
Grammatical Structures as An Avenue for Meaning in Shakespeare's Sonnets – A Formalist Approach

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Abstract

This article examines the relevance of grammatical structures in stemming meaning from Shakespeare's Sonnets 3, 40 and 147 through a formalist lens. By interrogating the intrinsic elements of language, such as syntax, semantics, and literary devices, the paper reveals how these features contribute to the sonnets' thematic richness and highlights the relevance of grammatical and linguistic structures. The analysis of grammatical composition, including clauses, sentence types and punctuation, exposes the poet's purposes and emotions, as well as the characters' behaviour. Sonnet 3 serves as a pivotal point, showing the poet's appeal to the "fair young man" concerning the nature of beauty and procreation, while Sonnet 40 brings to light themes of betrayal and loss through complex sentence structures. On the other hand, Sonnet 147 mirrors hopelessness in response to earlier denunciation, as indicated by disordered expressions. Ultimately, this article aims to highlight the significance of structural analysis in comprehending Shakespeare's poetic expression by examining similarities and differences among the selected sonnets. This underscores the wider implications of the interconnected themes of love, beauty, and existential reflection.

Keywords: Grammatical structures, meaning, Shakespeare, sonnets, formalist approach.

Introduction

In literary theory, formalism refers to critical approaches that analyse, interpret, or evaluate a text based solely on its inherent features. Mary Ann Cain, therefore, contends that "formalism asserts that the text stands on its own as a complete entity, apart from the writer who produced it" (1999, p. 89). This perspective emphasises the text as a complete entity, prioritising inherent features such as grammar, syntax, forms and literary devices, while downplaying the importance of the text's or poem's historical, biographical and cultural context. Consequently, it

reduces the importance of the text's historical, biographical, and cultural context, as well as the reader's personal appreciation. Chris Baldick defines a sonnet as a "lyrical poem comprising 14 rhyming lines of equal length: iambic pentameters in English" (2004, p.207). Shakespeare's sonnets exemplify the Shakespearean or English form, which consists of three quatrains followed by a couplet (Baldick, 1990) and "can be divided into four parts, which are the first four lines, the middle four lines, the back four lines and the final two lines" (Attar, 2019, p. 2). The grammatical structures inherent in these forms convey specific themes and meanings. Grammatical structures encompass various spheres, including semantics, syntax, language and literary devices. These constituents can be analysed to derive meaning from any literary work.

A formalist researcher employs the literary work's form strictly to deduce its sense. Grammatical structures serve as a medium for meaning for several reasons, as noted by George Yule (1996). They deal with (i) "what goes on in people's minds" (ii) "... people's social attitudes and values" and (iii) "... the nature of language, often independently of the users of language." (Yule, 1996, p. 87). Consequently, grammatical structures help to (i) reveal both a writer's and a character's intention(s), (ii) describe real attitudes and behaviour of characters as they exist in society, and (iii) facilitate the analysis of linguistic structures to establish a description of English grammar.

In this study, I will apply the grammatical structures evident in Shakespeare's Sonnets 3, 40 and 147 to elicit their meanings. In fact, in the difficult task of selecting from Shakespeare's collection of about 154 sonnets (Prasad, 2023), I have considered those that are the greatest, most important and most representative, which cover the relevant primary themes of love, procreation, betrayal and loss. Besides, Mark O'Connell (2008), Julia Lupton (2013), and Peter Herman (2005) point out the complications manifested in these sonnets. Sonnet 3 focuses on the transience of beauty and offers thoughts on ageing and affection. Sonnet 40 hinges on the theme of betrayal and forgiveness. In contrast, Sonnet 147 focuses on fascination and despondency, contributing to a comprehension of expressive unrest. These sonnets are in the collections of sixteenth-century English poetry, sustaining their literary importance. My examination will focus on three sentence types (simple, compound, and compound-complex) and their roles, main and subordinate clauses, phrases, literary devices, and specific diction and expressions that enhance the connotations and themes in the selected sonnets. This will illuminate a complete depiction and detailed description of the formal structures essential to the Shakespearean form in the selected works, in consonance with George Yule's (1996) explanation of the descriptive approach (92). Ultimately, I will analyse the differences and similarities among the three selected sonnets and highlight their importance. In what follows, I will examine and interpret Sonnet 3.

