

*Original Paper*

On the Poetic Crystallization of the Humanist Insights in  
Shakespeare's *Sonnet 18*

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**Abstract**

*As indicated clearly in existing literatures pertaining to Shakespearean sonnets, their interpretations are characterized with the general interpretation of sequential or entire sonnets and the essential interpretation of the singular sonnet them in a single article. In at least previous 5 years, the former has been centralized while the latter cornered. Rather pitifully, Sonnet 18 failed to be interpreted in details to identify its aesthetic and artistic values and virtues. Therefore, this article aims to interpret the much richer and profounder meaning in Sonnet 18 to provide crucial evidences for the poetic crystallization of humanist insights in elaborating the actual humanity, dignity and immortal pursuit of man in connection with the close relationship between the immortalization of man and that of poem when they are faced with the fatal crisis of time and death. For the sake of the overall elaboration of the profundity and perspicacity of the aesthetic and artistic meanings in those sonnets, this study will provide an analytical sample for the overall interpretation of the undiscoverable meanings in each of them in reference to its social and cultural contexts.*

**Keywords**

*Poetic Crystallization, Humanist Insights, Shakespeare, Sonnet 18*

**1. The Critical Inclination in Interpreting Sonnet 18**

As shown in the existing literature regarding the scholarships on Shakespearean sonnets, a growing number of international interpretations of those sonnets have been definitely characterized with the insightful critical penetratability owing to scholars' success in having a good access to the social and cultural essence of the poetic thoughts insinuated in those sonnets.

Analytical examples turn out to be available in translation criticism and literary criticism as to be shown below clearly. In the past 5 years, translation scholars have studied its translation from various perspectives, primarily ranging from the translation of it into Arabic language (p. 75) in the analyses of Ahmed M. M. Yousof (2020), the translation of its culture-specific items (CSI) in the studies of Basma Gamal Ebrahim Saleh, et al (2022) according to its translation procedures (p. 392) and the specific analysis of Nadia Mousa Suleiman Al-Diab (2024) its Arabic translation from systematic functional grammar (p. 1). At the same time, literary scholars have interpreted it diversely and distinctively in their own studies. Those interpretations have focused on a variety of issues including its topological cosmological body poetics (Luo Yiming, 2019, p. 5), its reaction to Spenser's *Hymne in Honour of Beautie* (p.1) according to James H. Runsdorf (2020), its rhythmic pattern and figurative language (p. 21) indebted to the interpretation of Mariwan Hasan and Lavin Fouad (2021), its themes, meter, and imagery (p. 781) as shown in the exploration of He Yuanhong (2023), and its engagement with Patrick Ness' *Different for Boys* (p. 135) with the help of the rich illuminations in the article of Merse Thorsten and König Lotta (2023).

In terms of the specific number of the Shakespearean sonnets interpreted in a single critical practice, previous and present interpretation are characterized with two critical inclinations, one focusing on the interpretation of more sonnets in one research article and the other that of a single sonnet over there. Based on the data in existing literatures, the former have overwhelmed the latter. According to those data acquired from those literatures, about 110 available journal articles published from 2019 downward on those sonnets, 84 of them focus on an given issue in more sonnets while 26 of them in one. In terms of the latter, 11 of them dwells on *Sonnet 18*. Therefore, although *Sonnet 18* has been either popularly mentioned or commented in an article that "these poems (these sonnets) are all related to friendship and love, with *Sonnet 18* being a particular classic (He Yuanhong, 2023, p. 782)," they are hardly focused enough in Shakespearean studies. As a matter of fact, the great importance of was even resonated in the earlier identification of Mariwan Hasan and Lavin Fouad (2021) that "Shakespeare's *Sonnet 18* is world-famous and considered as one of the most meaningful sonnets in literature (p. 21)." Pitifully, its crystallized humanist insights have failed to be presented generally in translation criticism and literary criticism even though they are supposed to be highlighted to clarify its high relevance to humanism on account of the increasing awareness of the crucial role of the latter in early modern intellectual lives. With standpoint of its close thematic connectedness with the Renaissance humanism that "signified the emancipation of the human faculties from the restraints of religious zeal, preoccupation or authority... (Perry, 1940, p. 17)" it will turn out to be much more meaningful to put more stress on the essential crystallization of those insights in interpreting the epistemological insights of man in this sonnet. Relatively speaking, the practical crystallization of those humanist insights will be grounded on the acquisition of the cognitive transcendence over the aesthetic and artistic traits and techniques emphasized in previous critical analyses. In short, the acquisition of this has taken into account the challenging characteristics in using humanist concepts to analyze this sonnet because it has

turned out to be difficult in “the definition of humanism (Wright, 1976, p. 7)” due to its perpetual updates. To be specific, the metaphorical imprints of those humanist implications on the images of this sonnet have poetically indicated that the conflicts between nature and man were truly unavoidable and unstoppable at that time. To this extent, it is quite understandable that those critical pities remain unaddressed in previous interpretations.

