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## UNIT 2      SHAKESPEARE'S SONNETS 18, 55, 65

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### Structure

- 2.0 Objectives
- 2.1 Introduction
- 2.2 Shakespeare as a Poet
- 2.3 The Shakespearean Sonnet
- 2.4 Themes and Concerns of the Sonnets
- 2.5 Sonnet 18
  - 2.5.1 Explanation
- 2.6 Sonnet 55
  - 2.6.1 Explanation
- 2.7 Sonnet 65
  - 2.7.1 Explanation
- 2.8 Let Us Sum Up
- 2.9 Questions
- 2.10 Suggested Readings

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### 2.0      OBJECTIVES

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This unit would familiarize you with the tradition of sonnet writing in England and Shakespeare's experimentation with the sonnet form. We would look at the sonnets of Shakespeare specifically, and view his poetic sensibility. The idea is to understand the general strains of Shakespeare's sonnets focusing on the themes and issues raised in them. The three sonnets in your course would be at the centre of this unit and we would interpret them for gaining an understanding of the many dimensions they open.

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### 2.1      INTRODUCTION

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Sonnets were a popular mode of literary expression in Renaissance Europe. In England particularly, the form came into vogue through the sonnets of Thomas Wyatt and Earl of Surrey in the early 16<sup>th</sup> century. The tradition was followed by Philip Sydney and Edmund Spenser. In the 1590s the private sonnet form and the public drama came of age. The former had an elitist edge while the latter thrived on mass acceptance. Shakespeare belonged to the group of middle-class writers who always wrote keeping in mind the ground realities. It is for this reason that he sought to write realistic works that consciously engaged with common feelings of the people. Even his sonnets create some space for realism. Certainly, Shakespeare was well aware of both the Italian sonnet form and the English one. As he borrowed elements from them, Shakespeare constantly experimented with them and evolved his own style in terms of structure and theme. He wasn't exactly keen on adding flow and lyricism to his sonnet, and wished to add depth to an emotion or an aspect of nature. He went into the nature of the life's issues explored the hidden layers of the phenomenon. If it was summer that caught his attention (as in sonnet 18), he would devote an entire sonnet to its features and aspects.

Shakespeare's collection of 154 sonnets was published in 1609 by Thomas Thorpe. The first edition of his collection bore a dedication to a certain W. H. that became the subject of much speculation. The dedication was provided not by Shakespeare but by the publisher, Thorpe. Till the eighteenth century it was believed that the sonnets were addressed to a woman who was Shakespeare's mistress. However, by the close of the century, in 1780 to be precise, a group of scholars claimed that more than a hundred sonnets had been addressed to a man. The word 'love' in Shakespeare's time was quite inclusive. It was used to address a mistress, friend or a patron. For instance, Shakespeare's *Rape of Lucrece* began with the author's dedication where he projected "love" for his patron that denoted regard for him. It is believed that sonnets 1 to 17 were addressed to a young man of high station. With respect to the dedication of the sonnets many conjectures have been made. According to one theory, "Mr. W.H." stood for William Herbert who became the earl of Pembroke in 1601 and was Shakespeare's patron as well. It is to him that

the first folio edition of Shakespeare's works was dedicated. However, another theory is that this mysterious man was Earl of Southampton (whose initials were H.W.) to whom Shakespeare had earlier dedicated his two long poems. A third view (and the one accepted by many critics) suggests that the sonnets were dedicated to William Harvey who was Southampton's step father. These schools of thought have continued to establish one or other fact but nothing has been established with certainty. Another aspect of the sonnets relates to the reference of the mysterious woman often alluded as the "Dark Lady" in Shakespeare's life. Not much clarity is available on this subject but subsequent scholarship on the subject has rendered some help. For instance, A.L. Rowse in 1984 indentified the "Dark Lady" as Emilia Lanier, who was a poet and the orphaned daughter of an Italian court musician. It is sufficient for us to keep in mind that broadly, Shakespeare's sonnets were addressed to a 'fair' young man who held a high social position and a dark lady with whom he enjoyed a love-hate relationship.

