

A Multi-perspective Interpretation of Imagery in Sonnet 98 by Shakespeare

Nianli Deng

Guangzhou University of Software, Guangzhou, Guangdong, China

Abstract: This study explores the seasonal imagery, floral imagery, and mythological imagery in Shakespeare's Sonnet 98, a sonnet in the Fair Youth sequence. The Multi-perspective exploration is conducted based mainly on Lakoff and Johnson's Conceptual Metaphor Theory along with the Elizabethan historical context of Sonnet 98. The study has also focused on how seasonal, floral, and mythological images form a cohesive system to present the theme of emotional loss. Based on the metaphorical and cultural connotations presented by the images, it is found that there is a subversion of conventional seasonal symbolism and floral symbolism in Sonnet 98. The subversion has created a unique expression of devoted love by indicating spring as a time of sadness and perceiving flowers as inferior copies of the beloved.

Keywords: Sonnet 98; Seasonal Imagery; Floral Imagery; Mythological Imagery; Metaphor

1. Introduction

William Shakespeare's 154 sonnets have long been a profound literary corpus that explores the eternal themes of love, time, separation, and immortality. Among these, Sonnet 98 is classified as one of the sonnets in the sequence dedicated to the "Fair Youth" (Sonnets 1-126). It stands out for its exquisite manipulation of natural imagery to articulate the agony of separation and the transcendence of the beauty of the beloved. The poem is set against the time of the arrival of spring, a season conventionally associated with renewal and vitality. In Sonnet 98, there is a subversion of this conventional symbolism by framing spring as a time of emotional loss. With the arrival of spring, the writer's emotional state is not cheerful but icy cold as winter in the absence of the beloved. The artistic appeal of the poem lies in this deliberate contrast between the external natural

world and the internal emotional landscape.

In recent decades, interpretations of Shakespeare's sonnets have shifted from purely rhetorical analysis to interdisciplinary approaches, integrating cognitive linguistics, cultural studies, and historical contextualization. Lakoff and Johnson's Conceptual Metaphor Theory (CMT) has emerged as a particularly insightful framework for unpacking the cognitive mechanisms behind poetic imagery, revealing how abstract emotions are conceptualized through concrete domains of experience[1]. Meanwhile, Chinese scholars have contributed unique perspectives by comparing Shakespeare's natural imagery with traditional Chinese poetic themes, highlighting cross-cultural similarities and differences in emotional expression. However, existing studies on Sonnet 98 often treat its imagery in isolation rather than exploring the interconnection of these images as a cohesive system of meaning. In the 21st century, Chinese scholars have studied sonnets by Shakespeare from diversified perspectives. The traditional historical perspective explores the mysteries embedded in the sonnets by integrating historical contexts. The New Criticism perspective conducts in-depth textual analysis of the sonnets by adopting the method of close reading. Meanwhile, philosophical and interdisciplinary perspectives have generated new vitality into the study of the sonnets by Shakespeare[2].

This study aims to interpret Sonnet 98 (From you have I been absent in the spring) by conducting a multi-perspective analysis of the imagery in Sonnet 98, with reference to CMT and historical contextualization. The primary research questions are as follows: How do images in Sonnet 98 reflect the writer's emotional experience of separation? What cognitive and cultural connotations these images? And what are the major functions of the images in the Fair Youth sequence? The study has adopted a theoretical framework integrating CMT with historical contextualization to make

analysis of three categories of images, namely the seasonal imagery, floral imagery, and mythological imagery. This study has also made analysis of the major functions of these images in the context of Shakespeare's sonnet 98.

2. Relevant Perspectives of Image Interpretation

2.1 Conceptual Metaphor Theory and Image Interpretation

Traditional literary criticism often views metaphor as a decorative rhetorical device, but Lakoff and Johnson's CMT revolutionized this understanding by positing that metaphor is "a fundamental mechanism of mind". According to CMT, human thought and language are structured by conceptual metaphors, which map the characteristics of a concrete, familiar "source domain" onto an abstract, unfamiliar "target domain"[1]. As can be seen in the example of the metaphor "love is a rose", it projects the concrete fragrance and gracefulness of rose onto the abstract concept of love. This enables people to understand and express romantic affections with the help of familiar experiences.

