

A Critical Analysis of Shakespeare's Sonnet No. 154

[Material prepared by Jayati Ganguly for Second and Sixth Semester Undergraduate students]

Shakespeare's sonnet series is highly acclaimed to be that piece of literature which popularised the Sonnet form in its own way in England. The Sonnet is defined to be a fourteen-line poem, usually in pentameter verse, though there are variations. Thus, the Shakespearean sonnet became another major type of sonnet form apart from the Italian or Petrarchan sonnet. The famous Italian poet Petrarch popularised the sonnet as he wrote them in praise of his beloved Laura and to celebrate his love for her. The Petrarchan sonnet form, as is widely known, is divided into an Octave (first eight lines rhyming ABBAABBA) and the Sestet (the last six lines usually rhyming either CDECDE or CDCDCD). The Shakespearean sonnet has three quatrains (four line stanzas) and an ending rhymed couplet. Thus the rhyme pattern of the sonnet is, ABAB CDCD EFEF GG. It is usually said about this structure that the poet/poet persona/speaker builds up a theme, rather a problem, in the quatrains. To this problem he provides a personal kind of solution in the ending couplet which comes as a turn after the continuity of argument in the preceding 12 lines. Though it is also often said that the Shakespearean sonnet, if not in formal structure, but in thought structure, resembles the Petrarchan form of Octave and sestet. In this, new turn or 'volta', in the thought pattern or imagery, is found in the last six lines of the sonnet. There is a lot of discussion, debate and conjecture about the arrangement of Shakespeare's sonnets in the series of 154 sonnets and whether they tell a 'story' when taken as a sequence or should be treated as individual pieces. There is also a lot of debate regarding the identities of the persons to whom the sonnets are said to be dedicated. The general consideration is that the first 126 sonnets are dedicated to a young man, referred to as the 'Fair Youth' while sonnet 127 to 154, are dedicated to a 'Dark Lady'. More precisely, the 'Dark Lady Sonnets' would be from 127 to 152 because sonnets 153 and 154 do not appear essentially in vein with the other Dark Lady Sonnets. Even The New Casebook, *Shakespeare: The Sonnets*, acknowledges that sonnets 153 and 154 do not seem to be an integral part of the sequence.

The young man is usually considered to be some Mr. W.H. who could be either William Herbert, the Earl of Pembroke or Henry Wriothesley, Earl of Southampton (the initials being reversed in his case). These two are the most widely considered possibilities

who may have been referred to as Mr. W. H. in the dedication, the 'only begetter' of the sonnets. The 'Dark Lady' is often referred to as 'My Mistress' by the poet-speaker and the actual identity of the lady is as dubious and debated as that of the young man, with names like those of Mary Fitton and Emilia Lanier being the most earnestly considered. The biographical references are often taken into consideration in academic scholarship on Shakespeare, but the themes of the sonnets transcend any specificity and remain wonderful pieces about human relationships, emotions and passion. The major themes of the most famous of the Bard's sonnets are: the eternity of Art which can immortalize a person (specifically the poet's loved one), that Love can transcend and defy Time which otherwise destroys everything that is mortal; that Death, the inevitable destructive force which destroys beauty and youth, can be triumphed by immortalizing the loved one through Art (in the poet/poet persona's case, art refers to his poetry). Intense love, passion and a variety of related emotions in the love between man and man (sonnets on 'Fair Youth') or between man and woman (sonnets on 'Dark Lady') have been explored by Shakespeare.

Sonnet 154 is the last sonnet of the series and is supposed to be read together with Sonnet 153, for both are based on almost the same theme and mythology. Neither of the two sonnets is directly addressed to the Dark Lady nor describes her or the poet-persona's love for her. Therefore, they are not exactly in the vein of the Dark Lady sonnets which are considered to begin from Sonnet 127 in the series. Sonnet 153 and 154 primarily celebrate Love and its all-conquering power and supremacy. Love surpasses all, is invincible and its passion is unquenchable. Though, it must be mentioned, the poet/poet persona's love and passion is still directed to his beloved/mistress in these two sonnets as well. But the certainty with which it can be claimed that the Dark Lady is the beloved meant by the poet-speaker till sonnet 152, this cannot be firmly claimed for sonnets 153 and 154. Another biographical interpretation is that there was a possible love affair between the Dark lady and the young man and thereby the whole thing turned into a love triangle, while the poet remained pining for the love of the lady. Certainly, canonical commentary highlights the aspect of sexual desire and passion personified by the Greek mythological character of Cupid, the God of Love and passion, more specifically, that of sexual desire and passion. These two poems are labelled as Anacreontic, derived after the poet Anacreon, who used to write epigrams (short poems) on love, wine and the like. Shakespeare's immediate source for the sonnets still cannot be specifically confirmed but the two sonnets are considered variations of the central conceit of a six-line epigram in a Greek Anthology which is attributed to Marcianus Scholasticus. There are other possible sources and adaptations from which the Bard drew as

noted by the scholar James Hutton. Epigrams were often structured as pairs with two different variations of the same motif and Shakespeare's sonnets 153 and 154 follow the trend.