Analysis and Interpretation of Sonnet 3

Sonnet 3 is considered one of the "fair lord sonnets" (Monte, 2021, p. 13), which include the first 126 poems of Shakespeare's sonnet sequence (Monte, 2021). These sonnets are either addressed directly to or written about a strikingly beautiful young man who functions as the guardian of the persona's contemplations of beauty and legacy. As one of the "procreation

sonnets,” it underscores the significance of reproduction as an agency of preserving beauty and memory (Booth, 1977). The persona in this sonnet cautions the “fair lord” to look into the mirror and ponder his beauty, influencing him to reproduce to make sure that his remarkable physical look does not disappear in the end. Without an inheritor, the persona advises that the young man’s beauty and memory of his existence will pass away, emphasising the unavoidability of death.

Sonnet 3

Look in thy glass, and tell the face thou viewest
Now is the time that face should form another;
Whose fresh repair if now thou not renewest,
Thou dost beguile the world, unbless some mother.
For where is she so fair whose unear’d womb
Disdains the tillage of thy husbandry?
Or who is he so fond will be the tomb
Of his self-love, to stop posterity?
Thou art thy mother’s glass, and she in thee
Calls back the lovely April of her prime;
So thou through windows of thine age shalt see,
Despite of wrinkles, this thy golden time.
But if thou live rememb’red not to be,
Die single, and thine image dies with thee.

(Shakespeare, 1994, p. 1363)

Sonnet 3 contains only 3 sentences. The first sentence spans lines 1-4; the second spans lines 5-12; and the final sentence covers lines 13-14.

Sentence 1

The first sentence contains the first quatrain, comprising thirty-five words, three clauses, three commas and one semi-colon. Its structure defies the usual “subject-verb-object structure” (SVO) structure, instead being interspersed with adverbial and relative clauses. Shakespeare begins this sentence with a compound structure, followed by a complex sentence featuring an adverbial clause of time and a relative clause. The arrangement and linkage of these various types of sentences, clauses and punctuation marks are worthy of comment.

The interrelationships among these grammatical components underscore the theme of procreation in Sonnet 3. The poet addresses his friend, a fair young man, using an imperative that feels more like an entreaty. In doing this, the persona uses a compound sentence, which has two instances of a verb, punctuated with a comma and joined by a coordinator “**look** in thy glass, **and tell** the face thou viewest” (Emphasis mine). The fair young man must first perform the action of “look” at his “face” in the object “glass” – which means mirror. After this action, he must then go on “and” “tell” the exact reflection he “viewest.” “... glass, face” are concrete nouns which have physical connotations, underscoring the theme of beauty in the sonnet. From this grammatical structure, one can discern that the sonneteer is starting a natural idea – beauty. He

gradually introduces the idea of beauty by prompting his friend to observe himself closely, and a complete idea forms, even though the line ends without a period. It runs onto line 2, beginning with an adverbial clause of time, “Now.” The clause denotes the right “... time” for the young man to engage in procreation, conveyed through the phrase “should form another,” and it is instant. The semicolon at the end of Line 2 indicates that Lines 1 and 2 together form a single independent clause, linking self-reflection and procreation.

As the poet builds on his message, he introduces a relative clause in line 3: “Whose fresh repair if now thou not renewest.” In this clause, a paradox arises with “fresh repair; renewest.” “Fresh” represents the young man’s beauty, while “repair, renewest” is for the “fresh” to reproduce that beauty in another form. The poet repeats his use of the adverbial clause of time “now,” which emphasises the immediacy with which the young man “should form another,” portraying that he should maximise this fleeting opportune time to replicate his beauty.

