the ruthlessness of time and how it destroys beauty. The poet assumes that a beautiful youth who is in his prime will be eroded by time, and his face and forehead will be wrinkled as they are carved with the traces of aging. Although time can endow human with youth and beauty, it is also a tyranny over them. Wherever time goes by, it will be marked by the traces of aging. When the time comes, youth will pass, and beauty will also disappear without a trace. In the long river of time, all the beautiful things will finally be a flash in the pan. In sonnet 19, the poet uses such words as "the lion's paws", "devour" and "swift-footed time" to describe the ruthlessness of time. He repeatedly emphasizes the destructive power of time, which is a vigorous opponent of youth and beauty.

Can the beautiful young lover just wait in pain for the time of being old and loose, and then destroy to death and decay in the grave? Faced with the erosion and destruction of time to love and beauty, Shakespeare's sonnets also give an expression of the strong desire to triumph over time. The destructive power of time is formidable, and human beings feel that such power looms large in life that they generate the strong desire to fight against and triumph over time. From the view of Shakespeare, although the Time's sickle is relentless, it still cannot get the better of the constantly reproduced future generations, fine verses enduring through the ages, and faithful love. As is shown in Shakespeare's sonnets, there are three major approaches to conquer time to get eternity.

### 2.3 Three Means to Conquer Time

The first approach is offspring. Offspring is a continuation of youth and beauty. The tide of time gives man a sense of urgency, under the chasing of time's sickle, man cannot carefully taste the flavor of youth and beauty, which constrains man to think how to keep the short life and extend the time of life as long as possible. The poet uses roses' short blooming time to allude to the fleeting of the beautiful season of life. He persuades people to get married and have children, so that they can not only enjoy the wonderful life, but also pass the beauty to their future generations.

The first 17 sonnets are mainly about this argument. The poet makes effort to persuade his friend to marry and have children so that he can get continuous life and eternal beauty. For example, in sonnet 3, "Thou art thy mother's glass, and she in thee/ Calls back the lovely April of her prime" (p. 6); in sonnet 12, "And nothing' gainst time's scythe can make defence/ Save breed to brave him when he takes thee hence" (p. 24). The poet holds the belief that man cannot refuse marriage and have children just because he does not want to damage his personal beauty. The beauty of youth does not completely belong to an individual, it also belongs to the world. Nature gives beauty to man is hoping that they can pass it down from generation to generation, instead of taking the gift to tomb. Even though time will carve marks on man's face, his youth and beauty can be showed through his offspring, and passed down to future generations, thus making beauty eternal and survive the destruction of time.

The second approach is poetry. Shakespeare thinks that beauty makes for the existence of poets, as where there is beauty, there are poems. Poetry eternalizes people and objects praised in the sonnets. Poetry can defy the power of time, and the objects depicted in the poems can become immortal along with the spread of poetry. Shakespeare believes that the value of poetry to some extent surpasses well beyond the natural beauty and human beauty, because all these may die out, however, the poetry that truly portrays all the beauty will never die.

Time is an enemy that human must defeat, while the poet is an uncompromising idealistic fighter. With the special identity and power, the poet comes up with a set of specific solutions to deal with the devouring time. Poetry is stronger than all the fierce and tough things, and it can frustrate time's attempt to destroy everything. The poetry of true feelings and rich content as well as the virtuous people it depicts will remain forever. Poetry of vitality is not only stronger than a lion, a fierce tiger, and a long-lived phoenix, but also firmer than a hard stone and a steel door, it can make the beauty of his lover spreading through the ages. In sonnet 18, the poet compares his lover to a summer's day, a flower and the sun, however, they all have a common weakness, that is, they are unable to stand the test of time. Only through poetry can love triumph over time, thus making the beauty of youth eternal.

