Not Marble, Nor The Gilded Monuments

(Sonnet 55) by William Shakespeare

INTRODUCTION

Sonnet 55 builds up on Horace’s theme of poetry outlasting physical monuments to the dead. In Horace’s poetry, the poet is himself immortalised by his poetry but in this sonnet, Shakespeare seeks to build a figurative monument to his beloved, the fair lord. The fair lord is not described or revealed in any way in this sonnet. Instead, the sonnet just addresses the idea of immortality through verse. The ravages of time is a recurrent theme in the sonnets of Shakespeare. So sonnet 55 is one of the most famous works of Shakespeare and a notable deviation from other sonnets in which he appears insecure about his relationships and his self-worth. Here we find an impassioned burst of confidence as the poet claims to have the power to keep his friend’s memory alive evermore.

KEY WORDS

1 gilded: covered with gold; gold-plated

2 unswept stone: a stone monument left uncared for

3 besmear’d: tarnished

4 sluttish: of unclean habits and behaviour

5 broils: tumult, fighting, disturbances, esp. in war

6 Mars: the god of war

7 quick: lively, fast moving, searching out

8 living record: this written memory of your life which continues after you are dead

9. outlive: live afterwards

10. overturn: destroy

11. room: place, space

12. dwell: live

13. Gainst: against
14. oblivious enmity: enmity which is forgetful of everything and so seeks to destroy everything
15. pace forth: stride forwards
16. posterity: future generations
17 doom: doomsday; the day on which the Last Judgment will occur
18. judgement : the day of the last judgement.

Poem

Not marble, nor the gilded monuments
Of princes, shall outlive this powerful rhyme;

Meaning .. Shakespeare starts with a very assertive statement. He feels his Sonnet is immune to the destructive potential of time. With passage of time, almost everything human beings create get devoured by time. Whole cities have been wiped out due to the inescapable wear and tear inflicted by the elements. At times, they fall prey to military conquests and are raged to the ground. Kings, emperors, and the rich and the powerful build tombs, memorials, graves, and monuments to immortalize themselves on earth long after they are gone. These majestic structures built with the best and the sturdiest materials defy destruction for some time – a few centuries, at best – but succumb to the ravenous Nature, slowly losing their luster and glamour. Stone by stone, brick by brick, they fall apart till they vanish into oblivion. So destruction of every man-made monument is written in every stone they are built with.

Shakespeare declares that his sonnets, with no destructible element in them, are undying. This is because they reach out to the hearts and minds of people. The lyrical attraction, and the emotion they convey impart them the power to defy time.

But you shall shine more bright in these contents
Than unswept stone besmear’d with sluttish time.

Now, it emerges that Shakespeare wrote these lines as a paean for someone (referred to as ‘you’) whom he loved very intensely. The bard feels that the glory and goodness of his beloved friend as narrated in his lines will set the heart of the readers aglow with pleasure, delight and admiration.

As per the Speaker, the vibrancy of his sonnet will be in sharp contrast with the mellowed, dist-laden, weathered, and eroded monuments that are slowly being robbed of their grandeur with the passage of time.
When wasteful war shall statues overturn,

And broils root out the work of masonry,

Meaning ... Historically, marauding conquerors target monuments, tombs and memorials. Pillaging the structures so beautifully and strenuously built gives them a sense of victory and vengeful satisfaction. So, we come across umpteen instances of commanders of armies turning on the memorials of the mortals they want to humiliate even much after their deaths.

Shakespeare underlines the transitory nature of man-made edifices to bring into relief the power and passion of his praise for his beloved.

Nor Mars his sword nor war's quick fire shall burn

The living record of your memory.

Meaning ... Shakespeare returns to shower accolades on his beloved friend. He avers that the passion and longing for the memories for his friend are too deeply etched in his sonnet to be erased or forgotten with the passage of time. In an allegorical way, Shakespeare conjures up the vision of a savage war and a sword. He tries to underscore the fact that the strong emotions glorifying the persona and qualities of his friend in the sonnet can withstand the ravages of the sword and the war.

‘Gainst death and all-oblivious enmity

Shall you pace forth; your praise shall still find room

Meaning ... Shakespeare continues to express his great adoration for his friend. Like a soul possessed, he sings his praise. The friend, the bard says, will tread the path of wars and destruction, but would emerge unscathed. No matter when he dies or how he dies, his glory will remain unaffected for all times to come.

