
| RESEARCH ARTICLE

A Glimpse of the Sun as a Timeless Motif in Elizabethan Renaissance: Shakespearean Sonnets 7, 18, and 33

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| ABSTRACT

Ever since the creation of man, he has been fascinated with the Sun as an essential element of nature that determines change in his daily life. In accordance with the natural cycle of the Sun from the east to the west, man started to calculate not only the time of the day, but also to determine the season of the year. Therefore, man rapidly started to view the Sun as a rich source of creativity due to its distinctive traits of size, light, and heat; which are incomparable to anything else. With its daily recurrence, primitive man started to look at the Sun and imagine it to be something like a golden chariot crossing the sky, while the Greco-Roman classics associated it with a heroic or divine figure as Apollo or Helios. In this article, the Sun is looked at during the Elizabethan Renaissance; particularly by the one and only "Bard of Avon" William Shakespeare (1564 - 1616) in his Sonnets 7, 18, and 33. In this collection of sonnets, the persona expresses his emotions and passions towards his beloved, where the Sun plays a vital role in their depiction. The article adopts a critical framework that attempts to highlight how Shakespeare looks at the Sun as something beyond a symbol or an archetype. The article attempts to illustrate how Shakespeare in Sonnets 7, 18, and 33 resorts to the Sun as a recurrent motif in a general outline of storytelling. In spite the fact that the persona does establish an evident connection of resemblance as well as a means of comparison between his beloved and the Sun, yet the Sun eventually proves to surpass humans, who change over time, while the Sun remains glorious and pure.

| KEYWORDS

Beloved, Persona, Shakespeare, Sonnets, Sun.

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Introduction:

The Renaissance is an intellectual movement that existed in Europe from the fourteenth to the seventeenth century. The term "Elizabethan Renaissance" is used to shed light on that intellectual movement that took place during the reign of Queen Elizabeth I of the Tudor dynasty, during the second half of the sixteenth century England. As Queen Elizabeth I herself was fond of theater, music, and poetry, Elizabethan Renaissance witnessed advancements in the diverse genres of literature that were notable works of aesthetics.

The Renaissance at large focused on the revival of the Greco-Roman classics as a source of inspiration. Greek and Roman mythology influenced Renaissance writers by offering them numerous solar allusions and archetypes, shaping how poets deployed Sun imagery in their expression of profound human emotions. This turned the Sun into a rich source of creativity.

In accordance with its centripetal perspective, the Renaissance focused on the welfare of man in this world; and not the other. This, in its turn, rapidly became notable in the rise of arts relating to human expression and presentation. One of the most highly regarded literary figures that existed in Elizabethan Renaissance England is William Shakespeare (1564 - 1616), due to his well-earned unique status in the English world of poetry and drama. With his contribution of coining beyond two thousand new English words and novel grammatical forms of expressions during the Renaissance, he presented the English language with a whole distinctive division known as the early modern division of English language (Kermode, 2005). He rapidly became to be

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known as the “Bard of Avon” reflecting his unique mastery over language and storytelling. In actuality, he is the one to popularize the English sonnet in Elizabethan literature, which became known as the Shakespearean sonnet in light of its particular rhyme scheme and structure. Thus, the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC) stated that: “Not of an age, but for all time, Shakespeare is England’s most celebrated dramatist and poet” (BBC, n.d.).

Thus, the objective of this article is to highlight how Shakespeare looks at the Sun as something beyond a symbol or an archetype through a critical framework. In other terms, the article attempts to illustrate how Shakespeare in Sonnets 7, 18, and 33 resorts to the Sun as a recurrent motif in a general outline of storytelling. This is conducted through the careful examination of the relationship between the persona and his beloved in light of the progress and changes in that relationship over time.

Review of Related Literature:

The Sun that has existed ever since the creation of time, has always been a source of mystery and inspiration throughout human history. It stood for something not only infatuating, but also mesmerizing. The Sun with its extraordinary nature rapidly became a universal and timeless archetype across cultures and times. Poets throughout history did not merely see it as a physical object in the sky, but rather as a symbol of hope, power, and even time itself. As a result, the Sun, that is mentioned in divine scriptures as a fascinating heavenly object in the vast sky, has evoked tremendous curiosity on part of mankind. Its consequent occurrence that announces a renewed commencement of day after night, light after darkness, warmth after coldness marks – in simple terms – a new beginning, a renewal of hope, and a promise of resurrection.

