

Shakespeare's Concept of Time: A Study of his Sonnets

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Abstract. The paper aims at examining the concept of time in some sonnets of William Shakespeare. His sonnets focus on various themes like beauty, friendship, love, procreation, nature, time and death. Moreover, the concept of time is a major theme in his sonnets. Shakespeare depicted time in his sonnets as a great force. It is not only an actual enemy of human being but also of nature. Shakespeare shows time as mightier and powerful. It is the time which brings decline to every beautiful creature of the world. It also brings death with the passage of time. Therefore, he depicted time as an evil force as well. Shakespeare says in sonnet 1 that the beauty of his friend will be destroyed in course of time, if he does not continue his generation. Here, time is referred to as a great destroyer. Similarly, his sonnet 18 refers to short-lived summer which is fatal for all creatures. Finally, his sonnet 19 presents time as 'devouring' and 'swift footed'. Here again, time is presented as dreadful. Thus, time is powerful of all wherein none can survive of it. It destroys every smaller and greater thing with its changing course of nature. Emily Dickinson also refers to time as an evil. According to her, time destroys the communion between man and Nature. Here, both the poet's concept of time is similar to some extent. They consider time as a forceful agent of death wherein none can escape of its clutches. Thus, the present study will explore Shakespeare's concept and views of time and its relevance in today's world.

Keywords : Time; friendship; procreation; death; relevance; forceful; nature; mightier and devastating.

In Hindu philosophy, 'Time' basically refers to kaala. Here, Kaala implies both time and death. Time stands for the god of death. It is also known as Yama. Time is bound to human life. Whereas Kaala determines a person's life upon this earth. Thereby, death and time are related to each other. A person's time begins with his/her birth and ends with his/her death. Hindus believe that the process of creation moves in cycles. Each cycle has four ages of time, as *Satya Yuga*, *Treta Yuga*, *Dwapar Yuga* and *Kali Yuga*. It has cyclical process of creation. It 'begins to end and ends to begin'. It is said that if a person overcomes time, he becomes immortal. So, death is not the end of time but a door to the next cycle of birth. In this regard, the selected sonnets will explore Shakespeare's own concept of time.

William Shakespeare is an English poet, playwright and actor. He is widely regarded as the greatest writer in the English language and world's pre-eminent dramatist. He is often called England's national poet and the 'Bard of Avon'. His works include some collaborations, consisting of 37 plays, 154 sonnets, two long narrative poems, and a few other verses. But the authorship of some verses is

uncertain. His early plays were mainly comedies and histories. In the early 17th century, Shakespeare wrote 'problem plays' as *Measure for Measure*, *Troilus and Cressida*, and *All's Well That Ends Well*. He then wrote mainly tragedies until about 1608, including *Hamlet*, *King Lear*, *Othello*, and *Macbeth*. These are considered the finest works in the English language. In his last phase, he wrote tragicomedies. It is also known as romances like *Pericles*, *Cymbeline*, *The Winter's Tale*, and *The Tempest*. William Shakespeare is world's greatest dramatist. His appeal is eternal. He satisfies the taste of Elizabethan audience. Dryden remarked about Shakespeare:

Shakespeare was the man of, who of all modern
and perhaps ancient poets, had the largest and most
comprehensive soul. (Mundra 2007:199)

Shakespeare's greatness lies in his power to combine the particular with universal. The taste of audience has changed, the dramas of age have changed, but the appeal of Shakespeare has remained undiminished. In this regard, Ben Jonson has very well remarked:

He was not of an age, but of all times. (200)

Shakespeare's sonnets mainly convey his own thoughts, meditations, and the mental conflicts. Moreover, it depicts his friendship with the Earl of Southampton on the one hand, and his love for the dark lady on the other. In this way, his sonnets have been divided into two parts. The first part, 1 to 126 sonnets is dedicated to Earl of Southampton. The second part, 127 to 152 sonnets is dedicated to the Dark Lady. The remaining two sonnets, 153 and 154 are the celebration of love. They inscribe the invincible power of love. Thus Shakespeare's sonnets mainly focus on the subject of love, friendship, nature, death, beauty, time, changes and stability. They are still relevant in day to day life.

Shakespeare applied the term 'time' about seventy-eight times in 126 out of 154 sonnets. It is said that time is the fourth character in his sonnets. It has played the role of a villain in his sonnets as a 'bloody tyrant' (67), 'devouring' and 'swift footed' (74), 'hideous night' (58). However, Shakespeare tries to conquer time.