The third approach is true love. Love in Shakespeare's sonnets includes friendship and love between man and woman. Meanwhile, love can reach a tacit understanding with God through the religious ascension of the mind and be the same to heaven and earth in order to get back to the original eternal realm without time. This kind of religious tacit understanding also exists in Shakespeare's sonnets. Take sonnet 31 for instance:

How many a holy and obsequious tear  
 Hath dear religious love stol'n from mine eye  
 As interest of the dead, which now appear  
 But things removed that hidden in thee lie. (p. 62)

The poet satirizes time's impotence of changing a loving heart. He puts forward that no matter how sharp time's sickle is, it is powerless in the presence of eternal true love. If love cannot conquer time, it will prove that there is no true love, then poets will lose the basis of writing love poems. The poet mentions that time can change man's beauty, but it cannot shake true love. Time's sickle is invincible and unstoppable, ruthlessly destroying the youth and beauty of lovers, but true love will never submit. Love has become a vigorous opponent of time.

In short, the theme of time is the logical premise for the poet to compose sonnets. On the basis of emphasizing the destruction and ruthlessness of time, the poet extols the beauty of love and friendship as the counterbalance with time, which shows that true love is not resigned to time, but in actuality transcends time. Study of the theme of time in Shakespeare's sonnets not only deepens the understanding of his drama creation changing from comedy to tragedy, but also deepens our understanding of the world view of humanistic writers of the Renaissance, especially the view of how to conquer time to gain eternity.

### 3. The Theme of Beauty

#### 3.1 *Unrivaled Beauty of His Friend—Mr. W. H.*

In Shakespeare's sonnets, he praises human life and beauty with enthusiasm. In sonnet 106, he claims that the beauty of his friend is incomparable. He believes that the young friend is the embodiment of beauty, so he compares his friend to a summer's day, the sun, spring, blooming flowers, rich harvest, Helen, etc., however, his beauty is beyond all of this natural power, which undoubtedly highlights the humanistic thoughts of the poet.

With regard to beauty, it can be reflected in many of Shakespeare's sonnets, taking sonnet 18 for example:

Shall I compare thee to a summer's day?  
 Thou art more lovely and more temperate.  
 Rough winds do shake the darling buds of May,  
 And summer's lease hath all too short a date.  
 Sometime too hot the eye of heaven shines,  
 And often is his gold complexion dimmed,  
 And every fair from fair sometime declines,  
 By chance or nature's changing course untrimmed;  
 But thy eternal summer shall not fade  
 Nor lose possession of that fair thou ow'st,  
 Nor shall death brag thou wander'st in his shade  
 When in eternal lines to time thou grow'st.  
 So long as men can breathe or eyes can see,  
 So long lives this, and this gives life to thee. (p. 36)

This sonnet was written for Shakespeare's friend Mr. W.H. Through a series of sensory descriptions, Shakespeare presents a vivid image of the beauty of his friend. In this sonnet, the poet realizes from the transience and impermanence of life that everything in the universe is changing, and the beauty of his friend will also die out with the lapse of time. However, Shakespeare seizes something eternal, that is, the virtue of human beings. In Shakespeare's sonnets, he puts all the natural wealth on his friend, not only praising the beauty of his appearance, but also eulogizing his moral virtues. As in his bad time, his friend offered him assistance and put him under protection regardless of his low social status. A person with benevolence is truly beautiful, just like his friend's beauty is unrivaled.

Shakespeare never blindly praises beauty. He thinks that outer beauty and inner beauty are independent of each other, and simultaneously connected with each other. He regards people of outer beauty but inner meanness as those who "enclose thy sins in sweets" (p. 190). In a word, Shakespeare believes that those who are internally and externally beautiful are truly beautiful and can long stay in people's memory.

### 3.2 Sustainable Beauty through Reproduction

In the long river of time, the beauty of an individual will gradually die out, however, as a group, beauty can partly be reserved through reproduction and inheritance, and beauty will last forever with the life passed on from generation to generation. In the alternation of generations, human life can continue, then his beauty will be passed on to future generations and this vigorous beauty will never die out. Shakespeare stresses in his sonnets that beautiful things can keep their beauty only through the continuation of life, and only vigorous life can make eternal beauty.