Due to its unique quality of transmitting light and heat, the Sun has constantly been an intriguing object to mankind. With its dominating orbit in the sky hovering over Earth, it is regarded extremely essential for human existence not only for transmitting light and warmth, but also calculating time. As man came to comprehend its impact on defining and determining time, he rapidly recognized its central role in defining the hours of the day as well as determining the seasons of the year. This, in return, did have an impact on human activity by relating the possibility of a particular practice to the time of the day falling in a certain month of the year; depending on the length of that day, its density of light, and the amount of heat that the Sun offers at the time. Consequently, the Sun is a fundamental object in nature that is necessary to secure the ongoing existence and well-being of man on Earth.

Later with the development of astronomy, it has been proven that the Sun is the core of the solar system in the cosmos. To put this in perspective, the Sun’s enormously humongous size is able to encompass all of the celestial planets put together. In other words, had the Sun been hollow, it would have hosted more than one million Earths put together (<https://nineplanets.org/questions/how-big-is-the-sun/>).

The Sun is indeed outstanding and incomparable to other planets and stars with its constant daily existence, movement in the sky, and distinctive traits of light and heat. Thus, the Sun has always been regarded as a dominantly fantastic celestial object of paramount significance to man, who associated it with the hero in myths and modern stories since both the Sun and the hero share distinctive traits of supremacy and strength.

Primitive man attempted to explain natural phenomena by resorting to myths as a means of a rich source of creativity. Myths were originally “religious narratives that transcend the possibilities of common experience and that [they] express any given culture’s literal or metaphorical understanding of various aspects of reality” (Leeming, 2005, p. xi). Therefore, a myth, through the variation of events and details, could be told and retold; and that once it loses its connection with belief, it becomes entirely and purely literary (Frye, 1957, p.31-32). As a result, primitive man looked at the Sun and imagined that it was a fiery chariot that is driven daily across the sky (Hamlyn, 1959, p.8). This rapidly resulted in perceiving the Sun as an archetype of prominence.

Methodology:

The article adopts a critical framework that attempts to highlight how Shakespeare looks at the Sun as something beyond a symbol or an archetype. The article attempts to illustrate how Shakespeare in Sonnets 7, 18, and 33 resorts to the Sun as a recurrent motif in a general outline of storytelling. So what is meant by an archetype and a motif, and what is their relevance to Sonnets 7, 18, and 33?

An archetype in *Anatomy of Criticism* is defined as: “A symbol, usually an image, which recurs often enough in literature to be recognized as an element of one’s literary experience as a whole” (Frye, 1957, p. 365). In psychoanalysis, an archetype is the basic element of the conscious mind that is hidden in the depths of the psyche in light of psychologist Carl Jung’s belief that archetypes emerge in literature from the “collective unconscious” of the human race (Jacobi, 1959, p.37). Consequently, archetypal themes include birth, death, sibling rivalry, and the individual versus society (Poetry Foundation, n.d.). Thus, this process of retelling stories allows the existence of a flexible balance between the archetypal myth and the modern story (Agten, 2019, p.1).

Elizabethan poets often drew on classical mythic structures where the Sun is a heroic or divine figure as Apollo or Helios. In Elizabethan cosmology, the Sun resonated with and was not merely viewed as a decorative object in the sky, but rather as a structured symbol in poetry and drama. After thorough examination of the frequency and significance of solar imagery in Shakespeare’s sonnets, Schrickx finds that Shakespeare situates the Sun within the Elizabethan macrocosm–microcosm worldview in light of its position in the cosmos, which mirrors human hierarchies of power, authority, and life force.

In his sonnets, Shakespeare weaves a story among a number of characters, making use of the Sun not only as a metaphor or a symbol; but rather as a recurrent theme known in literature as a motif. A motif is a central or recurring image in a literary work that is shared by other works. Unlike themes, which are suggestions, statements, or ideas, "motifs are details whose repetition adds to the work's larger meaning; multiple and varying motifs can take place within one work and across longer collections" (Poetry Foundation, n.d.). Accordingly, in his collection of sonnets, Shakespeare recurrently employs the Sun as a motif to provide clear statements through the persona about his love relationship.

Discussion:

In *Northrop Frye in Modern Criticism*, it is stated that Frye, one of the most outstanding literary critics and theorists of the twentieth century, has come up with a revolutionary theory by observing a downward movement from a particular literary work to the world at large. It is explained that this movement is an echo of the downward movement toward displacement because stories become more and more realistic as literature flows from unencumbered myth to mimetic modes with the promise to return (Krieger, 1966, p.11). Based on this downward movement, Frye divides his fictional modes into five categories that are: Mythic, romantic, high mimetic, low mimetic, and ironic.

