Immortality in Verse: An Analysis of Sonnet 81

Savannah Lund
Utah State University

Brooke Tingey
Utah State University

Clay Reed
Utah State University

Tambi Clark
Utah State University

Sadie Leonhardt
Utah State University

Follow this and additional works at: https://digitalcommons.usu.edu/english_3315

Part of the English Language and Literature Commons

Recommended Citation
Lund, Savannah; Tingey, Brooke; Reed, Clay; Clark, Tambi; and Leonhardt, Sadie, "Immortality in Verse: An Analysis of Sonnet 81" (2018). ENGL 3315 – Early Modern British Literary History. 3.
https://digitalcommons.usu.edu/english_3315/3

This Book is brought to you for free and open access by the Student Exhibits at DigitalCommons@USU. It has been accepted for inclusion in ENGL 3315 – Early Modern British Literary History by an authorized administrator of DigitalCommons@USU. For more information, please contact digitalcommons@usu.edu.
Immortality in Verse
An Analysis of Sonnet 81

Savannah Lund, Brooke Tingey, Clay Reed, Tambi Clark, and Sadie Leonhardt

A Guide to Analyzing

Shakespeare’s sonnets are like language puzzles. Each one is packed with so much rich detail and complex ideas, it can be difficult to see how the pieces fit together. This poster acts as a guide to analyzing Shakespeare’s sonnets and gives an example of a brief analysis with the focus on the themes of death and immortality. To analyze:

- Read sonnet at least twice (preferably out loud)
- Analyze by quatrain and final couplet
- Identify figurative language
- Identify the volta (shift in tone)
- Interpret overall theme

Sonnet 81

The first quatrain uses imagery related to life and death. The images and word choices here convey a tone of finality and maybe some bitterness on the part of the poet.

- Or I shall live to repent to thee.
- Or you survive when I in earth am rotten.
- From these your memory death cannot take.
- Although in me each part will be forgotten.

The second quatrain continues the pattern of life and death imagery. The imagery of death is reinforced here by use of words like grave and extended.

- Your name from hence immortal life shall have.
- Though I, once gone, to all the world must die.
- The earth can yield me but a common grave.
- When you potential in men’s eyes shall lie.

The couplet combines the imagery of life and breath. The tone becomes triumphant as the poet describes the successful immortalization of the beloved in verse.

- You shall live—such virtue back my pen—
- Where breathed most breathes, even in the witness of men.

Death and Immortality

- The speaker of the poem is jealous of his beloved because, while he will be buried in the ground and forgotten in the coming years, his beloved will go on to live in immortality.
- The beloved can only achieve this through the words of the poet.
- The speaker will soon be forgotten, but his beloved will always be remembered

Irony

This sonnet discusses the speaker’s fear that he will be forgotten, and the beloved will be remembered. There is irony in how Shakespeare sees the future. He mentions that the beloved’s name will have “immortal life,” although the name is never mentioned and the inspiration for the beloved is unknown. Shakespeare is well-known, and the beloved has been forgotten.

“The Body

- Imagery of the body is a common theme in Shakespeare’s sonnets.
- This poem is talking about how the beloved is immortalized by the speaking of Shakespeare’s verse in the future.
- We get images of tongues, mouths, and breath which represent the poem being spoken and viewed by the eyes of people in the future.

“Death Surprising a Young Couple” by Jan van de Velde (II), c. 1610 - c. 1650.

“Saint Jerome Writing” by Hans Springinklee, 1522