The conditional clause “if,” situated in Line 3, suggests the deterioration of the young man’s beauty over time. This enhances the urgency for the young man to create an heir while still youthful. Line 3 concludes with a comma, setting apart the conditional clause from the primary statement.

Contrastingly, if the young man fails to heed the poet’s request for procreation, he runs the risk of allowing his beauty to be lost— “beguile the world” (line 4). Ultimately, the admonition hinges on the idea of legacy that without successors to carry on one’s physical attributes and memory, an individual’s existence risks fading into oblivion. There is a pause on this line through the use of a third comma. Ostensibly, the poet uses that to separate issues discussed in both the 1st and 2nd parts of that sentence. The expression “unbless some mother” tells us that, despite the young man denying himself of his natural rights, he also does not allow his partner (wife) to enjoy the pleasure of being married to him. Naturally, some women marry in order to be a “mother”. Quatrain 1 expresses one thought, even though there are individual sentences which have complete thoughts.

Sentence 2

The second sentence, covering lines 5-12, contains significant rhetorical questions that emphasise the necessity of procreation. The persona asks through the prepositional phrase “For where,” followed by the verb phrase “is she,” coupled with the adjectival phrase “so fair,” bringing to the fore the poet’s high appreciation of the beauty of his friend’s beloved. Now, both his friend (husband) and his beloved (wife) are all fair, and each is proved to have the other. “...unear’d womb,” which ends the first line in the second quatrain, is a metaphor. It presupposes an undiscovered womb; thus, the womb cannot form another. It runs into the next line. The head words “tillage and husbandry” indicate that the sonneteer juxtaposes tilling of land with that of marital sexual intercourse. As crops, fruits and vegetables are produced out of cultivating the land, so is the “formation of another” in couples’ image through copulation. Therefore, the young man should not be “contemptuous” and use that means to reproduce. Two still stresses the need for the youth to procreate. It is a complex structure with sixty-five words, four clauses, two

question marks, three commas, and one semi-colon. The lines and words are longer than those in the first sentence. There are two clauses in quatrain two. Lines 5 and 6 form one clause. Line 5 begins with a preposition and ends with a question mark, making it an interrogative sentence. Lines 7-8 form another interrogative clause. Line 7 in the second quatrain begins with the coordinator “Or,” marking a swift shift in the poet’s thought. He uses a compound word “self-lover” in the second rhetorical question. Precisely, that is the only compound word in the sonnet. It signifies the young man’s selfishness, not wanting to reproduce. The poet reminds the youth of death’s inevitability. As the latter does not “form another” (Line 2) and dies, he ceases his procreation of succeeding generations, making that line of generations to deplete “... to stop posterity?”

The paramount fact is “death”, which is seen as the best fact to encourage reproduction. The rhetorical questions in the interrogative clauses serve as another means for the young man to reflect deeply on the necessity and responsibility of procreation, dramatically conveying the significance of legacy.

In the sestet's first line, Shakespeare makes a general statement in two parts, connected by a comma. He asserts that the fair youth is a reflection of his mother, stating, “Thou art thy mother’s glass, and she in thee.” This compound sentence merges two simple sentences, emphasising both subjects —“You” and “she”—and their respective objects—“glass” and “you.” But the use of the coordinator “and” has merged the two simple sentences into one compound sentence, making a declaration.

Line 10 of the sestet introduces a flashback with the verb phrase “calls back” and employs imagery with “April, prime” to signify the mother’s beauty in her prime. This line ends with a semicolon, indicating a shift to a new idea in line 11, linked to the previous line. So, the poet introduces Line 11 with an adverb, “So”, and a prepositional phrase, “through windows of thine age, ” which suggests dual meanings: the fair youth reflecting on his past and the potential view of his own child as a reflection of his beauty.

Line 12 consists of an adverbial phrase “Despite wrinkles,” and an adjectival phrase “this thy golden time,” underscoring that, despite ageing, this is the fair lord’s period of glory to till the land. The nouns “wrinkles” and “time” show physical connotations, while inversion in Lines 11 and 12 highlights the significance of the moment: “So thou through windows of thine age shalt see this thy golden time.”

