

IMMORTALITY TO SHAKESPEARE

The theme of immortality pervades Shakespeare's sonnet sequence, yet references to it occur within such rapidly shifting contexts that what the word means and why the concept is important to the speaker are dizzying questions. A careful study of sonnets 16, 55, 81, and 107 yields a promising theory: to Shakespeare, immortality represents his own power over the object of his poems – the power to create, influence, and preserve a loved one. As the sequence unfolds, the relationship of the speaker to the object changes, and the corresponding shift in the power balance between them is reflected in how the speaker characterizes immortality, what importance he gives it, and to whom he grants it.

While no four sonnets taken individually can adequately represent all of the richness and complexity of the entire sequence, these particular few—16, 55, 81, and 107—deal thoroughly with the different aspects of immortality with which Shakespeare concerned himself. Linked further by the motifs of the monument and the eyes of others, they bear a strong resemblance to each other while addressing and clarifying different points of Shakespeare's argument.

The idea of immortality enters into the sequence from the very beginning, when the first quatrain of sonnet 1 asserts that “increase” allows beauty to avoid death. The seventeen sonnets that follow share the theme of reproduction, stressing the inevitability of decay with time and reasoning that children provide a defense against it. The last line of sonnet 15 contains the first reference to writing, appearing as an alternative, if secondary, path to immortality, and the presence of the speaker himself, the “I” of the poems, announces itself. The emergence of the speaker as a thinking, acting entity casts the issue of immortality in an entirely different light, since it introduces a new agenda on the part of our narrator, who had hitherto remained fairly passive. Over the course of the next few sonnets, new themes are developed: mortality remains as inevitable and horrifying as ever, but the key to being remembered becomes firmly linked to the poems themselves and the speaker's abilities as opposed to reproduction.

What begins in sonnet 15 with “I engraft you new” is immediately picked up and developed in the next poem. Sonnet 16 crucially documents the surfacing of the narrator by comparing the relative success of reproduction and writing as agents of preservation in the face of time. At a first glance it would seem that Shakespeare sides against poetry in this comparison, but the syntax and logic of his argument actually go a great way to set up what becomes his contention for the rest of the sequence. The key lies in the ambiguity of the third quatrain, whose content and syntax struggle against one another:

So should the lines of life that life repair	9
Which this time's pencil or my pupil pen,	10
Neither in inward worth nor outward fair,	11
Can make you live yourself in eyes of men.	12

The first obstacle to a clear reading arises in line 9, which requires a syntactical correction on the part of the reader, placing “repair” as the main verb of the sentence and “lines of life” as the subject—the other three lines are subordinate clauses. A first reading, however, might interpret the first line as “the lines of life which repair life,” a construction which immediately breaks down, undermining the overtones of “repair.”

A second ambiguity surrounds the “pupil pen” of the tenth line. While a thorough understanding of the sentence as a whole asserts the inability of the pen to succeed in preserving the object’s memory, the construction of lines 11 and 12 suggest an entirely opposite meaning. Taking the eleventh line as an inserted clause allows the reader the possibility of forming a syntactically correct sentence while leaving it out entirely, and this new sentence excludes the flimsy negation of “can.” Ultimately, this reading does not hold up, but neither can the positive construction of the sentence be ignored. As Stephen Booth puts it, “the thrust of the syntax and that of the substance and context pull against each other. A reader grasps the logically available statement he expects to hear, but it is wrapped in a syntax that suggests an opposite position.”¹

¹ Booth, Stephen. *Shakespeare’s Sonnets*. Yale University Press: New Haven, CT.

Amid this very tension the speaker lays the foundation for his argument. Having already established the desirability of immortality, he sets out next to bind it inextricably to his act of writing. The early sonnets argue that being remembered even after death is important for its own sake; the narrator, speaking candidly, would perhaps argue that immortality is important because that is what the poet can offer. The tone of the sonnets throughout the sequence is that of a supplicant; the speaker variously advises, urges, pleads with, remonstrates, and chides the object, never in control but always seeking to guide. Poetry, in supplying the object with the promise of eternal life, thus provides the speaker with a means of evening the power balance between them.

The sonnets following number 16 reiterate and expand the power of the written word, and while the speaker remains ostensibly in the background, he never fails to remind us that his great gift of eternal life in memory is only possible because he, the "I," possesses it and is willing to devote it to his object. Sonnets 55 and 81 are perfect examples of the speaker's two-part strategy: first to establish the significance of writing as a defense against mortality, and second to subtly promote the speaker himself as the giver of immortality. The inescapability of death is brought out in sonnet 55 through the prolific use of words that mean "living" and the conspicuous absence of any literal use of the word. Even the third line's claim that "you shall shine more bright in these contents" brings to mind the image of a coffin. All that the speaker places in the path of "death, and all oblivious enmity" is the poem itself, which, while it may survive Mars' sword and war's fire, is still a fragile message. This reminder of the vulnerability of paper would seem to undermine the poem's assertion that these praises "shall still find room / Even in the eyes of all posterity," but it actually succeeds in strengthening the argument, heightening the worth of the poem itself. That words can outlast statues and monuments is merely a tribute to their author, who may as well be performing a miracle.