To define the general characteristics of each mode, in the mythic mode, the hero is divine. He is superior in kind to other men and the environment. This type of hero is found in myth proper as a god or a goddess. In the romantic mode, the hero is human, but he is superior to other men and the environment by being aided with magic or special powers. Frye argues in *Anatomy* that this kind of hero normally appears in legends and folktales. In the high mimetic mode, the hero is superior to other men but not to the environment. He is a leader, who displays authority, eloquence, and passion. This kind of hero is mainly found in epics and tragedies. The low mimetic hero is one of us because he is subject to the same weakness that we encounter and struggle with. Frye finds this kind of hero in comedies and realistic fiction. The hero of the ironic mode is inferior to us as he suffers from either a certain kind of defect, which might be physical, psychological, mental, or moral. This hero appears in stories of frustration and absurdity (Frye, 1957, p.33-34).

In light of these five modes, Frye relates their structural classification to five structures of meaning. He conducts this by developing what he calls "*mythoi* or generic plots" into the representation of the rising movement of spring, summer, autumn, and winter. After Frye establishes these four categories in which both nature and literature coincide, he divides these generic plots into a pair of comedy and romance contrasting them with another pair of tragedy and irony. Frye poses that the *mythos* of spring is comedy, the *mythos* of summer is romance, the *mythos* of autumn is tragedy, while the *mythos* of winter is irony and satire. Frye then correlates the elements of each season with the hero and his desires, which he achieves or does not achieve.

Interestingly, as the art of storytelling involves repetition of certain standard structures that keep recurring under various guises, Frye in *Fables* also links the ability of the hero with the energy of the Sun. Because he believes that the true hero of any story is the Sun, he associates the rise of the Sun in dawn or early morning with spring and birth or youth; as in creation myths or myths of the birth of the hero. He associates the time of zenith or noontime, when the Sun is at its utmost energy, with summer and marriage or triumph; as in the apotheosis myths or myths of the entry into paradise in comedy. He relates the Sun at the time of sunset or evening time with autumn and death; as in the fall myths or myths of the isolation of the hero in tragedy. He combines the darkness or night time that exists after the departure of the Sun with winter and dissolution; as in the myths of the return of chaos in satire (Frye, 1957, p.15-16).

Accordingly, it is interesting how the Sun is perceived in the ancient literary genre of poetry. Understanding the symbolic weight of the Sun in Elizabethan literature requires context from Renaissance thought. Throughout generations, poets like Shakespeare, who portray stories in their poetry through imagery, symbolism, and personification looked at the Sun and turned it into poetry as they relate it to resilience and meaning. This, in its turn, makes the Sun as one of the most recurring and powerful poetic images in Shakespearean sonnets.

Findings:

Shakespeare's Sonnets 7, 18, and 33 are examined in this article as they are touchstones for illustrating the Sun's agency and narrative centrality in each of these sonnets. Studies of symbolical imagery in Shakespeare's sonnets frequently note the recurrent use of solar imagery. This strongly suggests that the Sun imagery often corresponds to heroic, life-giving, or sovereign qualities in Elizabethan poetic texts. In Elizabethan poetry, the Sun is regarded as a character figure that explores moral and seasonal cycles having it at its center.

The persona in Shakespeare's Sonnets 7, 18, and 33 utilized the Sun to illustrate particular ideas about the persona's beloved. Shakespeare's intention through the persona is to depict a complete image of perfection of his own beloved. He wanted to portray an ideal image that happens to be flawless. An image that is incomparable to any other, and evidently there was no better image than that of the Sun to express that idea of the superlative ultimate, the exceptional, and the unique when heightened emotions of love are involved. That is why in sonnets 7, 18, and 33, the Sun is charmingly perceived as it is strongly associated with beauty and charm.

To illustrate, *Sonnet 7* uses the approaching Sun as an image of youth's ascent and eventual decline, bridging cosmic force and human life cycle. In this sonnet, the image of the Sun is viewed at its prime with a strong presence resembling energy, light, and heat. All of these traits are projected by the persona in his beloved at middle age. The persona states:

Lo, in the orient when the gracious light
Lifts up his burning head, each under eye
Doth homage to his new-appearing sight,
Serving with looks his sacred majesty;
And having climbed the steep-up heavenly hill,
Resembling strong youth in his middle age,
Yet mortal looks adore his beauty still,
Attending on his golden pilgrimage.

The portrayal of the Sun in *Sonnet 7* is extremely captivating. It functions as the beginning of the motif which symbolizes admiration and gracefulness. Its light is perceived with grace, its existence with majesty, its energy with strength, its appearance with beauty, and its texture with gold. In other words, the persona's choice of the Sun as the core symbol here is most suitable as it is a single object of momentum that encompasses all of these extraordinary traits.