Despite conjecture around the possible dates, sequence of the sonnets and the addressee, Shakespeare's sonnets have occupied an important position in Shakespeare criticism. The sonnets come across as personal and mature. They are striking, too, as thought-centric compositions. Critics such as Adena Rosman believe that "Shakespeare's sonnets were a Romantic obsession because their generically 'personal' rhetoric made them seem the key to Shakespeare's heart" (Rosmarin, Adena. "Interpreting Shakespeare's Sonnets". *Modern Language Association*. Vol. 100. No. 5 (October 1985) pp. 810-812 .811).

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## 2.2 SHAKESPEARE AS A POET

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It is believed that poetry brings out the genuine self of a person since it captures feelings and emotions rooted in a person's experience. Can we say that in poems and sonnets we get a glimpse of the real Shakespeare—the living man? Shakespeare's plays often proved difficult for identifying influences in real life. This was because Shakespeare did not leave in his works any hint of an actual situation. In the sonnets, too, we see sincerity as well as artificiality working in tandem. The sonnets appear in turns genuine expression of the poet's feeling as well as stylistic poetry devoted to a patron. There is, thus, a kind of duality in Shakespeare's sonnets where the writer expresses, then hides and covers the emotion skillfully. In any case, the bard appears to be a torn sensibility—dilemma and conflict in him playing a part. He rationalizes the point in one sonnet, (as in sonnet 35), pedestalizes the subject of his sonnets elsewhere, and takes pride in his identity as a poet. This is then followed by an exhibition of his passion which later blends with regret (sonnet 152). In another moment, he becomes self-critical, or indulges in self-deception (sonnet 93). Elsewhere, the speaker in the sonnets wears the mask of madness (as in 147) and yet shows clarity of thought. Such attributes as these make Shakespeare a poet of great variety and depth—he leaves much for interpretation and offers contradictory point of views to cover the vast variety of matters he is dealing with.

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## 2.3 THE SHAKESPEAREAN SONNET

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Let's look at the stanzaic structure of Shakespeare's sonnet. The Shakespearean stanza form consists of fourteen iambic pentameter lines, with the rhyme scheme--*abab cdcd efef gg*. The division of lines in a Shakespearean stanza, therefore, consists of three quatrains (twelve lines that rhyme alternately) and a couplet. What you get in a Shakespearean sonnet stanza is an arrangement of unaccented and accented syllables that have end-rhymes. According to the critic Paul Fussell, the English sonnet has a peculiar tendency termed the "balloon-and-pin-prick" pattern. The suggestion is that in the English sonnet there is a development of the problem (a conscious building up much like slowly inflating a balloon) which is carefully elaborated in the twelve lines of the three quatrains. This is followed by the resolution in the last, a couplet which is a witty conclusion or a quick turn-around from the dramatic description of the preceding lines. The last two lines burst the balloon as it were.

While Sidney's sonnet style was fixed and full of rhymes, Shakespeare's was experimental. The latter was discovering the potential of the sonnet form capable of attaining depth as well as expansion.

Shakespeare did not use the epistolary form popular at the time where the sonnet would be written as a letter of supplication to the beloved. The Italian sonneteer Petrarch had established a particular pattern and the poets of the time strictly adhered to it. The Petrarchan model of sonnet writing was introduced in England by Wyatt but by the time Spenser came to writing, the form had become flexible. In Shakespeare's time, more changes occurred in the form. The number of lines remained fourteen, but changes and variations were introduced within them. Thus, the English sonnet gained a specific identity in the hands of Shakespeare. Russell Fraser has observed:

The metrical pattern of the 'English' sonnet (abab cdcd efef gg) is directive. Committing the poet to three coordinate quatrains, it ends with a couplet that ties this series together. If well turned, the couplet approximates the epigram ... Shakespeare blurring the pattern he inherits frequently 'elides' his quatrains, as in the Italian sonnet in which the major turn occurs after line 8. (Fraser, Russel. "Shakespeare at Sonnets". *The Sewanee Review*. Vol.97. No. 3 (Summer, 1989) pp408-427. 409).

Thus, in Shakespeare's sonnets the shift from the quatrains to the couplet creates a disruption of meaning and alters it. There is a sharp turn in his sonnets. Owing to the brevity of the form, emotions captured in expressions are available as condensed. The sonnet becomes precise but is loaded with suggestion. In a play, the idea may be elaborated upon through dialogues and characterization, but in the sonnet, completion of the intent in fourteen lines is a must. This makes the sonnet complex and coded.

