UNIT 3 WILLIAM SHAKESPEARE’S SONNETS

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3.0 OBJECTIVES

You have already read some of Shakespeare’s sonnets and learnt to scan them. After reading this unit you will be able to think, speak and write on William Shakespeare and his sonnets in general and two sonnets, 29 and 30 in particular.

This will lay the foundation for an appreciation, in the long run not only of Shakespeare’s sonnets but also other sonnet sequences and long poems of Elizabethan poets such as Edmund Spenser (1552 – ‘99), Sir Philip Sidney (1554 – ’86), Christopher Marlowe (1564 – ’93), Samuel Daniel (1563 - 1619) and, quite a few others.

3.1 INTRODUCTION

In this unit you will read a brief life sketch of William Shakespeare (1564 - 1616) and two of his sonnets. Read this unit section by section in the order presented here giving yourself a short break from time to time. Don’t try to read both sonnets in quick succession. It may be a good idea to read them several times day after day till you have committed them to memory.

There is plenty of material on the internet on Shakespeare and other Elizabethan poets and poems; you may read them also if you like and if you have time.
3.2 WILLIAM SHAKESPEARE: THE NATIONAL POET OF ENGLAND

3.2.1 Introduction

Shakespeare is certainly the most famous of literary artists of the English Speaking world. He has been compared with Johann Wolfgang Von Goethe (1749 - 1832) in Germany, Victor Hugo (1802-85) in France, Miguel de Cervantes (1547-1616) in Spain, Alighieri Dante (1265 -1321) in Italy, Leo Tolstoy (1828-1910) in Russia and Tulsidas (1532? - 1623) in India. Ben Jonson (1574-1637) one of Shakespeare’s great contemporaries called him the greatest European writer:

Of all, that insolent *Greece*, or haughtie *Rome*
Sent forth, or since did from their ashes come
Triumph, my *Braitaine*, thou hast one to showe,
To whom all scenes of *Europe* homage owe,

Shakespeare has retained his place in the Western literature as the artist par excellence.

3.2.2 Early Life

William was the eldest son of John Shakespeare as glover and dealer in other commodities such as barley, timber and wood. John’s father Richard Shakespeare was a yeoman farmer of Snitterfield. He farmed in two manors one of which belonged to Robert Arden maternal grandfather of William. Richard, William Shakespeare’s grandfather died in 1561. John married Mary Arden around 1557 and William was born on 23 April, 1564 as he was according to local Church records baptized at the Holy Trinity Church Stratford-upon-Avon on 26 April, 1564, three days after his birth following the local tradition. Mary Arden and John Shakespeare had eight children of whom four sons and a daughter survived childhood. For a time John Shakespeare was very successful. He was the burgess of the borough and chosen and alderman in 1565 and bailiff in 1568.

William may have gone to the grammar school at Stratford run by the borough where he may have learnt to read, write and speak Latin and some of the classical poets. William Shakespeare certainly did not go to the University. Instead at the age of 18, in November or December 1582 he married Anne Hathway of Shottery only two miles away from Stratford. She was eight years his senior and three months pregnant by William. Their daughter Susanna was baptized on 26 May, 1583. Anne gave birth to their son Hamnet and daughter Judith on 2 February, 1585. We employment at this time except from the antiquary and biographer John Aubrey’s (1626-97) account of Shakespeare as a school master in the country.

3.2.3 In the Theatre

Shakespeare probably entered the world of theatre in 1587 when the Queen’s Men came to Stratford to stage a play. One of their men had been murdered and William Shakespeare filled the vacancy. The first recorded reference to his drama is by Robert Greene (1558-92) in his *Greene’s groats-worth of witte* (1592) in which he called Shakespeare ‘an upstart crow, beautified with our feathers. Greene had been educated at St. John’s College and Clare Hall, Cambridge from 1575 until 1583 and had been incorporated at Oxford in 1588. Greene was a
University Wit – a name coined by George Saintsbury (1845-1933) the chair, since 1895 of rhetoric and English literature at Edinburgh for twenty years. The other Elizabethan playwrights who had been to Oxford or Cambridge were Thomas Nashe (1567-1601). John Lyly (1554-1606) and Thomas Lodge (?1558-1625) Greene or his editor Henry Chettle (c. 1560-? 1607) printer and playwright of sorts also called Shakespeare un absolute Johannes Factotums ..... in his own conceit the only Shake scene in a country. As ‘Johannes Factotum’ or ‘Jack of all trade’ Shakespeare was criticized for being a second-rate tinkerer with the works of others.