"From Fairest Creature We Desire Increase" is the first sonnet among his 154 sonnets. It focuses on the theme of procreation. Here, the poet says that everyone wants beautiful and lovely things to redouble. So, the poet convinces his friend to procreate his generation. His beauty may preserve through his children. Only they can memorialise his beauty from generation to generation. If he does not rear his family, his beauty will destroy after his death. It will turn into ashes and 'making a famine where abundance lies' (35). Because every prettiest and loveliest thing destroys itself in course of time. So, the poet says to his friend not to be enemy to

himself. He tells that this time he looks handsome and charming. But his beauty will die out with his death. Therefore, the poet suggests his friend to have mercy and pity to the world. He eats up the beauty of the world like glutton being confined to himself. The day is not so far when he will be devoured by his own death :

From fairest creature we desire increase,
That thereby beauty's rose might never dies,
But as the ripper should by time decease.

(Paul 2010: 1-3)

The poet seems to present the destructive and cruel nature of time towards all the creatures. In this regard, Alexander Pope also depicted time as destroyer in his "Imitation of Horace". He says about how time steals youth and very life:

Years following years steal something ev'ry day.
At last they steal us from ourselves away. (Internet)

"Shall I Compare Thee To A Summer's Day", numbered 18 is the most delightful sonnet. It begins with the poet questioning himself for comparing his friend's beauty to that of a summer's day. The poet considers his friend being more graceful and lasting in summer's day, whereas the wind causes much damage to the tender buds. The summer has too short life. The sun often becomes bright and hot. Thereby every beautiful thing loses its beauty either by chance or by the changing course of Nature. But his friend's beauty remains unchanged. It never reduces in any circumstances. Because his friend's beauty is eternal. Even death cannot outshine his beauty. His beauty will multiply rather than reduce after his death. The poet writes this sonnet as a tribute to his friend. Therefore, this sonnet will impart imperishable beauty and life to his friend as long as this sonnet will be read. Here, the poet seems to challenge time for its destructive nature:

But thy eternal summer shall not fade,
Nor loose possession of that fair thou ow'st,
Nor shall death brag thou wand'rest in his shade,
When in eternal lines to time thou grow'st. (9-12)

The poet claims that time can destroy the things and can save their lives too. In this sonnet, it is time which destroys every pretty thing in summer. And it is time which gives immortal life to his friend. The poet presents time both as a saviour and destroyer:

So long as men can breathe or eyes can see,
So long lives this, and this gives life to thee. (13-14)

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John Milton's concept of time is quite similar to that of Shakespeare in his poem "On Time". In this poem, Milton seems to escape the ravage of time. The poet presents time as deceitful and living thing. He says human being must defeat it attaining an eternal life in heaven. From the very beginning of the poem, the poet implies that time is destined to death. The poet seems to triumph over death, chance and time as well:

When once our heav'nly-guided soul shall clime,
Then all this earthly grosnes quit,
Attir'd with stars, we shall forever sit,
Triumphing over Death, Chance, and thee O Time.
(Internet)

Shakespeare's sonnet 19, "Devouring Time Blunt thou the Lion's Paws" echoed the mightier and cruel nature of time. The title of the poem itself addresses time as 'Devouring Time'. It is time which destroys everything with the passage of time. Time can also destroy the long life of a bird like phoenix. This bird was supposed to live for six hundred years. Time has the power to devour things. In other words, time can take away the sharp teeth of a tiger from its jaws. It can make the earth devour of its own offspring. It can make beautiful season into ugly and ugly into beautiful. Time can do worst to everything, as it pleases. But, the poet claims that it cannot cause any damage to his friend's beauty. Because, the beauty of the poet's friend will sustain through this sonnet. His friend will remain as youthful and charming as he is at present. And this sonnet will preserve his beauty and youth. Here Shakespeare reveals devastating nature of time in the opening lines of this sonnet. He personified time here presenting it as a human being. It has the power to swallow the creatures:

Devouring time blunt thou the lion's paws,
And make the earth devour her own sweet brood,
Pluck the keen teeth from fierce tiger's jaw's,
And burnt the long lived phoenix in her blood,
Make glad and sorry seasons as thou fleet'st,
And do what'er thou wilt swift footed Time
(Paul 1-6)

The poet tells that time can do worst thing to his friend's beauty. But his beauty will never fade, rather it will retain through this sonnet. The poet has recorded his beauty by writing. Here, time stands as a healer in the following lines:

Yet do worst old time: despite thy wrong,
My love shall in my verse ever live young. (12-13)

To conclude, Shakespeare again triumphs over time here. In this regard, Shakespeare's concept of time resembles that of to Emily Dickinson. Both the

poets address time as cruel to all creatures that none can escape of its clutches. Shakespeare says that time is merely a 'dressing of former sight'. In other words, it is rehabilitation of past experiences which fade only to repeat itself on some future date. Hereby, time brings about changes in every walk of human life as well as in the sphere of Nature. It is quite relevant today. Every creature comes on this earth with time. It is the time itself which brings old age to human being. Ultimately, it takes away people's lives in the form of death. Here, it suggests the idea that everything in this world is temporary. But time is permanent.

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