Two Faces of Love: A Hermeneutical Phenomenological Analysis of Shakespeare's Sonnets 116 and 147

ABSTRACT

Aims: This study investigated the dual representations of love in William Shakespeare's Sonnet 116 and Sonnet 147, aiming to delineate the contrasting themes of idealized, eternal love and obsessive, destructive passion.
Research Design: The study employed qualitative textual analysis to examine poetic devices, metaphors, and thematic structures in each sonnet.
Methodology: Rooted in the literary and philosophical tradition, the research is guided by a hermeneutic phenomenological approach, allowing the researcher to interpret the emotional and existential dimensions of love as presented in the sonnets
Results: Sonnet 116 is revealed to portray love as unwavering and transcendent, akin to a moral compass or spiritual constant, while Sonnet 147 exposes love as a pathological desire that leads to emotional disintegration and madness. These divergent depictions are interpreted through the philosophical lenses of Heidegger, Gadamer, and Ricoeur, emphasizing that meaning is constructed not solely within the text but through the interpreter's lived experience. The results underscore Shakespeare's profound ability to depict love as both redemptive and ruinous, revealing the poet's deep engagement with the emotional polarities of human relationships. The findings suggest that the sonnets not only explore the surface feelings of love but also serve as phenomenological sites where love's ethical, spiritual, and psychological implications are disclosed.
Conclusion: In conclusion, this study demonstrates that Shakespeare's treatment of love transcends literary categorization and becomes a mode of being, experienced and interpreted through the existential condition of the reader. Love in Shakespeare's sonnets is not merely a theme—it is a phenomenon that reflects the human condition in all its beauty and brokenness.

Keywords: Sonnet 116, Sonnet 147, Hermeneutics, Phenomenology, textual analysis

1. INTRODUCTION

Love is often described as the lifeblood of human existence—the source of inspiration, the will to live, and the foundation of meaningful relationships. It transcends boundaries of race, social status, age, and geography. Universally felt and expressed, love assumes many forms and is embedded in nearly every aspect of human activity. Without love, both personal development and social cohesion would face significant challenges. To fully appreciate one's purpose in life, one must first learn to love.

Because of its profound impact on human experience, love has long served as a central theme in artistic expression. Individuals in love—especially those hesitant to openly express their affections—often channel their emotions into their creative pursuits. In many cases, artists produce their most powerful works, their opus magnum, under the influence of love. From the moment one begins a new day, love serves as the guiding force behind the unfolding of personal narratives, fueling the desire to craft the most meaningful story of one's life.

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Love, in its most inclusive form, spares no one. It is shared universally, irrespective of background or circumstances. Shakespeare, regarded as one of the most eloquent literary voices on the subject, has been praised for capturing "the spirit of it, its highs and lows, and the beauty of falling in love in some of the most poetic lines ever written" (Shakespeare and Love, n.d.). Across all 38 of his plays, the word “love” appears frequently, reflecting its thematic prominence in his body of work.

Shakespeare masterfully depicted various types of love with remarkable realism. For example, Romeo and Juliet is widely regarded as an embodiment of pure, innocent love and an iconic representation of love at first sight. His early plays—including The Two Gentlemen of Verona (1594), Love’s Labour’s Lost (1594), Romeo and Juliet (1595), A Midsummer Night’s Dream (1596), The Merry Wives of Windsor (1598), and Twelfth Night (1600)—all foreground love as a major theme (Ma, 2006). While Shakespeare consistently returns to love as a central topic, he resists providing a singular, fixed definition of it. Instead, readers are invited to uncover its meaning through the interplay of character, language, and situation.

Modern writers continue to draw on Shakespeare’s treatment of love as a model for portraying both its depth and its complexity. Through his characters and poetic voice, he offers a range of perspectives—from romantic idealism to emotional turmoil. Even in his sonnets, love is presented as a force that elevates, mystifies, and occasionally torments the speaker. His use of poetic language illustrates how love operates as a phenomenon that both uplifts and bewilders the human spirit.

