

Revision Question:

Shakespeare, Sonnet 55

In this Sonnet, the themes of time, of love and of poetry's power are skilfully woven together. Write an essay in which you discuss how details of diction, syntax, figures of speech, structure and sound are employed in order to shape and express meaningful connections between these themes.

Shakespeare, Sonnet 55

Not marble, nor the gilded monuments
Of princes, shall outlive this powerful rhyme;
But you shall shine more bright in these contents
Than unswept stone, besmear'd with sluttish time.
When wasteful war shall statues overturn,
5
And broils root out the work of masonry,
Nor Mars his sword, nor war's quick fire shall burn
The living record of your memory.
'Gainst death, and all-oblivious enmity
Shall you pace forth; your praise shall still find room
10
Even in the eyes of all posterity
That wear this world out to the ending doom.
So, till the judgment that yourself arise,
You live in this, and dwell in lovers' eyes.

Notes

You (line 3): the speaker addresses his beloved.

Sluttish (line 4): “slovenly”, “unclean”.

Wasteful (line 5): “which lays to waste”

Broils (line 6): “riots”, “tumults”.

Mars (line 7): the god of war, in Roman mythology.

Judgment (line 13): the Day of the Last Judgment, when the dead shall rise again.

Here is my response to the question, again presented without in-text references or a bibliography, as I am responding as I would in an examination environment:

William Shakespeare’s Sonnet 55 employs certain techniques to explain the themes of time, love and poetry’s power. This essay shall discuss how details of diction, syntax, figures of speech, structure and sound are employed in order to shape and express meaningful connections between these themes.

Shakespeare uses different poetic arrangements which differ from normal syntactical order, hence the sentence structure of the first line is incorrect. The poem opens with “not marble, nor gilded monuments” a double negative, which is unusual. The two words “not” and “nor” provide a negative connotation to the stones. The poet deliberately undermines these stones so he can uplift his beloved. By beginning with a strong negative assertion, a rhetorical question is asked to the reader to stimulate his or her curiosity as to what follows. The poet sets the tone and purpose of the sonnet: a

strong claim to the power of poetry, that it can transcend time and therefore maintain the memory of the poet's beloved. The syntax in line 5 is incorrect; the poet says "When wasteful war shall statues overturn". By reversing the last two words, the poet creates an image of statues being toppled over (up-side down). Shakespeare makes a very bold claim about the power of his poem when he compares his "powerful rhyme" to the durable "marble" and solid "gilded monuments". In the first quatrain he expresses his praise and confidence. He asserts that his poem of his lover, written in verse on fragile paper, will outlive the marble memorials of princes which will accumulate dust and dirt with time. The poet says in line 6 "and broils root out the work of masonry", by that he means to emphasize that when wars come they will destroy the statues. However, not anyone, not even the God of War can destroy his powerful poem.

The shift in tone from one quatrain to the next expresses meaningful connections between the themes of love, time and the power of poetry. Hence the tone changes in the second quatrain to aggressiveness when the poet attacks those who destroy the works of artists in order to protect his beloved. The third quatrain still emphasizes the theme, saying that the death of the lover will not be the end of him. It is the same as in saying that the words of the poem will live on forever. The poet uses words like "besmeared", "sluttish" and "broils" to describe the statues and devalue them in the eyes of the reader because he feels that they are weak, dirty and easily destroyed. Whereas, the power of his love will "shine more bright" in this sonnet and spread the message of love to future generations, thereby fulfilling his promise of immortality.

Shakespeare uses skillful repetition of the pronoun "you" and the adjective "your" to focus the reader's attention to his beloved who is the subject onto which immortality will be bestowed upon. The memories of the loved one are immortalised in the verses of the

poem. It is the poem itself that has the power to immortalise. The poet further personifies time to give it character in lines three and four “but you shall...besmeared with sluttish time”. Suggesting that time is careless and whorish, it cares for no individuals. Shakespeare personifies time to a dirty woman because he is attacking time so as to praise his lover. Time has the power to destroy because with time statues lose their value. He sees time as the enemy to an artist’s work and it destroys relationships as far as he is concerned because time took away his lover. The personification in line five is used by the poet to personify war as someone who is careless and reckless. War on its own cannot “overturn” statues; it is the soldiers that fight in wars that destroy. Shakespeare makes good use of irony in line seven when he says that you can burn paper but not its message. The irony in this line is that poetry is written on paper and its contents will live on more than the durable marble and gilded monuments of princes. Therefore the emphasis is that the memories of his lover will live forever. Wars destroy monuments but the irony is that “war’s quick fire” cannot destroy the eternal memory recorded in the poem.

Shakespeare makes good use of repetition in words like “live” and “living” which serve to keep the notion of life and immortality in the reader’s minds. He further uses alliteration throughout the poem to enhance its rhythm. Alliteration is used in lines one and two to bring about the ‘m’ and ‘l’ sounds in words like “marble” and “monuments” and the ‘i’ sound which is found in words such as “gilded”, “outlive” and “this”. Line five produces the ‘w’ sound in “when wasteful war” which is immediately followed by the ‘s’ sound in “shall statues”. In line four, the device of assonance is used in words like “unswept”, “stone”, “besmeared” and “sluttish to bring about the ‘s’ sound. The assonance used in line three is brought about by the ‘sh’ sound made by words “shall shine”. The ‘o’ sound is repeated to create an image of a gaping hole (emptiness) which

emphasizes the visible destruction of war. The repetition of sounds and rhythm brings harmony to the poem. The similar sounding words play a role in tying in everything together. In the couplet we see a good balancing act between the short 'i' and the long 'ai'. The ending rhymes carry more weight because of their position and contrast between the long and short sounds which remind us that rising and "dwell[ing] in lovers' eyes" is only possible if the beloved first lives in this poem.

William Shakespeare shows power and confidence in immortalising his deceased lover and the poem itself in Sonnet 55. The poem has everlasting power through its words and so the beloved will live on forever through the future generations who will continue to read this poem. The poet lives up to his promise of immortality and defies all those who criticise his art.