

Dr. Addington

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Shakespeare's Sonnet 30: A Close-Read Analysis

William Shakespeare's 30th sonnet (726-727) discusses life and its regrets sorrowfully while admiring a loved one's ability to make the regrets insignificant in comparison. The speaker's abundance of regrets is made clear throughout the entirety of the sonnet; however, the final couplet specifically addresses the person being spoken of removing his sorrows and his regrets fading. Along with the sentimental meaning of the sonnet, one may recognize the continuous legal and financial metaphors that are carried along throughout: it can be understood that the poem has a double entendre, and the speaker compares this emotional baggage to that of financial or legal issues. The poem suggests through figurative language and syntax that life is full of losses, but it can become less difficult with the help of a dear friend.

The speaker's abundance of regrets in life is made clear early on in the poem within the first quatrain. The poem explains, "I sigh the lack of many a thing I sought, / And with old woes new wail my dear time's waste" (3-4). These lines express the speaker's tragic remorse looking back on his own life: He wanted much more, but he wasted so much time and opportunity that he missed out on a great number of things that he could have had. This regret is the general theme of the sonnet; however, the final couplet does revisit this in a more positive manner, admitting that a good friend is enough to remove any sorrow. In addition to the sonnet's general theme and message, it is a nearly perfect sonnet, with only one bacchius that makes line 9 iambic tetrameter. The remainder of the sonnet, however, follows perfect and consistent iambic pentameter, just as a majority of Shakespeare's sonnets do.

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In sonnet 30, Shakespeare uses language very intentionally to get his point across. The speaker says, “Then can I grieve at grievance foregone, / And heavily from woe to woe tell o’er” (9-10). Line nine contains a bacchius to emphasize the language usage of grieve and grievance within the same line. The use of these two similar words in one line is to display that he is not only grieving now, but he has been for quite some time. “Grieve” is a present action- Shakespeare is currently grieving his “grievances”, which is a direct object of what he is grieving. This language may have been used to emphasize the true sorrow he feels when looking back on his past. This type of language mirroring is also used in line ten with “woe”, only this repetition is used to emphasize the speaker’s genuine sorrow, almost as if he is weeping. Shakespeare’s intentional use of language within these lines as well as the entirety of the sonnet help to portray the themes and emotions of the sonnet.

Alliteration is also used on multiple occasions within this sonnet. The speaker begins the first quatrain by saying, “When to the sessions of sweet silent thought” (1). The repetition of the first consonant “S” sound strengthens the words being used and their meanings in the sonnet. This trend is continued into the third line, with it saying, “I sigh the lack of many a thing I sought,” (3). In this usage specifically, the similar sounds of the words “sigh” and “sought” emphasize the changes in time within the line. The speaker is sighing in the moment; however, he is sighing over the things of his past. This combination of tenses is seen throughout the sonnet, and it helps the reader to understand where the speaker’s mind is. It is much easier to relate to and understand the speaker’s troubles when he is taking the reader with them to the regretful moments of his past within the sonnet.

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One of the more abstract features of the sonnet is its continuous metaphors referencing legal and financial terms while also keeping the sonnet's original meaning of past sorrows. This double entendre is found in many lines, including, "When to the sessions of sweet silent thought / I summon up remembrance of things past" (2). Session is a term that referred to courts during this time period, and this metaphor is continued in the second line with the terms "summon" and "remembrance". A summon is a term used in legal proceedings as well, for one would summon somebody else to court, and a remembrance is a summary in court. With all of these definitions in mind, these two lines can be read in more of a legal sense than a simple nostalgic sense. In the final couplet, a similar comparison can be seen, only this one relates to financial terms. The speaker states, "But if the while I think on thee, dear friend, / All losses are restored and sorrows end" (13-14). Although these lines are seemingly straightforward, the words "losses" and "restored" are just a few of the terms in the sonnet that can be seen as a reference to a financial burden more than an emotional one. Further examples of this can be found in other lines, where the speaker states, "And week afresh love's long since canceled woe, / And moan th' expense of many a vanished sight" (7-8). The use of the terms "canceled" and "expense" can be interpreted in a more literal manner, where the speaker has a financial burden from his past that still stays with him in the present. This double meaning can be interpreted as a way for the speaker to rationalize his emotional problems: Although they are organized and real, they make an extremely large impact on his life, similar to how a legal case or financial issues could heavily burden somebody's life. These seemingly insignificant word choices were completely intentional, and the sonnet is written in this manner for a reason.

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Sonnet 30 had the ability to convey the theme of loss and remorse alongside companionship through multiple language tools and comparisons while remaining a near-perfect example of a Shakespearian sonnet. The poem's final couplet enforces the idea that friendship can erase all sorrows; however, this may seem hard to believe considering the true pain showcased throughout the entirety of the poem. It is easy to understand the sonnet's general themes and ideas, but it's more difficult to attempt to understand the definition of a "dear friend." This friend that is spoken of seems to rid the speaker of his pains from his past; however, if his friend made him forget his sorrows, then wouldn't this poem not exist?

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Bibliography

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