Shakespeare’s personal life has also been subject to scholarly inquiry. Some critics have examined his biographical background in an effort to explain the intense emotional and erotic themes in his work. Of particular interest is the fact that more than 100 of his sonnets are believed to be addressed to a young man. This has led to questions surrounding the nature of Shakespeare’s own experiences with love and friendship. According to Masson (1901), Shakespeare’s sonnets are deeply autobiographical, revealing aspects of his private life in London, including a complex and emotionally charged friendship with a young nobleman—identified by some as the Earl of Southampton or the Earl of Pembroke.

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Two of Shakespeare’s most thematically revealing sonnets, Sonnet 116 and Sonnet 147, present conflicting conceptions of love. Sonnet 116, believed to be addressed to a young man, extols love as unwavering, eternal, and spiritually transcendent. In contrast, Sonnet 147, addressed to a "dark lady," depicts love as obsessive, unhealthy, and morally corrosive. The deliberate juxtaposition of idealized love for a man and disillusioned love for a woman has led some scholars to further speculate on Shakespeare’s sexuality (Ma, 2006; Masson, 1901). However, this study will not attempt to delve into the poet’s personal relationships or identify the historical figures behind the addressees. Rather, the focus is on how love is conceptualized and represented within the texts themselves.

This paper aims to examine the two distinct types of love portrayed in Sonnet 116 and Sonnet 147 using a hermeneutic phenomenological approach. By analyzing the language, symbolism, and emotional tone of the sonnets, the study seeks to clarify how Shakespeare constructs the phenomenon of love as both an ideal and a burden—an eternal virtue and a consuming passion.

2. REVIEW OF RELATED LITERATURE

2.1 Love in the Renaissance Period

The Renaissance period (14th to 17th century) marked a significant transformation in how love was perceived, experienced, and represented, particularly through literature and philosophy. Although both central to the human experience, love and marriage were regarded as separate institutions during this time. Romantic love was idealized and often spiritualized in literature, while marriage typically served social, political, and economic functions (The Gale Group Inc., 2001).

The idea of romantic love that flourished during the Renaissance has its roots in the tradition of courtly love, which was developed during the medieval period. Courtly love emphasized devotion and adoration, often directed toward an unattainable woman, thereby idealizing her as a paragon of virtue and beauty (Ma, 2006). This concept was foundational in the poetic works of Dante Alighieri and Francesco Petrarch, prominent Italian poets of the 14th century. In Dante's La Vita Nuova and Petrarch's Canzoniere, the beloved woman serves as both muse and symbol of divine perfection. Their depictions elevated love as a transformative, almost sacred experience (The Gale Group Inc., 2001).

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According to literary scholars, Dante and Petrarch redefined love in spiritual and idealistic terms, setting the tone for subsequent European poets, who came to regard love as "an experience above and beyond ordinary life" (The Gale Group Inc., 2001). While some poets infused their portrayals of love with sensuality and desire, others, following a more Platonic tradition, viewed love as pure, selfless, and ennobling.

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This idealistic portrayal of love carried into the English Renaissance through poets such as Sir Philip Sidney and Edmund Spenser, whose sonnet sequences (Astrophil and Stella and Amoretti, respectively) reflected the traditions of courtly love. In these poems, women were depicted as angelic and virtuous, and love was often associated with moral and spiritual refinement (SparkNotes Editors, 2003). As Cuddon (cited in Ma, 2006) describes, courtly love was not merely romantic or sexual but served as "an idea about heterosexual relationships" grounded in emotional discipline, reverence, and the ennobling power of affection.

Sidney's Astrophil and Stella, for instance, characterizes the beloved as chaste, constant, and spiritually uplifting. The speaker's longing is less about physical fulfillment and more about personal betterment through adoration and moral discipline. This ideal was emblematic of Renaissance thought, in which love was seen as a force capable of purifying the soul and leading one to higher moral ground (Ma, 2006).