Sentence 3

The closing couplet, constituting sentence 3, spanning Lines 13-14, encapsulates the sonnet’s overarching message: “But if thou live rememb’red not to be, / Die single, and thine image dies with thee.” Line 13 features a coordinator followed by a conditional clause and a verb phrase, with a comma separating them. It is established from this grammatical analysis that the negative effect of dying childless is to be erased from the book of memory. Line 14 serves as a command, reflecting the speaker’s irritation with the youth’s stubbornness to the former’s

request. As a result, the speaker starts with a verb phrase, a coordinator, and concludes with a noun phrase: “Die single and thine image dies with thee.” Especially, with the poet’s use of the verb phrase, it becomes clear that if the fair young man dies with no child (ren), then there will be no image to carry on his memory. On the other hand, if he chooses to remain single, everything will perish with him. Additionally, the use of capitalised first words at the start of each line in both the octave and sestet is a common technique in Shakespeare’s Sonnets.

From the grammatical analysis above, it is revealed that man’s beauty is bound by time and space. Therefore, one’s beauty only lasts for a period. Shakespeare cautions man to seize the perfect beauty, Shakespeare produced in one’s puberty stage, “...lovely April of her prime;” to reproduce the same image “form another.” Because human beings are mortals, and sooner or later, we will pass away. So, man’s own image will carry on his image (beauty) to succeeding generations and will live after him. What follows is the grammatical examination of Sonnet 40.

Analysis and Interpretation of Sonnet 40

Sonnet 40, like Sonnet 3, is also one of the “fair lord sonnets” (Monte, 2021). These sonnets progress from the celebration of beauty and love in Sonnet 3 to the darker, painful realities of love depicted in Sonnet 40. This sonnet is among the most desolate in the series, as it addresses the betrayal of the fair youth towards the poet (Monte, 2021). The poet cannot ignore the treachery of his beloved, who has taken his mistress. The sonnet expresses the reality of deception and loss in friendship, as the persona confronts his beloved friend and implores him to take all his other loves, even as he grapples with the pain of such betrayal. Sonnet 40 reveals themes of betrayal, forgiveness, and the complex interaction between love and affliction.

In the Shakespearean structure of three quatrains and a couplet, this sonnet is torn up into four sentences. Unlike in the previously analysed Sonnet 3, Shakespeare deploys these central messages, emphasising the internal struggle that emanates from love’s perfidies, while sustaining an emotive connection despite the wounds it provokes. Each quatrain and couplet corresponds to four distinct sentences in the analysis that follows.

Sonnet 40

Take all my loves, my love, yea, take them all,
 What hast thou then more than thou hadst before?
 No love, my love, that thou mayst true love call;
 All mine was thine before thou hadst this more.
 Then if for my love thou my love receivest,
 I cannot blame thee, for my love thou usest;
 But yet be blam’d, if thou thyself deceivest
 By wilful taste of what thyself refuseth.
 I do forgive thy robb’ry, gentle thief,
 Although thou steal thee all my poverty;
 And yet love knows it is a greater grief
 To bear love’s wrong than hate’s known injury.
 Lascivious grace, in whom all ill well shows,
 Kill me with spites, yet we must not be foes.

(Shakespeare, 1994, p. 1369).

Sentence 1

The first sentence has a compound-complex structure of thirty-eight words, beginning with a verb phrase and followed by noun phrases. Line 1 “Take all my loves, my love, yea, take them all” employs “Take” as an imperative verb directed at the young man. The persona petitions the addressee, the young man, to take all of his “loves,” “love,” and “them all.” The verb phrase “loves” is in the plural; “love” is in the singular, which creates ambiguity as it carries several connotations, such as the speaker’s: i. Love for his mistress or ii. Love for the youth or iii. Experience of loving and/or iv. specific love for the youth (line 5).

