

# Thou: The Connection between Shakespeare and his Sonnets

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**ABSTRACT** William Shakespeare Sonnet's were written from an autobiographical point of view that represents his personal struggles with love. Most notably defining this idea is the use of the word "thou", that which indicates identity, ownership and things one is owned. Shakespeare uses the friendship with the Lovely Young Man to showcase his desires for love and an everlasting saga for the young man. The spirit of the relationship between the two was perfectly normal for the time period, and a very strong relationship as Shakespeare's strong language suggests. A relationship that reaches its climax in Sonnet 18, "Shall I compare thee to a summer's day....." Was the end of Shakespeare's struggle with love truly defined in the end of The Sonnets? The world will never know, but poetic art and love can both be present in an autobiographical work, one which truly encompasses the word "thou".

One of William Shakespeare's most interesting works was his Sonnets, most notably the Sonnets written to the Lovely Young Man. Is this Young Man actually real or just an imaginary figure? Scholars have debated long and hard over this topic since the 19th Century. The word in the Sonnets that suggests they are autobiographical is "thou," which indicates identity, ownership and things one is owed. Without Shakespeare's use of "thou," the Sonnets would not reflect his personal struggles and the development of the friendship with the young man. Shakespeare is relying on the reader to understand the context with which the Sonnets were written to truly understand the friendship with the Lovely Young Man. The Sonnets are a balancing act between love and poetic art: without one, you don't have the other.

Close reading and analysis of the text reveals the importance of the friendship with the Young Man and the delicate balance between love and poetic art. In "Editing as Cultural Formations: The Sexing of Shakespeare's Sonnets," Peter Stallybrass wrote: "The construction of the individual and the making of the genders and sexualities are materially embedded in the historical production and reproduction of texts (Stallybrass, 2)". A writer becomes an author through what is written in the texts. In the construction of papers, there is an essence of purpose that becomes clear when the writer takes ownership of the work. For Shakespeare, a relationship worth writing about was as important as a relationship with a significant other. In the process, Shakespeare is making an investment in the friendship with the Lovely Young Man. Because Shakespeare had been involved in his writing, he uses "the boy as a central figure" (Stallybrass, 3). This is because everything in the Sonnets

revolves around the boy and his future. Shakespeare is asking the reader to think about these characters as real human beings so that the reader is able to connect with the friendship -- to see the value in a real relationship that may resemble something found in the reader's life.

The friendship theme would support the classifying of Shakespeare sonnet sequence as an autobiographical work. Heather Dubrow has been exploring how culture and history combine in literary pieces and has several notable pieces on Shakespeare and Twentieth Century Politics. Dubrow presents the following about Shakespeare's Sonnets: "The axiom that the first 126 poems involve the Friend and subsequent lyrics concern the Dark Lady generates assumptions about the presence of a linear plot (Dubrow, 1)". Although Dubrow argues that we do not always have to be bound by reading the Sonnets as following this pattern, there is a strong case to be made for the existence of a narrative. Even if the poems weren't written in the order in which they were printed, they were deliberately sequenced in the 1609 Quarto to produce a narrative. Shakespeare is clearly telling the reader a story, a personal story of friendship.

Shakespeare first illustrates the importance of finding a mate for the Lovely Young Man. The Speaker is the channel through which Shakespeare is communicating his wishes in Sonnet 1.

"His tender heir might bear his memory. But thou, contracted to thine own bright eyes, feed'st thy light's flame with self-substantial fuel, Making a famine where abundance lies, thyself thy foe, to thy sweet self too cruel (1-3)"

The young man has big beautiful eyes but they are too blind to see that young lady waiting for him. The

speaker uses “thou” and “thine” to emphasize that the eyes belong to the boy, and that he is too focused on himself to notice the world around him. A truly remarkable friendship is one in which each person has an equal vision of each other: mutual respect, understanding and responsibility to look out for the well-being of the other person. Shakespeare is emphasizing the importance of finding a mate, and Sonnet 1 clearly presents the urgency of the situation.