Greene’s attack is the earliest surviving mention of Shakespeare’s career in the theatre. Apart from Henry VI in 3 parts Shakespeare had also published Titus Andronicus and King John by 1592. Shakespeare began his writing career by adapting existing scripts, altering and modifying them which accounts for the variability in these early pieces.

3.2.4 The Poet

Shakespeare finds mention for the first time in the Stationer’s List in 1593 for Venus and Adonis. This was followed by The Rape of Lucrece in 1594. Both were dedicated to young Henny Wriotheslay (pronounced Risley, Riesley or Rosely) the third Earl of Southampton. Both were a literary and commercial success. The warmth and ardour of the dedication to Southampton of The Rape matches the fire and enthusiasm of the sonnets addressed to the ‘Fair Youth’ and it is quite certain that they were getting written about this time. The sonnets were not meant for the general public but only for the eyes of one or two lovers mentioned in the poems. They were published by Thomas Thorpe, without Shakespeare’s agency, in 1609. The volume includes the poem ‘A Lover’s Complaint’. In the meantime Robert Chester had published Shakespeare’s ‘The Phoenix and the Turtle’ in his Loves Martyr (1601) a collection of poems by various hands.

Poetry appears to have been Shakespeare’s pastime during the plague years in 1592 and ‘93. When the theatres opened in 1594 Shakespeare received a sum of hundred pounds, a great sum in those days, from Southampton with which he became a shaver in Lord Chamberlain’s Men, one of the most important acting companies then in London. As a shaver he was part owner of the stocks of the company and shared also in its expenses and profits. In 1596 John Shakespeare at Stratford applied for and got a coat of arms which established his gentility. Next year William bought New Place, the second largest house in Stratford. In 1598 Richard Burbage, the famous actor died and his two sons invited Shakespeare and four other of the principal actors in the Lord Chamberlain’s men to invest for a half share in the new globe theatre which they built on the Thames using timber from the old theatre for the foundations. The venture was a success and in 1602 Shakespeare could buy 107 acres of land and 20 acres of pasture from a local magnate John Combe. In 1603, at the accession of games I the company was renamed King’s Men.

3.2.5 Achievements

Shakespeare wrote some of his greatest tragedies such as Hamlet (1601), King Lear (1605), Othello (1604) and Macbeth (1606), Antony and Cleopatra (1607) and Coriolanus (1608) by 1608. His last plays, perhaps his most perfect, were romances: Pericles (1607), Cymbeline (1609), The Winter’s Tale (1611) and The Tempest (1611). Shakespeare returned to Stratford in 1613 where he died on 23
April, 1616. Two of his colleagues in the theatre, namely John Heminges (1556-1630) and Henry Condell (d. 1627) together edited the first folio (1623) of his plays and Ben Jonson (1572/3-1637) wrote his memorial verses for the in which he proudly proclaimed:

He was not of an age, but for all time  
And all the Muses still were in their prime  
When like Apollo he came forth to warme  
Our eares, or like a Mercury to charm!  
Nature her selfe was proud of his designes  
And joy’d to were the dressing of his lines  
Which were so richly spun, and woven so fit,  
As, since, she will vouchsafe no other wit.

Shakespeare has attracted the greatest number of scholars engaged in the study of English Literature in each generation and in every land. Shakespeare has found admirers not only in literature but also in cinema.

Now that you have read a brief note on Shakespeare’s life and work find out for yourself how well you have understood it with the help of the exercise below.

