

Love of Mortals: An Ecological Interpretation of Shakespeare's Sonnets

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Abstract

Growing ecological problems have drawn literary critics' attentions to the ecological themes in literature. Ecocriticism advocates for the study of ecological dimensions in classic works. Early ecological consciousness is found in Shakespeare's sonnets. This paper argues that Shakespeare's poetry not only celebrates the sincerity of human love but also implies a profound understanding of human's place in nature. Unlike the anthropocentrism prevalent in the Middle Ages and the Enlightenment, Shakespeare's sonnets reflect a clear perception of the cycles of nature and the transience of human life. By using metaphors, comparisons and contrasts, Shakespeare reveals to readers the mortality and ordinariness of human alongside the immense power of nature. By analyzing three of Shakespeare's sonnets, the paper seeks to uncover his simple ecological perspectives on the relationship between human and nature.

Keywords

Shakespeare, ecocriticism, sonnet.

1. Introduction

In modern times, the ecological crisis has become a major threat to the survival of human, with global warming accelerating the deterioration of human's living environment. Ecological ethics believes that anthropocentrism is the root cause of contemporary environmental problems and ecological crises. The theology of the Middle Ages established the fundamental concept of anthropocentrism that humans are the greatest achievement of God's creations, destined to utilize all things and to dominate and rule over all things [1]. During the Enlightenment, anthropocentric values were largely solidified, with Kant arguing that man is the supreme legislator of nature, placing human's position above nature. Under the guidance of anthropocentric values, mankind embarked on the path of conquering nature. It cannot be denied that human's practice of transforming nature did foster a prosperous civilization, but what followed was a series of ecological crises, and the relationship between human and nature deteriorated significantly.

Ecocriticism emerged in the late 1970s and early 1980s within the English literature and criticism. It advocates a return to the simple and harmonious relationship with nature that existed before the industrial period, seeking to counteract the consequences caused by capitalist modernity. The purpose of ecocriticism is to eliminate anthropocentric values, dissolve the dichotomy between human and nature, rebuild a harmonious relationship between human and nature, and construct a new ecological and environmental ethics. Ecocriticism believes that since modern writers intend to compose works with idealistic tendency, they should pay attention to the future of human life and reflect on the crisis of current existence [2]. As for the ecological literary criticism, it should not only pay attention to those modern and contemporary works with ecological themes, but also actively explore the ecological facts in classic literary works.

While the primary themes of Shakespeare's sonnets concern the sincere friendship and love between humans, his simple ecological thoughts are hidden in his poetic language. Unlike the anthropocentric values of his contemporaries, Shakespeare possessed a relatively clear and accurate understanding of human's position in nature and relationship with nature. Building upon this understanding, Shakespeare highly praised the strong and sincere love of human beings, despite being ordinary and small. This paper analyzes Shakespeare's Sonnet 73, Sonnet 116 and Sonnet 130 to examine the embodiment of his ecological thought.

2. Finite Life

Frye suggests that the narrative structure of Western literature, taken as a whole, is an imitation of the cyclical movements of nature. The cycle of nature can be roughly divided into four phases: morning, afternoon, evening and night; or spring, summer, autumn and winter. And accordingly, the narrative structure of literature can also be divided into four structures: comedy -- the narrative structure of spring; romance - the narrative structure of summer; tragedy -- the narrative structure of autumn; irony and satire -- the narrative structure of winter.

In terms of the formal phase, literature, as a "hypothetical verbal structure" [3], is an imitation of nature. The narrative structure that corresponds to autumn is tragedy. In mythology, the death of a god is often associated with autumn or dawn: "The god may be a sun-god, dying at night and reborn at dawn, or else with an annual rebirth at the winter solstice; or he may be a god of vegetation, dying in autumn, or else with an annual rebirth at the winter solstice; or he may be a god of vegetation, dying in autumn. the winter solstice; or he may be a god of vegetation, dying in autumn and reviving in spring" [3].