Primarily, this means the addressee requests that the young man “take all” of his mistresses. Line 2 is an interrogative sentence, posing a rhetorical question: “What hast thou more than thou hadst before?” From this, the persona develops the theme of emotional pain arising from betrayal by questioning the fair youth’s status before and after their meeting, and whether the young man has actually achieved anything good from this acquaintance/association.

Subsequently, after this interrogation, the persona constructs a declarative sentence: “No love, my love, that thou mayst true love call.” This sentence states that the young man’s love is not genuine and absolute. Hence, the recipient has achieved what he perceives as love; it cannot be considered “my true love.” The persona’s reiteration of love, thrice in this line, confirms this conclusion.

A further elucidation could be that the sonneteer’s love for the youth is neither absolute nor genuine, due to his having a mistress, which demonstrates a divided affection. Per the sentence conclusion with “**All mine** was thine before thou hadst this more,” the focus on “**All mine**” shows quantifier and determiner roles. As a quantifier, it indicates “everything” that the poet has. As a determiner, it qualifies the adjective “mine,” which also signifies “possessions.” Consequently, “All mine” comprises all the poet’s love, all his mistresses, and even all his possessions. The second part of the line, “before thou hadst this more,” augments the first.

Altogether, the persona uses “love” five times in this first sentence. That is, it appears twice in line 1, in both singular and plural forms, while thrice in the singular form in line 3. These analyses and interpretations epitomise the central theme of love’s complexity and its interconnectedness with agony.

Sentence 2

Sentence 2 is in the second quatrain, employing dependent clauses to show the complexity of love. “Then,” as an adverb of time, begins line 5, which signifies a point of time in a change of thought/perspective. This is manifested through the sonneteer’s use of a conditional phrase, “if for my love, thou my love receivest.” This phrase ushers in a new order of perspective, highlighting a shift in the persona’s position. The young man’s act of “receivest” a stolen love focuses on an imbalance, in which the feminine endings: “usest, deceivest, refuseth” in lines 6, 7, and 8 depict discomfort and the internal struggles of the speaker. This struggle is additionally stressed in the use of paradox, “... cannot blame/be blam’d,” which creates themes of sadness and degradation in the love triangle. The juxtaposition of doubt and trust complicates the reliability of love and reveals the inherent tensions surrounding it.

The phrases “But yet” (Line 7) and “By willful...” (Line 8) are subordinators that create a chain of reasoning behind blaming the young man. in subordinate clauses which are linked to each other. The linkage of these subordinate clauses provides reasons to blame the friend. The reason is the youth’s sexual experience and enjoyment “By wilful taste...” his better part declines to recognise the moral implications of his actions, showcasing the theme of self-deception regarding what is truly right and just.

Sentence 3

Structurally, sentence 3 is located in quatrain three. Lines 9 and 10 contain a complex sentence structure. In that, there is one independent clause (Line 9) and a dependent clause (Line 10). The subject in the independent clause is the poet's friend, now addressed as a “gentle thief,” utilising an oxymoron to present a softer image of theft. Despite the theft of “all my poverty,” the speaker’s tone is laden with forgiveness, evoking a Christ-like resilience: “I do forgive thy robb’ry.” However, Line 10 begins with “Although”, an adverbial clause of concession, contrasting the tenderness of the speaker’s feelings with the young man’s actions. The phrase depicts an imbalance where the youth’s numerous choices starkly contrast with the speaker’s emotional deprivation, amplifying the cruelty of this situation.

Lines 11 and 12 form a complete sentence, invoking biblical undertones with “...love knows”, “God knows, or heaven knows.” Thence, the persona rhetorically asks, “Who could ever deceive a lover?” This portrays the psychological harm a lover inflicts on the beloved, a wound akin to that inflicted by an enemy. This injury aligns with Line 11 “love’s wrong, hate’s known injury,” culminating in the exploration of betrayal within romance.

