



# Time and Eternity in Shakespeare's Sonnets

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**How to cite this paper:** Xue, M.C. (2023) Time and Eternity in Shakespeare's Sonnets. *Open Access Library Journal*, 10: e10008. <https://doi.org/10.4236/oalib.1110008>

**Received:** March 14, 2023

**Accepted:** April 18, 2023

**Published:** April 21, 2023

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## Abstract

Time is a vital keynote of Shakespeare's sonnets. From the perspective of time, this paper attempts to explore the theme of time and the ways how to against time in Shakespeare's sonnets. It reveals Shakespeare's positive attitude towards time and making efforts to keep eternity, and his affirmation of human ability against time, which is filled with philosophy and implications.

## Subject Areas

Literature

## Keywords

Sonnets, Theme of Time, Eternity, Shakespeare

## 1. Introduction

Shakespeare wrote 154 sonnets during his life, which have won great acclaim and continued attention since their publication in 1609. In Shakespeare's sonnets, there are many themes, such as friendship, love, art, and time. Among them, time is not only the theme, but also the keynote. Time is an important internal factor in his construction and connection of 154 sonnets and one of the most interesting themes that influenced the poetry of the 16th century. In his sonnets, Shakespeare not only expresses the cruelty and ruthlessness of the sword of time to nature and life, but also displays that he has done all his efforts to surpass time and preserve immortality with solutions. For hundreds of years, many domestic and oversea scholars have appreciated and interpreted Shakespeare's sonnets from comprehensive and multiple perspectives. For example, scholars discuss love, friendship, time, beauty, and so on, which are popular in the Renaissance. However, most of the studies on time are from the perspective of cognitive metaphor and analyze time-related sonnets independently [1]. In

fact, time is the basic framework of Shakespeare's sonnets, and many sonnets are closely related. Therefore, from the perspective of time, this paper will take sonnet 73 and 116 as examples and combine them with other sonnets to explore Shakespeare's attitude towards time and his method of fighting against time and keeping eternity in sonnets.

## 2. Time in Shakespeare's Sonnets

Time is an important internal factor in construction and connection of Shakespeare's sonnets. The word "time" directly appears in sonnets over and over again, which shows that time is indeed a major theme of sonnets' concern. Following are the statistics on the distribution of the word "time" and time-related words (Table 1). The form includes different ways of expression and frequency of "time" in Shakespeare's sonnets.

**Table 1.** Distribution of the word "time" and time-related words in sonnets.

Words	Frequency	Distribution in Following Sonnets
Time	44	1, 3, 5, 12, 16, 17, 18, 30, 32, 39, 44, 47, 49, 52, 55, 57, 58, 63, 70, 73, 76, 97, 100, 106, 107, 108, 109, 115, 117, 120, 124
Times	9	6, 11, 37, 38, 57, 58, 60
TIME	24	12, 15, 16, 19, 22, 60, 63, 64, 65, 77, 100, 116, 123, 126
Hour/Hours	12	5, 16, 19, 33, 36, 52, 57, 58, 61, 63, 68
Clock	2	12, 57
Total	99	

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

Besides, related-words such as hour, week, day, month, season winter, and spring are also frequently used in sonnets. For example, "day" appears in 46 places, "hour" appears in 16 and "winter" in 10 [2]. From this, it can be seen that time is the keynote of sonnets.

## 3. Time Is Never Resting and Devours Everything

People in Renaissance believed that time were merciless and could destroy all good things in the world [3]. In Shakespeare's sonnets, he explored the vicissitudes of beauty, friendship and love over time [3]. In his sonnets, he always emphasizes that "swift footed" time mercilessly devours youth and beauty. A beautiful young man in the river of time will be eroded by time, with the forehead branded by the marks of time, until the face becomes wrinkled and miserable. Taking sonnet 73 as an example, it can be seen that time is powerful.

## 73

That time of year thou mayst in me behold  
 When yellow leaves, or none, or few, do hang  
 Upon those boughs which shake against the cold,  
 Bare ruined choirs where late the sweet birds sang.  
 In me thou seest the twilight of such day  
 As after sunset fadeth in the west,  
 Which by and by black night doth take away,  
 Death's second self, that seals up all in rest.  
 In me thou see'st the glowing of such fire  
 That on the ashes of his youth doth lie,  
 As the death-bed whereon it must expire,  
 Consum'd with that which it was nourished by.  
 This thou perceivest, which makes thy love more strong,  
 To love that well which thou must leave ere long

The main theme in Sonnet 73 is the process of aging and how the speaker feels about it. The speaker constructs a metaphor in order to characterize the nature of old age. Throughout the first lines, the speaker relates old age to a particular "time of the year". First, old age is portrayed as autumn, where "yellow leaves, or none, or few, do hang". The speaker suggests that aging is similar to the moment of the year when the leaves have almost completely fallen, the weather is cold, and the birds left their branches. This metaphor emphasizes the harshness and emptiness of old age. This can be read, especially, when the speaker says that "boughs ... shake against the cold" and "Bare ruin'd choirs". Sonnet 73 portrays the speaker's anxieties towards aging, and, in the first four lines, the speaker seems to be implying that autumn is the particular time of the year when death occurs. Moreover, the speaker compares his aging process to nature, and, particularly, to autumn. In this sonnet, the speaker wants to express that you can see the aging process, I'm closing to death. So, in this part we can see the late autumn and early winter images which show decaying and closing to death. Then the speaker uses twilight, dark night, and ashes of fire to show the end of youth. Energy and passion is consumed, and everything is decaying.

