

How Shakespeare's Sonnets Evoke Emotion

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In this essay I will discuss Shakespeare's Sonnet 30 in an attempt to determine what the qualities are in works of art that evoke emotional responses. I suggest that an emotional response is triggered when a collision made virtually inaudible to the conscious mind by a substantively insignificant harmony (often phonic harmony as in line 1 of Sonnet 30) strikes hard upon the unconscious mind. The patterns and harmonies are complex and numerous in Sonnet 30, but they are not noticeable except, perhaps, by someone like me, someone searching the text in an attempt to find out what the text has that gives it the power to move a reader.

Leading scholarly work that addresses how emotions are evoked in art are, so far as I have read, unavailable. Helen Vendler's treatment of the sonnet speaks mainly to the time and psychological dimensions of the speaker's experience. Vendler's focus on the Sonnets wonderfully illuminates the "drama" that is created by the entrance of the words themselves, as though the words are like characters in a play. She does not raise the question that I do about how readers are emotionally moved by poems. Stephen Booth addresses the experience of the reader as a way to speculate on what it is in poems that make them so much admired and beloved. He asserts that the complexity of various harmonies superimposed on the lines, which go unnoticed to the conscious mind, generate for it the state of being on the brink of discovery; and it is this state that one finds pleasurable.

I use Booth's method of analysis to describe—or at least try to describe—the word-by-word, line-by-line experience the poem evokes. In demonstrating the manifold complexities of the first quatrain on the sonnet, I hope to make a start on showing what Booth did not: that the layering of complex harmonies not only generates the pleasure of feeling that one is on the brink of discovery, but that, as they collide and crash and explode, those overlapping but distinct harmonies also account for the strong emotional responses so many readers feel and report to one another in non-academic conversations.

In order to launch into my argument I must first address a fundamental idea that some may find controversial. I recognize that the idea that one's experience of art has much to do with how it impacts one unconsciously may be counter-intuitive to the way one normally thinks about art. We are taught that art makes one conscious of beauty and complexity. But in my paper I will show that the experience of feeling moved by art has more to do with the blows one experiences that are not immediately, if ever, comprehensible.

The idea that works of the caliber of Sonnet 30 can make a reader capable of receiving the blow without consciously recognizing it to be one (or not even recognizing that it is one that evokes emotional response) is not easy to grasp and, if grasped, is not self-evidently valid. I will therefore rely on a tenaciously close reading and analysis of the sonnet's sound patterns, words and syntax, in order to show how the complexities of the poem are at once overwhelmingly complex, yet effortlessly understood by readers. My reading will be so close, in fact that I will focus only on the first quatrain of the sonnet. The analysis requires a kind of patience that the poem does not ask of its readers especially the analysis of sound patterns, which are crucial for understanding the poem's complexity.

I've stated my idea that an emotional response to a poem comes from readers' ability to effortlessly take in a poem that is harmonically lulling and pleasurable, yet is also devastatingly complex

for the mind. Paul Ramsey writes about Sonnet 30, “Sonnet 30, whose effects are as thickened as those of Sonnet 24, is a deeply moving poem. I was more moved by Sonnet 30 before I saw how visibly rich the sound linkage is, and I suspect the judgment implicit in that change is right; richness of sound is consonant with and no small cause of the range of complexity of the sonnets” (Ramsey 90). Ramsey recognizes the sonnet’s power to move, and its complexity, but doesn’t link the possibility that the experience of complexity is the reason he is moved. Also, he doesn’t find the poem as moving once he sees the complexity. I cannot speculate on why he doesn’t feel as moved, but I argue that why he felt moved in the first place was due to the unconscious impact of the complexity. This complexity, the architecture of the harmonies, imposes demanding work on the mind in the moment of the reading. The ease of experiencing the poem aurally does something akin to dilating the mind of readers; it opens and sensitizes it to the complexity that then hits it like explosives. The pleasure of aural experience overrides the need to systemize, thus readers don’t realize the mental gymnastics they are performing in the experience of the sonnet.

The explosion of complexity that the poem demands on the mind is a sort of violence; it is a force that thrusts itself into the mind and then overwhelms it. The sonnet generates agitating experiences from things that are at once the same and different, and the discordant and violent experience on the mind is simultaneously different from the aurally harmonious and pleasurable experience. It is not just the complexity that causes unease, it is also the collision and explosion of the two opposing experiences: pleasure (aurally) and agitation (mentally). The resultant intensity of readers’ emotions is often not closely examined.

