UNIT 2: WILLIAM SHAKESPEARE: SONNETS 65 & 144

UNIT STRUCTURE

2.1 Learning Objectives

2.2 Introduction

2.3 Shakespeare: The Poet

2.3.1 His Life

2.3.2 His Works

2.4 The Text of the Sonnets

2.4.1 Explanation of the Sonnets

2.5 Poetic Style

2.6 Let us Sum up

2.7 Further Reading

2.8 Answers to Check Your Progress

2.9 Model Questions

2.1 LEARNING OBJECTIVES

After going through this unit you will be able to:

- discuss the life and works of William Shakespeare
- explain Sonnets 65 and 144 as a real testimony of time's immortality and the complications in love relationships.
- appreciate the distinctive characteristics of Shakespearean Sonnets.

2.2 INTRODUCTION

This unit will introduce you to one of the greatest pioneer in the field of English literature and culture, William Shakespeare. Apart from his creative genius which flowered in all its magnificence in the theatrical arena, his poems, sonnets and his histrionics have become a part of English lore. Stressing on the focus point of this unit, 'Shakespearean Sonnets', we will discuss here in detail the distinctive characteristics of his sonnets.

A sonnet is a form of lyric poetry where the poet's deep feelings and

emotions are projected with fourteen lines and a specific rhyme scheme. Shakespeare is one of the greatest sonneteers of his age. His sonnets are "the most precious pearls of Elizabethan lyricism, some of them unsurpassed by any lyricism." Shakespeare wrote altogether 154 sonnets. Majority of his sonnets were written in London in the 1590's during an outbreak of plague that closed theatres and prevented playwrights from staging their dramas. Shakespearean Sonnets are units of fourteen iambic pentameter lines rhyming according to the English or Surreyean form. Each line consists of ten syllables. The syllables are divided into five pairs called iambs or iambic feet. 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 of gg Only three of Shakespeare's 154 sonnets do not confirm to this structure: Sonnet 99, which has 15 lines, Sonnet 126, which has 12 lines and Sonnet 145 is written in four-foot lines.

Shakespeare addresses the majority of his sonnets (1-126) to an unidentified young man with outstanding physical and intellectual attributes. It seems like with this man, the poet shares an intense, romantic relation. The youth's love, at time, fills the poet with intense joy. Sonnets 1-17 all take the form of persuasions where the poet urges the 'fair youth' to marry and procreate so that he can pass on his superior qualities to a child, ensuring his immortality. From Sonnet 18 a new perspective opens up. Shakespeare shifts his viewpoint claiming his own poetry to be highly essential to immortalise the young man and his qualities. The final sonnets (127-154) are addressed to a mysterious 'dark lady'--- a sensuous, irresistible woman of questionable morals who captivates the poet. Evidences in the sonnets prove that both the poet and his young man have become obsessed with the 'dark lady'. The tone of the final sonnets is distressing, with language of sensual feasting, uncontrollable urges, and sinful consumption.

The critics have managed to draw out some thematic features in the sonnets like time, love, fidelity, death, immortality, art and the artist and friendship. The prescribed sonnets- 'Sonnet 65' and 'Sonnet 144'- highly

points out the theme of time, immortality and fidelity respectively. Sonnet 65 shows how the poet talks about the ravaging effects of time and claims his poetry to immortalise the ravaging effects of time. Sonnet 144, on the other hand, describes fidelity as the ambiguous relationship between the narrator, the young man and the dark lady takes on the nature of an emotional triangle. The characteristic brilliance of Shakespeare like quibbling and wordplay among are also part of the sonnets and they stand as literary marvels of the age in their own right. In the Sonnets, Shakespeare breaks away from the courtly conventions of the 1590's and explores a new emotional range.

2.3 SHAKESPEARE: THE POET

William Shakespeare (1564-1616) towers as a colossus over the English literary and cultural scene. He has been praised for his "knowledge of the heart", his superb poetry, aesthetic cunning in his disposition of dramatic action, his theatrical skill and his ability to create living worlds of people. External facts about his life are scanty and much of the connections between the dates associated with his life and career are based on conjecture and detective work.