In Shakespeare's sonnets, he fully demonstrates the power of time to destroy everything and his thought of fleeting youth and aging appearance, thus realizing the inevitability of passing time. He has written time as a cruel a bloody tyrant (sonnet 16), a beast (sonnet 19), while youth and beauty as the field that the ploughman plows down (sonnet 2), brave day sunk in hideous night (sonnet 12), and darling buds of May that rough wind blow (sonnet 18). Time is "never—resting" (sonnet 5) and "devouring" (sonnet 19). "And nothing gainst Time's scythe can make defence/Save breed to brave him when he takes thee hence" (Sonnet 12); "O thou my lovely boy who in thy power,/Dost hold Time's fickle glass his fickle hour" (Sonnet 126) and images "Time's scythe/sickle", "Time's fickle glass", "Time's injurious hand" illustrate time is merciless and

devouring.

#### 4. Ways to against Time

From the analysis of the sonnets mentioned above, time is never resting and can destroy and devour everything. It seems that Shakespeare has a pessimistic attitude towards time. However, in his sonnets, it can also be found that optimistic attitude towards time and his efforts to surpass time and preserve immortality and eternity with following solutions.

##### 4.1. True Love Can Surpass Time

In his sonnets, love is one of the most important themes. He implied many images to symbolize love, for example, the image “rose”, “beauty’s rose” (sonnet 1), “roses have thorns” (sonnet 35), “rosy lips and cheeks” (sonnet 116) and “my Rose” (sonnet 109), all those “roses” are used to symbolize his beloved. Scholars tend to study the love them of sonnets, especially the nature of love and analyze love-related sonnets separately [4]. However, Shakespeare always emphasizes true love will never fade away and highlight the mortality of love. Especially, he explained the relationship between true love and time, and highlight true love can be eternal and against time.

##### 116

Let me not to the marriage of true minds  
 Admit impediments. Love is not love  
 Which alters when it alteration finds  
 Or bends with the remover to remove.  
 O, no, it is an ever-fixèd mark  
 That looks on tempests and is never shaken;  
 It is the star to every wand’ring bark,  
 Whose worth’s unknown, although his height be taken.  
 Love’s not Time’s fool, though rosy lips and cheeks  
 Within his bending sickle’s compass come;  
 Love alters not with his brief hours and weeks,  
 But bears it out even to the edge of doom.  
 If this be error, and upon me proved,  
 I never writ, nor no man ever loved.

This sonnet 116 explores the nature of love and what “true love” is. In this sonnet, Shakespeare’s speaker is ruminating on love [5]. He says that love never changes, and if it does, it was not true or real in the first place. He compares love to a star that is always seen and never changing. It is real and permanent, and it is something on which a person can count. Even though the people in love may change as time passes, their love will not. In this sonnet, the images “ever-fixed mark” and “star” highlight the value of true love. Love is constant, strong and enduring throughout time, making true love a way to overcome the constraints of time.

## 4.2. Marriage and Childbirth Can Conquer Time

The poet believes that humans are not powerless in the face of time. Human can transcend the boundaries of time through the reproduction of the next generation to realize the value of human own and the meaning of life [6]. Although death is inevitable, beauty and virtue can be continued through reproduction, thus achieving the resistance of time, and keeping eternity of youth and beauty from generation to generation. Therefore, while praising young man's youth and beauty, the poet persuaded young man to preserve his youth and beauty by getting married and having children. The poet raises this theme at the beginning of his sonnets. In the first sonnet, the poet praises the beauty of friends "Thou that art now the world's fresh ornament, And only herald to the gaudy spring" to inform his young friend if he doesn't marry and has children as soon as possible, will "mak'st waste in niggarding." then poet through "the fair child is proof of beauty" (sonnet 2), taking the child as his own "glass" "window" (sonnet 3), taking the young friend who is reluctant to marry as "beauteous niggard" "Profitless usurer" (sonnet 4), "were not summer's distillation left" (sonnet 5) to repeat this theme.

