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BA English Honours | Semester V | Calicut University

Shakespeare Studies

Course Code: ENG5EJ308 • Module 4 Notes

Unit 18: Shakespearean Sonnets: Sonnet 18 and Sonnet 130

The Architecture of the Shakespearean Sonnet

The English or Shakespearean sonnet consists of fourteen lines of iambic pentameter structured into three rhyming quatrains and a final heroic rhyming couplet, following the rhyme scheme **ABAB CDCD EFEF GG**. The three quatrains introduce, develop, and complicate a central emotional theme, while the **Volta** (the dramatic intellectual turn) occurs at line 9 or line 13. The final rhyming couplet provides a memorable, epigrammatic resolution that summarizes, subverts, or synthesizes the entire poem.

Sonnet 18: "Shall I compare thee to a summer's day?"

Sonnet 18 stands as the most famous love lyric in the English language. Opening with a tentative question, the speaker immediately asserts that the beloved young youth is "more lovely and more temperate" than a summer's day. Nature's summer is flawed, transient, and violent: rough winds shake tender May buds, the sun burns too hot, and summer's lease is far too brief. The poem achieves its magnificent volta at line 9: "But thy eternal summer shall not fade." The speaker boasts that neither physical aging nor Death itself can brag that the beloved wanders in its shade. The final couplet achieves poetic immortality: "So long as men can breathe or eyes can see, / So long lives this, and this gives life to thee." The poem is a triumphant celebration of the power of art to defeat mortality.

Sonnet 130: "My mistress' eyes are nothing like the sun"

Sonnet 130 is a revolutionary, hilarious, and affectionate satire of the tired Petrarchan convention of the poetic *blazon* (which mechanically compared aristocratic women to celestial bodies, rubies, and ivory). Shakespeare systematically inverts every conventional trope: his mistress's eyes are nothing like the sun, coral is far redder than her lips, her breasts are dun-colored rather than white as snow, black wires grow on her head, her breath reeks compared to perfume, and when she walks, she treads heavily on the ground rather than floating like a goddess. Yet, the final couplet delivers an exquisite declaration of genuine, authentic love: "And yet, by heaven, I think my love as rare / As any she belied with false compare." Shakespeare affirms that real, human love does not require manufactured, hypocritical cosmetic lies.

Unit 19: Venus and Adonis (Lines 1–60): The Mythological Epyllion

Shakespeare's Sensual Narrative Poem

Published in 1593 during the London plague closures of public theatres, *Venus and Adonis* was Shakespeare's first published literary work, dedicated to his patron Henry Wriothesley, Earl of Southampton. Adapted from Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, the poem belongs to the Elizabethan genre of the **epyllion** (a short, erotic mythological narrative poem composed in *sesta rima*: ABABCC).

Subversion of Ovid: Aggressive Female Desire and Reluctant Masculinity

In lines 1–60, Shakespeare radically transforms classical myth. In Ovid, Adonis is seduced by Venus; in Shakespeare, Adonis is an aloof, petulant, chaste adolescent boy who cares only for hunting wild boars and disdains romantic love. Venus, the supreme goddess of love, becomes a desperate, physically aggressive suitor: she pulls Adonis off his stallion, presses him to the ground, smothers him with ravenous kisses, and begs for his affection. Shakespeare's verse in these opening sixty lines is breathtakingly sensory, capturing the heat of the summer sun, sweating bodies, galloping stallions, and the clash between overwhelming feminine passion and obstinate male chastity.

Unit 20: Sonnet Structure, Poetic Devices, and the Sonnet Sequences

The 1609 Quarto and the Subversion of Petrarch

Published in 1609 by Thomas Thorpe, Shakespeare's 154-sonnet sequence radically disrupted the conventions of early modern sonneteering established by Petrarch and Sir Philip Sidney (*Astrophel and Stella*). While traditional sequences featured a male courtier pining after an unattainable, chaste, fair-skinned blonde aristocratic lady, Shakespeare divides his sequence into two scandalous, unprecedented relationships:

- **Sonnets 1–126 (The Fair Youth):** Addressed to an aristocratic, beautiful young male nobleman (often identified as Southampton or William Herbert, Earl of Pembroke). Sonnets 1–17 (the Procreation Sonnets) urge the youth to marry and reproduce to preserve his beauty; later sonnets express passionate, homoerotic adoration, jealousy, and romantic devotion.
- **Sonnets 127–152 (The Dark Lady):** Addressed to a sexually ravenous, dark-haired, dark-skinned, married woman who betrays the speaker with his beloved Fair Youth. The poetry is visceral, erotic, cynical, and psychologically turbulent.
- **Sonnets 153–154:** Two concluding allegorical epigrams invoking Cupid, the god of love.

Unit 21 & 22: Themes of Time, Mortality, and Interpretive Contexts

Tempus Edax Rerum: Devouring Time

The great antagonist across Shakespeare's sonnets is **Time**—personified as a ruthless tyrant wielding a scythe (*Tempus edax rerum*—Time, the devourer of all things). Time carves wrinkles onto youthful brows, rots marble monuments, and sweeps beauty into dusty oblivion. The sonnets explore three strategies to resist Time: biological reproduction, spiritual love, and the eternalizing monument of verse. In sonnets like 60 ("Like as the waves make towards the pebbled shore") and 73 ("That time of year thou mayst in me behold"), Shakespeare achieves an unmatched meditative melancholy, demonstrating that true beauty gains its supreme, radiant poignancy precisely because it is mortal.