A demonstration of the harmonies and patterns is readily I found in line one: “When to the sessions of sweet silent thought.” The word “sessions” implies a gathering with others, an official meeting of sorts, but “sweet silent thought” makes a hairpin turn from the idea of an official gathering to a meeting with one’s private thoughts. There is a difficult leap of content from the impersonal and interpersonal (“session,” an official meetings with others), to the personal and private (sessions of silent thought). The line makes a shift from the business-like and official idea of “sessions” to the more sentimental tenderness of “sweet,” from external to internal, from public to private. As readers effortlessly move from “sessions” to “thought,” the incongruity between the two phrases is probably imperceptible but it is nevertheless registered by the mind.

The power of the collision in line 1 (of incongruity and ease through phonic repetitions which I will later point out) is compounded by the fact that readers experience it within the brief moment it takes to read the line. In thinking about a poem, readers will often analyze it after the experience of reading it. The kind of analysis that I believe gets at the heart of the sonnet’s intricate workings is the kind of close reading that pays attention to the experience of the reading in that very moment, in contrast to a retrospective analysis wherein one thinks about a poem after reading the whole work.

When readers pay attention to each syllable, sound, word and line moment by moment, then they are apt to make discoveries from the sonnet that might otherwise be overlooked, or worse, never experienced. I say this to keep in mind that throughout my analysis, what is important to me is the authentic experience of the poem in my reading of it, and to point out that this is not a typical way to go about analyzing a poem. Therefore, the intense experiences of simultaneous alike and different elements colliding in the sonnet are further deepened because they are experienced as quickly as it takes to read the fourteen lines of the sonnet. The intensity of rich complexity happening in quick succession is another reason why the mind becomes overwhelmed, triggering emotion. C.L. Barber attributes sound to the effect of Sonnet 30, “‘When to the sessions of sweet silent thought,’ the huddled sounds serve to convey the pressure of the past on the present as a thickening or troubling of speech. Where we feel a twinge of amusement, it is usually in combination with feelings dictated by underlying rhythm” (Barber 15). Barber, like myself, suggests that underlying rhythms generate the line’s feeling, in this case a feeling of amusement. Taking this idea one step further, I argue that “huddled sounds” are one type of rhythm, or harmony, generated in the line, but in combination with other over-lapping organizations that occur simultaneously, one may not only be amused, but moved.

Returning back to line 1, not only is the complexity of the shift in content stunning, the sound of

the words generate a sense of seamlessness in the line when there is actually discord. It is possible to make such a dramatic shift using other words, but these specific words—“sessions of sweet silent thought”—have an emotional impact on readers that is due in part to the effect of their phonic repetitions. To put it another way: the phonic repetitions make the aural experience dominant, enabling readers to easily follow the line without thought to the improbability of the connection between the impersonal to personal. The aural complexity of line 1 derives from patterning several sounds, mainly “s” and “t.” The two “s” sounds in “sessions,” in the first half of the line, and the “s” sounds in “sweet” and “silent,” in the second half of the line, connect the two phrases phonically. The “t” sound occurs in “to,” “sweet,” “silent,” and “thought.”

The “s” and “t” combination weaves thickly through the line giving it a pulsating effect. The “s” and “t” sounds, because of their consistent repetition in the line, stand out, yet the sounds are subtle because of their intricate arrangement; they are placed in the line to generate and maximize phonic harmony. The subtleties of the sounds generate an effect of pulsation rather than sounding artificial. For example, “When to the sessions of sweet somber soliloquy” is much more obvious—and terrible—in its sound patterning than the original line because the only sound pattern is a simple alliteration of the “s” sounds. In the original line, the sounds are interwoven, meaning that their placement in the line forms a pattern that is intricate in the way the colors of a rug are interwoven to create a larger pattern or picture. Similarly, there is a woven quality in the repetition in “silent” of the “en” sound in “When,” of the “th” sound in “the,” and in “sessions” and “of” of the “uh” sound (the schwa) in the “the.” In combination these sound patterns generate complex harmony in the line.

So the content of line 1 is patterned, as are its sounds. The two are both alike and different. The substantively contrasting phrases, because of their complexity, do the opposite of what the sound patterns do. They create unease of meaning in the mind, an effect quite different from the ease generated by the overwhelming complexity. The mind’s experience of the two contrasting phrases that are seemingly unrelated, are related through sound and the syntactic connection made by “of” (“sessions of sweet silent thought”). The complexity of the leap is surprising—though unconscious—and that surprise triggers an emotional response as the reader reacts to the easy experience of difficult unions. One responds emotionally, I assert, when the complexity of coinciding harmonies seem to explode in the mind of the reader or the listener. When the mind is overwhelmed by complexity, the intensity of that complexity stimulates emotion.