In poetic creation, this cognitive mechanism is amplified. poets strategically select source domains (such as nature, seasons, or objects) to construct complex metaphorical systems that convey nuanced emotions. As Turner notes, "poetic metaphor is an extension of ordinary metaphor, exploiting the same cognitive capacities but with greater creativity and density"[3]. For Sonnet 98, the key conceptual metaphors revolve around the mapping of "emotional state" (target domain) onto "natural phenomena" (source domain). Metaphors of seasons, flowers, and mythological images are applied to indicate emotional states. By analyzing these mappings, we can uncover how the writer's feelings of separation, longing, and devotion are encoded in the creation of imagery. Recent developments in CMT have emphasized the role of "image schemas" in metaphorical mapping, basic cognitive structures derived from bodily and sensory experiences, such as "container," "path," or "opposition"[4]. In Sonnet 98, the "opposition" schema is particularly prominent, as the poem repeatedly sets up contrasts, like the contrast between spring and winter, the contrast between beauty of nature and beauty of the beloved, and the contrast between presence and absence. These

contrasts are not merely poetic devices but cognitive structures that help the writer articulate the dissonance between external reality and internal emotion.

2.2 Historical Contextualization and Image Interpretation

To fully interpret the imagery in Sonnet 98, it is essential to situate the poem within the cultural and historical context of Elizabethan England. During the Renaissance, nature was not viewed as a neutral backdrop but as a "book of signs" that reflected human emotions and divine order[5]. Elizabethan poets often drew on the "chain of being", a hierarchical structure that related all creation, from objects to God, to equate natural phenomena with human experiences[6]. For example, spring was associated with youth and renewal, summer with maturity, autumn with decline, and winter with death, a seasonal symbolism that Shakespeare both applies and subverts in Sonnet 98.

In addition, Elizabethan agricultural society fostered a deep connection between humans and the natural world, which is reflected in the detailed descriptions of spring. In Sonnet 98, April is described as "proud-pied April" (line 2), refers to the wonderful colors of spring flowers. The term "proud-pied" would have resonated with farmers and gardeners familiar with the seasonal transformation of the landscape. Similarly, the mention of "Saturn" (line 4), the Roman god of agriculture and time, carries both mythological and agricultural connotations. Saturn was associated with melancholy and restraint, so when he "laughed and leaped" (line 4) at the arrival of spring, it well reflects the upcoming vitality of the season.

Similarities can be found between Elizabethan natural symbolism and traditional Chinese poetic conventions, particularly the use of affective image, which is called as "xing" in Chinese, in the *Book of Songs*, where natural objects are used to express emotions. The comparative study of Li Bai and Shakespeare's works has found similarity in emotional expression by using floral images[7]. However, Shakespeare's subversion of seasonal symbolism, using spring to indicate sadness rather than joy, differs from the more consistent symbolic associations in traditional Chinese poetry. This cross-cultural perspective could enrich understanding of Shakespeare's originality in manipulating natural imagery.

3. Analysis of Typical Imagery in Sonnet 98

The imagery of Sonnet 98 plays an important role in the broader narrative of the Fair Youth sequence. The sequence begins with the writer urging the beloved to marry and breed children (Sonnets 1-17), then shifts to the promise of immortalizing the beloved in poetry (Sonnets 18-25), and later explores themes of separation, jealousy, and reconciliation (Sonnets 26-126). Sonnet 98 makes a typical part of this sequence, during a period when the speaker and the beloved are separated either physically or emotionally.

In the Fair Youth sequence, the imagery of Sonnet 98 reinforces the central themes of beauty of the beloved and the power of poetry to preserve that beauty. Although the writer cannot be with the beloved physically, he creates imagery in the practice of writing to achieve spiritual connection with the beloved. The final line "As with your shadow I with these did play" suggests that when the natural world fails to serve as an ideal substitute for the beloved, the sonnet forms a close tie of their relationship. This echoes the expression in Sonnet 18 that the beloved will live "in eternal lines". In the Fair Youth sequence, there is ongoing reflection on the connection of love, time, and poetry.