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## 2.4 THEMES AND CONCERNS OF THE SONNETS

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Shakespeare's early sonnets, particularly sonnets 1-14, are of a uniform nature; they have a shared theme of marriage and familial harmony. They are meant to persuade a young man, for instance, to marry and have children so the beauty of the parents is passed on to the progeny. Some flattery and romance are involved in it. Shakespeare depicts admiration for the subject of these sonnets. The more sustained themes of the sonnets are the themes of love and time which could be observed with poignancy. It is the power that both love and time wield over human life that makes the poet interested in exploring the subject.

In the early sonnets, we find different shades of love—youthful love, passionate love, mature love among others. References to love are also representative of many things—one of them could be 'true' love, romance, close friendship, regard and admiration, or transitory fascination. One might see the variations in Sonnets 29, 116 and 30, all revolving around the idea of love. Shakespeare steered clear of the conventional theme of wooing and imploring a lady. At the same time, the idea of love stood examined as also reaffirmed. There is a passionate engagement with the theme of love in Shakespeare—it makes the poet mad, leaving him open to guilt and revulsion, while the passion takes him towards the joys of being in the company of the beloved. If there is desire, it is accompanied by suffering. In the sonnets, moments are captured and feeling is rationalized.

Shakespeare's preoccupation with time and its changing nature that he significantly brought out in his plays is also evident in his sonnet sequences. See the opening quatrain of sonnet 64:

When I have seen by time's fell hand defaced  
The rich proud cost of outworn buried age,  
When sometime lofty-towers I see down razed,  
And brass eternal slave to mortal rage

The stark changes caused by time leave the poet humbled as also aware of historical movement where individuals appear as mere actors. The critic Victor Kiernan has observed that "everyone with a pen has written about Time, but Shakespeare said far too much about it for there to be any doubt of its poignant meanings for him; and it rarely failed to inspire him. It is a salient theme of fourteen sonnets, three of them in the opening set" (Kiernan, Victor. *Shakespeare: Poet and Citizen*. London: Verso, 1993.(154)).

Kiernan further notes that “eternity” is “one of its key-words”, an aspect of time that “throw(s) a huge shadow on the sonnets”.

Another theme of the sonnets is fame. It could be seen in sonnets ranged between sonnet nos. 18 and 83. In the early sonnets, Shakespeare felt unsure about the sonnet form, as it were, and was enamoured of fame achieved by great artists and poets. However, in his heyday he was aware of his popularity. It also was the case that his interest in the idea of fame diminished with time. With respect to the famous court figures and courtly culture in Shakespeare’s sonnets, Kiernan has further made an interesting observation:

What may be called the official or ‘court’ culture was as elaborate and showy as a courtier’s costume. In his sonnets as in his long poems, Shakespeare was submitting to its artificialities, its conceits and verbal capers and quibbling (e.g. no. 24, 46), devoid of any real meaning...Shakespeare may well have had fits of self-doubt. In No. 55 he is triumphant; in No. 72 he is ashamed of ‘that which I bring forth’, ‘things nothing worth’. (Kiernan, Victor. *Shakespeare: Poet and Citizen*. London: Verso, 1993. 156)

Similarly, the theme of remorse resurfaces in several of Shakespeare’s sonnets. In the sonnet 152, he alludes to himself as the man breaking vows of matrimony and thus regrets his decision and suffers the pangs of guilt.

There are many references to the seasons in Shakespeare’s sonnets for describing the weather, the beloved or even a state of mind. He refers to the “stormy gusts of winter’s day” (sonnet 13) and “never-resting time leads summer on/ To hideous winter and confounds him there” (sonnet 5) as suggestive of the many phases of life. Seasons accompanied by the natural landscape add freshness and tenderness to the experience projected in the sonnets. Shakespeare often brings in images from nature to prove a point. Natural objects, too, have a life of their own. So far as the poet is concerned, they have power over human effort. This is dwelt upon in the sonnets and the two worlds (human courts as well as cities and natural landscape) stand juxtaposed therein. As we turn attention to the specific sonnets in the course, we notice themes and attitudes of many other kinds as well.