The poet, on the one hand, achieves the purpose of exhortation by threatening his beloved friend to go to the grave alone and withered if he does not get married and has children. Gruesome images of death appear in his sonnets, such as "Pity the world, or else this glutton be—To eat the world's due, by the grave and thee" (sonnet 1), and "But if thou live remembered not to be, Die single, and thine image dies with thee." (sonnet 3). "Thy unused beauty must be tombed with thee, Which usèd lives th' executor to be." (sonnet 4) "Be not self-willed, for thou art much too fair To be death's conquest and make worms thine heir." (sonnet 6). "So thou, thyself outgoing in thy noon, Unlooked on diest unless thou get a son." (sonnet 7). "Thou single wilt prove none" (sonnet 8). The poet further points out that "But beauty's waste hath in the world an end, And, kept unused, the user so destroys it. No love toward others in that bosom sits That on himself such murd'rous shame commits" (sonnet 9) if a young man does not have children, he has committed murder, he has committed a shameful murder against himself. then "gainst thyself thou stick'st not to conspire" (sonnet 10), also, in sonnet 11, "threescore year would make the world away. Let those whom nature hath not made for store, Harsh, featureless, and rude, barrenly perish" (sonnet 11), speaker describes celibacy as the destruction of the family and the whole world, as an act of treason, and even as a crime so wicked that it will destroy the world.

On the other hand, the poet persuades his friends through the benefits of marriage and childbirth. Youth and beauty are not the property of an individual; they are "Nature's bequest" (sonnet 4), to be handed down from generation to generation, not to be buried in the grave. If a young man gets married and has children, beauty and youth will continue: "This fair child of mine Shall sum my count and make my old excuse, Proving his beauty by succession thine" (son-

net 2). “But flowers distilled, though they with winter meet, Leese but their show; their substance still lives sweet.” (sonnet 5). “then you were Your self again after yourself’s decease When your sweet issue your sweet form should bear” (sonnet 13).

### 4.3. Poetry Can Keep Eternity over Time

In addition to the sonnets urging marriage and childbirth, the poet expresses the idea that the power of poetry can maintain youth and beauty, that’s one of the ways to against time and keep eternity. When marriage and childbirth cannot persuade his young friend, the poet had to change his words. In fact, Shakespeare was using his belief in literary immortality to maintain the youth and beauty of young man. One of the distinguishing features of the Renaissance was that the artists of this period forge a belief in themselves that their works had eternal value. Literary immortality and art permanence are popular themes of poetry during the Renaissance. For Renaissance poets, poetry was immortal beyond time, and thus poetry can give “immortal fame” to those beauty and goodness of the objects of their praise. Poetry has the power to against time, and the object in poetry can be immortalized. Sonnet 18 is such a declaration. In this sonnet, the speaker regards his young friends as a mild summer day, the buds of May and the sun in the sky, but these cannot avoid changes controlled by fate, they will be devoured by time. Only Poetry can surpass time, keeping young man’s youth and beauty: “So long as men can breathe or eyes can see, So long lives this, and this gives life to thee”. What’s more, in sonnet 19, the poet describes that time can destroy and devour everything, however, he still believes that his poems have the power to against time and keep his beloved young. In sonnet 55, 60, 65 and 107, the poet also expresses the same idea.

In the sonnets, the endless vitality of poetry is greater than the fierce beast and the long life of phoenix, wider than the vast earth and the boundless ocean, more impregnable than the stone, steel door. Sometimes the poet admits that the face of his beloved friend will fade, but he believes that poetry can keep the spirit of his beloved friend alive. As in sonnet 63: “His beauty shall in these black lines be seen, and they shall live, and he in them still green.” It expresses the Christian belief that the body dies and the spirit lives forever [7].

From the aforementioned solutions to counter the effects of time, true love, marriage, childbirth, and poetry can resist time and maintain immortality and eternity. Shakespeare seems to praise true love, marriage, childbirth and poetry in his sonnets, but he actually highlights the wisdom and greatness of mankind through these three ways that humans take to against time. Although time has the power to change and devour everything, humans are not powerless. Humans have found solutions to withstand the effects of time. In Shakespeare’s Hamlet, “What a piece of work is man! How noble in reason! how infinite in faculty! in form and moving how express and admirable! in action how like an angel! in apprehension how like a god! The beauty of the world! The paragon of animals!”

(Hamlet, II, ii), it can be found that Shakespeare conveys the same idea, the greatness of human and praise human's ability to against time. So, from this perspective, it also emphasizes wisdom of human and human power.

## 5. Conclusion

Time is one of the most important themes in Shakespeare's sonnets. The theme of time is the logical premise for the poet to create his poetry. In Shakespeare's sonnets, "time" and time-related words appear 99 times in total, which can reflect his "time" consciousness and attitude towards time. He emphasizes the destructive power and ruthlessness of time in his sonnets. Though time is never resting and can devour everything, he provides solutions against time, marriage, childbirth, true love and poetry. Humans can keep eternity in endless time in three ways. These three ways against time can also reflect his praise of beauty, love, friendship and poetry, and his affirmation of human ability against time. What's more, it can also be found that Shakespeare praises the greatness of humans. So, the theme of time and ways against time are the logic to consist of Shakespeare's sonnets. It also can reveal that the poet wants to search for something beyond time to change the passive position that humans are controlled by time and make efforts to keep eternity. One limitation of the study is the narrow selection of sonnets used as examples. To address this, further research will explore the themes of time and eternity more thoroughly in a wider range of Shakespeare's sonnets.

## Note

All the sonnets in this article taking as example are from Shakespeare's Sonnet, edited by Barbara A. Mowat and Paul Werstine [8].

## Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest.

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