Sonnet No. 154 begins by referring to Cupid as **“The little love-god”** while sonnet 153 begins by directly referring to Cupid. Cupid is said to have lain down beside his “brand” or the flaming fire torch which is the representative symbol of the love-god, also the metaphor for unconquerable love and passion in the sonnet. It is Cupid's weapon for inflaming the fire of passion and ‘hot-desire’ in people and because of this quality, the brand is called the **“heart inflaming brand”** in Sonnet 154 and “love-kindling fire” in sonnet 153. Sonnet 151 too has reference to Cupid or ‘Love’ who inflicts wounds with his weapons but he, the poet says, is too young to feel the pain that he causes others by arousing the strong emotion of love or by sexually arousing them. The brand of Cupid is also a phallic symbol as the sexual aspect of love and passion and that of sexually transmitted diseases is consistently highlighted by commentators. The sharp binary opposites are found in both the sonnets. The love-god Cupid (infusing all with hot-desire and passion) on one hand and the Goddess of Chastity Dian/Diana on the other (also the Nymphs who are her followers and practitioners of chastity and virginity). As Cupid is said to lie beside his brand, a few nymphs, who are followers of Goddess Diana and have vowed to maintain a chaste life come near the place where the love-god sleeps. If sonnet 153 is referred to, the geographical location where Cupid sleeps appears to be a kind of valley with lakes and fountains where the nymphs are moving about for according to classical mythology, the cool springs are associated with Diana and the nymphs were considered to be the attendant spirits or guardian spirits who presided over the rivers and fountains. The **“fairest votary”** may refer to the earnest and the most ardent devotee of Diana, or it may, by an extension, refer to Goddess Diana herself. The phrase ‘maiden hand’ refers to the maiden votary who takes up the brand of Cupid in order to steep it in the **“cool well”** in sonnet 154 (“cold valley fountain” in 153). By doing this, the votaries of Diana or perhaps, Diana herself, wish to disempower Cupid who professes something that is against their profession of a chaste life. They wish to cool and make powerless Cupid's brand which has inflamed and is potential to inflame a multitude of hearts with the hot desire and passion. The military image/metaphor is evoked by using the word “legions” to suggest how millions of true hearts have been warmed up with the passion of love and sexual desire by Cupid's brand (**“Which many legions of true heart have warmed”**). The word legions evokes military image/metaphor in relation to the next line where Cupid is referred to as the **“general of hot desire”** meaning he is the supreme commander who is in charge of arousing

passion and physical desire. This commander or general is “disarmed” (the arm or weapon is taken away from its owner as they tried to disempower him, deprive him of his brand, of ‘hot desire’ or the power to arouse hot desire). This is done, as he sleeps on, by a ‘virgin hand’ who takes the brand away from the God to steep it in the cool well in order to render it dysfunctional. In terms of rhetoric, the phrase ‘virgin hand’, like the earlier phrase ‘maiden hand,’ may be said to be examples of ‘Synecdoche’ where a part is used to refer to the whole and in these phrases ‘hand’ is the part used to refer to the person/lady who is a virgin or a maiden. Another characteristic figure of speech that is apparent in the way the lines of the sonnet have been written is ‘Inversion’.

The next lines of the sonnet describe that the maiden steeps the brand in the cool well to ‘quench’ the fire that inflames fire in hearts. The expression **“quenched in a cool well by”** (‘by’ means ‘nearby’) is also considered by commentators as having a sexual innuendo meaning that the hot desire or the sexual passion of man is quenched when he physically unites with the female body (cool well). The reference to sexually transmitted diseases and the practice of going to hot water baths or fountains to cure venereal diseases is made by critics at this juncture of the sonnet interpretation. The Arden edition of the sonnet series explains thus:

In both sonnets Cupid's *brand* is given a bawdy application, and both draw on the twofold association of hot baths with the treatment of sexually transmitted disease and with sexual encounters which may cause such disease, a double association which goes back to antiquity (*Shakespeare's Sonnets*).

The sexually transmitted diseases were considered the harmful effects of love, thus this connotation of the metaphor is justified. The next line of the sonnet describes how, on steeping Cupid’s brand in the cool well, the heat of the brand is transmitted to the water instead of the fire of the brand getting cooled or quenched. **“Which [the cool well] from love’s fire [the brand and its heat, ‘love’ may also refer to Cupid in general] took heat perpetual”** suggests that the cool well absorbed the fire of love/sexual passion and turned (developing or “growing”) into a perpetual or eternal (“dateless” in 153) hot bath (“seething bath” in 153) or hot spring which were thought to have cured maladies or diseases of men: **“Growing a bath and healthful remedy/ For men diseased;”** (“Against strange maladies a sovereign cure” in sonnet 153). Love’s fire heats water rather than being itself cooled has layers of paradoxical interpretations. The same metaphor which has suggestions of all diseases being cured also has the gross suggestion of the transmission of and suffering due to

venereal diseases. The Arden edition explains that the burning water image has suggestions of infection and urination caused due to venereal disease.