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<td>2) Name some of the poems of William Shakespeare along with the dates of their composition/publication.</td>
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<td>3) Name some of the famous tragedies of Shakespeare.</td>
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<td>4) What was the name of the company which Shakespeare also partially owned?</td>
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3.3 SHAKESPEARE’S SONNETS

3.3.1 Background

Sonnets are fourteen-line poems in two or three rhyme schemes. One of them is named after the Italian humanist and poet Petrarch (Francesco Petrarca) (1304-74) who used the sonnet sequence to praise Laura whom he first met in 1327. His odes and sonnets in praise of Laura were later included in Conzoniere of Rime (1360). His sonnets structurally and also in thought process are divided into octaves and sestets, i.e. eight-and six-line stanzas. The octaves follow the rhyme scheme abba, abba put the rhyme scheme of the sestets vary:

Ccd ccd or ccdcd or cdece. Petrarch had profound influence on European literature as he showed the way for the revival of interest in ancient Greek and Latin literatures. The most well known name in English for the immediate influence of Petrarch is that of Sir Thomas Wyatt (1503-42) who held many diplomatic assignments in France, Italy, Spain and the Netherlands in the service of the Tudor monarch Henry VIII (1509-47).

Sir Thomas visited Italy for the first time in 1527 when he got inspired by Petrarch’s poems and essays and translated them into English. The most accomplished writers of Petrarchan sonnets in English are Milton and Wordsworth.

Henry Howard, (by courtesy) Earl of surrey (? 1517 - 47) was in the English army in France (1544-6). However, his sonnets were predominantly in the ‘English’ form, i.e. abab, cdcd, efef, gg which was later used by Shakespeare. A third variety of the sonnets is that invented by Spenser. The rhyme scheme of a Spenserian sonnets is:

abab bcbc cdcd ee

3.3.2 The Themes of Shakespeare’s Sonnets

Shakespeare did not write his sonnets for publication. Thomas Thorpe published them in 1609 without his permission. He got the manuscript from someone whose name bears the initials W.H.A.L. Rowse opines that Shakespeare must have given his sonnets to Henry Wriothesley ten years younger than himself to whom he had dedicated his Venus and Adonis and the Rape of Lucrece and who was the ‘fair youth’ to whom the first 127 sonnets were addressed along with the 25 addressed to the dark lady from some lewd background and the last two to Cupid the god of Love, thus making in all 154 in the sequence. These sonnets are amatory in character but it was in these sonnets that Shakespeare bared his soul and must have found their publication quite embarrassing.

Scholars are of the view that a large number of the sonnets were written in the years 1592-94 when the theatres were closed in London due to plague and Shakespeare was in the country. Young Henry Wriothesley, Earl of Southampton about 19 was young and beautiful and Shakespeare 29. Marlowe described Southampton in his portrait of Leander in Hero and Leander with liveliness and precision

His dangling tresses that were never shorn,
His body was as straight as Circes wand,
Jove might have sipped out Nectar from his hand,
Even as delicious meat is to the taste,
So was his neck in touching, and surpassed,
The white of Pelo’s shoulder.
In Greek mythology Pelops was grandson of Zeus. His father Tantalus, cooked and served Pelops to the gods at a banquet but only Demeter, mourning the loss of her daughter Persephone, was distracted enough to eat from the dish. The gods ordered the body restored but the shoulder. Demeter’s portion, was missing, and Pelops was given a replacement of ivory. The body of Pelops, says Marlowe, was whiter than ivory.

Marlowe’s description of Southampton in the person of Leander would have been approved by his contemporaries:

Some swore he was a maid in man’s attire  
For in his looks were all that men desire……..  
And such as knew he was a man would say,  
Leander, thou are made for amorous play:  
Why are thou not in love, and loved of all?  
Though thou be fair, yet be not thine own thrall.

Marlowe advised Leander, i.e. Southampton, to avoid narcissistic tendencies in himself and open himself to others’ affections.

Shakespeare’s expressions of love in the ‘fair youth’ sonnets are more platonic than sexual. Let’s read sonnet 18:

Shall I compare thee to a summer’s day.  
Rough winds do shake the darling buds of May,  
And summer’s lease hath all two short a date  
Sometime too hot the eye of heaven shines,  
And often is his gold complexion dimm’d;  
And every fair from fair some time declines,  
By chance, or nature’s changing course, untrimm’d

In the first two quatrains we get a picture of the impact Southampton has made in Shakespeare’s mind, the portrait draws its power and force by comparison with nature. There is ‘twon’ or ‘Volta opening of the third quatrain. The mood of the poem shifts and the poet expresses a revelation:

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.

