

Scorn Not the Sonnet

by Sylvia Kramer

Sylvia Kramer is a Dramaturgy major from Edmond, OK who wrote this essay in the "Keepin' It Real" course taught by Nick LoLordo.

We use the word "real" in two different ways. In one sense, the real is the physical, the non-fantastical, the things we can rely on to be true. The real deal. David Boren, taxes, and the sun are real; James Bond and Atlantis are not. Dinosaurs used to be real, but are not real anymore. And so on. In another sense, the "real" involves the emotional, the visceral, and the personal. You might tell a friend, "If you had been there, you would have understood what it was *really* like." When a conversation turns to matters that are close to the heart or painful, we say that it "got real." In *Will in the World* (2004), Harvard's Stephen Greenblatt discusses the reality of Shakespeare's life in that first, physical, literal sense. Did the young man referred to in the procreation sonnets actually exist? If so, can we identify him? What was Shakespeare's real motivation for writing these particular poems? We cannot be absolutely certain about the answers to these questions. Shakespeare lived so long ago that many people, starting with Delia Bacon and including Sigmund Freud and Mark Twain, have questioned whether or not he really wrote the plays attributed to him ("Past"). But, as Greenblatt says, the reason we care about the physical realities surrounding Shakespeare's existence is because we are entranced by the emotional, personal reality in his writing: "As with any other writer whose voice has long ago fallen silent and whose body has mouldered away, all that is left are words on a page, but even before

a gifted actor makes Shakespeare's words come alive, those words contain the vivid presence of actual, lived experience." Helen Vendler, another Harvard professor and literary critic, says in her preface to *Poems, Poets, Poetry*, that "we read imaginative works... in order to gain a wider sense of the real" (xlii). Shakespeare's work satisfies our desire to better understand the emotional realities of others and of ourselves. Because he speaks so beautifully and clearly about the deep, intimate parts of the human experience, we become invested in him and want to know more about the surface details of his life. Like an audience at a magic show moved and amazed by seemingly impossible displays, we are desperate to know what goes on behind the curtain. However, Shakespeare is buried so deep in the past that he, like a magician, will never reveal his secrets.

Why did Shakespeare write sonnets?

According to The Poetry Foundation, they were published as a collection of a 154 poems in 1609, but were most likely composed several years earlier ("William"). Greenblatt offers a practical explanation: he wrote them for a paycheck. Greenblatt contends that Shakespeare was commissioned to write the procreation sonnets to convince Henry Wriothesely, a poetry-loving bachelor, to get married (Greenblatt). Even if we accept this theory as true, it does not answer the whole question. Were the sonnets just a job to Shakespeare, or were they more personal? Did they contain any autobiographical details about Shakespeare's relationship with Wriothesely? That is just the beginning — there are also many questions about other figures mentioned in the sonnets: the rival poet and the dark lady ("William").

Our curiosity about the sonnets is especially piqued because they fit into a different genre than Shakespeare's more popular works, his plays. Romeo and Juliet are clearly fictional characters, separate from the playwright. Sometimes this is the case with poetry as well — poetry criticism states that a reader should not

automatically conflate the author of a poem with the speaker. However, many poems are autobiographical and it's easy for the line between the author and speaker of a poem to be blurred. The Bard himself seems to state that he is the speaker of the sonnets when he says in the last line of Sonnet 136, "...my name is Will" (136.14). The sonnets fit into the genre of lyric poetry. Dramatic poems, like Hamlet's soliloquies, are meant to be recited and to tell stories about characters. Lyric poems like the sonnets are more personal. We put ourselves in the place of the speaker and experience what he experiences. As Vendler says, "Lyric is the genre of private life" (xlii). Lyric poetry is home to expressions of the second type of real, describing emotional experiences held close to the heart.

While it may seem that the sonnets can be interpreted as clues about the real, historical Shakespeare, this is not necessarily the case. In his poem, "Scorn Not the Sonnet," William Wordsworth tells us not to look down on the sonnets because with them "Shakespeare unlocked his heart." But, is that true? Did William Shakespeare, through the sonnets, unveil his inner life to his readers? In the practical, physical sense of reality, Wordsworth is wrong—Shakespeare's heart remains locked to us. The sonnets do not offer the identities of real people whom he loved, or why he loved them, or for how long. That information is sealed away, both by Shakespeare's own ambiguity and the passing of time.

At first glance, this fact seems like a huge disappointment. We crave a narrative to give context to the emotional experience of reading the sonnets—when we have fallen in love with the poet's soul, it is only natural to want to meet him in the flesh, to understand the physical reality of his life. We know so little about our fascinating, almost impossibly imaginative author, or about his beautiful young man, or his rival poet, or his dark mistress. These figures, some more shrouded in mystery than others, spark our

curiosity—they have been written and speculated about countless times. Oscar Wilde wrote a short story about the identity of the fair youth, entitled, "The Portrait of Mr. W.H." One character in the story attempts to convince another that the "W.H." in the dedication of the sonnets refers to a young man named Willie Hughes. Eventually, the character is so convinced that his theory is correct, he shoots himself in defense of it, saying, "I shall have died by my own hand for Willie Hughes's sake" (Wilde 193). It seems that readers of Shakespeare's sonnets have some kind of stake in them and the way they hint at an overarching narrative.