Stephen Booth’s brilliant account of what happens to one’s mind when reading a masterful lyric poem has prompted me to look further into how poems make us feel:

Perhaps the happiest moment the human mind ever knows is the moment when it senses the presence or order and coherence—and before it realizes the particular nature (and so the particular limits) of the perception. At the moment of unparticularized perception the mind is unlimited. It seems capable of grasping and about to grasp a coherence beyond its capacity. 14

That moment of unparticularized perception that Booth believes is brought about by reading a poem is more than a happy moment; it is a mental experience as powerful as a spiritual ecstatic moment, or an intuitive leap of genius. The experience of easily understanding something very difficult is pleasurable; however, the impact of such quick, successive moments that one experiences in the reading of a sonnet is overwhelming.

Let’s take another look at the particulars. In line 2: “I summon up remembrance of things past,” the schwa or “uh” sounds from “sessions” and “of” recur in “summon,” “up,” and in another “of.” Two “m” sounds occur one after the other in “summon,” and the “m” sound recurs twice in “remembrance.” I point this out to show connections, and to suggest that the repetitive sounds hold line 2 together and bind it to line one, bind it in a way extra to the bond made by syntax. The “s” and “t” sound pattern in line 1 continues in line 2. There is only one “t” sound in line 2 but in a crucial echo of the last “t” sound in line 1, it occurs as the last sound of the line—a line full of “s” sounds: “summon,” “remembrance,” “things,” and “past.” The “s” sound occurs four times in the line in “summon,” “remembrance,”

“things,” and “past.” The placement of the sounds make them distinct: the “s” in “summon,” and the “t” in “past,” are as far away from each other as they can be within a ten syllable line, and they make a bridge from the beginning of the line to the end of the line. The “s” and “t” sounds framing the line in “summon” and “past,” are—at the very moment when the “t” of “past” completes the pair—also paired in the concluding “st” where the two sounds are crushed together into what amounts to a single sound. Here again, the two sounds pulsate in the line.

The following illustration of the first two lines may help illuminate what the patterns do. In the following version of lines 1 and 2, I will italicize the “s” sounds and underline the “t” sounds:

When to the *Session***S** of *Sweet*t *Silent***t** thoughtt
I *Summon* up remem**br**an**CE** of thing**S** pa**St**

The “s” and “t” pattern repeats in “sweet” and “silent” and that repetition is echoed in “past.” If we bridge the various “s” and “t” combinations from the outermost points of the line in toward the center—that is, pair the first “t” sound in “to” to the last “t” in “thought,” the first “s” of “sessions” to the “t” in “silent,” the second “s” of “sessions” to the “s” of “silent,” and the “s” in “sweet” to the “t” in “sweet”—the following pattern emerges: *tt st ss st*. This is a distillation of the complexity of the “s”/ “t” patterning readers will take in without being conscious of it. And there is yet another pattern of meaning embedded in the line. “Summon” in line 2 continues the “legal session” metaphor started in line 1 with “sessions,” and makes the metaphor specifically one of courts of law. The two words also share the same first “s” sound. Thus, syntax and subject connect lines 1 and 2. That connection is strengthened by metaphor and alliteration.

Patterns that mimic elements from previous lines generate an echo of those elements. The experience for readers is one of remembering previous lines by unconsciously linking elements of their current line to past lines. Part of the complexity of Sonnet 30, is that elements repeat, making readers remember what they have read before at the same time that they are proceeding along with the Sonnet. To add to this complexity, the poem itself mimics this idea of the past and present experienced simultaneously: Sonnet 30 is a poem about remembering the loss of the past and grieving in the present. I mention echoing patterns to show another example of the complexity that occurs in the mind while readers enjoy the ease of the Sonnet’s sounds.

Echoing occurs in line 2. The preposition “of” in line 2 mimics the “of” in line 1: “of things past” and: “of sweet silent thought.” The word “of” links the phrases in the center of both lines. Similarly, the phrases in line 2 echo those in line 1. In the same way that “thought” breaks away by breaking inward, from the external, formal sense of “when to the sessions,” the noun phrase “remembrance of things past”—another private, internal activity—breaks from the formal, even courtly tone of “I summon up.” Again, there is a push and pull of content in these lines, a difficult union of phrases, like a pulling away that is woven or pulled together by phonic harmonies.

A careful analysis of line 3 also reveals its considerable complexity of patterns, some of which link us back to lines 2 and 1: “I sigh the lack of many a thing I sought.” The long “i” and the “s” sounds in “I sigh” are echoed by the long “i” and the “s” sounds in “I sought” at the end of the line. “Sigh” also echoes the same sound in the word “silent” of line 1. In these ways, the first two words of line 3 connect back to lines 2 and 1. Within line 3 there are many sound patterns: the “th” sound occurs in “the” and “thing,” echoing the “th” in lines 2 and 1; the long “i” pattern occurs in “I,” “sigh,” and “I”; the “m” and “n” in “many” echoes the “m’s” and “n” in “remembrance” of the previous line; and “thing” echoes “things” of the previous line.