3.1 Seasonal Imagery

Sonnet 98 opens with a direct statement of separation: "From you have I been absent in the spring" (line 1). This line immediately establishes the poem's central tension: the speaker is physically separated from the beloved during a season that culturally signifies union, renewal, and joy. The subsequent description of spring, "proud-pied April, dressed in all his trim" (line 2), has employed personification to emphasize the season's ostentatious vitality. "Proud-pied" refers to the multicolored appearance of spring, while "trim" suggests careful adornment, as if April is dressed in fine clothing to celebrate its arrival. This personification constructs the conceptual metaphor "spring is a festive person", which helps mapping the concrete experience of a dressed-up creature onto the abstract season. The vitality of spring is further emphasized by the image of Saturn when he "laughed and leaped" (line 4). In classical mythology and Elizabethan astrology, Saturn was the god of time and melancholy, associated with heaviness

and restraint[8]. The joy of Saturn in spring highlights the vigorous power of the season. With the arrival of spring, even the solemn figure is refilled with vitality. Nevertheless, this vigorous natural vitality serves only to emphasize the writer's emotional emptiness. The inner emptiness is presented in the expression "Yet nor the lays of birds, nor the sweet smell / Of different flowers in odor and in hue, / Could make me any summer's story tell" (lines 5-7). The seasonal image of "summer" (lines 5-7) is adopted to prolong the time of spring. According to In Old English and Middle English, "summer" could refer to both spring and summer[9]. In these lines, the conjunction "Yet" signals a contrast between the external world and the inner emotional state. After spring there would come the best season of summer, the inner world would still be lack of something that is far more attractive than the wonderful singing birds and blossoming flowers. The inner emptiness is introduced by the primary metaphor of "winter" in Sonnet 98, which implies that "absence of the beloved is winter". This metaphor has illustrated the bitterness of winter, which echoes with the writer's emotional loss. This metaphor is reinforced in the final couplet: "Yet seemed it winter still, and, you away, / As with your shadow I with these did play" (lines 13-14). The noun "shadow" introduces a secondary metaphor that "the presence of the beloved is light and absence of the beloved is dark". In this metaphor, the shadow has represented an imaginary substitute for the real thing. It has also emphasized the the writer's emotional winter despite the arrival of spring in nature.

3.2 Floral Imagery

Floral imagery is central to Sonnet 98, with the speaker explicitly rejecting the beauty of lilies and roses in favor of the beloved. The lines "Nor did I wonder at the lily's white, / Nor praise the deep vermilion in the rose" (lines 9-10) subvert the conventional use of these flowers as symbols of perfection in Elizabethan poetry. The lily was traditionally associated with purity and innocence, while the rose symbolized beauty and passion, themes that appear in numerous sonnets of the period. However, the speaker dismisses these flowers as "but sweet, but figures of delight, / Drawn after you, you pattern of all those" (lines 11-12), constructing the conceptual metaphor "the beloved is the original and the flowers are copies".

The verb “drawn” in “Drawn after you, you pattern of all those” (line 12) is particularly significant in deepening the emotion. It metaphorically compares the beloved as a model and further suggests that the beauty of the sweet flowers is merely a copied reproduction of the beloved in absence. This metaphor reflects the Renaissance belief in “imitation” as a literary and artistic principle, but with a twist: instead of nature being the model for art, the beloved becomes the model for nature[8]. This inversion is unique to Shakespeare’s sonnets, distinguishing them from both Elizabethan and traditional Chinese poetic traditions where nature is often the ultimate source of beauty.

The floral imagery frequency has been applied with high frequency in the Fair Youth sequence of sonnets by Shakespeare, with roses used in twelve sonnets and lilies used in five of them. In most of these sonnets, flowers are used for comparison to praise the beloved’s beauty. For example, Sonnet 54 describes roses as “roses of mine own” that “smell far sweeter than the wild” (lines 11-12). To a certain extent, Sonnet 98 takes this even further by rejecting the comparison, asserting that flowers cannot be compared to the beloved because they are just inferior copies of the real perfection. This rejection underscores the depth of the writer’s devoted love: the beauty of the beloved transcends even the perfect natural objects.