Poetry's imagery of autumn and dusk often symbolizes old age and the approach of death. The three quatrains in Shakespeare's Sonnet 73 employ autumn, twilight, and an extinguishing fire as metaphors for the poet's approaching end of life. At the beginning of the three quatrains, the poet uses "thou mayst in me behold" and "in me thou seest..." to introduce the object of his depiction [4]. Thus, the autumn, the twilight and the glowing fire symbolize the poet's current stage of life. In the first quatrain, the poet depicts himself as a gloomy autumnal scene: few yellowed leaves shivering in the cold wind, no birds singing on the bare boughs of the trees, and the earth long bereft the bustle and vitality of spring and summer -- everything tending towards death as the footsteps of winter are already approaching. In the second quatrain, the poet compares himself to the twilight preceding night: the sun setting in the west, soon to be followed by night, the embodiment of death, sealing everything in silence. Through the first two quatrains, the poet reveals to the reader that human life, like the cyclical movement of nature, goes through stages of birth, flourishing, decline, and ultimately death. The alternation of the seasons and the sunrise and sunset are cyclical. After autumn and winter have passed, spring will come again, and the end of the night is the beginning of the dawn. However, human life is irreversible. Life is a one-way journey with no hope for rebirth after death. Therefore, in the third quatrain, the poet compares the state of his own life to a flame that is about to be extinguished: youth is ashes that have been burned out, and the fire of life is still lingering on it, about to be extinguished together with the ashes. The extinguishing of the flame is an irreversible process, which implies the fragility of human life. Nature possesses the power of cyclical renewal, but human cannot be reborn.

Sonnet 73 reflects Shakespeare's acute perception of human's place in nature, as Shakespeare uses autumn, twilight, and glowing fire as metaphors for the ending of human life, and in fact implicitly making comparisons among them. It is true that human death, like autumn and twilight, belongs to the final stage in the cycle of nature. However, nature is cyclical: autumn and twilight are only relative stages in the movement of nature and will not stay forever, as nature possesses a strong regenerative power. Human life, in contrast, is mortal: after enduring

a few short cycles of seasons it will be approaching death, just like the burning of flame. Shakespeare highlights the mortality of human through the sonnet's three quatrains, emphasizing that human will never attain equality with mighty nature. Therefore, in the final couplet, Shakespeare urges readers to "perceive" this fact, to recognize the brevity and the preciousness of life, and thereby to be more determined in their love for their beloved.

3. Mutable World

In the first quatrain of Sonnet 116, Shakespeare metaphorically compares two lovers to the two ends of a "compass". In Shakespeare's time, the "compass" as a symbol often appeared in poetry. For example, in John Donne's *A Valediction: Forbidding Mourning*:

If there be two, they are two so
As stiff twin compasses are two;
Thy soul, the fix'd foot, makes no show
To move, but doth, if th' other do.
And though it in the centre sit,
Yet, when the other far doth roam,
It leans, and hearkens after it,
And grows erect, when that comes home.
Such wilt thou be to me, who must,
Like th' other foot, obliquely run;
Thy firmness makes my circle just,
And makes me end where it begun. [5]

John Donne uses "compass" to symbolize the unyielding love between him and his lover. Even miles apart, there is an unbreakable bond between them like a compass, ensuring their final reunion. In John Donne's view, the compass represents stability, for one foot of the compass is fixed and no matter how far the other foot roams, the lovers will be reunited in the end. John Donne sees the compass as a symbol of steadfast love.

In the Renaissance, "the compass is usually associated with the making of a circle, the ancient symbol of eternity, but in Sonnet 116 the emphasis is more upon the contrasting symbolism of the legs of the compass" [6]. Shakespeare asserts that "Love is not love / Which alters when it alteration finds" [4], emphasizing the instability of the external factors of love, such as the lover's changing appearance (rosy lips and cheeks). While other poets of the same era spent much time praising the beauty and unparalleled appearance of their lovers, Shakespeare pointedly noted that people age, and physical beauty inevitably fades with time. Since the Middle Ages, human has been given a unique position in the natural world. The Bible states that God created the world, with humans as his greatest achievement, and all other creations were made for humanity's sake. Consequently, the world is to be interpreted in the light of human, with human not only utilizing but dominating and ruling over all things. Thus, during the Renaissance, a great deal of poetry celebrated human's specialness, greatness, and superiority over nature, often over-glorifying the human image. For example, in John Donne's poem, the love represented by the compass is static in time, unaffected by external conditions and thus unchanging. This is the perfect love in the poet's views, but it is also undeniably the love being highly idealized and uncommon in reality. However, in the beginning of Sonnet 116, Shakespeare also uses the metaphor of compass, but shows that love is subject to external conditions. Although love can be eternal, changes in external conditions are always the threats.

Shakespeare then compares love to a lighthouse that is “never shaken” [4] in the tempest, and people, like boats, are steadfastly moving towards the lighthouse in the tempest. The “tempest” symbolizes the external obstacles and challenges to love, while true love can certainly withstand the test and stand firm like a lighthouse. Shakespeare further points out that true love remains uncorrupted by time, even as time erodes the lover’s beauty, love “alters not with his brief hours and weeks, but bears it out even to the edge of doom” [4].

Compared with John Donne’s *A Valediction: Forbidding Mourning*, where ideal love is depicted as the unchanging compass, in Sonnet 116, Shakespeare employs more restrained language and a more realistic tone to speak of true love enduring trials in real life. The poem’s rationality combined with its strong emotion creates rich artistic tension.