The Sun in *Sonnet 7* is not to be seen as only a mere object that recurs in nature, but rather as a character with a lot of prestige and grandeur. Even the natural departure of the Sun is not viewed as an expected decline, but rather a sacred journey from east to west in accordance with the normal cycle of nature. The Sun is also perceived with a lot of awe since it is attended to by mortals that stand aside with reverence just by tracing the track of the Sun's daily journey. It is as if these mortals view that the Sun graces the sky with its mere presence. Therefore, the choice of the Sun as the beginning of the motif in *Sonnet 7*, with all of its mesmerizing characteristics that are vibrant in the heart of the sky, is strongly associated with the outstanding hero, who is not like any other.

The motif continues in *Sonnet 18*, as the persona wants (as a means of exaggeration) to state how unmatched his beloved is by comparing him to nothing better than the Sun. He states:

Sometime too hot the eye of heaven shines,
And often is his gold complexion dimmed;
And every fair from fair sometime declines,
By chance or nature's changing course untrimmed.
But thy eternal summer shall not fade
Nor lose possession of that fair thou ow'st,
Nor shall Death brag thou wand'rest in his shade,
When in eternal lines to time thou grow'st.

Now as beauty is in the eyes of the beholder, and since the persona is so much in love; he makes a bold statement that the beauty of his beloved does surpass that of the Sun as it will remain eternally sustained in these lines of poetry of *Sonnet 18*. In his perspective, that makes a lot of sense since the memory of his beloved is indeed preserved as long as man is capable of reading these lines of poetry. The persona here is attempting to show that the Sun may be at times too hot or dimmed as a sign of decline, and that the primary summer season does fade away; yet he does not find anything more suitable than the Sun to measure up the beauty of his beloved with. This partake is an implicit acknowledgement on the part of the persona of the distinctive characteristics of the Sun that are incomparable with anything else. In that sense, the Sun; even in the context of *Sonnet 18*, does represent both dominance and prominence.

To explain, the statement of "the eye of heaven shines" here presents the Sun as a central agent in the sonnet's poetic conceit. In this sonnet, the mention of the Sun does surface again by portraying it as the shining "eye of heaven" with its "gold complexion". No matter the time of day, the Sun's impact of heat and energy do remain with a promise of return according to the normal cycle of nature. That is why the usage of the Sun as a motif in *Sonnet 18* indicates that it is used to function not only as a poetic symbol, but also as a primary force of nature. This, once more, underscores the Sun's magnitude and essentiality.

Sonnet 33 pairs the motif of the Sun with moral and emotional dynamics, offering rich material for arguing that the Sun serves as a source of renewable human desire. In *Sonnet 33*, the persona states that:

Full many a glorious morning have I seen
Flatter the mountain tops with sovereign eye,
Kissing with golden face the meadows green,
Gilding pale streams with heavenly alchemy,
Anon permit the basest clouds to ride
With ugly rack on his celestial face,
And from the forlorn world his visage hide,
Stealing unseen to west with this disgrace.

Even so my sun one early morn did shine
 With all-triumphant splendor on my brow,
 But, out alack, he was but one hour mine;
 The region cloud hath masked him from me now.

The motif continues underscoring the Sun's remarkable nature for which the persona associates his beloved with. This is evident as the persona associates his beloved with the Sun by stating that the latter has a "golden face" and a "celestial face". Yet, there is a departure of heightened expectations due to a transformation or a "heavenly alchemy" in the condition of that beloved.

Just like the Sun, there is evidently a descend since that face becomes masked and no longer clear and accessible for interpretation by the persona due to "[t]he region cloud". Here the focus is on the gradual disappearance of the Sun, announcing the rupture of that love relationship. The overall emphasis in *Sonnet 33* is about the setback and the eventual downfall in the affiliations of the beloved towards the persona, who feels a sense of betrayal and abandonment with the disappearance of the Sun. This is heightened as the persona concludes this is the couplet of *Sonnet 33* by stating:

Yet him for this my love no whit disdaineth;
 Suns of the world may stain when heaven's sun staineth.

Conclusion:

The Sun has always been one of the strongest symbols of poetry during Elizabethan Renaissance. The Sun is, therefore, employed by Shakespeare in his Sonnets 7, 18, and 33 to resemble its distinctive magnitude. Thus, the persona in these sonnets acknowledges, whether implicitly or explicitly, the supreme status of the Sun as a poetic motif relating it to his beloved.

The Sun in Shakespeare's Sonnets 7, 18, and 33 is portrayed not only as the archetype of vigor in regard to celestial planets, but also as a motif of constant superiority and premium. It is strongly associated with the persona's beloved due to its resilience and survivability. Yet in the concluding lines of *Sonnet 33*, the actual Sun supersedes its association with the persona's beloved highlighting it as a motif of glory that never loses meaning.

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