A key philosophical influence on Renaissance conceptions of love was Neoplatonism, a revival of the ideas of Plato adapted by Renaissance thinkers such as Marsilio Ficino. Neoplatonists asserted that true love transcended physical desire and aimed toward the divine, representing a longing for spiritual union and intellectual harmony. Such "Platonic" love was often portrayed as the highest form of affection—sacred, selfless, and ultimately redemptive (The Gale Group Inc., 2001).

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Perhaps the most profound exploration of love in the Renaissance can be found in the works of William Shakespeare, often hailed as one of the greatest love poets in history. Shakespeare's sonnets and plays explore the tension between idealized love and the social conventions of marriage. Works such as Romeo and Juliet, Much Ado About Nothing, and Twelfth Night depict love as both deeply sincere and subversive—often challenging the rigid expectations of society and marriage.

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While Renaissance marriage was often a strategic alliance, Shakespeare emphasized emotional authenticity and individual choice. His portrayal of love goes beyond social

conformity, suggesting that love has the power to transcend societal limitations—a theme that continues to resonate with contemporary audiences (Novelguide, 2024).

2.2 Hermeneutical Phenomenology

Hermeneutical phenomenology is a branch of phenomenological inquiry that integrates the interpretive nature of hermeneutics with the descriptive methodology of phenomenology. Rooted in continental philosophy, it has profoundly influenced the humanities and social sciences, particularly in understanding texts, experiences, and consciousness.

Hermeneutics, classically defined, is the theory and methodology of interpretation, originally applied to biblical and classical texts but later extended to philosophical and human sciences (Audi, 1995). Wilhelm Dilthey was pivotal in broadening hermeneutics beyond theology, dividing the human sciences into three structural levels: experience (Erlebnis), expression (Ausdruck), and comprehension (Verstehen). According to Dilthey, experience involves direct, subjective engagement with reality; expression is the outward manifestation of internal experiences; and comprehension includes both accurate and flawed understandings, emphasizing relational meaning-making (Mantzavinos, 2016).

Dilthey's ideas intersect with Edmund Husserl's phenomenology, especially in the emphasis on lived experience. Husserl sought to describe phenomena as they appear in consciousness, suspending assumptions through a method called "epoché" or bracketing. Dilthey, however, leaned more towards the interpretive, suggesting that expressions often convey more meaning than the author consciously intends, laying the groundwork for the hermeneutic circle—understanding the whole through the parts and vice versa (Agosta, 2011).

Martin Heidegger, a student of Husserl, advanced hermeneutical phenomenology by situating interpretation at the heart of human existence. In Being and Time (1927), he argued that all understanding is inherently interpretive and embedded in one's historical and linguistic context. He redefined phenomenology not as a purely descriptive act but as a way of being—Dasein—in which interpretation is fundamental (Heidegger, 1962).

Heidegger claimed that interpretation is not a choice but a mode of existence. In his later work, he stressed the poetic and linguistic dimensions of interpretation, stating that language is not merely a communication tool but the very medium in which reality is disclosed. "Only where there is language is there world," he wrote, emphasizing that meaning arises through participation in a pre-existing linguistic structure (Eagleton, 1983).

Hans-Georg Gadamer, Heidegger's student, extended this thought in Truth and Method (1960), where he proposed that understanding is a dialogical process. He introduced the idea of the "fusion of horizons" (Horizontverschmelzung)—the merging of the interpreter's perspective with that of the text or other. Gadamer emphasized that our preconceptions are not obstacles to understanding but necessary starting points, continually reshaped through interpretive engagement (Gadamer, 1975).

For Gadamer, meaning is not fixed but unfolds through reflection and openness to the other. Methodical, objective analysis, he argued, is secondary to experience and historical consciousness in the quest for truth.

Paul Ricoeur integrated hermeneutics and phenomenology through his concept of narrative identity. He argued that individuals understand themselves and others through stories, which mediate between lived experience and historical context. Ricoeur stressed the role of metaphor and symbol in revealing deeper meanings, emphasizing that interpretation involves

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not only reconstructing authorial intent but also disclosing latent structures of meaning in texts (Ricoeur, 1981).