Sentence 4

Finally, Lines 13 and 14 constitute the last sentence of Sonnet 40. This sentence is shorter in length than in Sonnet 3. Line 13 begins with a paradox: “Lascivious grace” in the first part of the sentence, and another instance of paradox, “ill well” in the 2nd part of the sentence. Graciousness is lascivious and sensual; sensuality is gracious. The paradox creates a contradiction, which is brought into sharper focus by the second half of the line. “Ill” represents evil, and “well” represents good. “...grace” also has a religious meaning – “God’s grace,” alluding to God’s beneficence. Secondly, there is the grace of a nobleman’s title, “Your Grace,” which would be relevant if we knew that the youth was real and was of a noble quality, a nobleman of Elizabeth’s court. “...in whom” is an appositive to “lascivious grace.” In that, there is a close relationship between the phrases, and each could explain the other.

Line 14 concludes the sonnet with a declarative sentence which begins with a verb phrase, “Kill me, with spites; yet we must not be foes,” conveys the essence of relentless love, asserting that even in the face of pain and betrayal, the bond of love remains, despite the pervasive bitterness. The closing couplet tries to rescue the situation. Out of this declarative sentence, the theme of unfaithfulness, but forgiven, is realised in this sonnet. Again, this sonnet uses the word “love” more often than in any other sonnet (10 times). This is perhaps an expression of the fact that the poet feels his love is more threatened here than at any other time, and by repetition of the word, he will cast a spell and prevent his love from flying away.

The four analysed sentences adhere to the structure of a Shakespearean sonnet: 3 quatrains and a couplet. The interconnected, independent, and subordinate clauses, along with key literary devices, underscore the themes of unreciprocated love and betrayal. I then analyse Sonnet 147 in the subsequent paragraphs as the last in this study.

Analysis and Interpretation of Sonnet 147

In Sonnet 147, the speaker addresses the dark lady, revealing the emotional turmoil stemming from rejection as previously expressed in Sonnet 40. This sonnet explores themes of desire and obsession, where the persona likens his infatuation with the dark lady to a fever that engulfs his mind and spirit, leading to irrational and painful emotional states. The duality of love is emphasised, showcasing its capacity to inspire both joy and deep despair, highlighting the often-painful dynamics of human relationships, thereby expressing its resolve in response to Sonnet 40. In three sentences, broken into five independent and eleven dependent clauses, Sonnet 147 explores love's dual nature and its potential to distort perception, leading to feelings of betrayal. The ensuing analysis will examine the grammatical structure of Sonnet 147, drawing connections to its presented themes.

Sonnet 147

My love is as a fever, longing still
For that which longer nurseth the disease;
Feeding on that which doth preserve the ill,
Th' uncertain sickly appetite to please.
My Reason, the physician to my Love,
Angry that his prescriptions are not kept,
Hath left me, and i desperate now approve
Desire is death, which physic did except.
Past cure i am, now reason is past care,
And frantic mad with evermore unrest;
My thoughts and my discourse as mad men's are,
At random from the truth vainly express'd;
For i have sworn thee fair, and thought thee bright,
Who art as black as hell, as dark as night.¹⁴

(Shakespeare, 1994, p. 1385)

Sentence 1

The first quatrain consists of a single sentence. It has twenty-nine words, two commas and one semi-colon. The independent clause in Line 1 states: "My love is as a fever," a simple sentence that includes a subject (My love), a verb (is) and an object (fever), expressing that the speaker's passion for his beloved is like that of a fevered individual. The simile is identified in the independent clause, "love...as a fever." "Love" and "fever" are two unlike things juxtaposed. Perhaps this device encapsulates the intensity of his feelings and continues the sentiments of Sonnet 40. The presence of a comma, rather than a full stop, links this thought to the dependent

clause “longing still,” indicating the continuous nature of his desire. Here, “still” functions as an adverb of time, emphasising the persona’s current state of longing.

The term “fever” is commonly associated with love in Shakespeare’s sonnets, as seen in Sonnet 119, where it refers to obsession and distraction. The word “...nurseth” in line 2 is ambiguous, meaning both nurturing health and sustaining the disease, thus giving prominence to the enigma of love as both recuperative and injurious. The use of a semi-colon at the end of line 2 connotes the end of this reflection.