While Sonnet 98 does not explicitly reveal political symbolism, the mention of the rose’s “deep vermilion” (line 10) may subtly link beauty of the beloved to ideas of nobility and legitimacy. This historical resonance enriches the metaphor, positioning the beloved’s beauty as not only personal but also culturally significant. The cultural connotations of roses in Elizabethan England add another layer of meaning. Shakespeare’s roses often carry political undertones, referencing the “Wars of the Roses” between the House of Lancaster (red rose) and the House of York (white rose).

3.3 Mythological Imagery

While seasonal and floral imagery dominate Sonnet 98, the mention of Saturn introduces a layer of mythological symbolism that deepens the engagement with time, which is a central theme in the Fair Youth sequence. Saturn, the Roman god of time and agriculture, is described as “heavy” (line 4), a reference to his association with melancholy and the weight of time. In this

line, there is a transformation from a gloomy figure to one who “laughed and leaped” (line 4) at the arrival of spring. It creates a metaphorical contrast between “time is restraint” and “spring is liberation”. This contrast is particularly meaningful in the context of the Fair Youth sequence, which repeatedly grapples with the destructive power of time. Sonnet 18 well declares that the beauty of the beloved will be preserved “in eternal lines” (line 12) to resist the passage of time. Apart from this, Sonnet 98 focuses on the experience of enduring the harsh time without the presence of the beloved. In Sonnet 98, the writer feels that time has lasted for long in a state of emotional winter when the natural world has actually moved toward spring and then summer. When the writer is immersed in sadness, Saturn’s laughter thus signals the indifference of time and season to complex human emotion. Time continues to progress, ringing in spring and renewal, and the writer remains trapped in a state of emotional loss. In Shakespeare’s sonnets, time imagery embodies the poet’s profound thoughts on time and rich emotional experiences, and can be regarded as a symbol of human emotions and a reflection of the poet’s inner world[10]. Yimin Luo points out that the artistic and ideological value of Shakespeare’s Sonnets lies in the fact that it is not merely a collection of love poems focusing on romances and affections. It also touches upon an extremely significant theme of time. The interpretation of time in the sonnets by Shakespeare are particularly brilliant and insightful with a wealth of metaphors.

The mythological reference to Saturn also connects Sonnet 98 to the broader humanistic concerns of the Renaissance. Saturn is associated with the “Golden Age”, a time of peace and abundance in ancient mythology. The laughter of Saturn in the sonnet may subtly evoke the hope of a return to the ideal state when the writer is reunited with the beloved. This hope is implicit in the final couplet: the writer plays with the shadows of the natural world as a substitute for the beloved, which suggests that the separation is temporary and that the presence of the beloved will eventually endure the emotional winter.

4. Functions of the Imagery in Sonnet 98

4.1 The Construction of Inner Emotion

Sonnet 98 has constructed a unique expression of devoted love. is its subversion of conventional

seasonal and floral symbolism. In Sonnet 98, Shakespeare uses spring as an expression for sadness, which emphasizes the writer's heartfelt longing for the beloved. That is quite different from the common use of spring in Elizabethan poetry, was commonly associated with joy, love, and renewal. This subversion is purposeful not arbitrary: by rejecting the joy of spring, the writer positions the beloved above the natural world, regarding their love as more powerful than seasonal cycles.

The comparison between the of floral beauty and the beloved has further reinforced this devoted love. In Sonnet 98, By describing lilies and roses as "figures of delight" (line 11) drawn from the beloved, the writer believes that the beauty of the beloved offers the supreme standard to measure all the other beauty. This echoes the theme of the Fair Youth sequence, which repeatedly positions the beloved as an image of perfection. In Shakespeare's Sonnet 2, the writer urges the beloved to marry and have children so that "thy tender heir might bear thy memory" (line 4), emphasizing the beloved as a model of beauty for the future generations. Sonnet 98 echoes with this theme by indicating that even nature is a copied reflection of the charm of the beloved.