In addition to these echoing effects there is a complex way that “Sought” echoes “past” in the previous line: The “s” and “t” sounds are again present in the same word, only now they are at opposite ends of the word instead of fused together. The “s” and “t” sounds also resemble the push and pull effect on readers. The *abab* rhyme scheme is another sound repetition characteristic of the sonnet, but all the repetitions, so far, are like the threads that connect the reader back to the previous lines. By pointing these patterns, I reveal the complexities that I argue stimulate emotions, that these complexities,

unbeknownst to readers, are firing off in the mind and causing agitation and a sense of being overwhelmed, which in turn is released or vented through emotional response.

In analyzing lines 1-3, I've been able to show the density and power of complexity. However, line 4 is the most complex line so far, and is also, I argue, the most emotionally moving line so far: "And with old woes new wail my dear time's waste." The "w" sound in "with," "woes," "new," "wail," and "waste," connects back to line one's "w" sounds in "when" and "sweet." Line 4 includes the "s" and "t" patterns in "woes," "time's," and "waste." "Waste" also connects back to "past" at the end of line two, not only in the fusing of the two sounds, but in completing the *abab* rhyme scheme. "Past" does not rhyme perfectly with "waste," yet the effect on the reader is not jarring. The "st" sound pattern, so prevalent in the first four lines, and contained fused together in the rhyming words, has the effect of making the lines and the rhyme cohere even though the lines—as I have shown—do not quite cohere in substance and the rhyme does not quite cohere in sound.

Besides the "w" and "st" patterns in line four, there are others worth mentioning because they also repeat in previous lines. The "n" sound repeats in "and" and in "new" in the first half of the line; and in the second half of the line, the "m" sound is present in "my" and "time's." The "n" sounds echoes the "n" sounds in line one, and the combination of "m" and "n" sounds is echoed in lines two and three. The long "i" sound in "my" and "time" may appear small, but there are quite a few of these sounds throughout the quatrain. "Th" sounds are similarly subtle, yet they make an interesting pattern throughout, occurring twice in line one, once in line two, twice in line three, and once in line four in the word "with." The "d" sound in the words "and," "old," and "dear" in line four is a new repetition in the poem; and the "o" sound of "old" and "woe's" is different from any of the previous "o" sounds in lines one to three. There may be other phonic patterns that I have left out, but it is clear that line four has the most intricate harmonies, using all of the established patterns as well as new ones.

A reader may feel much emotion from reading line four and contribute it to the content of sadness in the poem; however, I think that the intensity of emotion is due to the effect of overwhelming complexity in the mind. On the surface, line four expresses sadness through content, especially in words like "woe" and "wail," but the strong undercurrent of sound patterns and word patterns is what readers feel.

Each word in line 4 connects, in some way, to the word that follows the next immediate word. "And" connects to "old" with the "d" sound, "with" connects to "woes" with the "w" sound, "old" connects to "new" by way of being opposites, and "woes" connects to "wail" with the "w" sound. There is a fusion of "w" sounds in the middle of the line between "new" and "wail." The previous "I" sound pattern resumes after that, connecting "my" and "time" through the "i" sound; "dear" and "waste" are connected by their opposite meanings, "dear" meaning precious and valuable, and "waste" meaning without value.

Line 4 is certainly the most complex line yet. It is like the grand finale of a fireworks show, explosive in the quick succession of various patterns colliding in a very short span of time. Stanley Fish in his essay on *Paradise Lost* asserts that "it is the nature of sophistry to lull the reasoning process; logic is a safeguard against a rhetorical effect only after the affect has been noted. The deep distrust, even fear, of verbal manipulation in the seventeenth century is a recognition of the fact that there is no adequate defense against eloquence at the moment of impact (Fish 197). Just so is Shakespeare's eloquence, and the poem is so finely wrought that Sonnet 30 lulls readers, leaving no adequate defense against its impact.

Fish goes on to say that "the reader is drawn into [Paradise Lost], not as an observer who merely notes the interaction of patterns, but as a participant whose mind is the locus of that interaction" (198). The same principle holds for Sonnet 30. The harmonies in syntax, phonics or incidental topics and the effortless mental activity they engender in readers are the reasons why a poem like Shakespeare's Sonnet 30 draws readers in, simultaneously lulling while attacking the mind and thereby evoking emotional response.

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