Sonnet 81 is rather more heavy-handed in its treatment of the "I." The first eight lines set up a series of opposing parallels in which the object is accorded immortal life while the speaker is condemned to be forgotten. However, the inclusion of so many references to the speaker puts him

as much in the minds of readers as the object, contrary to the content of the lines. The last six lines change the direction of the sonnet; whereas the speaker and the object are initially juxtaposed within the opposing parallels, they become literally united through the verse itself and the promise that it holds to prolong life. The construction of the third quatrain equates “my gentle verse” with “your being” through the notion of future generations reading them—the one is syntactically indistinguishable from the other. Line 13 contains the logical union of speaker and object, again linked significantly by the poet’s power to grant immortality: “You still shall live, such virtue hath my pen.” The conclusions found at the end of this sonnet, like the repetition of the “I” in the first part, completely contradict the speaker’s opening claims regarding the longevity of his own memory.

These three sonnets so far have revealed the utility of immortality as a concept to the speaker, and how he uses it to acquire worth in the eyes of the object. The sonnet sequence contains many examples of this strategy, but it also includes numerous variations on it. In the later parts of the sequence, these differences seem to reflect a change in the relationship between speaker and object. For example, in tone and symbolism sonnet 107 bears a striking resemblance to others of the sonnets, but one crucial distinction sets it apart: the speaker, not the object, is preserved in the poem.

The first eight lines are full of shadowy references to future stability in the wake of an uncertain time, but the language is far from reassuring. In one reading, the first quatrain seems to say that the poet’s love, while thought to have been quelled, still endures, and the insistence on legal terms to express this sentiment calls into question the ability of law and society to regulate the relationships between people. The next four lines all indicate that a difficult time has come to an end, but they do so in a confused manner that leaves doubt as to the reality of that situation:

The mortal moon hath her eclipse endured,	5
And the sad augers mock their own presage;	6
Incertainties now crown themselves assured,	7
And peace proclaims olives of endless age.	8

Each of these lines could be interpreted either positively or negatively; “endured” could mean either “survived” or “capitulated,” and the “incertainties” may alternately have been resolved or gained the upper hand. Depending on which meaning of “mock” the reader takes, the second line could mean that the “sad augers” were never fulfilled, or that they have been repeated, and while olive branches are a traditional symbol for peace, in this case “peace proclaims olives,” an unexpectedly backwards phrasing.

Line 9 affirms the positive version of these lines by describing the time as “balmy,” but the doubtful overtones cannot be ignored, nor do they disappear from the final quatrain. While the speaker seems to proclaim his victory over death, this announcement itself takes on an almost desperate tone. Death “subscribes” to him with the “drops” of line 9, and whether this means that Death submits or signs his name to him is unclear. That these same drops make his “love look fresh” suggests that he means ink and describes his poetry, which is ironic given that he intends to evade death by living “in this poor rhyme.” The poem is thus both the symbol of Death’s mark upon him and his means of living in “spite of him.”

The object, to whom the sonnet returns in the couplet, is conspicuously left out of this interchange with Death, and told instead that he must “find” his monument in “this.” The tone of these last lines is more abrupt—almost to the point of being rude—than is generally used to address the object; no longer is he granted immortality through the words of the poet, since this time the speaker has reserved that advantage for himself. “This” therefore probably does not refer to the poem itself, but rather to the speaker’s situation in lines 9-12, which becomes a monument to the object because it represents the speaker’s devotion to him.

This sonnet treats the idea of immortality differently than do the others, and the object receives a different understanding as well. The shift found here reconstitutes the relationship between the poet and his love, setting the writer above his object, who has lost his chance at eternal life through poetry. Exactly what event might be reflected in this sonnet is debatable, but the

profound uncertainties explicit in it, together with the bitterness of the tone, suggest that the speaker did not welcome the change.

Other sonnets in the sequence document similar shifts, many of them centering on the same idea of immortality, and the power of the writer to grant it. Numbers 71-74 vividly describe the unpleasantness of earthly death and decay, while urging the object to forget the poet who praises him; the juxtaposition suggests instead that the poet very much wishes to be remembered, and hopes that his writing will serve as a reminder to the object. Sonnet 65 picks up the themes shared by 55, stressing the grim presence of mortality in life and calling his work a “miracle” that overcomes time. In 122 the speaker seems to lament his fall from favor, and here he admits that his power of remembrance is not infinite, saying that the memory of the object remains with him “Beyond all date ev’n to eternity— / Or at the least so long as brain and heart / Have faculty by nature to subsist.” He has not abandoned the idea of immortality, but having lost his love, he no longer speaks enthusiastically of the fame he has to offer.

The whole history of the relationship between the narrator of the sonnets and the object of his affection is laid out over the course of the sequence, and the changes that take place are reflected in how the speaker discusses and uses the concept of eternal life. To the poet, immortality becomes an important asset, because he believes his writings will confer respect and renown on the subject he chooses. In competing for the love of another, this ability lends him a powerful advantage, and as a consequence many of the sonnets deal with the theme of death and mortality and the capability of words to preserve memory.