Next comes the turn (with “but I”) in the sonnet which leads to the ending couplet or the rhymed couplet, thereby ushering the ending thought of the sonnet where the poet/poet persona says:

**. . . but I, my mistress' thrall
Came there for cure, and this by that I prove:
Love's fire heats water, water cools not love.**

The speaker calls himself his mistress'/beloved's “thrall” or slave as he is completely enslaved by his love, passion and desire for her which overpowers him and any attempt to cure his heart of the malady of love and pining. He says that the hot water bath that is famed to cure all the diseases of men, could not provide him with a cure and this is how he proves that the love and passion that overpowers him is more powerful than the hot bath which in turn is charged up by the heat and passion and cannot cool his love. The Cambridge edition notes that the first half of the last line of the sonnet explains fancifully how a certain medicinal hot spring was created and the second half complains that, although such a spring or ‘bath’ may cure other diseases, it fails to alleviate or cure the disease of love, just as in sonnet 153 where the poet-speaker says he “found no cure” when he went to the magical hot spring (*The Sonnets*, The New Cambridge Shakespeare). The poet persona insists in sonnet 153 that it is only in the beloved, his love, that he can find some cure: “the bath for my help lies/ Where Cupid got new fire: my mistress' eye.” The Arden edition explains the last line has bawdy connotations of the persistence of sexual desire and passion, no matter what, nor even the venereal diseases or their treatment (*Shakespeare's Sonnets*, Arden).

Michael Schoenfeldt states that Shakespeare's sonnet sequence explores love in its range of moods, situations and expressions and the sequence “characterizes love as a highly idealized emotion and as a deeply degrading passion”. He also says that sonnets 153 and 154 pay a tribute “to the contagious and intractable power of Cupid's ‘heart-inflaming brand’.” Transcending any contextual or specific explanation, it may be said that the sonnet, at one level, suggests that the general emotion/passion of Love is the most powerful, supreme and surpasses everything else; it is invincible and eternal and has the capacity to cure all those diseased and suffering from mortal pains. This perspective is what may be said to be the poet's celebration of love, an exalted glorification of the sublime emotion. C. F. Williamson in the essay “Themes and Patterns in Shakespeare's Sonnets” in *The New Casebook*

mentions that Shakespeare explicitly states that the love he celebrates is independent of the world of happenings and so the love is changeless. This statement well establishes the eternity and transcendental quality of love that the poet believed in. This perspective is validated by the poet's strong and doubtless affirmation of the universal invincibility and glory of love: **"Love's fire heats water, water cools not love"**. It is not possible to contain love as the more it is contained, the more intense it becomes, is the speaker's suggestion. The last sentence uses the figure of speech called 'Chiasmus', which is an inversion of the order of words or phrases, when repeated or subsequently referred to in the sentence. 'Love' and 'water' are used in such a manner in the sentence as their order has been inverted in the second half of the sentence.

One also finds the poet's characteristic assertion of the quality of eternity, but it is not that of his beloved or of Art which immortalizes love and beloved, as he is famed to do in his earlier sonnets. Here he claims the eternity and eternal glory of Love which has the power to cure all pain and disease. In his case, perhaps, the fulfilment of love (or even merely the sight of the beloved) can cure the pain. The possible reasons for this pain may be pining for the lady he loves and the desire for a reciprocation of love, or even the pain he might have felt due to the love affair between his friend, the Youth and the Dark Lady (as some biographical studies suggest), or it may suggest merely the pain of passion in general, as the phrase "sick withal" in 153 connotes. This can be understood if the ending couplet of sonnet 153 is referred to where the poet says that he too went to the hot bath to find cure for his malady but couldn't find it there for he realized that the cure for his malady/pain/suffering is not to be found in the hot spring but on the eyes of his beloved which have such immense power so as to rekindle the extinguished torch of Cupid. Metaphorically and paradoxically, the lady/mistress is both the source and the cure of his pain.

Thus, Shakespeare's sonnet 153 and 154, almost twin sonnets, as they may be called, may be considered a general celebration of love as well as an analysis of the poet / poet-persona's condition who feels extremes of emotion and passion, and all this is understood through the ancient mythological metaphor of Cupid and Diana's votaries. In fact, the emotion of love may be said to have been personified in the concrete image of Cupid. The use of such figures of speech and those like paradox, synecdoche, chiasmus and inversion, are remarkable technical features of Shakespeare's sonnet no. 154. The ending couplet or the rhymed couplet, as they are called, epigrammatically put forth the speaker's final comments on the supremacy of love. But the short, pithy and epigrammatic expressions sufficiently express the elevated quality of love. The theme of eternity of love is not missed in these

sonnets. The rhyme pattern of the sonnet is the characteristic Shakespearean rhyme pattern: ABAB CDCD EFEF GG. The lines of the quatrains rhyme alternately and then there is the rhymed couplet. Sonnets 153 and 154 though may not essentially convey the most well known flavours of Shakespearean sonnets, remain uniquely beautiful.

References

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