



“Rose” Image in Shakespeare’s Sonnets

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Abstract

Imagery is an important key to open a poem and explore the poet’s inner word. In Shakespeare’s sonnets, the rose is repeated image, which is placed in a dominant position among all the other flower imagery. In general, rose is one of the most conventional image in the sonnet. So, this article aims to explore why Shakespeare prefers “rose” to other flower imagery, and what are the symbolic meanings of “rose” images in Shakespeare’s sonnets. Imagery is the poem’s link to the senses, figure out “rose” images in sonnets can make us read sonnets with more understanding.

Subject Areas

Literature

Keywords

Rose, Imagery, Symbolic Meanings, Sonnets, Shakespeare

1. Introduction

William Shakespeare, the greatest writer in the English language and the world’s pre-eminent playwright, produced 37 plays from 1588 to 1613 [1]. He has made outstanding achievements in drama and has also distinguished himself as a great poet by writing some non-dramatic poems. Shakespeare has written 154 sonnets which made a great contribution to world’s literature. After studying Shakespeare’s sonnets, the 1609 quarto, and most of the sonnets in depth, it can be found that the image of rose in Shakespeare’s sonnets is an important element that cannot be ignored. There are more images of “rose” than other flowers. Image is the most common term in literary criticism. According to Chinese classical literary theory, image is the fusion of meaning and image, the same feeling of heart and object and the fusion of scene [2]. What’s more, the image is a picture with words performance, a poem itself is composed of many images, an image

[3]. The image is the perceptual image that a poet uses the imagination to build up, and the carrier of poetry to strengthen the emotion in the poem. Therefore, it is necessary to explore the imagery in the poem, which is a golden key to read poetry. Previous studies of image in Sonnets are mainly about “summer”, “eye”, and imagery of “time”. However, few studies explore deeply about image “rose”. Therefore, the most important thing of the present study is to figure out “rose” in Shakespeare’s sonnets, to explore why Shakespeare prefers “rose” to other flower imagery, and what are the symbolic meanings of “rose” images in Shakespeare’s sonnets.

2. “Rose” Images in Shakespeare’s Sonnets

William Shakespeare refers to the Rose over 70 times in his works [4]; it is the most mentioned flower throughout his work. In his sonnets, “rose” images are mentioned frequently in sonnet 1, 18, 35, 54, 67, 70, 95, 98, 99, 109, 130. Following are the statistics on the distribution of “rose” images (Table 1). The author has made a form that includes “rose” and its related words in Shakespeare’s sonnets. It can be seen that “rose” images are placed in a dominant position and play important role in Shakespeare’s sonnets.

3. Why Shakespeare Prefers “Rose” Image?

Shakespeare’s 154 sonnets include various kinds of flower imagery, varying from the flowers in general to the specific flowers, such as violet, marigold, lily, rose, canker blooms etc. Among all the flower imagery, the rose imagery stands out as

Table 1. Distribution of “rose” images in Shakespeare’s sonnets

Way of expression	Words	Frequency	Distribution in following sonnets
Direct description of “rose”	Rose	5	54 67 95 98 109
	Roses	5	54 99 130
	Rose	1	1
	Roses	2	35 67
Description related with “rose”	Darling buds	3	18 54 70
	Sweet/sweetest/ sweetness	67	1 4 5 6 8 12 13 16 19 26 29 30 35 36 38 39 52 54 63 70 71 73 75 76 78 79 89 93 94 95 98 99 100 102 104 106 108 113 114 118 125 126 128 133 135 136 145 151
	Flowers	13	5 16 21 65 68 69 94 98 99 113 124
	Distilled/distills/ distillation	4	5 6 62
	total	8	100

(Data are collected by the author from Sonnets edited by Mowat, A. B. and Werstine, P.).

being more dominant than the other flowers. So, why Shakespeare prefers to rose?

As is known to all, rose has earned the tribute of “The queen of flowers” and “the UK Royal National Rose Society (RNRS) has some fossils of rose foliage considered to be many millions of years old” [5]. Rose is the national flower of the United Kingdom (UK), which beauty is universal and unanimous. In the long human history, rose has been playing an important part in people’s life. “The rose is one of the most omnipresent and powerful symbols in all literature, in addition to being one of the most complex for us to understand, especially across the mist of time” [6]. In English literature, it is popular to use rose image. For example, Robert Burns’ “A Red Red Rose”, Robert Frost’s “The Rose Family” and Gertrude Stein’s “Rose is a rose is a rose is a rose”.

The second reason Shakespeare frequently uses rose imagery in his sonnets is that he likes to compare young man to beautiful flowers [2]. More specifically, rose is the most wonderful symbol of good in his heart than other flowers. Beauty, sweet odor, distillation, all these part of “rose” can be described vividly in sonnets and have power, attraction and conviction to persuade young man get marry and keep eternal beauty.

4. Symbolic Meanings of “Rose” Images in Shakespeare’s Sonnets

In Shakespeare’s sonnets, the rose imagery has appeared many times in different context. “Rose” images in different context have different symbolic meanings. After reading “rose” related sonnets, it can be make conclusion that there are following three symbolic meanings of rose image in sonnets.

4.1. The First Symbolic Meaning of Rose Image: Beauty and Youth

Rose is a symbol of beauty. By employing rose as his first flower imagery at the very beginning of his sonnets, Shakespeare capitalized the first letter of “Rose” and puts rose in a prominent position. Though many scholars have studied why Shakespeare use capital letter “R” of “Rose” in first sonnet in 1609 quarto, it seems to be a crux. However, from the rose imagery in the first sonnet, we get some hints about the theme of his sonnets: beauty and youth.