From fairest creatures we desire increase,  
That thereby beauty's rose might never die,  
But as the ripener should by time decrease,  
His tender heir might bear his memory. (p. 2)

These four lines show that youth is just like summer, flourish and fruitful, but if man still has no children till the prime of life, it means that green branches and leaves will become withered in the bleak autumn wind and under the cold frost. On the contrary, if love and beauty bear fruit, leaving offspring to inherit beauty, then when one gets old, his essence will be kept fresh forever.

In the eyes of Shakespeare, love–marriage–reproduction is an endless cycle. Only by this can life last forever and beauty keep fresh forever. Life is limited and time is unlimited, so the sustainable beauty has to gain eternity through constant reproduction and development. This is the beauty of life. To hold fast to the beauty of life in a flash, man has to ceaselessly struggle against time to gain sustainable beauty through reproduction.

### 3.3 Eternal Beauty of Literary Art

The beauty of literary art, in a narrow sense, is the beauty of text rhetoric, then is the beauty of image, and finally is the beauty of connotation. Poetry is the earliest form of literature, and its lyricism, implication and conciseness give it aesthetics. Shakespeare believes that beauty can last forever through the form of poetry. Shakespeare's sonnets take beauty as the highest model and criterion, and regard poems as the means of recording beauty. He vigorously praises true love and friendship that penetrate the beauty of mind, which has a very high value of literary art.

The language of Shakespeare's sonnets is highly elastic. It leaves great imaginary space for readers behind the refined words. No matter whether it is praising his friend or bemoaning the fate, there is full of artistic conception of beauty between the lines. Shakespeare is adept in using a variety of rhetoric skills to enhance language, especially using pun and oxymoron. For example, in sonnet 18, "And every fair from fair sometime declines" (p. 36), the use of "fair" is a pun, the first meaning of which is beautiful things, and the second is beauty itself. In sonnet 40, "gentle thief" refers to the poet's bosom friend. The poet is angry that his lover is carried off by his friend, so he calls his friend "thief"; however, the poet cannot give up the friendship, thus he calls his friend "gentle thief". Just a simple phrase takes the complicated feeling of love and hate to his friend to an extreme. Phonological harmony is another language feature of Shakespeare's sonnets. Melodious rhyme makes the poetry a harmonious unity on the sound. The vivid sense of rhythm is in correspondence with the internal emotions of poetry, which gives an aesthetic enjoyment to readers.

Image is the blending of poet's emotions and distinctive images. It is the very soul of a poem. The images of Shakespeare's sonnets are magnificent and plentiful, through these images, readers can reach the heart of the poet to feel the poet's personal joys and sorrows and emotional mighty waves. The image of the sun derives from the Greek mythology, symbolizing light and youth. Shakespeare uses the sun's trajectory of a day to symbolize the three stages of human life. In sonnet 7, "Lo! in the orient when the gracious light/ Lifts up his burning head, each under eye" (p. 14), the "gracious light" refers to the sun. The poet shows a lifetime with the trajectory of the sun in order to persuade his friend to marry and have children as early as possible to inherit his beauty and not to idle away his youth so as to avoid regret when in his declining years. The poet shows his true love for his friend between the lines.

Humanistic thought is the core of English Renaissance. Shakespeare's sonnets eulogize friendship, describe love and pursue the ideal life of truth, kindness and beauty. It is hard to find a bosom friend in one's lifetime, and friendship is an invaluable asset. In the eyes of Shakespeare, everlasting pure friendship that based on no material interests is supreme. Love is the most beautiful human affection that can give power, confidence and hope to people. Love in the view of Shakespeare is sacred and lofty. For the same love poems, he can put into deeper feelings. He puts the beauty of his friend into the poems, and all beautiful things will coexist with time

and never withers and falls. Shakespeare's praise of friendship and love reveals human nature of truth, kindness and beauty. Self-esteem, self-respect and benevolence, which demonstrate the brilliance of humanity, shine brightly in these poems.