2.3 Phenomenological Criticism and Literary Hermeneutics

Phenomenological literary criticism, influenced by Husserl and later developed by theorists such as Roman Ingarden and Georges Poulet, centers on the relationship between text and reader. This approach examines how a reader's consciousness interacts with the text, highlighting the aesthetic experience as something that emerges within the act of reading. The text is seen not as an objective entity but as a manifestation of the author's lived world (Lebenswelt)—structured experience made available to the reader's perception (Armstrong, 2010).

Terry Eagleton explains that, in this tradition, the literary work is not merely a reflection of objective reality but a complex embodiment of the author's subjective consciousness. Critics aim to uncover the deep structures of the author's mind, emphasizing recurrent themes and imagery that reveal how the author experienced the world. This process mirrors phenomenology's goal of describing the lived world as it presents itself to consciousness (Eagleton, 1983).

In this framework, language is not a transparent medium but the site where meaning and being are disclosed. Heidegger's notion that language "gives" the world aligns with structuralist claims that language precedes individual consciousness and is constitutive of human reality.

Hermeneutical phenomenology continues to influence disciplines such as education, psychology, theology, and literary studies. It offers a methodologically rich, philosophically grounded approach to understanding meaning, emphasizing situatedness, historicality, and the role of the interpreter. As Mantzavinos (2016) notes, hermeneutics offers interpretive tools not only for textual analysis but also for understanding human action and expression, always acknowledging the fallibility and historical nature of interpretation.

3. METHODOLOGY

3.1 Research Design

This study used a qualitative research design based on hermeneutic phenomenology to interpret the lived experience of love as depicted in Shakespeare's *Sonnets 116* and *147*. Through close textual analysis, the researcher examined poetic devices such as metaphor, imagery, enjambment, personification, and tone to uncover how Shakespeare presents two contrasting types of love—one ideal and enduring, the other obsessive and destructive. Guided by the hermeneutic circle, the interpretation moved between parts of the text and its whole meaning, integrating the researcher's own emotional and philosophical insights. This approach aligns with the phenomenological emphasis on understanding meaning through lived experience rather than objective measurement.

3.2 Sources of Data

The primary sources of data for this study are William Shakespeare's Sonnet 116 and Sonnet 147, both selected for their thematic contrast in representing ideal and destructive forms of love. These sonnets were drawn from Shakespeare's Sonnets (1609), widely recognized as a key literary corpus reflecting the emotional, philosophical, and relational dimensions of love. Secondary data included scholarly literature on Shakespearean criticism, poetic analysis, and hermeneutic phenomenology, which provided interpretive frameworks and supported the

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textual analysis. These sources enabled a deeper understanding of the sonnets' language, structure, and existential themes.

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3.3 Data Analysis

The analysis process involved close reading and interpretive reflection based on the principles of hermeneutic phenomenology. Each sonnet was examined for its use of poetic devices, including imagery, extended metaphor, personification, enjambment, repetition, and tone, to understand how love is thematically and emotionally constructed. The researcher engaged in a hermeneutic circle, moving between specific lines or phrases and the larger meaning of the text to uncover how the concept of love is disclosed. The interpretive act was also informed by the researcher's own emotional responses and life experience, aligning with the phenomenological emphasis on lived meaning. Rather than seeking objective truths, the analysis aimed to reveal the essence of love as understood through the interplay between poetic language and human consciousness.

4. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

4.1 Two Types of Love in Shakespeare's Sonnets 116 and 147

Love in Sonnet 116 is the kind of love that feels heavenly—firm, unchanging, and filled with emotional security. The speaker defines love by what it is not:

"Love is not love / Which alters when it alteration finds, / Or bends with the remover to remove." (ll. 2–4)

This suggests that real love stands the test of change and hardship. It is not something that fades when challenges arise; rather, it remains unshaken. This love is what people dream about—perfect and lasting, like a guiding star:

"It is the star to every wandering bark." (l. 7)

Love here is like a lighthouse—it doesn't move, but it helps the lost find their way. This kind of love is comforting, uplifting, and good for the soul. Even as time tries to destroy beauty, love remains powerful:

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"Love's not Time's fool, though rosy lips and cheeks / Within his bending sickle's compass come." (ll. 9–10)

Here, Shakespeare assures us that age cannot destroy the true emotional bond shared by lovers. This kind of love brings out the best in people. It motivates, heals, and celebrates

loyalty, much like what marriage symbolizes. It's not fleeting; it's deep, inspiring, and something to be thankful for.

In contrast, love in Sonnet 147 is the kind that slowly eats away at the person who feels it. It is a love full of lust, described as a disease:

"My love is as a fever longing still / For that which longer nurseth the disease." (ll. 1–2)

The speaker is aware that what he feels is harming him, yet he continues to crave it. The personification of reason as a doctor who gave up trying to heal him shows how out of control this love is:

"My reason, the physician to my love... / Hath left me." (ll. 3–5)

There is inner conflict—the mind warns, but the body continues to desire. It is a toxic kind of love that exhausts both heart and soul. The speaker even calls himself "mad":

"Past cure I am, now reason is past care, / And frantic-mad with evermore unrest." (ll. 7–8)

Even when he realizes the woman he loved isn't who he thought she was—

"I have sworn thee fair, and thought thee bright, / Who art as black as hell, as dark as night." (ll. 13–14)

—he is still trapped. This love is forbidden, full of guilt, desire, and moral confusion. It shows how the heart can betray the mind when lust takes over. It is not the love that strengthens—it weakens, tempts, and poisons the spirit.

The researcher's interpretation is drawn from the lens of her lived experience, seeing love as both a source of joy and destruction. Through Shakespeare's use of metaphors, personification, and oppositions, the sonnets become mirrors to the heart's many conditions. As the researcher reads and reflects, she does not merely observe but participates in the meaning-making. This is a hermeneutical phenomenological act, as explained by Heidegger—every understanding is already interpretive. The researcher finds herself within the sonnets, guided by the truth that literature is a space where human emotions and experiences unfold, shaped by both history and the self.

4.2 Poetic Devices Used in Shakespeare's Sonnets

Both Sonnet 116 and Sonnet 147 showcase Shakespeare's masterful use of poetic devices—such as extended metaphor, personification, enjambment, repetition, and imagery—to explore

the complexities of romantic love. While Sonnet 116 idealizes love as eternal and unchanging, Sonnet 147 presents love as a destructive force driven by lust.

In Sonnet 116, Shakespeare characterizes ideal love as constant and incorruptible. The phrase:

“It is an ever-fixed mark” (l. 5)

employs an extended metaphor, likening love to a navigational marker—an image that suggests unwavering stability. This image, according to Vendler (1997), reinforces the notion that true love offers guidance and moral certainty even amid emotional turbulence.

Similarly, the line: “It is the star to every wandering bark” (l. 7) expands the metaphor further. Here, love is portrayed as a celestial guide to lost souls ("barks"), underscoring its role in directing and inspiring life’s journey. The imagery evokes the North Star, a fixed point used in maritime navigation, and symbolizes constancy amid uncertainty (Booth, 1977).

Shakespeare continues:

“Love’s not Time’s fool, though rosy lips and cheeks / Within his bending sickle’s compass come” (ll. 9–10),

This use of enjambment conveys the unstoppable flow of time, yet asserts that love remains unbent by temporal decay. The physical signs of beauty may fade—“rosy lips and cheeks”—but love’s essence persists. The personification of Time, armed with a “bending sickle,” connects love’s endurance to its ability to defy the natural aging process (Garber, 2004).

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Further, Shakespeare writes:

“Love alters not with his brief hours and weeks” (l. 11),

The possessive pronoun “his” personifies Time again and implies an active moral duty within the lover to remain steadfast. The lover is not merely a passive subject of emotion but a bearer of responsibility—consistent with Shakespeare's moralizing view of ideal love (Schalkwyk, 2002).