This Lovely Young Man has made many mistakes, and without Shakespeare in his heart, he would continue to do so. Beauty and time have opposite effects, and the young man is tempted by fate. Sonnet 41 is further emphasizing why the young man should reproduce: “Gentle, thou art, and therefore to be won: Beauteous thou art, therefore to be assailed.” Lines 5 and 6 show us the deep affection and love Shakespeare wishes for the young man to achieve. The Lovely Young Man is good natured and the perfect match for the young lady. Shakespeare uses the word “assailed” to emphasize his desire for the two, as if he wanted to take him over in a strong attack. Again, using the word assailed with the word “thou” further emphasizes Shakespeare is taking ownership of his work. Shakespeare is using the Sonnets to take ownership over the Young Man’s actions: it gives him the power to control his friend’s behavior.

Shakespeare is persuading the Lovely Young Man to take action to secure his legacy. In Sonnet 44, Shakespeare emphasizes his desires by use of vivid language:

“If the dull substance of my flesh were thought, Injurious distance should not stop my way; for then despite of space I would be brought, from limits far remote where thou dost stay. No matter then although my foot did stand Upon the farthest earth removed from thee; For nimble thought can jump both sea and land As soon as think the place where he would be. But ah! Thought kills me that I am not thought, to leap large lengths of miles when thou art gone, But that so much of earth and water wrought I must attend time’s leisure with my moan, receiving nought by elements so slow but heavy tears, badges of either’s woe. (1-9)”

Shakespeare is telling us that this love the Lovely Young Man is capable of is something that goes wherever he goes. It is clear that this love is not a temporary feeling or desire, but a long lasting desire for happiness. Love is something that a person cannot predict nor control: it happens. For somebody like Shakespeare, this theme can be taken and used to create bright imagery

and craft many sonnets talking about it. Shakespeare truly wants the Lovely Young Man to be happy while he has time remaining in his life.

The autobiographical nature of Shakespeare’s work tells us that the Lovely Young Man will not live on forever, but hopefully his legacy will. The Lovely Young Man himself (just as Shakespeare) must die one day soon. In the end of Sonnet 3, Shakespeare tells the Lovely Young man clearly “But, if thou live not to be remembered, die single, and thine image dies with thee (11-12).” If the young man does not start thinking about the future, time will run out before he can find a woman. This friendship will not last forever. In Sonnet 77, Shakespeare is making a reference to how fast time truly is going by: “Thy dial how they precious minutes waste (2).” Shakespeare is underscoring the need for the Lovely Young Man to act quickly before his dial runs out of time. For the reader, there can also be a connection made with the young man and how time flies away. If no action is taken, the Lovely Young Man will die lonely and Shakespeare will be devastated. The Sonnets show how important friendship was during the time period in which Shakespeare was writing. A friendship was a sacred thing, and should not be broken under any circumstances (Dubrow, 296).

Shakespeare was a master at using the power of language as art. However, modern analysis has brought new elements into Shakespeare’s writing. Margareta de Grazia has many publications relating Shakespeare to the cultural context with which he wrote his pieces. She clearly explains her position: “I wish to propose that modern treatments of the sonnets have displaced a singularly modern dilemma: what to do with the inadmissible secret of Shakespeare’s deviant sexuality (de Grazia, 37).” As Stallybrass would agree, modern analysis has revealed new insight into the relationship between the young man and Shakespeare. It is not surprising that with the rise of LGBT issues within the 21st Century people would assume Shakespeare was writing as a homosexual, but the Sonnets support Shakespeare’s desire for the Lovely Young Man and his mate alone. As mentioned before, during the time in which Shakespeare was writing, relationship status was not as important as the foundation of the relationship: a strong, loving and caring relationship was the most important thing. The reader is free to draw any conclusion one may wish from reading Shakespeare’s Sonnets, but it is important to remember the context and time period in

which the Sonnets were written. When reading Shakespeare in historical context, there is simply no way to distinguish friendships between men and a homoerotic relationship that involved sexual desire. Reading Shakespeare’s work as autobiographical, the reader should focus on the friendship and not any other issues that may arise today in order to fully understand the purpose of Shakespeare’s writing.