Even in the eyes of all posterity

That wear this world out to the ending doom.

Meaning ..... The speaker clearly is overwhelmed by the tide of emotions for his beloved friend. This gets reflected in the audacious manner in which he proclaims that his sonnet depicting his love for his friend will continue to be read by one and all. Such love for the sonnet and the beloved person will continue undiminished for all times to come. Till the world survives, the love for the sonnet would survive.
So, till the judgment that yourself arise,

You live in this, and dwell in lovers’ eyes.

Meaning .... The beloved friend may die, but he will continue to live in the Sonnet 55, and be admired by the countless readers who would be smitten by him as intensely as Shakespeare has been. He will continue to live like this until the day of Final Judgment when he will be resurrected.

**Concept Map:**

1. Why do you think the rich and the powerful people get their statues and monuments erected in their memory?

   Answer: The rich and the powerful get monuments and statues carved on the one hand to make an ostentatious display of their wealth and on the other hand, to immortalize themselves so that the future generations know and remember them. However, the monuments and the statues fail to fulfill their wish.

2. Describe how monuments and statues brave the ravages of time.

   Answer: The statues and the monuments which the rich and the powerful get erected in their memory brave the ravages of time. Initially, they stand neglected and face the evil practices
adopted by the future generations. Later, they are tarnished by the destructive wars. In short, they face the difficult and cruel times and thus, brave the ravages of wars and conflicts.

3. Why does the poetry refer to time as being ‘sluttish’?

Answer: Time has been personified here as a slut which means being disloyal and untrustworthy. The poet calls time sluttish as it is not loyal to anyone. Just as a slut, loses its charm and beauty with time, the princes and the powerful, who enjoyed great privileges and popularity at one time get lost and forgotten with the passage of time. The ornate monuments and statues that they get erected to perpetuate their names even after their death stand neglected after some time and eventually, they are tarnished by wars. Hence, time displays its disloyalty towards once all powerful kings. The minds and the morals of the people change with the changing times. Wasteful wars, conflicts, etc dominate the cultural changes of the times. Unfortunately, the practices and behavior of the people get sluttish and unclean with the change in their time. Thus, the poet refers time as ‘sluttish’.

4. The poet says that neither forces of nature nor wars can destroy his poetry. In fact, even godly powers of Mars will not have a devastating effect on his rhyme. What quality of the poet is revealed through these lines?

Answer: Forces of nature or wars can destroy human beings, animals, cities, and even monuments. The power of the God of war, Mars, has a devastating effect on everything that is mortal. However, poetry and the great creations of the poet are immune to such forces of nature. The sonnet written by the poet in praise of his friend will survive all these natural forces, wars and the ravages of time. Even the godly power of Mars can’t diminish the shine and glory of his rhyme. The poem will survive all these and be remembered till posterity.

Sure of his verses not being destroyed by forces of nature, wars and the unmatchable power of God, the poet reveals his self-confidence, optimism and his immense faith in the power of his poetry. He conveys that ‘Pen is mightier than the sword’.

**IMPORTANT QUESTION**

1. What is the theme of sonnet 55?
   Ans. Shakespeare believes that love is eternal and everlasting. It cannot be destroyed or controlled by materialistic things that are made to stand forever, but in the end all are doomed to destruction like the gilded monuments. Not even the sword of Mars or wars can destroy love, Shakespeare’s true idea of love is that love will exist till the end of time. Since there is no end to love it will exist forever. This sonnet shares this theme with other sonnets which oppose the power of verse to death and Time’s cruel knife and promise immortality to the beloved. The concluding couplet seems to curiously satisfy the curiosity as to who is being referred to. It is enough that it lives in ‘the lover’s eyes for all the mysteries will be comprehended on the last day of judgement. What distinguishes Shakespeare from others is that he values the identity of the
beloved, he recognises that the beloved has his own personal immortality, that is no way dependent upon his poetry. So the poet’s verse will continue strongly even in the face of death and dispassionate enmity. It will always live in poetry and in the eyes of the lovers who will read this. So the theme is love and the power of love that outlives all.

