

A Brief Analysis of Ethical Themes in Shakespeare's Sonnets

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Abstract: Shakespeare's sonnets is a summit of the development of the sonnet in England. Themes in hissonnets are often related to time, love, friendship, art and the eternity and a number of his philosophical thoughtsare expressed through these themes. This essay will focus on analyzing love, family and social ethics expressedby them to explore Shakespeare's humanistic ethical thoughts.

Key words : sonnets love ethics family ethics social ethics

I. Shakespeare's Sonnets

When it comes to William Shakespeare, his four great tragedies and comedies immediately emerge out in our mind. However, as a giant in his time and even all the times, his achievements are far more than these dramas. His sonnets is as well as well-known by the world. Since Philip Sidney had published his *Astrophel and Stella* in 1591, the great influence of Petrarca's sonnets began to happen widely to more and more poets. Under such a popular wave of sonnets in England, Shakespeare started his sonnets creation and formed his unique style. His sonnets and Spenser's are two famous varieties of Petrarca's sonnets. Like his dramas, his sonnets also left us valuable literary treasures. Zhao Yuan commented his sonnets as "a peak in the history of poetry" in his article.(6) During Shakespeare's whole life, he wrote 154 sonnets in all, among which the first 126 sonnets were written to a handsome aristocratic young man, from the 127th to 152nd were written to "Dark Lady" and the left two were not relevant to the first two series of poems. And Shakespeare's sonnets have been the focus of numerous and innovative studies of scholars at home and abroad from the ancient to modern times since they were published. They have begun with studying the content, themes, imagery and writing techniques of the poems, and then as various literary theories have emerged and developed, they have combined with them to form innovative perspectives to reinterpret and analyze Shakespeare's sonnets, exploring the literary values of these sonnets as they evolve with the times. Shakespeare, the great humanist, whose sonnets reveal people's thoughts, feelings and inner world and explore the mystery of eternal humanity, which reflects the infiltration of ethical ideas in his works. The outstanding contribution of Shakespeare's sonnets lies in that they not only project the general picture of ethics in the Renaissance period, but also contain the thinking and inquiry of ethics. This essay is written to explore Shakespeare's humanistic ethical thoughts by analyzing love, family and social ethics the three ethical themes in his sonnets.

II. Love Ethics in Shakespeare's Sonnets

Love is the main melody of sonnets, obviously as well as of Shakespeare's sonnets and love ethics, one of the classical ethical themes, is impossible to be ignored. According to relevant researches, there are two lovers in his sonnets, a handsome young noble man and "Dark Lady", both of who have illicit relationships with the poet. In other words, Shakespeare's sonnets themselves violates normal ethical relations in terms of the people he wrote for. According to Tu An's analysis in his *The Greatest Mystery in British Literature: Shakespeare's sonnets*, the young man, "Dark Lady" and the poet the three are also a complicated triangle of love conflicts which is shown in Sonnet 144 (4). Therefore, it's worth digging out Shakespeare's love ethics hidden in these poems.

Professor Luo Yimin had ever stated that "Shakespeare's sonnets express love in three aspects: truth, kindness and fairness."(3)The first feature displayed in his sonnets is "truth", and Sonnet 116 is a full presentation of it:

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:
 Oh no! It is an ever-fixed mark
 That looks on tempests and is never shaken;
 It is the star to every wandering 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.(1)

In the poem, the first four lines introduce the author's view of love that true love is not hindered by anything and put forward the assumption that love which goes with the alterations and removers is not true love. The second four lines highlight the image of true love through metaphors: love is "an ever-fixed mark" showing its firmness and love is a guiding "star" indicating its eternity. The third four lines strengthen true love is able to fight against the decay of time. The last two lines of the sonnet are a heroic couplet, often whimsical and surprising, and as an aphorism of its own bring out the theme. In the last two lines of the poem, it looks like Shakespeare is overturning his mentioned remarks, but it pushes us into a deep thinking of true love. The poet reveals the theme successively, making the readers' understanding of true love become a visual description with some metaphors and then deepening the understanding of true with a "if" conditional sentence. Shakespeare manages to make a good use of form and structure of sonnet to serve its subject matter, conveying a good view of true love to the world through rigorous poetic structure, flexible rhetoric and vivid images. He yearned for the eternity of love by eulogizing the love of a couple. But strong and stable love is not easy to obtain which depends on the unity of two minds and the perfect harmony of two spirits. In his Sonnet 116, moving from the negative to the positive, on the one hand, Shakespeare sings the unwavering love is capable of overcoming all obstacles including the test of time, on the other hand, the passage of time and the aging of appearance makes him doubt that.