Finally, the line:

“Love is not love / Which alters when it alteration finds” (ll. 2–3)

repeats the word “love,” reinforcing through anaphora and negation that true love is definable only by its resistance to change. As Neely (2004) notes, this rhetorical pattern works as a logical argument rather than emotional reflection, asserting love as an ethical and spiritual ideal.

In contrast, Sonnet 147 presents love as a pathological obsession, marked by moral weakness and bodily deterioration. The opening metaphor:

“My love is as a fever, longing still / For that which longer nurseth the disease” (ll. 1–2)

casts love as a sickness, suggesting its corruptive power over both body and mind. The repetition of disease-related words—“fever,” “ill,” “sickly,” “death,” “frantic-mad”—reveals a

semantic field of decay, emphasizing that this love depletes rather than nourishes (Duncan-Jones, 1997).

The line:

“Feeding on that which doth preserve the ill” (l. 4)

captures a paradox: the more the speaker indulges in lust, the more he deteriorates. This highlights a cycle of dependency, where desire sustains the very illness it causes—a view echoed by Dollimore (1998), who describes Renaissance eroticism as both alluring and self-annihilating.

Shakespeare introduces the personification of reason as a physician:

“My reason, the physician to my love... / Hath left me” (ll. 3–5).

This metaphor affirms the speaker’s awareness of his emotional decline, but also signals his abandonment of rational control. Though he recognizes the cure, he fails to follow it, symbolizing moral and psychological surrender.

Even in the face of emotional disintegration, the speaker attempts to deflect responsibility:

“For I have sworn thee fair and thought thee bright, / Who art as black as hell, as dark as night” (ll. 13–14).

The final couplet’s color imagery—from “bright” to “black as hell”—marks a full collapse of illusion, revealing how lust has blinded the speaker’s moral judgment. Yet, his continued obsession implies a tragic self-awareness, not unlike what Ricoeur (1981) calls a “narrative of internal contradiction”.

5. CONCLUSION

This study sought to delineate two contrasting portrayals of love in William Shakespeare’s Sonnets 116 and 147, using a hermeneutic phenomenological approach to explore how love is revealed as both an ideal and a destructive force. Through close textual analysis, it was found that Sonnet 116 presents love as immutable, ethical, and spiritually fulfilling—symbolized through enduring metaphors such as the “ever-fixed mark” and the “star to every wandering bark.” In contrast, Sonnet 147 reveals love as a pathological craving, expressed through metaphors of illness and madness, highlighting the torment of a love corrupted by lust and moral weakness.

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Using poetic devices such as imagery, personification, enjambment, and metaphor, Shakespeare constructs love not as a singular or static concept, but as a dynamic human experience that oscillates between transcendence and downfall. The application of hermeneutic phenomenology allowed for a deeper understanding of how these emotional states are not merely textual representations, but reflect lived experiences—how love is felt, endured, and interpreted by the human subject.

Ultimately, this study affirms that Shakespeare’s sonnets are not just literary artifacts but phenomenological sites where the essence of love is disclosed in its fullness—both as a virtue that elevates and as a force that consumes. In reading these sonnets, one not only encounters Shakespeare’s view of love but is also invited to reflect on the moral, emotional, and existential dimensions of their own experience of love. The reader becomes a participant in the

interpretation, embodying Heidegger's notion that understanding is not a detached act but a mode of being-in-the-world.

Thus, the study concludes that Shakespeare's Sonnets 116 and 147 offer enduring insights into the human condition, capturing the contradictory nature of love as both an anchor and a tempest—one that elevates the soul and one that consumes it.

COMPETING INTERESTS

The author has declared that no competing interests exist.

AI DISCLAIMER

ChatGPT and Grammarly have been utilized to improve sentence structure and organization. Consensus has also facilitated the search for valuable related literature.

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