From fairest creatures we desire increase,
That thereby beauty’s Rose might never die,
But, as the ripper should by time decease,
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.
Thou that art now the world’s fresh ornament
And only herald to the gaudy spring,

Within thine own bud buriest thy content,
 And, tender churl, mak'st waste in niggarding.
 Pity the world, or else this glutton be,
 To eat the world's due, by the grave and thee (Sonnet 1).

In first sonnet, rose symbolizes the pure beauty of his fair friend, his youth and vitality. But beauty likes a blossom and beauty fades like a flower. The young man's youth also fades away with time passing. In this sense, rose is both the symbol of beauty and the metaphor of fast-fading beauty and youth. So, this sonnet puts the idea that if we want to live forever, then the only way is to have children. These children will continue our names long after we pass, while a lack of procreation will lead to a quick demise. Other sonnets like 54, the lines "The rose looks fair, but fairer we it deem", "And so of you, beauteous and lovely youth, When that shall vade, by verse distils your truth" also emphasize the "beauty" and "youth" of young man.

4.2. The Second Symbolic Meaning of Rose Image: Love

In addition to beauty and youth, love is also a theme in Shakespeare's sonnets. For example, in Sonnet 109, rose imagery is used to symbolize his beloved: "For nothing this wide universe I call/ Save thou, **my Rose**; in it thou art my all" (Sonnet 109). Here, the speaker use "my Rose" means "my love". From the capitalizing letter "R" of rose, it can be seen that "Rose" is very normal and actually the name of his beloved, because roses signify romantic love. From the Sonnet 63 to the Sonnet 66, Shakespeare's speaker has used "my love" continuously to address his beloved. The same expression "my love" and "my Rose" can be seen his sincere love flow like a river without end: "Against **my love** shall be as I am now" (Sonnet 63). "That Time will come and take **my love** away" (Sonnet 64). "That in black ink **my love** may still shine bright" (Sonnet 65). "Tired with all these, from these would I be gone,/ Save that to die, I leave **my love** alone" (Sonnet 66).

4.3. The Third Symbolic Meaning of Rose Image: Immortality

In Shakespeare's opinion, rose is a perfect combination of both outward fair and inward worth. In nature, rose is a sweetly scented flower. In Sonnet 54, Shakespeare's speaker extols the pleasant smell of roses to such an extent that he associates the sweet perfume of roses with truth, this truth includes immortality [1].

O, how much more doth beauty beauteous seem
 By that sweet ornament which truth doth give.
 The rose looks fair, but fairer we it deem
 For that sweet odor which doth in it live.
 The canker blooms have full as deep a dye
 As the perfumèd tincture of the roses,
 Hang on such thorns, and play as wantonly
 When summer's breath their maskèd buds discloses;

But, for their virtue only is their show,
 They live unwooded and unrespected fade,
 Die to themselves. Sweet roses do not so;
 Of their sweet deaths are sweetest odors made.
 And so of you, beauteous and lovely youth,
 When that shall vade, by verse distils your truth. (Sonnets 54).

In the first quatrain of Sonnet 54, he explicitly puts forward the argument: Truth is the sweet ornament, which makes an already beautiful thing more beautiful or even stunningly beautiful. Rose is a flower which contains both beauty and fragrance. The reason why the fragrance of rose will enhance the beauty of rose is that the pleasant smell is an inseparable companion to rose. As the saying goes, beauty without virtue is like rose without fragrance. Fragrance is the inner beauty of rose, which will make rose look fairer. So truth is to the beauty what sweet smell is to the rose. Besides, beauty without truth is transient and short lived, real roses symbolize true beauty which is immortal. Real roses are both sweet when they are in or past the prime of their lives or even when they are shriveled. Shakespeare's speaker contrasts the sweet death of the roses with the bitter death of the canker blooms sharply. The latter dies a miserable death while the former dies a sweet death. The adjective "sweet" is used three times in two short lines to emphasize the pleasant smell and inward beauty of rose. Shakespeare's speaker even uses superlative degree "sweetest" to modify odors to highly praise the heady perfume of the roses and the worthy sacrifice of the roses. From the comparative degree of "fairer" (Line 3) to the superlative degree of "sweetest" (Line 12), the varying degrees of the key adjectives make the process of distilling perfume increase from the greater strength to the greatest degree, which intensifies the conclusion: immortality. What's more, "distill" also emphasizes his friend will remain immortal in his verse. Therefore, from this level, "rose" symbolize immortality.

5. Conclusion

Shakespeare also named "rose poet of European", "rose" images in his sonnets are not only simple images to make sonnets look perfect, they also convey symbolic meanings, which is the "key" to explore the value of poem. With the rose imagery, the speaker extols his beloved passionately and heartily. The successful use of the rose imagery helps to reveal Shakespeare's values and ideals of humanism. By successfully employing the rose imagery, Shakespeare extols the virtues of love, beauty and youth, displays his faith in the immortality of his verse. The rose imagery in Shakespeare's sonnets helps readers appreciate and cherish the beauty and youth, love and truth all the time. However, the limitation of the study is that the author just lists two reasons why Shakespeare prefers rose in his sonnets, but the reasons could be more. So, in further research, the author will explore more reasons of using "rose" image in Shakespeare's sonnets.

Note: All the sonnets in this article taking as example are from Shakespeare's Sonnet, edited by Barbara, A. Mowat, Paul Werstine [7].

Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest.

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