

Similarities and Differences Between a Spenserian Sonnet and a Shakespearean Sonnet

Both sonnets of Spenser and Shakespeare are respectively similar, although different at the same time. First of all, we could say that they share the main theme or topic, which deals with the triumph of love over oblivion or the eternity of love through poetry. So it means that it is implicit the well-known literary topic of the eternity through fame. This shared topic consists on a divine, sacred and heavenly love influenced by Platonism and Christian ideas, and taken from the Italian poetry of Petrarch. Even though we have two similar conceptions about this heavenly kind of love, we have two different points of view coming from these two sonneteers. These differences on semantics will also be shown in the structure of both sonnets. On the one hand, Spenser's sonnet talks about the author's attempt to immortalize his beloved or her love. The first quatrain tells us the desperation of the man when he remembers an incident which took place any summer day at the seaside, in which he writes his beloved's name in the sand of the beach but the ocean waves wipe it away, as time will destroy all manmade things. In the next stanza we have a change of direction because a second voice different from the author's voice. This reaction of the woman's voice claiming that he intends to immortalize her is not worthy because at the end we all die, so she advises him not to worry about being mortal. Therefore, between the second and the third quatrains, the volta is found, which implies a semantic change in terms of the opposition of the man's argument to the woman's argument. The term "volta" means "turn" and it refers to the change in thought in a sonnet. This third stanza is a turning point in the poem in which the author shows that she is wrong quoting that she will be able to survive death and be eternally remembered because of his writings, like this poem. The final couplet summarizes the topic by comparing the eternity of love and death to the brief life and humanity.

Regarding structure, this is a Spenserian sonnet, which consists of a mixture of the Italian and the English structures of a sonnet, just because it is like a Shakespearean sonnet in terms of structure but it is like a Petrarchan sonnet in terms of meaning, as the volta is between the second and the third stanza. Thus, the rhyme scheme is abab bcbc cdc d ff, made up of three quatrains and a couplet. Consequently, Spenser uses the rhyme scheme to create a contrast between earthly ideas and objects that will finally be destroyed, like the image of the sand, and heavenly ones that will last forever (like his lines, "my verse"). So time and nature are shown to destroy the author's manmade works and his attempts are not successful. Then, the author changes his speech and shows how he can immortalize his beloved in the poem he is writing. For this reason, Spenser uses a very melodic rhythm and an iambic pentameter to create a calm and a pleasant-sounding poem. His frequent use of alliteration such as "die in dust" and "verse in virtue" helps to complete the whole poem and string together the themes of the poem.

On the other hand, Shakespeare keeps talking about the same topic of the passing of time and the immortalizing of the recipient. In this sense, there is a small difference between Spenser's sonnet and Shakespeare's sonnet, due to the fact that both sonnets express the speakers' love to their beloveds. Shakespeare also addresses the idea that love can never change and will outlive death and oblivion in the eyes of the future generations and even until the end of time. Shakespeare in the final couplet stresses his belief in the firm nature of true love by challenging anyone who can prove the opposite. The final two lines serve as the conclusion to the sonnet, containing the same message about love that show self-confidence, a firm belief in true love and a positive attitude about the future of true love.

Unlike Spenser's sonnet, in which two voices are exchanging words, this second sonnet is entirely expressed from one point of view as Shakespeare uses only one voice. This single voice stands up for one main idea through all the poem, so no contrast is shown in the poem. Moreover, this contrast of ideas in Spenser's sonnet is noticeable by the volta between the second and third stanza, but in Shakespeare's sonnet a volta is not found as there is no change of meaning through the lines of the poem.

Another difference between the two sonnets is the rhyme scheme. Shakespeare's sonnet has the rhyme scheme abab cdcd efef gg, consisting of three quatrains and a couplet.