2.3.1 His Life

William Shakespeare was born on April 23, 1564 in the village of Stratford-on-Avon in the county of Warwickshire. His father John Shakespeare was a farmer's son who came to Stratford about 1531, and began to prosper as a trader in corn, wheat, leather and agricultural products.

Of Shakespeare's education little is known. He probably attended the Grammar School at Stratford for a few years where he picked up "small Latin and less Greek." His real teachers meanwhile were the men and women and natural influences which surrounded him. His education at the hands of nature came from keeping his heart, as well as, his eyes wide open to the beauty of the world. His tremendous memory and his ability to note down and remember every significant thing in the changing scenery of earth and sky made him such a great writer that till date no one has ever equaled him in the perfect setting of his characters. At the age of fourteen, Shakespeare's father lost his

little property and fell in debt. The boy consequently was withdrawn from school. What Shakespeare did after he had left school is uncertain. But if we rely on the evidences found in his plays it can be said that he was a county school master, a lawyer's clerk, a clown, a king , a Roman etc. he was everything in his imagination, and it is impossible from his study of his scenes and characters to form a definite opinion about his early occupations.

In 1582, Shakespeare tied his nuptial knot at the age of eighteen, with Anne Hathaway, the daughter of a peasant family and his senior by eight years. When he was hardly twenty-one he was burdened with three children. It is, generally supposed, though without any sure ground, that Shakespeare left Stratford in or about 1586 for London, and took the way to fame and fortune. Of his life in London nothing definite is known. It was the period of his great literary activity. He entered into the stirring life of London with perfect sympathy and understanding which he had shown among the simple folk of his native Warwickshire. Shakespeare's first work may well have been that of a general helper, an odd job man, about the theatre; but he soon became an actor. The records of the old London theatres show that in the next ten years he gained a prominent place. Shakespeare's poems, rather than his early dramatic attempts, mark the beginning of his success. By dedicating his 'Venus and Adonis' to the Earl of Southampton he managed to get a large sum of money as a gift and he shrewdly invested the sum. He soon became part owner of the Globe and Blackfriars theatres. Within a decade of his arrival in London, he had become one of the most famous actors and literary men in England.

Shakespeare's life in London was an unbroken record of success and growing prosperity. In or about 1609 or 1611, after the period of his great tragedies he is supposed to have left London for Stratford. Though still in the prime of life, Shakespeare gave up his dramatic work to live the comfortable life of a country gentleman. After a few years of quiet at Stratford-on-Avon Shakespeare died on the anniversary of his birth, April 23, 1616 and was buried in the chancel of Stratford Church.

2.3.2 His Works

Little is known of the beginning of William Shakespeare's career as a writer. Perhaps, he began well as a collaborator like many of his contemporaries. Shakespeare's poetic and dramatic career extends over a period of twenty four years-1588 to 1612. His works are grouped into four periods corresponding to the growth and experience of his life and mind.

The first period extends from 1588 to about 1595 and includes *Love's Labour's Lost, The Comedy of Errors, A Midsummer Night's Dream, Two Gentlemen of Verona, Romeo and Juliet, Richard II, I, II and III, Henry VI and Richard III*. To this period belong also the two poems: *Venus and Adonis* and *The Rape of Lucrece*. This period served his dramatic apprenticeship. The works of this period show an extraordinary facility in expression and a rare gift of phrasing which distinguished his work. The treatment of life is superficial and there is no depth of thought or characterisation.

To the Second Period (1595-1601) belong the greatest comedies and historical plays. It includes *King John*, The *Merchant of Venice*, The *Taming of the Shrew*, *Henry IV*, I and II, *Henry V*, *The Merry Wives of Windsor*, *Much Ado About Nothing*, *As You Like It*, *Twelfth Night and the Sonnets*. This period shows a rapid growth and development in his art. First he touches on many different phases of life and presents a gallery of portraits. The historical plays epitomise the great era of Elizabeth's reign and embody her political insight and wisdom. Secondly, he shows rare skill and delicacy in drawing the female characters. Late in 1598, Shakespeare's Sonnets became a public story. The Sonnets strike the note of gloom and despair which prelude the Third Period of four tragedies.