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## 2.5 SONNET 18

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Shall I compare thee to a summer’s day?  
Thou art more lovely and more temperate:  
Rough winds do shake the darling buds of May,  
And summer’s lease hath all too short a date:  
Sometime too hot the eye of heaven shines,  
And often is his gold complexion dimm’d;  
And every fair from fair sometime declines,  
By chance, or nature’s changing course, untrimm’d:  
But thy eternal summer shall not fade,  
Nor lose possession of that fair thou ow’st;  
Nor shall Death brag thou wander’st in his shade,  
When in eternal lines to time thou grow’st:  
    So long as men can breathe, or eyes can see,  
    So long lives this, and this gives life to thee.

### 2.5.1 Explanation

Sonnet 18 is one of the most famous among Shakespeare’s sonnets. It begins with a rhetorical question the answer to which is not required nor is it important for the poet. Still, it helps in emphasizing the beloved’s eternal youth. The fact that it is a question suggests that there is indeed to be a dialogue to settle it. Further, a dialogue requires two people for holding it— the “I” and “thee” in the sonnet substantiate it. The question is whether the lover’s contemplation in the sonnet is about the beloved being addressed. The

satisfactory answer would be that it is both. The poet is talking to himself as much as he is addressing the friend or beloved.

A “summer’s day” in England would be a long sunny day much wished for. The summer months are seen as time for rejoicing. References to the cyclical seasons are conventional symbols in poetry. Seasons may be used to represent stages of human life. Winter stands for old age; spring signifies budding youth; whereas summer is the prime of life or young adulthood and autumn is the middle age. The seasons also could symbolize moods and state of feelings. Winter suggests cold, degeneration and death. Spring on the other hand, is suggestive of effervescent fresh beauty. Summer signifies warmth, charm, vitality and stability, even as autumn brings out moods of contemplation and mature thought. Keeping this as background, let us approach Shakespeare’s sonnet 18. We find that the friend/beloved is being equated with a summer’s day which is meant to be full of energy and life. This period is also suggestive of romance and passion. The poet finds the comparison inadequate. That is why the addressed figure has much more than what a summer’s day can offer. The beloved is more “lovely” and “temperate”—thus more desirable than summer and is found to be more poised, pleasant and constant.

To highlight the stark contrast between the summer season and the beloved, Shakespeare goes on to list the faults with summer that clearly aren’t seen in the beloved. According to the poet, summer is reckless and violent as the “rough winds shake the darling buds of May”. The line also points at the predatory nature of summer represented through the “rough winds” that forcibly “shake” (sexually assault) the soft buds. Secondly, summer’s “lease” is too short i.e. it is short-lived and is soon taken over by other seasons. The third shortcoming of summer is found to be its extremity (the opposite of temperate), that it gets too hot or is dimmed by clouds and rains. This is certainly true of English summer which sees enough intermittent rains between warm days. The idea presented here is that summer is inconstant and fickle. Note that summer is personified here with its “gold complexion” that dims with nature’s course.

Later, Shakespeare broadens the scope of his subject to include everything “fair” that fades and “declines” with time. Circumstance or nature can cause the decline of beauty. However, Shakespeare is quick to note that it is not the case with his beloved as he claims “but thy eternal summer shall not fade”. While the seasonal summer is transitory and changeable, the beloved’s summer (beauty) is eternal for the poet. Even death, the poet argues, cannot “brag” that it has sway over the beloved since the poet has immortalized in his “eternal lines” the object of love. What does the poet mean by “thou grow’st” in them? How can the beloved grow in the lines with time? Shakespeare refers to the afterlife of a literary work—with time as the popularity of his verse grows, so would the subject’s fame. As is evident, Shakespeare is conscious of his popularity and in fact takes pride in. This strain in sonnet 18 is not consistent with his other sonnets where he projects self-doubt and questions his own worth as a poet. For instance, in sonnet 76, Shakespeare begins with “why is my verse so barren of new pride/ so far from variation and quick change?” and “why write I still all one, ever the same?”.

Finally, the couplet at the end of sonnet 18 reinforces the ever-lasting influence of poetry as Shakespeare suggests—“So long as men can breathe, or eyes can see, /So long lives this, and this gives life to thee”. Here “this” refers to the sonnet he has written. He suggests that so long as men live, they would need poetry to sustain them. Shakespeare’s verse would last equally well. Interestingly, the couplet has added a twist to the logic of the poem. While the poet was all along in the sonnet recounting the qualities of the beloved, he strikes a high note to praise his work as also the object of love. The claim is that his poetry will infuse life into the figure being described.