One reason we are so curious about Shakespeare's life is that the two kinds of real are not as separate as they first seem. In terms of literature and art, both practical and emotional reality benefit when paired with the opposite kind of reality. Concrete, nonfictional reality without emotional, personal reality is dusty and lifeless, an instructional manual or math textbook. Emotional reality without anything tangible is lofty and difficult to relate to—physical details enrich emotional language by giving it context. Sonnet 18 is Shakespeare's most famous sonnet—most are familiar with the question, "Shall I compare thee to a summer's day?" (18.1). According to Greenblatt, the historical purpose of this poem was to convince a young bachelor to get married. Combining rich, emotionally real themes such as the transitory nature of life, the exquisiteness of nature, and the definition of beauty, the poem is both exhilarating and empathetic. The line, "And every fair from fair sometime declines," has a rhythm and flow and comments on the finiteness of good things in this world. The narrator is simultaneously in an almost childlike awe about the addressee's beauty and jaded about the nature of life and how nothing lasts. Then, he gives us the transition in sonnets 19 and 20, in which the young man is no longer urged to live forever through his progeny, but through the speaker's verse! Now there is a

personal relationship between the young man and the narrator. Subtle changes like these between individual sonnets, as well as among the many different “characters” – the young man, the dark mistress, the rival poet – create hints of a compelling, overarching narrative. That narrative may leave some questions unanswered, but it is enough to give context to the emotional reality of the poems. According to psychologist Pamela B. Rutledge, “Stories are how we are wired.... Stories create genuine emotions, presence (the sense of being somewhere), and behavioral responses.” The pieces of stories and characters in the sonnets are part of their draw – they are one of the reasons the sonnets cause us to have an emotional reaction.

Another reason the sonnets have such an emotional reality is the way they invite us inside. Because they are lyric poems, they are intimate and deal with matters close to the heart, discussing love, death, time, nature, and other topics that involve all of humanity. Although everyone will invest in each poem somewhat differently, there is common ground between the narrator and the reader because topics like love, lust, jealousy, and mourning the passage of time are universal. We are sometimes left feeling that his words fit better in our mouths and hearts than our own – you might say, “It’s good to see you,” when you *mean*, “Haply I think on thee, and then my state, /like to the lark at break of day arising” (29.10-11) This facet of the sonnets contribute to their realness – they bridge the you-had-to-be-there gap of emotional reality and ask us to forget the untranslatability of immediate experience.

Sonnet 130 contains a lot of reality in the sense that it is not fantastical: the woman described is not idealized in the way we might expect from love poetry. Because of this, the sonnet grabbed hold of me in a personal way. I don’t fit the ideal of love poetry – even in my best moments I fall far short of a summer’s day in terms of loveliness. Yet, sonnet 130 is a celebration of that, of women who walk on the

ground (12), and yet, are loved, a concept that feels real and personal to me. As Vendler writes, “There are moments in life when one poem suits and another doesn’t” (xlii). She’s referring to the pleasure and connection we gain from poems at a personal level – which changes throughout our lives and from person to person as circumstances change. Both the inherent narrative of the sonnets and their personal nature show that, whether or not Shakespeare unlocked his heart, he knew how to unlock ours.

Although curiosity about the Bard’s real life is natural, reading sonnets solely as if they were a crime scene to a detective is missing the point. The identity of the beautiful young man matters less than the enduring words written about him – the sonnets themselves contain more value than do their inspiration. In sonnet 19, the speaker promises the fair youth that his beauty will live on forever through the poet’s verse. If there was a man who had actually managed to become immortal, we might care about his name somewhat, but, in the long run, his method for living forever would be of much greater importance to us than the fact that he did. So it is with the sonnets – we are certainly interested in the identities of the people mentioned in the poems but more important are the sonnets themselves. Wordsworth implores us not to scorn the sonnet. I implore us not to ask the sonnet to be more than what it is – because nothing more is needed. As Greenblatt says, “One of the prime characteristics of Shakespeare’s art is the touch of the real” (qtd. by LoLordo). The sonnets are dramatic and emotional, but thanks to Shakespeare’s imagination, intensity of feeling, and talent with words, they also feel concrete and real – in both senses of the word.

Works Cited

- Greenblatt, Stephen. *Will in the World: How Shakespeare Became Shakespeare*. New York: W.W. Norton Company, 2004. Print.
- "Past Doubters." Shakespeare Authorship Coalition. *DoubtAboutWill.org*. 2013. Web. 10 Nov. 2016.
- Rutledge, Pamela B., Ph.D. "The Psychological Power of Storytelling." *Psychology Today*. Sussex Publishers, LLC. 16 Jan. 2011. Web. 10 Nov. 2016.
- Shakespeare, William. *Shakespeare's Sonnets*. Ed. Barbara A. Mowat and Paul Werstine. Folger Shakespeare Library. New York: Simon and Schuster, 2004. Print.
- Vendler, Helen. *Poems, Poets, Poetry: An Introduction and Anthology*. 2nd ed. Boston: Bedford of St. Martin's, 1997. Print.
- Wilde, Oscar. "The Portrait of Mr. W. H." *Corpus of Electronic Texts*. Web. 10 Nov. 2016.
- "William Shakespeare." *Poetry Foundation*. Poetry Foundation, n.d. Web. 10 Nov. 2016.
- Wordsworth, William. "Scorn Not the Sonnet." *Poetry Foundation*. Poetry Foundation. 2012. Web. 15 Oct. 2016.