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Beauty, Vanity, and Perception in the Sonnets of Shakespeare

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Themes

Sonnet 62 shows many themes that are prevalent in all of Shakespeare's sonnets. In considering the storyline of the sonnets as a whole, this moment in the series demonstrates a shift from admiration for the fair young man, to narcissistic self-admiration, to a more critical recognition that his own beauty is a personal illusion. This critical perspective is later exemplified in the dark lady sonnets where he scrutinizes her, thus giving readers varying perceptions of beauty and vanity.



Beauty

The first two quatrains focus on the poet's mirror image. Much like the image of Narcissus above, the poet looks at his reflection and becomes somewhat obsessed. While he still loves the fair young man, he becomes more in love with himself at this point in the series. The poet's self-love is only generated, though, because he first sees the fair young man in the reflection.

Sonnet 62

Sin of self-love possesseth all mine eye
And all my soul and all my every part;
And for this sin there is no remedy,
It is so grounded inward in my heart.
Methinks no face so gracious is as mine,
No shape so true, no truth of such account,
And for myself mine own worth do define
As I all other in all worths surmount.
But when my glass shows me myself indeed
Beated and chopped with tanned antiquity,
Mine own self-love quite contrary I read;
Self so self-loving were iniquity.
'Tis thee, myself, that for myself I praise,
Painting my age with beauty of thy days.

Vanity

The frequent use of "me", "myself", "I", and "mine" convey the selfish nature of the sonnet. "Sin of self-love" alludes to pride, the first of the 7 deadly sins, setting the sonnet in a religious context. Claiming the sin has "no remedy" the poet shows his disregard for the magnitude of the sin itself—this is who he is and nothing can be done about it. Yet he realizes that his self-love cannot last into old age. The image of his "tanned antiquity" brings him to the realization that his love in himself is actually "iniquity." Much like the woman in the figure on the right, the poet points to his reflection in a prideful way, only to come to the realization that he is not beautiful after all.

Perception

This sonnet, as with the other sonnets in this section, is dedicated to the fair young man. The poet has abandoned the prospect of convincing the fair young man to have children, and has now decided to immortalize him through verse. One way in which the poet shares his admiration for him is through an allusion to Plato's concept of soulmates, where humans are split in half by Zeus and are not complete without their other halves.



Change in Perception

As a whole, this sonnet reverses the premise of Petrarchan traditions described above, in which two lovers become one. The writer twists this tradition by creating a complex representation of the psychology of love and how it can lead to sin. The volta, or shift in thought, comes after the second quatrain. Here, the poet begins to darken the theme by demonstrating how love can easily turn inward. This more obscure tone is reflected in the entire sequence of Shakespeare's sonnets as the poet begins to become more critical of himself, the fair young man, and the dark lady.