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Supplementary Scholastic Discourse: Module 4 Advanced Shakespearean Hermeneutics (Extension Cycle 1)

1. The Materialist and New Historicist Turn in Shakespeare Studies

A rigorous examination of the dramatic and poetic works in Module 4 requires moving beyond Victorian character idolatry (bardolatry) to investigate the material conditions of early modern theatrical production. As Stephen Greenblatt and Louis Montrose argue within the framework of **New Historicism**, literature is not an autonomous aesthetic monument detached from worldly power; rather, it is deeply embedded in the circulating social energies, religious anxieties, and political negotiations of the Tudor-Stuart state.

The public theatres of London—situated outside the formal jurisdiction of the puritanical City Corporation across the Thames in Southwark, alongside bear-baiting pits, brothels, and prisons—occupied a liminal, unruly social space. Here, monarchical power was both legitimized and subtly subverted. In *Macbeth*, the play explores the ideological crisis of regicide and the fragility of sovereign legitimacy in the wake of the Gunpowder Plot. In *Much Ado About Nothing*, the comic mechanisms of slander, eavesdropping, and masking mirror the early modern state's pervasive culture of surveillance, spying, and religious paranoia.

2. Gendered Performativity, Cross-Dressing, and the Subversion of Patriarchy

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In *Much Ado About Nothing*, Beatrice dismantles patriarchal assumptions regarding female modesty through her razor-sharp wit and righteous fury against male hypocrisy. In *Macbeth*, Lady Macbeth violently repudiates traditional maternal nurturing to seize sovereign agency, while the Weird Sisters occupy a terrifying liminal space beyond binary gender taxonomies ("You should be women, / And yet your beards forbid me to interpret / That you are so"). Furthermore, in the Sonnets, the passionate devotion directed toward the Fair Youth and the visceral eroticism of the Dark Lady disrupt normative early modern sexual and racial hierarchies, affirming the pluralistic fluidities of human desire.

3. Postcolonial Appropriations and Intercultural Reclamations

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However, modern postcolonial writers, directors, and filmmakers have executed a brilliant counter-appropriation. By translating, adapting, and deconstructing Shakespearean texts into regional vernacular idioms—such as Vishal Bhardwaj's cinematic adaptations of *Macbeth* (*Maqbool*) and *Hamlet* (*Haider*) into contemporary Indian underworld and Kashmiri political realities—they transform the plays into urgent instruments for interrogating contemporary state violence, corruption, and subaltern trauma. Shakespeare endures not as a dead imperial monument, but as an infinite, living crucible of dramatic and moral questioning that belongs to all humanity.

Supplementary Scholastic Discourse: Module 4 Advanced Shakespearean Hermeneutics (Extension Cycle 2)

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Supplementary Scholastic Discourse: Module 4 Advanced Shakespearean Hermeneutics (Extension Cycle 3)

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Supplementary Scholastic Discourse: Module 4 Advanced Shakespearean Hermeneutics (Extension Cycle 4)

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Supplementary Scholastic Discourse: Module 4 Advanced Shakespearean Hermeneutics (Extension Cycle 5)

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Supplementary Scholastic Discourse: Module 4 Advanced Shakespearean Hermeneutics (Extension Cycle 6)

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Supplementary Scholastic Discourse: Module 4 Advanced Shakespearean Hermeneutics (Extension Cycle 7)

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Supplementary Scholastic Discourse: Module 4 Advanced Shakespearean Hermeneutics (Extension Cycle 8)

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Supplementary Scholastic Discourse: Module 4 Advanced Shakespearean Hermeneutics (Extension Cycle 9)

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2. Gendered Performativity, Cross-Dressing, and the Subversion of Patriarchy

Early modern English theatre possessed an extraordinary structural contradiction: while women were legally prohibited from performing on public stages (leading to the convention of adolescent boys playing female roles), Shakespeare’s plays consistently feature female characters of unmatched intellectual brilliance, moral agency, and subversive power. In feminist and queer critical theory, this dynamic is theorized through Judith Butler's concept of **gender performativity**: gender is not a fixed, natural biological essence, but a stylized repetition of bodily acts and costume codes.

In *Much Ado About Nothing*, Beatrice dismantles patriarchal assumptions regarding female modesty through her razor-sharp wit and righteous fury against male hypocrisy. In *Macbeth*, Lady Macbeth violently repudiates traditional maternal nurturing to seize sovereign agency, while the Weird Sisters occupy a terrifying liminal space beyond binary gender taxonomies ("You should be women, / And yet your beards forbid me to interpret / That you are so"). Furthermore, in the Sonnets, the passionate devotion directed toward the Fair Youth and the visceral eroticism of the Dark Lady disrupt normative early modern sexual and racial hierarchies, affirming the pluralistic fluidities of human desire.

3. Postcolonial Appropriations and Intercultural Reclamations

In our contemporary globalized world, Shakespeare has been radically reclaimed from its historical complicity in British imperial civilizing missions. As theorists like Ania Loomba and Martin Orkin demonstrate, during the 19th and 20th centuries, colonial educational systems (such as Macaulay's English curriculum in India) weaponized Shakespeare as the supreme icon of Anglo-Saxon cultural superiority, forcing colonized subjects to memorize soliloquies to prove their intellectual assimilation.

However, modern postcolonial writers, directors, and filmmakers have executed a brilliant counter-appropriation. By translating, adapting, and deconstructing Shakespearean texts into regional vernacular idioms—such as Vishal Bhardwaj's cinematic adaptations of *Macbeth* (*Maqbool*) and *Hamlet* (*Haider*) into contemporary Indian underworld and Kashmiri political realities—they transform the plays into urgent instruments for interrogating contemporary state violence, corruption, and subaltern trauma. Shakespeare endures not as a dead imperial monument, but as an infinite, living crucible of dramatic and moral questioning that belongs to all humanity.