4.2 The Connection between Nature and Emotion

Sonnet 98 has also explored the complex relationship between nature and human emotion, a central concern in both Shakespeare's works and Renaissance humanism. The sonnet suggests that though nature can stimulate emotions, it cannot replace the human connection that provides meaning to the emotions. The writer is surrounded by the beauty of spring, like birds, flowers, warm weather. Shakespeare is like a musician, the poet touches the keys and runs over a keyboard of metaphors borrowed from different sources.[11] Despite the beauty of nature, none of these images can generate joy because of the absence of the beloved. This depiction reflects the Renaissance belief in human power. While nature is a powerful force, human relationships are more important in shaping emotional experience. The natural phenomenon of shadow appears a metaphor in the final couplet: "Yet seemed it winter still, and, you away, / As with your shadow I with these did play" (lines 13-14). The physical phenomenon of "shadow" introduces a

secondary metaphor that "the presence of the beloved is light and absence of the beloved is dark". In this metaphor, the shadow has represented an imaginary substitute for the real thing. It has also emphasized the the writer's emotional winter despite the arrival of spring in nature. From a cross-cultural perspective, there is also a parallel between this "shadow" metaphor and the use of shadow in Tang poetry, where it often symbolizes departure and separation. Li Bai has also expressed inner feeling by writing "I drink alone; with no one else, / I raise my cup to the moon and my shadow". This cross-cultural resonance highlights the universal nature of the emotion embedded in the image of shadow.

In Sonnet 98, the writer's emotion is personal and the inner sadness is not a general response but a situational reaction to the absence of the specific beloved. This individualism reflects the humanistic emphasis on the unique value of each individual.

5. Conclusion

Shakespeare's Sonnet 98 is a masterful expression of emotional loss and devoted love based on the construction of a complex system of natural, floral, and mythological imagery. By making analysis of conceptual metaphors with reference to the Elizabethan historical context, this thesis has revealed how the major images function as conceptual metaphors. Images like spring, summer, winter, lilies, roses, and Saturn have presented the abstract emotional state vividly with concrete natural phenomena. In an unconventional way, the image of spring is used to evoke sadness and flowers are perceived as imperfect copies of the beloved. The subversion of conventional seasonal symbolism and floral symbolism has created a unique expression of devoted love.

This study has made an multi-perspective analysis of imagery in Sonnet 98, integrating conceptual metaphor theory and historical contextualization, along with an essential fragment of cross-cultural comparison. Future research could expand the analysis of Sonnet 98 with comparative study of other sonnets in the sequence. It is worthwhile to explore how Shakespeare's use of imagery evolves across different periods. Further cross-cultural research could also explore more about the diversified use of imagery and compare Shakespeare's imagery with that of other poetic traditions.

References

- [1] Lakoff, G. & Johnson, M. *Metaphors We Live By*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003.
- [2] Wang, G. A Review of Studies on Shakespeare's Sonnets in the 21st Century. *Foreign Literature*, 2014(6): 44-52+158.
- [3] Turner, M. *The Literary Mind: The Origins of Thought and Language*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996.
- [4] Johnson, M. *The Body in the Mind: The Bodily Basis of Meaning, Imagination, and Reason*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987.
- [5] Tillyard, E. M. W. *The Elizabethan World Picture*. New Jersey: Transaction Publishers, 2011.
- [6] Bate, J. *The Genius of Shakespeare*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998.
- [7] Hu, J. A Comparative Study of the Images of Flowers in Li Bai and Shakespeare's Poems — Taking the Images of Lotus and Rose as Examples. *Masterpieces Review*, 2023 (12): 30-32.
- [8] Greenblatt, S. *Will in the World: How Shakespeare Became Shakespeare*. New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2004.
- [9] Hao, T. The Reception of Shakespeare's Sonnets in China. *Journal of Shanghai Jiao Tong University (Philosophy and Social Sciences)*, 2024(9): 121-136.
- [10] Yang, D. & Du, F. The Image and Its Aesthetic Value in Shakespeare's Sonnets. *Journal of Suihua University*, 2024(3): 70-73.
- [11] Shaytanov, I. O. Poetic Reflection in Creation of the Human: The Reflective Muse in Shakespeare's Sonnets. *Foreign Literature Studies*. 2023(6): 11-23.