On the ground of the critical pities figured out in existing translation criticism and literary criticism to highlight the epistemological ingredients embedded in the poetic thoughts of this sonnet, this paper will embark on the poetic crystallization of the humanist insights in this sonnet according to the rich illuminations in those three humanist concepts, namely, the humanity, dignity and immortal pursuits of man to provide one more analytical sample for the overall interpretation of the undiscoverable humanist implications hidden in *Sonnet 18* in connection with its social and cultural contexts.

## 2. The Poetic Crystallization of the Character’s Humanity in *Sonnet 18*

Just as Renaissance has opened a brand-new horizon for cultural and intellectual medievalism throughout European, William Shakespeare has insinuated into his lyrical sonnets a critical permeability implicitly to highlight the crystallization of his humanist insights according to the zeitgeists in which his sonnets have been rooted. Among his 154 sonnets, *Sonnet 18* can be accepted as a good sample in the presentation of his poeticized persistence in humanity in spite of its failure to be figured out definitely in Shakespearean criticism in past 5 years. Based on a sufficient awareness of the impact of those zeitgeists on the poetic presentation of man’s humanity, this following analysis will be centered on the poetic emphasis implied impressively and insightfully in the metaphorical comparison between the irreplaceable beauty of his character and that of summer according to what has been presented passionately in the production of the first quatrain of this sonnet as what to be quoted and analyzed below.

*Shall I compare thee to a summer’s day?  
Thou art more lovely and more temperate:  
Rough winds do shake the darling buds of May,  
And summer’s lease hath all too short a date: (18: 1-4)*

As identified in the comments of Randall A. Poole (2018) on humanist insights into nature that many humanists “discovered the real structure of the skies, the place of the sun and the planets (p. 5),” this poet has made his way to the traits of summer to compare the inferiority of summer shown in the third to the fourth line of this quatrain and the longevity of his character in its second line. Actually, his lyrical inclination turned out to be in consistence with their preference of nature to belief. Apparently, the metaphorical vivification of this distinctive comparison aims at capturing the humanity of his character because it has been clearly kept in the mind of him and those of Renaissance humanists that “the highest purpose of humanistic study is the fullest realization of one’s humanity (Poole, 2018, p. 26).”

Inadequate as Shakespearean Scholars' critical efforts have been made in past 5 years to figure out in this character's humanity interwoven in the lyricization of the passions of this poet when a hesitant choice has to be made or an ambiguous balance struck between the previous belief in man's divinity and the present one in his humanity especially his dignity. Indebted to the insightful encouragements acquired from the imaginative illumination of many humanists, he has focused on the lyrical reconfiguration of this character's incomparable qualities to highlight the values and virtues of man. In the affirmation of Randall A. Poole (2019) with the Kantian notion of regarding man's capacity for his ideal self-determination as "the source of human dignity (p. 30)", it can be seen inferred from the second line of this quatrain that the lyrical presentation of his humanity has been insinuated in the comparison made between the beauty of summer and the superiority of man in terms of the brevity of the former and the loveliness and temperateness of the latter. In a sense, what has actually been manifested in this comparison is inclined to act as the consciousness of man "to transcend the empirical world (Poole, 2019, p. 31)." In the wake of the critical stance of Ralph Barton Perry (1940) regarding the positive qualities of man, the superiority of man to the brevity of summer and the vulnerability of its darling buds are in a position to be acknowledged as the vital symbol to be echoed with the Renaissance belief that "humanism testifies to the eminence of man over the rest of creation (p. 24)." To sum up, the comparative emphasis on the superior loveliness of man and his temperateness in this quatrain in this sonnet is supposed to be viewed as the main lyrical evidences for the poetic crystallization of his humanity pertaining to the timeless and essential existence and significance of his beauty. Of course, it has been made evident in this comparison that the beauties of man have turned out to be superior than those of summer indebted to the particularization of man and his power in Renaissance humanism.

