

But were
You should liue twice 18.

SHall I compare thee to a Summer
Thou art more louely and more
Rough windes do shake the darke
And Sommers lease hath all too
Sometime too hot the eye of heauen
And often is his gold complexion
And euery faire from faire for
By chance, or natures changing
But thy eternall Sommer shall
be possession of that

**UNDERSTANDING SHAKESPEARE:
THE SONNETS**

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Los Angeles

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NOTE: All lines numbers referred to in this text are consistent with those found in *The Norton Shakespeare* (Stephen Greenblatt, editor).

CHAPTER 1

SHAKESPEARE'S SONNETS TO THE YOUNG MAN

BACKGROUND ON WILLIAM SHAKESPEARE

William Shakespeare is, according to almost everybody, the greatest writer England has produced. Some people (especially if they are English) will even argue that Shakespeare is the greatest writer that the world has produced. But no matter how one may rank Shakespeare in the pantheon (or group) of the world's best authors, a person cannot help but marvel at the creativity, the insight, and the genius of William Shakespeare.

Shakespeare was born in 1564. This is the same year when Christopher Marlowe was born (and when the astronomer Galileo was born). Shakespeare is also the younger contemporary of Spenser (born in 1552) and Sidney (born in 1554).

William Shakespeare was both a great playwright and a great poet. His plays generally fall into three categories: **comedies**, **histories**, and **tragedies**. Occasionally, critics add a fourth category, **romances**, to define or categorize a few of the plays (like *The Tempest*). In some cases these categories overlap. For example, both *Richard III* and *Julius Caesar* could be labeled as either tragedies or histories. However, the former is labeled a history

play and the latter is labeled a tragedy. The reason for this is that the history plays are generally those that concern English history (but not, for example, Roman history).

Shakespeare's career as a playwright falls, for the most part, into two distinct decades:

1590's	Comedies and Histories
1600's	Tragedies

But the student should also note that Shakespeare did write some comedies after 1600 and some tragedies before 1600. Shakespeare's tragedies, especially, have been translated into numerous languages. And every student of English literature should be familiar with these plays:

<i>Romeo and Juliet</i>	1595
<i>Julius Caesar</i>	1599
<i>Hamlet</i>	1600-01
<i>Othello</i>	1603-04
<i>King Lear</i>	1604-05
<i>Macbeth</i>	1606
<i>Anthony and Cleopatra</i>	1606

In some cases the exact date of composition is unknown. Shakespeare's plays were not published when he wrote them, but historical records do usually indicate when the plays were first performed in London.

There is very little information about Shakespeare's early life. He grew up in the English countryside and received a typical rudimentary or simple education for that time. Such an education would include the study of the Latin language as well as the reading of numerous works of Greek and Roman literature, many of which were available in English translations in the late 16th century.

Sometime before 1590 Shakespeare moved to London. Although he may have acted in a few minor roles on the stage, Shakespeare predominantly made his living in the business end of the theater (like a stage manager or producer). Even a great writer like William Shakespeare could not earn a sufficient income by his writing alone. In Shakespeare's time, actors always performed together in **acting troupes**. An actor in one troupe would practically never perform with the actors of another troupe. Like individual writers, an acting troupe might also seek the patronage of a wealthy aristocrat for financial support. By the early 1600's Shakespeare's troupe became so widely known and so respected that they received the patronage of the highest aristocrat in the land, King James I. From that time on, Shakespeare's acting troupe became known as the **King's Men**.

Shakespeare, however, was actually financially successful before that time. In 1597 he bought **New Place**, a fine and expensive house in his country hometown of Stratford-on-Avon. Nevertheless, Shakespeare continued to write plays

Understanding Shakespeare: The Sonnets

and work in London until approximately 1610, at which time he retired. Shakespeare died in 1616.

THE SONNETS

In addition to being considered the greatest playwright of England, Shakespeare was also the greatest poet of his day. His sonnets, especially, form one of the most intriguing collections of poems from the Renaissance.

Like Sidney's *Astrophil and Stella*, Shakespeare's collection of 154 poems forms a **sonnet cycle**. Written in the early 1590's (but not published until 1609), Shakespeare's sonnets, like other cycles, concern love and focus on the attitudes and feelings of the speaker. However, Shakespeare's cycle is far different from Petrarch's or Sidney's poetry. Shakespeare creatively approached the cycle from a new and unusual perspective. Generally speaking, Shakespeare's *Sonnets* differ from the previous cycles in four distinct ways:

- (1) The object of the male speaker's affections is a **young man**, not a lady, in 126 of the 154 poems. The young man thus becomes the object of praise, love, and devotion just as Stella had been in Sidney's poems or Laura had been in Petrarch's poems. The love suggested in these poems is not necessarily homosexual. The love between two males suggests a bond of friendship, like that between two very close brothers. Such a Platonic love does not exclude either man from having relationships with females.

- (2) In the last 26 sonnets, the object of affection is a **dark lady**. In traditional Renaissance poetry, the beautiful lady is presented as blond-haired and blue-eyed. Moreover, she is typically virtuous and pure. Shakespeare's lady not only has dark hair and dark eyes, but she is also sensuous and sexually promiscuous (or active). Thus, **lust** (rather than virtue) becomes a more common motif in these sonnets.
- (3) In the sonnets by Petrarch and Sidney, the focus is primarily on the speaker as an **unrequited lover**. And so the poems reflect the up-and-down emotions that the speaker experiences as he goes from hope to melancholy or from delight to disgust. There is no unrequited love in Shakespeare's sonnets, and the poems do not reflect the see-saw (the up-and-down) emotions of the speaker. However, Shakespeare's sonnets do indicate several conflicts within the speaker.
- (4) There is, perhaps, more of a story (although it is rather vague) in Shakespeare's *Sonnets* than in other sonnet cycles.

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