The Third Period, from 1601-1608 includes the four tragedies, *Hamlet*, *Othello, King Lear* and *Macbeth*, along with *All's Well* That *Ends Well*, *Measure for Measure, Troilus and Cressida, Antony* and *Cleopatra*, *Coriolanus and Timon of Athens*. It is a period of gloom and depression and marks the full maturity of his powers--- dramatic, intellectual and expression. In the tragedies, Shakespeare deals with the problems of life and fate, error followed by extreme punishment and the darker side of human experience. As side issues, there are

the stings of ingratitude and treachery, a Motif which is further worked out in his plays of the Fourth Period, with the crowning result of forgiveness and reconciliation.

The Fourth or last period ranges from 1608 to 1612 and includes *Pericles, The Tempest, Cymbeline, The Winter's* Tale and the unfinished *Henry VIII*. During this period his temper shifts from gloomy and despair to serene and peaceful. Two features distinguish the plays of this period. Firstly, there is a tender touch about the women. Secondly, the plays take us back to the joys of the simple life of nature. Even though the groundwork still furnished tragic fashion but the evil is controlled and conquered by the good. At the same time these plays show the decline of Shakespeare's dramatic powers with the careless construction and unsatisfied characterisation.

Shakespeare Sonnets were first published in 1609, even though some of them had been written much earlier. The volume of sonnets was entered into the Stationer's Register on 20th May, 1609 by Thomas Thorpe. On the other hand his plays were first published in quarto editions which began to appear in 1597. A complete editions of his plays appeared in 1623. It was published by his friends John Heminges and Henry Condell. This is known as the First Folio, the first fully authorised edition of the plays. Hence, Shakespeare marks a great and tremendous contribution to the field of English Literature and culture.



CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Q1. State whether True or False

a. Shakespeare attended Grammar School at Stratford. T/F
b. Shakespeare's first published poem is “The Rape of Lucrece”. T/F
c. Macbeth belongs to the Third Period of Shakespeare's dramatic career. T/F
d. Shakespeare wrote all together 154 sonnets. T/F

Q2. Answer the following:

a. What is the name of Shakespeare's Father?

b. Name the four tragedies written by Shakespeare.

c. Mention the format of Shakespearean Sonnets.

d. When did Shakespeare die and where was he buried?

2.4 THE TEXT OF THE SONNETS

Sonnet 65

Since brass, nor stone, nor earth, nor boundless sea,
But sad **mortality** o'er-sways their power,
How with this rage shall beauty hold a plea,
Whose action is no stronger than a flower?
O, how shall summer's honey breath hold out
Against the **wreckful** siege of **battering days**,
When rocks **impregnable** are not so stout,
Nor gates of steel so strong, but Time decays?
O fearful meditation! where, alack,
Shall Time's best jewel from Time's chest lie hid?
Or what strong hand can hold his swift foot back?
Or who his spoil of beauty can forbid?
O, none, unless this miracle have might,
That in black ink my love may still shine bright.

Mortality: the condition of being susceptible to death.
Wreckful: destructive.
Batt'ring days: days of harassment.
Impregnable: too strong to be penetrated.

Sonnet 144

Two loves I have of comfort and **despair**,
Which like two spirits do suggest me still;
The better angel is a man right fair,
The worser spirit a woman colour'd ill.
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.
And whether that my angel be turn'd **fiend**
Suspect I may, but not directly tell;

Despair: loss of hope
Tempteth: tempt; to provoke someone
Wooing: to endeavor to gain someone's support
Fiend: an enemy

But being both from me, both to each friend,
I guess one angel in another's hell:
Yet this shall I ne'er know, but live in doubt,
Till my bad angel fire my good one out.