The second distinctive feature of his view of love is kindness. The kindness in Shakespeare's view of love is the call of fidelity as in Sonnet 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 ruin'd choirs, where late the sweet birds sang.
 In me thou see'st 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
 Consumed with that which it was nourish'd by.
 This thou perceivest, which makes thy love more strong,
 To love that well which thou must leave ere long.(1)

In the first quatrain, the poet regarded the lifetime as the four seasons in a year and focus on the autumn which has the metaphor of the old age. In the second four lines, he continues to use the twilight to mean the decay phrase of a human being. In the third quatrain, the poet describes himself as a remnant flame like "such fire that on the ashes of his youth doth lie" and "ashes" tells his lover his life is coming to an end. Shakespeare understates a man's life with the metaphors of the cycle of four seasons in a year, the change in a day and the change of the flame, pointing out that when human is at old ages of life, like yellow leaves in autumn, like a sunset dissolved in the west, like dying ashes. Life is coming to an end, death is coming, so we must seize every minute of time to go to cherish life and the love. The couplet of the poem is his inner call for his lover's strong and faithful love. Through strengthening the meaning of fidelity to life, he expresses his burning desire for loyal and steadfast emotions.

Fairness is the third feature of his view of love. In the great humanist's opinion, one's appearance is not the real beauty but the fairness of his or her inner heart. Take Shakespeare's Sonnet 130 as an evidence:

My mistress's eyes are nothing like the sun;
 Coral is far more red than her lips' red;
 If snow be white, why then her breasts are dun;

If hairs be wires, black wires grow on her head.
 I have seen roses damask'd, red and white,
 But no such roses see I in her cheeks;
 And in some perfumes is there more delight
 Than in the breath that from my mistress reeks.
 I love to hear her speak, yet well I know
 That music hath a far more pleasing sound;
 I grant I never saw a goddess go;
 My mistress, when she walks, treads on the ground.
 And yet, by heaven, I think my love as rare
 As any she belied with false compare. (1)

The poet has been describing his lover whose eyes are not as bright as the sun, whose lips are not as bright as coral, whose chest is not as white as snow, whose hair is not golden, and whose voice is not as beautiful as music in the first four lines. Although the lover is not a perfect lady, she is a beauty in the poet's eyes and more beautiful than any beautiful fairy. Shakespeare described his lover as an ordinary female image through a series of descriptions of his lover's appearance by several comparisons. After comparing his lover with the sun, coral, snow, roses, music and goddess, the poet frankly admits that "my mistress" his lover is not beautiful, but "I" still inexplicably fall in love with her in a complete mess, as the Chinese old saying "Beauty lies in the eyes of the beholder" in the next lines. The beauty in the eyes of lovers is determined by the individual aesthetic value and aesthetic tendency not only inferred by his or her face. In Shakespeare's time, women in upper class or the lower class all love to dress up with makeups, making themselves a good face into a palette. But as a humanist who doesn't agree with that, Shakespeare held the belief that the real beauty is a natural, simple, unaffected one, just like his "Dark Lady". In Sonnet 127, he thinks that those who make up are "Fairing the foul with art's false borrow'd face"(Shakespeare 288) and that black beauty is truly beautiful when she remains true. Thus it can be concluded that what hide under the stimulation of love should be our deep or subconscious psychological or spiritual aesthetic needs rather than simple physiological needs, that is, when aesthetic objects conform to the aesthetic psychological or spiritual needs, love really comes into being. That is just Shakespeare thought love is the product of a union of hearts. True love is not simply based on the other's superficial beauty, youth or passion but on the inner fairness which does not change with time or circumstances.

From the three examples of his sonnets, Shakespeare expresses his love ethics from his humanism that true love is true, kind and fair. He also calls for the freedom of love and respect in love in his other sonnets.

III. Family ethics in Shakespeare's sonnets

Although Shakespeare mainly eulogizes friendship and love in his 154 sonnets, it's not to be strange to find some related to family ethics. Love is the basis of family. Shakespeare wrote such a sonnet to further praises love between family in his mind. A lonely life is sad and nothing accomplished, only in the harmony of family life can we realize the happiness of life and preserve their own value by the descendants what mirrors his humanistic thoughts that . That can be seen in Sonnet 8:

Music to hear, why hear'st thou music sadly?
 Sweets with sweets war not, joy delights in joy.
 Why lovest thou that which thou receivest not gladly,
 Or else receivest with pleasure thine annoy?
 If the true concord of well-tuned sounds,
 By unions married, do offend thine ear,
 They do but sweetly chide thee, who confounds
 In singleness the parts that thou shouldst bear.
 Mark how one string, sweet husband to another,
 Strikes each in each by mutual ordering,
 Resembling sire and child and happy mother
 Who all in one, one pleasing note do sing:
 Whose speechless song, being many, seeming one,
 Sings this to thee: "thou single wilt prove none."(1)