Shakespeare’s epiphany is in actual fact condescension in the garb of true esteem which ceases to remain muffled in the last two lines of the sonnet:

So long as men can breathe or eyes can see,  
So long lives this, and this gives life to thee.

Compared with the spiritual love for the ‘fair youth’ in sonnet 18 Shakespeare’s sonnets for the Dark Lady are overtly sexual in appeal. It is evident from the poems that the lady has dun coloured skin and black hair. Shakespeare scholars have named Lucy Negro a London prostitute, Mary Fitton and Emilia Lanier as likely candidates for the dubious distinction of being Shakespeare’s partner in the acts of love.
3.4 SONNETS 29 AND 30: A STUDY IN COMPARISON

3.4.1 The Texts

Sonnet XXIX

When in disgrace with fortune and men’s eyes
I all alone beweep my outcast state,
And trouble deaf heaven with my bootless cries,
And look upon myself, and curse my fate,
Wishing me like to one more rich in hope,
Featured like him, like him with friends possessed,
Desiring this man’s art, and that man’s scope,
With what I most enjoy contented least;
Yet in these thoughts my self almost despising,
Haply I think on thee, and then my state,
Like to the lark at break of day arising
From sullen earth, sings hymns at heaven’s gate;
For thy sweet love remember’d such wealth brings
That then I scorn to change my state with kings.

Sonnet XXIX

When to the sessions of sweet silent thought
I summon up remembrance of things past,
I sigh the lack of many a thing I sought,
And with old woes new wail my dear time’s waste:
Then can I drown an eye, unused to flow,
For precious friends hid in death’s dateless night,
And weep afresh love’s long since cancelled woe,
And moan the expense of many a vanished sight:
Then can I grieve at grievances foregone,
And heavily from woe to woe tell o’er
The sad account of fore-bemoaned moan,
Which I new pay as if not paid before.
But if the while I think on thee, dear friend,
All losses are restor’d and sorrows end.

3.4.2 An Analysis

‘When to the sessions’ and the preceding sonnet 29 – ‘When in disgrace with fortune and men’s eyes’ – are companion pieces. In 29 the poet bewails certain retrogression in his fortune and in 30 the loss of friends and many things he sought in life which he could not get. In both poems Shakespeare cheers up when he remembers his friend. Then he overcomes the hurt caused by his outcast state or depression inflicted by his lack of achievements or loss of friends. However, for a lyric (sonnet 30) that tells us about the intimate experiences of the poet, its language couched in formal court vocabulary may appear wooden on cogitation is seamless in offering the contradictory aesthetic experience of pain and happiness.

In both sonnets i.e. 29 and 30 Shakespeare recounts common losses, unfulfilled ambitions, decease of friends, etc. In sonnet 29 Shakespeare seems to bemoan certain qualities and influence he could not acquire: ‘Desiring this man’s art, and that man’s scope’. In sonnet 30 he sighs the lack of many a thing he sought. The
immediate reason for the downcast state in which he finds himself is fall from the
favour of goddess Fortuna as well as people around him. Nothing precipitous
accounts for the dip in happiness in sonnet 30 but idle memory: ‘sessions of
sweet silent thought’. So while in sonnet 29 the poet like Job in the Old
Testament troubles deaf heaven with his bootless cries’ in sonnet 30 he wastes his
‘dear’ time summoning old thoughts to the court of his mind. A setback in his
career forces the poet to take recourse to the reassurance of religion in sonnet
29; in sonnet 30, the relaxed indulgence in past memories makes him somewhat
distant, aloof and offish. So while in sonnet 30 he is conscious of the wastage of
his time, in sonnet 29 the experience is more intense and the poet like Job curses
his fate.

Shakespeare wrote the sonnets when he was in his late twenties and early thirties.
It appears somewhat strange that he should be overcome by grief for ‘precious
friends hid in death’s dateless night.’ We recall that Marlowe, born in the same
year as Shakespeare himself and the only contemporary poet Shakespeare alluded
to in his plays died in 1593 and his only son Hamnet passed away in August 1596
and Spenser in 1599. Their decease could bring tears to his eyes. The overarching
self-possession in sonnet 30 is expressed by the poet’s assertion that his eyes are
‘unused to flow.’ Still the loss remembered in sonnet 30 is so personal in nature
and affecting his person that he cannot help crying:

And weep afresh love’s long since cancelled woe,
And moan the expense of many a vanished sight:

The memory of his son Hamnet must have been profound and moving. Did
Shakespeare use Hamnet to buttress some scene or character in some of his early
plays which comes to him with a sense of guilt? The poet bemoans ‘The expense
of’ some of his ‘vanished sight.’