4. Ordinary Humanity

Shakespeare’s Sonnet 130 is an anti-Petrarchan work. Francesco Petrarca was a key figure in the perfection of the sonnet form, so that sonnet is also known as the Petrarchan poem. He is also recognized as the founder of love poetry. In his sonnets, he often compares parts of a beautiful woman’s body to creations in nature. For example, a mistress’s eyes are compared to the sun and the stars, the white skin to snow, or the red cheeks to roses. The combination of all these perfect features creates an image of a divine goddess. Petrarca’s sonnets, in their delightful tones, portray the unparalleled perfection of his lover in an exaggerated way, elevating her to celestial status. This style soon became popular, as poets celebrated the perfection of their lovers’ appearances as flawlessly divine.

Shakespeare protests and satirizes against this kind of sonnets that over-idealizes and even mythologizes the beloved in Sonnet 130. The sonnet subverts the Petrarchan sonnet by parody, describing a lady of ordinary appearance by contrasting her with various beautiful natural beings: Her eyes could not compare with the sun; nor were her lips redder than coral; nor were her breasts snow-white; her hair curled on the top of her head; nor were her cheeks more delicate than a rose’s; nor was her breath pleasant; her voice was far from being so beautiful as music, and she treaded on the ground when she walked.

In contrast to the beautiful and elegant goddess in Petrarchan sonnet, Shakespeare’s lover is an ordinary mortal. If Petrarchan sonnet is to mythologize man and make him on the equal level of nature, Shakespeare’s Sonnet 130 is to pull human back to earth, emphasizing human’s “mortality”. In many poems of Shakespeare’s day, the poets often compared human to the great and noble things in nature. For example, in Christopher Marlowe’s *From Doctor Faustus*, he describes Helen’s beauty:

O thou art fairer than the evening air
Clad in the beauty of a thousand stars!
Brighter art thou than flaming Jupiter
When he appeared to hapless Semele,
More lovely than the monarch of the sky
In wanton Arethusas azured arms;
And none but thou shalt be my paramour! [5]

Christopher Marlowe employs a series of abstract metaphors, declaring that Helen is fairer than evening air, more beautiful than a starry sky, more dazzling than the flaming Jupiter, and even lovelier than sun reflected in water. This is a typical manifestation of anthropocentrism. As a matter of fact, human is part of nature, and possesses a subordinate position in the natural world. Since the creation of human, all their behaviors are constrained by nature, and compared

with the powerful nature, human beings are indeed too powerless. The natural phenomena in Christopher Marlowe's poem -- wind, starry skies, planets and the sun -- are all grander than the human. However, medieval theological values, positioning human as the greatest achievement of God's creation, established anthropocentric thought. During the Renaissance, human's self-consciousness greatly expanded, and human was elevated to an unprecedented status, thus giving rise to the perspective in Christopher Marlowe's poem: human daring to compare himself to nature and even claim superiority over it.

Shakespeare's Sonnet 130, however, offers a contrasting view. Sonnet 130 compares the poet's beloved with various natural wonders, but concludes that every aspect of the beloved is inferior, emphasizing human mortality and restoring humanity to its subordinate position within nature. Compared with other poems popular in Shakespeare's time that infinitely exaggerated the beauty of human and extolled the greatness of human in comparison with nature, Sonnet 130 takes a more realistic attitude towards the physical conditions of human, and more rationally describes the position of human in nature, exemplifying an accurate understanding of the relationship between human and nature.

However, Shakespeare does not merely negate the humanists' efforts to praise human by revisiting human's position. In the final couplet of the sonnet, Shakespeare performs a huge reversal. All the earlier parts of the poem are about how mortal and ordinary the lover is, yet in the end the poet expresses his unwavering love. Even though his beloved is so mediocre, in the poet's eyes she is so uniquely beautiful. The contrast between the initial description of the beloved's ordinariness and the dramatic affirmation in the couplet highlights the steadfastness and preciousness of the poet's love. It glorifies the fact that although humans are mortal and ordinary, there exists a steadfast love between them that transcends the physical conditions, and this constitutes their greatness.

5. Conclusion

During the Renaissance, the age of humanism, the status of human was elevated to an unprecedented height. In his sonnets, Shakespeare, as a humanist, affirms the value and dignity of human without losing himself in the odes dedicated to human which infinitely exaggerate human's ability and status. Instead, he recognizes human's true place in nature from a realistic and rational perspective, based on which humans generate the valuable love for each other. Even though human lacks the surpassing beauty of nature, possesses the life less enduring than nature's cycles, and face external threats to love's stability, they are able to inspire a more unwavering and faithful love as time goes.

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