

Sonnet 53: What is your substance, whereof are you made, By: William Shakespeare

What is your substance, whereof are you made,
That millions of strange shadows on you tend?
Since every one hath, every one, one shade,
And you, but one, can every shadow lend.
Describe Adonis, and the counterfeit
Is poorly imitated after you;
On Helen's cheek all art of beauty set,
And you in Grecian tires are painted new.
Speak of the spring and foison of the year:
The one doth shadow of your beauty show,
The other as your bounty doth appear;
And you in every blessed shape we know.
In all external grace you have some part,
But you like none, none you, for constant heart.

‘Sonnet 53,’ also known as ‘*What is your substance, whereof are you made,*’ is number fifty-three of one hundred fifty-four sonnets that Shakespeare wrote over his lifetime. It is part of the Fair Youth sequence of sonnets, which last from number one all the way through one hundred twenty-six. These are all about and directed to a young, beautiful man about whom the speaker cares deeply.

In this poem, Shakespeare explores themes of beauty and male/female. This sonnet is similar in subject matter to ‘Sonnet 20’ in which the Fair Youth’s beauty is compared to a man’s and a woman’s.

Throughout the poem, Shakespeare uses figurative language to describe the nature of the youth. He is more beautiful than Adonis, Helen, the spring and the fall. In everything beautiful, there is a bit of the youth but the youth is far more gorgeous and desirable than any other beautiful thing in the world.

Structure

‘Sonnet 53’ by William Shakespeare is a fourteen-line poem that is contained within one stanza, in the form that has become synonymous with the poet’s name. The English or Shakespearean

sonnet (sometimes also known as the Elizabethan) is made up of three quatrains, or sets of four lines, and one concluding couplet, or set of two rhyming lines. The poem follows a consistent rhyme scheme that conforms to the pattern of ABAB CDCD EFEF GG and it is written in iambic pentameter. Iambic pentameter means that each line contains five sets of two beats, known as metrical feet.

As is common in Shakespeare's poems, the last two lines are a rhyming pair, known as a couplet. They often bring with them a turn or volta in the poem. They're sometimes used to answer a question posed in the previous twelve lines, shift the perspective, or even change speakers. In this case, the turn brings with it a clear statement about the youth's superiority to all other beautiful and valuable things.

Poetic Techniques

Shakespeare makes use of several poetic techniques in '*Sonnet 53*'. These include but are not limited to alliteration, allusion, and metaphor. Alliteration occurs when words are used in succession, or at least appear close together, and begin with the same sound. For example, "bounty" and "blessèd" in lines eleven and twelve.

A metaphor is a comparison between two unlike things that does not use "like" or "as" is also present in the text. When using this technique a poet is saying that one thing is another thing, they aren't just similar. There is a good example in the last lines where the speaker compares the youth to the spring and the fall and determines that he is more beautiful and more bountiful than either.

An allusion is an expression that's meant to call something specific to mind without directly stating it. In '*Sonnet 53*' the speaker alludes to stories from Greek mythology as well as to themes from previous sonnets.

Detailed Analysis

Lines 1-4

What is your substance, whereof are you made,

That millions of strange shadows on you tend?

Since everyone hath every one, one shade,

And you, but one, can every shadow lend.

In the first lines of 'Sonnet 53,' the speaker begins by asking a rhetorical question. This was a technique that Shakespeare was fond of using in his sonnets. These questions might in theory be addressed to the listener, the Fair Youth, but are in reality posed just to get a point across. In this case, the question is concerned with the youth's essence. He asks the young man what he is made of because there are "millions of strange shadows," or reflections of him everywhere.

While most people only have one image he has many. His innumerable good qualities and beauty give much to everyone around him. The youth can be seen everywhere the speaker looks.

Lines 5-8

Describe Adonis, and the counterfeit

Is poorly imitated after you.

On Helen's cheek all art of beauty set,

And you in Grecian tires are painted new.

In the second quatrain, he alludes to Adonis, a youth from Greek mythology that was so beautiful that the goddess Venus fell in love with him. If someone describes adonis, or an artist tries to

paint him, they will end up with a poor imitation of the youth's face. This alludes to the youth's superior beauty over even this notoriously beautiful young man.

In the next lines, Shakespeare creates another allusion that refers to Helen, the great beauty of Sparta who was taken to Troy by Paris, therefore setting off the Trojan war and the Siege of Troy. If an artist tried to depict Helen he would again end up with an image of the youth in Grecian "tires" or costume. These lines are connected to a previous comparison the speaker made in 'Sonnet 20' to the youth having the best features of men and women.

Lines 9-14

Speak of the spring and foison of the year;

The one doth shadow of your beauty show,

The other as your bounty doth appear,

And you in every blessèd shape we know.

In all external grace you have some part,

But you like none, none you, for constant heart.

In the third and final quatrain of 'Sonnet 53,' the speaker compares the spring to the youth. Once again the youth is more lovely. We might "Speak of" or celebrate the "spring and foison" or harvest season, but it is only a "shadow of your beauty". The same can be said for fall.

In the last lines, the speaker concludes by saying that the youth is part of every beautiful thing in the world but is beyond them as well. He is unlike anything or anyone else.