In Sonnet 80, Shakespeare belittles himself before the Lovely Young Man while not being able to find the right words to communicate his true respect for the Lovely Young Man: “O How I faint when I of you do write; Knowing a better spirit doth use your name, and in the praise thereof spends all his might, to make me tongue-tied speaking of your fame (1-5).” Shakespeare has illustrated a shift from his desire for the Lovely Young Man to have a child to underscoring the importance of the friendship between them.

Shakespeare is telling the reader throughout the Sonnets that his spirit is restless; it wanders and is not capable of being tied down. The Lovely Young Man shares this trait with Shakespeare, interested in wandering and exploring, not thinking about the future. This would be consistent with a personal struggle that Shakespeare may have been experiencing. The Sonnets were a way to release his energy and his sorrow. In Sonnet 89, Shakespeare wants the reader to again feel sorry for him, “Say thou didst forsake me for some fault. (89)” He wants the reader to believe he has done something wrong, and that he will spend the rest of his life wasting away. By calling on the reader, Shakespeare is asking for the reader to consider his state and to draw a parallel to the Lovely Young Man and how they are both wasting away. Shakespeare feels the blame for what is happening to the Lovely Young Man:

“Say that thou didst forsake me for some fault, and I will comment upon that offence: Speak of my lameness, and I straight will halt, against thy reasons making no defense. Thou canst not, love, disgrace me half so ill, to set a form upon desired change, As I’ll myself disgrace; knowing thy will, I will acquaintance strangle, and look strange; Be absent from thy walks; and in my tongue, thy sweet beloved name no more shall dwell, lest I, too much profane, should do it wrong, and happily of our old acquaintance tell. For thee, against myself I’ll vow debate, for I must never love him whom thou dost hate (1-6).”

He believes that everything the Lovely Young Man has to offer, including the self-pity and his restlessness,

belong to Shakespeare himself. If the Lovely Young Man were to come to hate himself, then Shakespeare would come to hate himself, because Shakespeare could never love someone the Lovely Young Man hated. This friendly and sincere relationship that Shakespeare and the young man share reaches its climax in Sonnet 18: “Shall I compare thee to a summer’s day (1)” tells us how much love Shakespeare truly has for the young man. Shakespeare believes this young man is resolved to live a wonderful life, and that perhaps he should find the young lady. While time may continue to not help the case for the Lovely Young Man—“Rough Winds do shake the darling buds of May, and a summer’s lease all too hath short a date”—Shakespeare continues to tell the young man that he is too precious to be forgotten to the sands of time. “But thy eternal summer shall not fade.” Shakespeare is trying to tell the Lovely Young Man his name will live on forever if he finds a young woman.

By this point in his work, Shakespeare knows time is running out for the Lovely Young Man and the Sonnets are nearly finished. Sonnet 126 presents that time is nearly up: “Thy loves withering as thy sweet self-grow’st (4).” The boy and Shakespeare are growing old, and their love is about to run out, and the time for the Lovely Young Man is almost over. Certainly Shakespeare has to feel sorry for himself and the Lovely Young Man at this point. Shakespeare ends Sonnet 126 with one final statement about the Lovely Young Man: “Her audit, though delayed, answered must be, and her quietus is to render thee (11-12).” When Shakespeare was writing this final love Sonnet, was he truly giving up on the struggle he presented in the previous Sonnet, or was he just moving on to another topic? The world will never know.

By showing the reader an insight into his personal life and writing style, William Shakespeare is able to develop a picture of his relationship with the young boy, and truly take ownership of his work. By making reference to the boy as a Lovely Young Man, Shakespeare establishes the beauty of the friendship with the boy. Shakespeare takes this effect to new heights with references to the universe, yet Shakespeare still maintains the urgency of the situation for the Lovely Young Man. The Lovely Young Man’s time is all too short and Shakespeare wants him to be remembered. The Lovely Young Man’s central role in the Sonnets accomplishes that much in the same way that Shakespeare is remembered today. Rather than simply creating a work of fic-

tion, Shakespeare uses the Sonnets to write of a very important personal experience. The word “thou” truly illustrates that the Sonnets reflect not only the writing, but the very life of William Shakespeare.

## References

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