2.4.1 Explanation of the Sonnets

Sonnet 65

Sonnet 65 is an extension of Sonnet 64. These sonnets are about the ravaging effects of time on both love and life and how the poet attempts to overcome mortality with his immortal writings. Time along with its destructive force intensely disturbs Shakespeare. To illustrate how powerful and destructive time can be, he chooses to list certain objects in nature that are least vulnerable to time like stone, brass, iron, and seas rather than those more delicate of nature's object like flowers. Just like the other sonnets, here too the couplet provides a solution. It illustrates some hope that will ultimately resist and defeat time. In the poet's case, it is through his verse that he will emerge victorious. The sonnet opens with a list of elements that are subject to decay-brass, known for its power of endurance, stone, earth and sea. All these cannot withstand the ravaging effects of time. It makes the poet enquire how beauty can hold out against the destruction of time as its strength is similar to that of a flower. Here, the poet compares beauty with a flower to portray the delicacy of its survival.

The Sonnet continues with the poet's queries regarding the issue of time and mortality. Summer, which is the symbol of life, is personified here. The poet points out summer's battle against time asking how it can endure the destructive force of time. Whatever time holds under seize is compelled to surrender. Rocks look very strong but they cannot endure the repeated blows of time. Like rocks, even gates of steel and iron fail to resist the battering of time. Time is very strong and nothing has the power to hold its swift foot back. This quatrain consists of certain rhetorical questions which very evidently highlight time's

power and the poet's obsession to hide his "best jewel", his lover from the ravages of time. When the destroyer puts the best jewel of its own creation in its chest of drawers none can retrieve it and hide it anywhere. The fair youth, who is nature's marvel and a jewel for the poet will also not endure. The couplet, just like the other sonnets, provides a solution against the destruction of time. As per the poet, immortality is possible. A miracle alone may have efficacy against the destructive powers of time. In the poet's case the possibility of this miracle is in his own verse, in the enduring power of poetry. He feels that his lover can remain immortal in his 'black ink' which can ultimately resist and defeat time.

Sonnet 144

Sonnet 144 composed by William Shakespeare is the only sonnet where he refers to both the "Dark Lady" and the young man, his "two loves". Throughout the sonnet Shakespeare attempts to showcase a love triangle and also tries to consider the situation with detachment. A sense of uncertainty is often observed while going through each and every quatrain of the said sonnet. It is also observed that the poet's mood is cynical and mocking and the uncertainty about the relationship torments him the most. His unique style of projecting the love triangle stylistically makes him successful in creating an extraordinary space in the field of sonnet writing.

In the very first quatrain of Sonnet 144 the speaker introduces two characters considering them as his lovers, the "fair youth" and the "dark lady" respectively. According to him, one is comforting while the other is despairing. Both of these two lovers are compared to spirits dwelling within the speaker. Here, the contrast between the two lovers is also noteworthy. While the fair youth is described to be his "better angel", the "dark lady" tends to be the "worser spirit" and a woman of dark complexion.

In the second quatrain of the sonnet the speaker seems to be disappointed with the woman of dark complexion; saying that she would send him to hell soon. He is disappointed as she is very much

prone to tempt his "better lover", the fair youth and makes him away from the speaker. She doesn't only snatch his "better lover" away from him but also wants to corrupt him and turn him into a devil. With the help of her dark pride, the woman of dark complexion also tries to seduce the "better angel" which is perhaps disappointing to the speaker.

In a state of bewilderment the speaker is expressing that he doesn't know if his better angel is turned into a "fiend" or not. All he does is to suspect the relation between the 'fair youth' and the 'dark lady'. The speaker also seems to be tormented with the feeling of uncertainty as he is not sure whether his two lovers are in a friendly relation or not. Being detached from his two lovers he can do nothing but guess the possibility of the certainty of the relationship between the two lovers.

Universally in the last two lines of the Shakespearean Sonnets one gets the solution of the problem raised in the quatrains. But exceptionally in the present sonnet, the couplet instead of providing a solution to his uncertainties heightens it. He concludes by saying that the relation or the affair between the dark lady and the fair youth is totally unknown and uncertain, hence, keeping him in doubt. He will be in a state of uncertainty until his bad angel drives away his good angel.



CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Q3. Choose the correct answer from the following:

a. The poet's mood in the Sonnet 144 is:
   - i. Cynical and mocking
   - ii. Pleasant
   - iii. Anger

b. The theme of Sonnet 65 is:
   - i. Love triangle complicacy
   - ii. Time immortality
   - iii. Friendship

Q4. Describe the two characters shown in Sonnet 144.