The ensuing subordinate clauses in lines 3-4, which are complex, stem from several phrases. They depend on the main clause, “My love is as a fever” (line 1). The verb phrase “Feeding on that” introduces the clause, and next is the relative clause “which doth preserve the ill,” and it ends with a noun phrase “Th’ uncertain sickly appetite to please” (line 4). Employing “sickly” indicates that love as an illness is the main motif of Sonnet 147, whereas “appetite” moreover denotes lust and sensuous desire, accentuating the bodily characteristics of emotional relationship. Although the structure here is complex, relevant themes emerge, including the speaker’s love nourished by unachievable wishes, which perpetuates his emotive pain and agony.

Sentence 2

Sentence 2 of Sonnet 147 appears in quatrain two and consists of twenty-nine words with five commas, mirroring the structure of sentence 1 while presenting profound introspection. The opening line, “My Reason, the physician to my love,” employs an appositive construction that highlights the intimate relationship between “Reason” and “physician.” This suggests that the persona sees Reason as a guiding force meant to heal the afflictions of love. However, this ideal is immediately challenged as the persona conveys frustration that Reason’s prescriptions for love are disregarded.

“My Reason” denotes both a faculty of the soul and feeding metaphors tying it to Sonnet 40. Personified as a doctor, “Reason” reveals the persona’s failure to adhere to the regimen meant to cure a disease (love). The second sentence’s dependent clauses flow cohesively, with enjambment indicating the persona’s unbroken thought process. As time progresses, represented by “now,” the persona feels desperation leading to “death,” a consequence of ignoring Reason’s guidance, whose physic “Reason” will not allow. The persona’s word choices: fever, disease, ill, physicians, prescription, physic, death, and cure focus on an ailment potentially linked to a sexually transmitted disease.

Sentence 3

Sentence 3, spanning from lines 9 to 14, exhibits a prosaic form, containing fifty-one words, two independent clauses and five dependent clauses. The independent clause “Past cure I am” reveals the speaker’s inability to heal from his beloved’s betrayal. The use of the adverb of time “now” alongside the capitalised “Reason” personifies and emphasises the present moment, indicating the speaker’s resignation to the futility of further emotional justification. This presupposes that the speaker is no longer considering those bitter things as reasons for staying in the relationship. “...now reason is past care” is dependent on “Past cure I am.” The

proverb “Past cure past cure” (West, 2007, p. 448) aligns with the mundane adage, “Don’t cry over spilt milk,” suggesting an acceptance of irreparable loss.

Line 10, dependent on the earlier independent clause, begins with the coordinating conjunction “And,” adding to the speaker’s frantic state of unrest caused by love. The simile comparing “My thoughts and my discourse” to “mad men’s are” (line 11) portrays his mental turmoil. Madmen are characterised as being sick; hence, in its contextual usage, it suggests a feverish quality, in keeping with the theme of fever introduced at the start. As the sonnet progresses, his anger intensifies, evident in his disordered thoughts, leading him to stray at random from the truth (line 12): “At random from the truth vainly express’d.”

It ends with a semicolon, which directly eats into the closing couplet. Line 13, the longest, depicts his disillusionment with his beloved’s nature, contrasting his initial perceptions with harsh realities: “For I have sworn thee fair, and thought thee bright.” He elucidates that he has sworn his beloved to be of good nature, but she is not “thee fair and thee bright” when she is, in fact, “dark” and benighted. Unlike in Sonnet 40, he forgives his fair youth by concluding the poem: “Kill me with spites, yet we must not be foes” (line 14). Ultimately, line 14 starkly characterises her as “black as hell, as dark as night,” depicting the depth of his despair and judgment. Apart from this, the persona expresses his desperation by passing judgment on the interlocutor. Six imageries identified in the epithets are “fair”, “bright”, “black”, “hell”, “dark”, and “night”. Whereas “fair” symbolises virtue, “bright” indicates that the beloved is shining like a star, which is good. “Black, hell, dark, night” symbolise evil. The epithets have both physical and moral significance, for he seems determined to prove that his beloved is not beautiful either in soul or body. This sonnet uses a simile three times. Finally, “black” is in comparison to “hell”, and “dark” is also in comparison to “night.” In this similarity, the persona has no escape for himself, and only realises he is trapped in the black vortex of hell in which his mistress resides, and there is no release from the darkness.