In the first quatrain, the poet raised two questions with the help of music: first is "Music to hear, why hear'st thou music sadly?" and the other is "Why lovest thou that which thou receivest not gladly, Or else receivest with pleasure thine annoy?". And then in the next four-lines, he put forward his view that the marriage with children will make the music concord than the singleness does. The third quatrain still employs the image of music to emphasize the harmony of music played by marriage and family. The music played by couples, father and son and the family is just the harmonious and the monotonous tone is mournful. The last two lines directly point out that "thou single wilt prove none." to indirectly strengthen the importance of marriage and

family. This pursuit of family harmony is also Shakespeare's ideal of social ethical order. As the smallest unit of society, the harmony and stability of family play an important role in maintaining social order. A harmonious and happy family is mainly maintained by reasonable family ethics.

IV. Social ethics in Shakespeare's sonnets

Expect love and family ethics shown in his sonnets, how to build his ideal society also represent his social ethics. Li Dingqing's article "Literary Ethics Criticism and the Construction of Humanism" published in *Foreign Literature Studies* in 2006 clearly admits the outstanding contribution made by Shakespeare, the great master of humanism, "as the most gigantic character of the period, Shakespeare, with his profound artistic penetration and wide artistic inclusiveness, developed humanist moral ethics to its most comprehensive and perfect stage, portraying the overall social moral and ethical landscape in a positive and negative way, in a true manner."⁽²⁾ The social ethics in Shakespeare's sonnets are a way of attacking and venting discontent with the reality of society, and then suggesting that the goodness of human nature can change such an unpleasant social situation, and that the goodness of human nature can gradually build up a harmonious ideal society in his mind. England in Renaissance, where Shakespeare lived, was at the point of social transition. He saw and experienced the evil side of the world. He interrogates the old order and ethical relations between society and man, and between man and man. He depicts the ugliness of society, his own unfair social treatment, the betrayal of his lover and the weaknesses of human nature, and other ugly things and attack the ugliness and bad customs of the real world. Even he directly calls the world is "infection" in Sonnet 67.⁽¹⁾ And in this poem the poet embodies the qualities and ethical and moral standards required of an ideal human being. In Shakespeare's mind, the establishment of an ideal society is supposed to base on the perfection of individuals including individual's inner and outer shaping, the form of interpersonal harmonious relations and the relationships between man and society. Shakespeare's sonnets range from advocating the release of one's true emotions and free human nature to the pursuit of a good moral order in which people live in harmony with each other. Shakespeare's sonnets shape such a social order that shunning evil and doing good and praising virtues and punishing vices. It needs to build new ethics, a rebellion against the old church of divine, ethical and moral order from evil, hypocritical, twisted living conditions between man and man and man and society through the moral edification, rational guidance and human's efforts so as to achieve the ideal of a harmonious society. In Sonnet 119, the poet concentrates on conveying the idea of confrontation between good and evil and the humanistic ideal of overcoming evil with good, "O benefit of ill! now I find true/That better is by evil still made better/And ruin'd love, when it is built anew,/Grows fairer than at first, more strong, far greater."⁽¹⁾ Evil must be overcome by good, good is also better in the confrontation with evil. It reflects the poet's difficult process of thinking of destroying the old and establishing the new, rebelling against the old morality and seeking for new ethics. It is through giving praise to the new kind of human nature of the loving friend and Shakespeare's yearning for the harmonious loyalty of the new ethical thought of human relations that to question and challenge the hypocrisy of humanity, hierarchy and secular ethics in the old moral order.

V. Conclusion

It is not difficult to find that in fact there is a progressive relationship between the three kind of ethics, and the three together reflect Shakespeare's humanistic ethics philosophy. The poet's direct expression of his love for "the young man" and "Black Lady" in the form of poetry appeals to people to love freely. In Wang Zhongxiang and Nie Zhenzhao's book *History of Foreign Literature*, "the poet regards them as artistic expressions of harmonious relations between people, with special emphasis on humanist ideals such as spiritual union, loyalty and understanding."⁽⁵⁾ In his sonnets, he also emphasizes the importance of one's good virtues to the "fair, kind, true" of love, hoping to achieve a harmonious and perfect relationship between people through the guidance of love ethics, so as to establish his new ethical ideal society. While family ethics focuses on the preservation and continuation of happiness, because family's harmony is the epitome of a harmonious society. Although Shakespeare attacked the ugliness of real life, it did not affect his pursuit of creating a harmonious society based on people as a humanist. Shakespeare's sonnets are a great treasure with moral ethics in it which is worth being explored.

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