

Palgrave's Golden Treasury

Topic - Shakespeare's Sonnet No - 29 (Part I - Introduction)

As a sonneteer

Shakespeare's place among the all time great dramatists of the world is undoubtedly among those at the helm. That he is equally a prince among the English Sonneteers is also undisputed.

We may, in this context, quote Crossland who writes:-

"All the finest poets have been either fine sonneteers or unconscious workers in the sonnet movement, there is no poetry of the highest order which does not in some sort distinguishedly ally itself with sonnet poetry." A host of other critics like Dr. Furnivall have thrown much light on the inspirational and autobiographical aspects of Shakespeare's sonnets. He goes on to write:-

"(2) that in the sonnets, Shakespeare did unlock his heart — that they reveal the depths and heights of the great soul which wrote his plays; (23) that his fair male friend and his dark naughty woman-love have not yet been identified and probably never will be; (222) that for knowledge of Shakespeare, his identification is needless, however interesting it would be. What we want the sonnet for and what we get in them is Shakespeare himself."

However, the autobiographical aspect of the poet's sonnets did receive much notice after the publication of the folio of 1609 under the signature of T. T. or Thomas Thorpe. Critics have, ~~but~~ however opined that the dedication must have been written by Shakespeare himself though it appeared under the name of the publisher (T. T. or Thomas Thorpe) the dedication is as follows:-

“ To The Onlie Begetter of
 These Ensuing Sonnets.
 Mr. W. H. All Happinesse
 And that Eternities
 Promised
 By
 Our Ever-Living Poet
 Wissheth
 The Well-Wishing
 Adventurer in
 Setting
 Forth

- T. T.

Though there is no unanimity among the critics about the real identity of either the fair male friend or that of the Dark Lady, most of them agree that "Mr W. H." means William Herbert

and the reference 'dark lady' stands for Mary Fitton.

Shakespeare's sonnets are reflective of an autobiographical love triangle of which we find a gist in the sonnet no 144 which begins as follows:-

“ Two loves, I have of comfort and despair,
Which like two spirits do suggest me still,
The better angel is a man right fair
The worst spirit a woman, coloured ill,
To win me soon to hell my female evil,
Tempteth my better angel from my side
And would corrupt my saint to be devil,
Wooing his purity with her foul pride. ”

It is believed that the poet was having concurrently a handsome, young and wealthy friend and an unfaithful yet grossly attractive brunette as girl friend who enthralled him and kept him prisoner to her dark charm. It so happened that the poet 'on some pretext, sent his rich noble, popular young friend to the dark-eyed lady with love-messages; whereupon the lady fell in love with the fair, charming and noble boy friend of the poet. She, ditched the poet and wooed and won him over. Shakespeare, in the process had to lose both his friends and his mistress.

But the most remarkable feature of these love-sonnets is the absence of any blame, reproof or complaint. We do not find even a trace of resentment or contempt; neither is any evidence of anger or jealousy on part of the poet. The whole series of sonnets resonates with admiration as well as affection.

Shakespeare has composed 154 sonnets in number unlocking his heart and mastery over rhythm in them. It is in these sonnets that Shakespeare was able to show not only the sincerity of tone but literary qualities of high order as well. These gems of poetry comprise of the touch of perfection in their phraseology, in their perfect blending of sense and sound as well as in their versification.

Coming to the technical aspect one can safely assert that Shakespearean sonnet, which is English form of sonnet as opposed to its Italian counterpart, is simpler in its structural form than the Petrarchan sonnet. Though written even before Shakespeare, this English variety, no doubt reached its perfection at the hands of this stalwart. All of his sonnets are written in same rhyme-scheme as follows: - ab ab cd ed ef gg.

(To be continued in the next lecture)