Sonnets 29 and 30 may be called complementary; the former is full of tear and
cries and in the latter Shakespeare seems to have gained self-control and
authority even compensating for the loss in the former sonnet. The second
quatrain of sonnet 29 exposes Shakespeare’s innermost desire. He was a
commoner, unlike Henry and Robert i.e. Southampton and Essex. However, he
was conscious of his gifts. And still, he must have felt that he was inferior even
as a playwright, to Christopher Marlowe of his own age. He must have desired
the art of Marlowe and Spenser and the scope of earls of Southampton and Essex
to whose circle he belonged. Marlowe was University educated; Shakespeare had
give up his education owing to some catastrophic decline in his father’s fortune. The latter’s status in the late 16th century was that of a hanger on and an
ordinary actor and at best an insignificant playwright. He lacked many things: the
skills of Marlowe as well his scope as one of Walsingham’s circle and of course
the ‘influence’ of Essex who was very dear to Queen Elizabeth. But more than all
these Shakespeare sought the company of Henry Wriothesley, Earl of
Southampton ‘the world’s fresh ornament’ of which he never felt he had his full.

Let’s now turn to the third quatrains in the two sonnets. It is typical of
Shakespeare to turn around the train of thought. Sonnet 30 is a more formal,
public conscious utterance, so Shakespeare introduces the idea of now grieving
over his grievances mentioned in the preceding quatrains. In a way, the
melancholic strain is strengthened in the third stanza which gives and epiphanic
character to the concluding lines of the poem:

But if the while I think on thee, dear friend,
All losses are restored and sorrows end.
This revival of spirit comes faster in sonnet 29. The third quatrain reverses the melancholic atmosphere of the foregoing quatrains. Here Shakespeare tells his reader that while he is despising himself on several counts he remembers his friend, i.e. Southampton, his ‘state’ or body begins to sing,

Like to the lark at break of day arising
From sullen earth, sings hymns at heaven’s gate;

Shakespeare has used an epic simile in a lyric and an extremely fresh and rejuvenating one. The poet’s gloom was like the darkness of night, like the solidness, sullenness and miserableness of the dark earth but the lark symbolizes joy and light just like the ‘break of day’ and it rises from the sullen earth carrying with it earth’s music in the form of ‘hymns’, ‘at heaven’s gate.’ Shakespeare has offered a scintillating image of light in the lark in sonnet 29 which reminds us of ‘the main of light’ in sonnet 60 where ‘nativity’ the birth of an infant is compared, by suggestion to dust particles in a shaft of light in an otherwise dark room.

The end of sonnet 29 is as luminescent as the image of the ‘lark at break of day arising’:

For thy sweet love remembered such wealth brings,
That then I scorn to change my state with kings.

Sonnets 29 and 30 are on the theme of memory but while the former is rich in passion the latter is restrained in emotion. The poetic devices never stand out for their own sake; they unobtrusively enrich the texture of the poem and enrich our aesthetic experience.

Now would you like to answer some of my questions?

Self-check Exercise II

1) What is an image? Cite two examples of images from the sonnets you have read in this unit.

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2) What is the rhyme scheme of the two sonnets you have read above?

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3) Copy a heroic couplet from one of the poems you have read.
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4) Copy a line from one of the texts where you find an example of alliteration.
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3.5 LET US SUM UP

Shakespeare was called a ‘Star of Poets’ who was ‘not of an age but for all time’. In this unit you read a brief biography of him and of his contributions to English drama and poetry. Next you read about the sonnet with special reference to Shakespeare’s.

In this unit you also read two sonnets of Shakespeare. They have been compared as they are on the theme of memory. Shakespeare’s treatment of the subject in the two poems is quite different but appropriate to the mood. You must read the poems several times or better still memorize them.