From the grammatical analysis above, the sonnet captures the poet’s internal conflict regarding his lover’s infidelity and the unresolved desire intertwined with that pain.

Conclusion

From the above, the grammatical analysis of Shakespeare’s Sonnets 3, 40, and 147 reveals distinct structures: Sonnet 3 has 3 sentences with 4 independent clauses and 6 dependent clauses; Sonnet 40 contains 4 independent and 7 dependent clauses; and Sonnet 147 has 3 independent and 11 dependent clauses. Strikingly, Sonnet 40 has a fourfold structure, with each quatrain and its couplet forming sentences that convey the soreness of unrequited love and the complexities of yearning. Contrarily, Sonnet 3 emphasises the relevance of procreation at the opportune time to the “recalcitrant” fair young Lord, while Sonnet 40 changes from idealism to the wound of perfidy, depicting the polygonal feature of love.

The fair youth’s unfaithfulness muddies their association, as the persona pursues the reestablishment of their friendship despite the misdemeanour, underscoring contemporary societal issues surrounding friendship and betrayal. Sonnet 147 highlights how the sonneteer’s passionate antiphon against the dark lady’s infidelity worsens their relationship, echoing themes of disillusionment depicted in Sonnet 40.

Even though Shakespeare uses simple vocabulary in the sonnets under study, for instance, “fever”, “physician”, and “madmen” (Sonnet 147), “blame”, “loves”, “love”, and “poverty” (Sonnet 40), “glass”, “wrinkles”, “prime”, and “form another” (Sonnet 3), their combinations in sentence construction present complex syntax and layered meanings, as seen in phrases like “Lascivious grace, take all my loves” (Sonnet 40), “Nurseth” (Sonnet 147), and “through windows” (Sonnet 3). The language enables readers to provide a perfect description of the grammar of the English language.

Literary devices— paradox, metaphor, personification, simile, and imagery—enrich the sonnets, particularly in Sonnet 40’s paradoxical expressions of love; for instance, “cannot blame/ be blamed, gentle thief, lascivious grace.” Diction evokes emotions; Sonnet 40 utilises pathos, while Sonnet 147’s harsh language expresses outrage and elicits pity in readers.

Declarative sentences begin with a verb in all three sonnets:

Sonnet 147 – **Feeding** on that which doth preserve the ill (line 3).

Desire is death, which physic did except (line 8)

Sonnet 40 – **Take** all my loves, my love.....take them all (line 1)

Kill me with spites, yet we must not be foes (line 14)

Sonnet 3 – **Die** single, and thine image dies with thee (line 14)

The verbs emphasised are all in verb phrases (Yule, p. 106), which form complete statements. But the structures do not follow the normal SVO order in English. These verb phrases stress action and emotion, as shown in notable lines from each sonnet that underscore the interplay of desire and despair.

Employing the formalist lens to analyse Sonnets 3, 40, and 147 exposes divergent themes of reproduction, disloyalty (but forgiven), and unrequited love, respectively. Whereas Sonnets 3 and 40 refer to the fair Lord, they hinge on diverse dimensions of love and human experience. Therefore, the application of the formalist approach, through the analysis and interpretation of grammatical structures, reveals the sonneteer’s intentions and the persona’s attitude and behaviour within their societal milieu, facilitating a nuanced understanding of English grammar and poetic structure. From the foregoing examination, it emerges that William Shakespeare’s oeuvre has enduring significance and that formalist analysis plays a fundamental role in literary scholarship, portraying the inalienable link between language, form and meaning.

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