2. How is Time personified in the poem? What purpose does it serve?
   Ans: Time is a great leveller. It destroys everything like the monuments or statues. All the magnificent structures of the world will be razed to the ground. Then ‘time is personified as a slut which is an unfavourable comparison. Just as a slut’s beauty changes with time, similarly, time also changes everything. A slut’s physical beauty does not last, nor does her attractions. Similarly time changes all relations or equations that one forges in life.

3. What is the poet’s message in sonnet 55?
   Ans: The poet wishes to communicate that Love is beyond all barriers, whether materialistic or physical. All the other things are doomed for destruction but love will stand the test of time. Since there is no end to love, it will exist forever. Time’s cruel knife cuts everything, changes all relations but not love. So the poet’s love for his friend will continue strongly even in the face of death and dispassionate enmity. It will live forever in the eyes of the lovers. So the theme is love and the power of love that outlives all.

**LITERARY DEVICES**

**PERSONIFICATION**
- ‘Gilded monuments’: Shakespeare personified these by giving them life-spans.
- *Posternity*: It is given a human characteristic of ‘sight’
- *Mars*: war is given the title of ‘mars’. This is rooted in Greek mythology, as Mars is the God of war.
- *Time*: as a slut. Just as the beauty of a slut undergoes great changes, so does time usher in great changes.

**HYPERBOLE**

This means exaggeration, but too much exaggeration which sometimes becomes unbelievable. In this poem, the poet claims that no amount of time or change can obliterate the words he writes, shall make his reader understand the awesome power as he as a wordsmith wields.

**REFERENCE TO CONTEXT – MCQs**

Read the extracts given below and answer the questions that follow:

1. “Not marble nor the gilded monuments
   Of prices, shall outlive this powerful rhyme” (i) Here poetry as compared to monuments is........
   (a) long lasting. (b) short-lived. (c) as powerful as gilded monuments.

2. “You live in this, and dwell in lovers’ eyes.” (ii) The phrase ‘lovers’ eyes signify..................
(a) the loving eyes of a lover. (b) the poetry will be forgotten forever. (c) the poetry will survive all destruction.

3. Nor Mars his sword nor war’s quick fire shall burn (iii) Here sword of Mars is referred to........ (a) sword of mars, God of war. (b) fires of wars. (c) Destructive nature of war.

4. “Living record of your memory.” (iv) Here living record refers to....................... (a) the sonnet the poet has written for his friend. (b) an existing statue of his friend. (c) his friend who lives in the poet’s memory.

Answer : (i) (a) (ii) (c) (iii) (c) (iv) (a)

Read the following extracts and answer the questions. (REFERENCE TO CONTEXT – NON-MCQs)

1. Not marble, nor the gilded monuments of princes, shall outlive this powerful rhyme (a) What are gilded monuments? Ans : The monuments that are decorated and embellished with gold.
   (b) What purpose do the monuments serve? Ans : They are symbols of power and riches to remember the dead and the mighty. (c) What will powerful rhyme achieve? Ans : The powerful rhyme will immortalise the person in whose memory it is written.

2. Nor Mars his sword nor war’s quick fire shall burn The living record of your memory. (a) Who is ‘Mars’? Ans : In Greek mythology, he is the ‘god of war’. (b) How will ‘living record’ survive the test of time? Ans : The written words of the poet will never be destroyed by nature or time. (c) How are other things destroyed with time? Ans : Other things, like monuments, statues will be destroyed by nature-made or man-made disasters or war.

3. Shall you pace forth, your praise shall find room Even in the eyes of all posterity That wear this world out to the ending doom (a) What will happen to the praise of the poet’s friend? Ans : The poet’s friend will be remembered even by the coming generations. (b) What is the future of the world predicted? Ans : The physical world is doomed, it will be destroyed. (c) What do the above lines reflect about the poet’s personality? Ans : The poet is too concerned and loves his friend too much.
4. So till the judgement, that yourself arise You live in this and dwell in lover’s eyes
(a) What is ‘judgement’? Who delivers it?
Ans : Judgement Day or Doomsday is when everyone is rewarded or punished for their deeds by God.
(b) Who will survive? How?
Ans : All else will be destroyed but poet’s love for his friend will survive.
(c) Explain — “dwell in lover’s eyes”.
Ans : Poet’s love for his friend will survive because it will live on in the eyes of the lovers.

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