The sonnet is lyrical and soft in its use of words. It is evocative as well. The use of words such as “breathe” and “see” in the couplet bring alive the characters of the lover and the beloved and establishes the nature of their love. Certainly, it is a one-sided expression for we have no way of knowing what the beloved thinks and feels. It is the poet and his experience that is at the centre of this sonnet.

The theme of this sonnet is love’s eternal presence and how it can become immortalized in poetry. Love is constant and impermeable. So is poetry, too. If we considered this as description of a conventional love

poem, then it would be difficult for the sonnet to provide minute details of the actual beauty of the person. We know nothing of the complexion, features, height, physical form and hair of the beloved, something that poets take great pains to describe in love poetry. In fact, when Shakespeare gives us a glimpse of that detailing in other sonnets, we see in his description an inversion of the conventional beauty of a woman. For instance, his sonnet 130 opens with “My mistress’ eyes are nothing like the sun/ coral is far more red than her lips’ red” and “if hairs be wires, black wires grow on her head”. “Yet”, says the poet, “by heaven, I think my love is as rare as any”. Thus, Shakespeare seldom adheres to the conventional idea of love poetry that was popular and established in his day. He challenged the notion of love based on traditional beauty.

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## 2.6 SONNET 55

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Not marble, nor the gilded monuments  
Of princes, shall outlive this powerful rime;  
But you shall shine more bright in these contents  
Than unswept stone, besmear’d with sluttish time.  
When wasteful war shall statues overturn,  
And broils rot out the work of masonry,  
Nor Mars his sword nor war’s quick fire shall burn  
The living record of your memory.  
‘Gainst death, and all oblivious enmity  
Shall you pace forth; your praise shall still find room  
Even in the eyes of all posterity  
That wear this world out to the ending doom.  
So, till the judgement that yourself arise,  
You live in this, and dwell in lover’s eyes.

### 2.6.1 Explanation

In this sonnet, Shakespeare begins on a note of confidence with respect to his verse. He terms it "powerful rime" that outlives both marble and gold-plated monuments of Princes that were perfected with skills of the artisan. Here, marble could refer to the tombs of kings that had gilded effigies of the monarch such as found on a sacrophagus (stone coffins with carvings, inscriptions or sculpture). This fine detailing on figures of princes in the sonnet appear weak and pale before the power of poetry. Shakespeare claims that in poetry he would preserve the object of his affection. He corroborates this by saying: "You shall shine bright in these contents." This is the first comparison he makes between fine artistic works and his poetry. In the second case, he equates his verse with the natural objects and finds the latter corrupted over time. The stones have been "besmeared with sluttish time". Why has time been called sluttish? What is the meaning of the term ‘slut’ and how was it used at the time? In Elizabethan England, it was a common usage and suggested both a promiscuous woman and an untidy-unkept woman. The first definition of slut in Oxford English Dictionary is, “a woman of dirty, slovenly, or untidy habits or appearance; a foul slattern.” Here, the sexual connotation of the word was not established. However, it had come in vogue during Shakespeare's time. For instance, Shakespeare in his play *Cymbeline* makes the character Iachamo says the following:

Sluterry to such neat excellence opposed  
Should make desire vomit emptiness,  
Not so allured to feed. (Act 1. Scene 6, lines 43-6)

The above lines are spoken by Iachamo in the context of Imogen whom he wants to seduce in order to win a bet with her husband and to prove a point to him that all women are unfaithful. Thus, the word “sluterry” also suggested unfaithfulness, especially in women in Shakespeare's time. In Shakespeare, the reference to "sluttish time" raises the pertinent question—what was Shakespeare's intention in using the word? Is it to suggest that time belongs to none forever and is never loyal to any person? Or has the

reference something to do with the corruption caused by time? Let's look at the reference in the sonnet further. "But you shall shine more bright in these contents /Than unswept stone, besmear'd with sluttish time". That the beloved shall shine while the stone gets covered with grime caused by time seems to be the suggestion here. Supposedly, eternal youth reflects on the beloved and his verse, while stones and monuments that may appear glamorous today would soon deteriorate in the poet's scheme of things. Further in sonnet 55, Shakespeare refers to the destruction caused by wars and broils where all material objects including the finest works of art are vandalized. The statutes and works of masonry are turned to dust. The supposed beauty of his sonnets would on the other hand outlive them. Finally, the poet rests his case by making the object of love the judge of his verse. It is the beloved for whom the sonnet is written who would decide the worth of his poetry and whether he has done justice to it. To him "The judgment" would "arise" from the beloved. Is this sonnet in praise of the beloved or just an example of powerful poetry? What is the focus of the sonnet? To us, the poet is reinforcing as much the undying life of poetry as he is lauding the beauty of the beloved. It stays in the lover's eye and cannot be stained and gets commemorated in the poem.