Q5. Write a few lines on immortality of time with special reference to Sonnet 65.

2.5 POETIC STYLE

While Shakespeare's reputation is based primarily on his plays, he became famous first as a poet. His activities as a poet of his age can be highlighted by the study of his non dramatic poetry. As Shakespeare grew in experience his style of writing reflected his intellectual development, his character study deepened, his taste improved and technique became more and more individual. It can be observed that poetry is inherent in most of his works. He only introduces prose whenever he wishes to lower the dramatic pitch and does not desire a poetical effect.

Shakespeare's poetry depends on extended, sometimes elaborate metaphors and conceits, and language is often rhetorical. His work is characterised by paradox by narrative and thematic diversity, and by attempts to render the inner workings of the mind, exploring the psychology of perception. His style of writing is to take the audience on a voyage of emotions. He incorporates perceived truths with actual events and provides a glimpse of what could love been or a perspective of what might happen. Shakespeare had an amazing genius for words. He shows unrivalled powers of expression. The beauty of words, the aptness and originality of phrases, the wealth of striking similes and metaphors, the felicities of language, the richness and sweetness of verse-these are found in his works to an astonishing degree.

Shakespeare's standard poetic form was blank-verse, composed in iambic pentameter. His verse was usually unrhymed and consisted of ten syllables to a line. Once Shakespeare mastered traditional blank verse he began to interrupt and vary its flow. This technique releases the new power and flexibility of his poetry. Shakespeare is one of the greatest sonneteers of his age. His Sonnets have marked such achievements that they have been successful in attaining their own position and genre known as Shakespearean Sonnets in the field of literature. His Sonnets consists of

three quatrains each rhyming alternately, and a rhyming couplet to conclude. Shakespeare's Sonnets sincerely reveal an emotional crisis in his life. His Sonnets are noticeable for beauty of images and the flawless perfection of style and versification. He breathed into the Sonnets a lyric melody and meditative energy which no writer of any country has surpassed.



2.6 LET US SUM UP

You have just finished reading about Shakespearean Sonnets and specifically Sonnet 65 and Sonnet 144. With his unmistakable style Shakespeare tries his best to project time immortality and love triangle complicacy which are the distinctive characteristics of his Sonnets. The unit discusses about the life and works of William Shakespeare and his popularity that he had gained for creating a new realm of composing sonnets in the field of English literature. His unique style of composing the dramas, as well as, other works, mark him as one of the greatest pioneers. You will find Sonnet 65 and Sonnet 144 interesting after having read through the unit and interpreting the possibilities of the sonnets on your own.



2.7 FURTHER READING

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2.8 ANSWER TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Ans to Q.1: a. true b. false c. true d. true.

Ans to Q.2: a. John Shakespeare. b. *Hamlet, Othello, King Lear* and *Macbeth*. c. Units of fourteen iambic pentameter lines rhyming according to the English or Surreyan form. d. Died on April 23, 1616 and buried in the chancel of Stratford Church.

Ans to Q.3: a. cynical and mocking b. time immortality

Ans to Q.4: The two characters shown in Sonnet 144 are the 'Dark Lady' and the 'Fair Youth'. The two characters are contradictory to each other as described by the poet. The character of the 'Dark Lady' seems to be portrayed as the "bad angel" whiles the poet is in the famous of the 'Fair Youth' describing him as the "good angel". The 'Dark Lady' is projected here as the temptress who is very much prone to tempt and corrupt the speaker's "better lover", the 'fair youth'. On the other hand the fair youth is described as innocent, having angelic credentials.

Ans to Q.5: It is needless to say that time has great destructive power. Nothing is permanent. Everything gets destroyed by the ravages of time. Sonnet 65 highlights this very theme. It shows how everything, even the strongest like brass, stone etc can't escape the ravages of time indicating the transitory nature evident in the world. But the poet concludes that his verses have the power to withstand the destructive ravages of time projecting its immortality.



2.9 MODEL QUESTIONS

Q1. Discuss the life and works of William Shakespeare

Q2. Explain the Sonnets 65 and 144 by Shakespeare

Q3. Discuss the poetic style employed in Shakespeare's sonnets.

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