In terms of language, image, and theme, Shakespeare's sonnets are the treasure of poetry. Shakespeare eulogizes pure friendship, true love and beautiful human nature with extraordinary artistic expression. All beautiful things in the world and the pursuit of beauty can be handed down from generation to generation and eternalized through poetry. Just as Shakespeare said, "So long as men can breathe or eyes can see, so long lives this, and this gives life to thee" (Hu, 2001, p. 37).

#### 4. The Theme of Love

Love is another prominent theme of Shakespeare's sonnets. During the Renaissance, men broke through the mental slavery of the medieval age and passionately praised and eulogized love. Lived in the great changing period of the Renaissance, Shakespeare also had his deep understanding of the theme of love. In Shakespeare's view, love means the treasure not only for worldly love, but also for friendship, loyalty, sacrifice and tolerance.

##### 4.1 *The Ecstasy of Love*

Humanists hold the belief that love is established at the foundation of loyalty. There is the concept of love all over Shakespeare's sonnets. Shakespeare always believes that true love should be perseverant, faithful and eternal. In the eyes of Shakespeare, love is the fundamental power to resolve annoyance and pursue dreams, and love can bring great joy to human beings. No matter what sorrows and frustrations the poet confronts, as soon as he thinks of his friend and lover, all glooms will vanish into thin air. As Shakespeare said in sonnet 47, "Or if they sleep, thy picture in my sight/ Awakes my heart to heart's and eye's delight" (p. 94). As long as there is love in the poet's heart, he will feel great joy. It is love that brings the poet back from the edge of destruction when the world treats him unkindly. Love is the center of his life and the sunshine on a cloudy day. Take the sonnet 29 for example:

When, in disgrace with fortune and men's eyes,  
I all alone beweep my outcast state,  
And trouble deaf heaven with my bootless cries,  
And look upon myself and curse my fate,  
Wishing me like to one more rich in hope,  
Featured like him, like him with friends possessed,  
Desiring this man's art and that man's scope,  
With what I most enjoy contented least:  
Yet in these thoughts myself almost despising,  
Haply I think on thee, and then my state,  
Like to the lark at break of day arising  
From sullen earth, sings hymns at heaven's gate;  
For thy sweet love remembered such wealth brings  
That then I scorn to change my state with kings'. (p. 58)

The first quatrain of this sonnet focuses on a great deal of challenges and misfortunes and the miserable situation of the poet. The second quatrain describes that the poet is envious of the prosperity and companionship and talents of others and feels that he is good for nothing. His miserable situation is thus pushed to the extreme. Then in the third quatrain, as soon as the poet thinks of the love of his friend, all sorrows and pains vanish in a flash and the poet cheers up at once. And then, the ending couplet sums up the theme of the sonnet: the thought of love brings him such great joy that he "scorn to change his state with kings" (ibid.). The couplet is an emotional declaration that the possession of his friend's love is more precious than fame, glory, and power, and even if he is in adversity, the thought of his friend's well-being turns misery into ecstasy.

##### 4.2 *The Torture of Love*

Although Shakespeare believes in love and eulogizes love, there are also bitter love and pessimistic emotions in Shakespeare's sonnets. Shakespeare expresses the exhaustion of his body and mind that he has no peace and quietness all day and night, which is caused by the feeling of missing his friend. We can see that from the lines as

“Lo, thus by day my limbs, by night my mind,/ For thee, and for myself, no quiet find” (p. 54) and “But day doth daily draw my sorrows longer,/ And night doth nightly make grief’s strength seem stronger” (p. 56), which clearly reflects the torture of love.