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## 2.7 SONNET 65

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Since brass, nor stone, nor earth, nor boundless sea,  
But sad mortality o'ersway their power  
How with this rage shall beauty hold a plea,  
Whose action is no stronger than a flower?  
O, how shall summer's honey breath hold out  
Against the wreckful siege of battering days,  
When rocks impregnable are not so stout,  
Nor gates of steel so strong, but Time decays?  
O fearful meditation! Where, alack,  
Shall Time's best jewel from Time's chest lie hid?  
Or what strong hand can hold his swift foot back?  
Or who his spoil of beauty can forbid?  
O, none, unless this miracle have might,  
That in black ink my love may still shine bright.

### 2.7.1 Explanation

This sonnet extends the theme of "Time" as elaborated in sonnet 64. In sonnet 65, Shakespeare speaks of the power of "sad mortality" over everything. For him, nothing holds sway over it. Brass, stone as also the entire earth and the vast sea succumb to its power. The poet brings up the rhetorical question—how can beauty that is as fragile as a flower contest with this "rage" that he calls mortality? Similarly, he claims that the soft "honeyed breath" of the summer season (symbolizing joy and love) can scarcely hold out against the wrath and juggernaut force of time that he compares with "the siege of battering days". The comparison Shakespeare builds here is between the strong and the delicate. The latter cannot withstand the power of the former. What does Shakespeare mean by "sad mortality"? Death may appear both fearful and sad. It is the loss of lives that leaves those living in a state of sadness. The awareness of inevitability of death creates feeling of sadness in the poet. Not only does death evoke a sense of helplessness, the same can be seen in degeneration, too. The poet remarks: "Time decays" and the sternest and strongest of natural objects such as "rocks impregnable" and "gates of steel" fail to withstand time's natural course. Against the power of time, they would erode and deteriorate.

In the Sonnet, soon the feeling of "sad mortality" is replaced by "O fearful meditation". The thought of doom and decline leaves the poet fearful. When Shakespeare asks: "Where, alack, Shall Time's best jewel from Time's chest lie hid?" he knows that even the best jewel that time has provided cannot hide away from "time's chest". It is observed that change in human life and body is inevitable and irreversible. Shakespeare asks—who can stop or "forbid" the "beauty" from "spoil" and which "strong hand" can change the course of time and return to previous state? "None", is the obvious answer. In the following

lines in the sonnet, the view is reversed. The poet asserts that as time reigns supreme over all life and objects, poetry can cast a magic spell. Poetry has “might” and it can immortalize and bring back time of the past alive through the “ink”. The claim is made that in poetry, love can shine bright. The historical moment would flee, beauty too would fade away, but poetry would keep the essence of the beloved alive.

Finally, the poet wishes that even as his powers have gone weak and he is approaching middle age, his words (“black ink”) may still have power to move people with his love. The poet wishes to share his experience of love with the reader. The point is whether it is for validation or to prove to himself his own worth. These multiple interpretations arise from the logic of his sonnets and Shakespeare keeps all meanings alive in his verse. To stress the point, Shakespeare wrote many sonnets on the idea of time and its mutability. Sonnet 65 was at the centre of that cluster of sonnets.

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## 2.8 LET US SUM UP

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This unit has outlined the basic form of Shakespearean sonnet and its features. It has brought into discussion Shakespeare’s inventive mind and creative genius as a poet. In this unit, a general view of the collection of the sonnets has been provided as also the themes and issues raised therein. Further, a detailed explanation of sonnets 18, 55 and 65 is offered, too.

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## 2.9 QUESTIONS

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1. Comment on the nature of time in Shakespeare’s sonnets keeping in view the theme of immortality.
2. What for Shakespeare is the larger role of poetry and the poet? Explain.
3. Write a note on the Shakespearean stanza.
4. How is love projected by Shakespeare in his sonnets?

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## 2.10 SUGGESTED READINGS

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