Shakespeare also shows contradictory psychology in his sonnets. The poet treats his lover with great enthusiasm and a true heart, however, he gets cheat and betrayal in return. He feels the illusion of friendship and love, and he describes his lover who betrayed love as the embodiment of evil, while his friend as the embodiment of angel, just as Shakespeare says in the sonnets, “The better angel is a man right fair, the worser spirit a woman coloured ill” (p. 288).

To win me soon to hell my female evil  
Tempteth my better angel from my side,  
And would corrupt my saint to be a devil,  
Wooing his purity with her foul pride. (p. 288)

These four lines show that the innocent angel can also degenerate into evil under the lure of carnal desire, which has taken the place of love. His lover and friend betray him, and he is deep in pain and torture because of this. Faced with the cruel reality, he feels frustrated, helpless and hopeless. However, he does not want to lose his friendship, so he can do nothing but forgive his friend, and endure the suffering, bitterness, complaint, torture and helplessness on his own. As a man with a great talent for writing, he can just put such complicated feelings into words. From these words in sonnet 147 like “fever”, “disease”, “ill”, “sickly”, “physician”, “prescription”, “death”, “unrest”, “madmen”, etc., we can see that love is a disease that makes the poet torturous and almost crazy. However, the poet is just like a flying moth darting into the fire, even though knowing the lies and deceptions, he still falls in what is called love.

#### 4.3 *The Solace of Love*

In the process of love, there are both joy and torture, but it brings spiritual comfort to man eventually. Shakespeare is sure that love is the most important motivation that encourages people to be tenacious and dauntless when faced with challenges and misfortunes in life. The poet has complained about his misfortune and low social status once and again in his sonnets, but he always cheers up in the end. He makes it clear in the sonnets 153 and 154 that “only love can make up for the lost love and that only love can warm up his dying spirit” (Lou, 2006, p. 35). In these two sonnets, Shakespeare uses the allusion of Cupid’s torch of love that will never extinguish to illustrate the eternity of love, a permanent solace in life. The two sonnets are in fact “two versions of the same theme, and they are not unsuitably placed as a kind of coda to the Dark Lady Sonnets, to which they relate” (Rowse, 1984, p. 309).

The little love-god lying once asleep  
Laid by his side his heart-inflaming brand,  
Whilst many nymphs that vowed chaste life to keep  
Came tripping by; but in her maiden hand  
The fairest votary took up that fire  
Which many legions of true hearts had warmed,  
And so the general of hot desire  
Was sleeping by a virgin hand disarmed.  
This brand she quenched in a cool well by,  
Which from love’s fire took heat perpetual,  
Growing a bath and healthful remedy  
For men diseased; but I, my mistress’ thrall,  
Came there for cure; and this by that I prove:  
Love’s fire heats water, water cools not love. (Gu, 2008, p. 308)

Even though one suffers the torture of love, the hot spring of love can also be an excellent medicine to cure him. Love’s fire can never be quenched, and love is everlasting.

In conclusion, everything in the world is in constant change, so is love. Faithful and eternal love is the purpose

for human to eulogize and pursue, in which truth, kindness and beauty are unified, and Shakespeare's sonnets fully express such a pure thought. Love is the respect for natural beauty and the exposure of something false, ugly and evil, and he hopes that man can build up a world full of truth, kindness, beauty and harmony in love. For Shakespeare, "love is a passion as well as an art" (Lou, 2006, p. 46).

## 5. Conclusion

During the Renaissance, the traditional themes of European sonnets are friendship and love. Shakespeare not only inherits this tradition but also updates it. He especially observes the erosion and destruction of time and gains insights into its counterforce—sustainable beauty and love. Shakespeare not only exquisitely describes his internal world, but also deeply expresses his unique feeling on the external world. There are profound philosophical thoughts contained in the plain language, and his thoughts have impressive social meanings and remarkable characteristics of the era, which is exactly the charm of his sonnets and one of the important factors that make his sonnets an immortal classic.

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