### 3. The Poetic Crystallization of Character's Dignity in *Sonnet 18*

Although it has been quite well-known to readers that "...classical literature was never more often attacked than it was throughout the centuries of Renaissance enlightenment (Bush, 1939, p. 42)" as epitomized definitely in the intellectual conflicts between the old intellectual inclination of the previous era and the new one during Renaissance, it has been identified in the analysis of Randall A. Poole (2019) that "one of the main themes of Renaissance humanism was human dignity (p. 26)." Similarly, this thematic inclination in poetic production is said to crop up in Petrarchan sonnets and to be particular in Shakespearean sonnets. An example used to give voice to the continuation and inheritance of this humanist view in the production of this sonnet will be the dignity of man imprinted in the poetic lines of the second quatrain of *Sonnet 18* according to what is impressed in the lines to be quoted and analyzed below.

*Sometime too hot the eye of heaven shines,  
And often is his gold complexion dimmed,  
And every fair from fair sometime declines,*

*By chance, or nature's changing course untrimmed:* (18: 5-8)

As shown in the poetic delineation of and deliberation of the images of the sun, sunshine and beauty of summer, it can be perceived from the objective description of those images that this descriptive process seems to a divination of nature rather than a dignification of man and his dignity due to the unchangeable impact of the natural laws on the courses it takes in the updates of time. In spite of this, it can be seen from the figurative language of this quatrain that nature has been personified and natural beauty in summer dignified to glorify the dignity of man indirectly. The fairness of the fair in this season as shown in the third line of this quatrain has provided an insightful evidence for the necessity to highlight the dignity of man in the transience of his beauty in the summer of a year in reference to the rhetorical devices referred in this line to echo the humanist pursuit during renaissance in his defense for this dignity. In essence, the desire for the maintenance of this fairness in this pursuit has epitomized the humanist statement that "human dignity consists in our capacity for perfectibility (Poole, 2019, p. 27)." As a matter of fact, the essential consistence between the pursuit of this fairness in this quatrain and the persistence of this perfectibility in this humanist statement has been exemplified in their interactive resonance.

In the light of the great similarity they bear with each other as discussed above, it has brought to light the critical insight that the impressive pursuit of the fairness poeticized in this sonnet has acted as a microcosm of the defenses humanists have been seeking for from the second half of 15<sup>th</sup> century to renaissance according to the influential examples a circle of philosophers have set under the leadership of like Marsilio Ficino (1433-1499) to actualize the effective practical measures for "the defense of human dignity (Poole, 2019, p. 26)." Although the maintenance of this fairness turns out to be quite difficult for man due to his helplessness and hopelessness in stopping the passage of time, appropriate efforts to be made for it tend to be indispensable due to the inevitability of the impact of the natural laws. In essence, the much profounder consistence hidden behind this similarity has a lot to do with the difficulty in resisting against the inappropriate prioritization of the central thought of Greek humanism in highlighting "the conception of Nature as Ideal (Wright, 1976, p. 9)."

Of course, it has to be admitted objectively that as reflected in the difficulty in the maintenance of the fairness of man and summer portrayed in this quatrain, it is also difficult or even impossible for humanists to put more stress on the power of man even if it has been made evident in the clear elaboration of George Henrik Von Wright (1976) that "humanism is a defense of man, lays emphasis on man's dignity and on human values (p. 6)." Therefore, it tends to be normal that man has great difficulty in resisting against the natural laws that have great impact on the protection and promotion of his dignity as seen in the practical failure to change the untrimmed natural course poeticized in the last line of this quatrain. To a much greater extent, those natural laws bear a great similarity with the devaluation of man's dignity popularized in previous age. This massive popularization has made many scholars like George Henrik Von Wright (1976) take it for granted that "the humanism of the

Renaissance was an upheaval against received authority and paved the way for reform in religion and a revolution in science (p. 7).”

In this case, even if this is not the case, the elimination of this impact cannot be achieved in a short while. What is worse, the summer in a year shakes with the early phase of renaissance in the history of humanism when an old age fails to be ended and a new one remained quite difficult to show up. A little different as the summer of a year in this quatrain is from the renaissance of humanist history, their unfavorable situation has been confirmed clearly in the essential summarization of the fundamental laws of historical evolution that “... It is characteristic of the great changes in history that a kind of abyss appears between an old order in a process of decay and a new order in process of becoming (Wright, 1976, p. 20).” From the point of view of the ambivalence between the old power and new power at such transitional phase, it can be understandable from this quatrain that the transitional nature of the summer in this sonnet and that of renaissance in this historical process has been epitomized in the procrastination of the time for man to be liberated from the imprisonment of his dignity due to the effects of those natural laws propounded in medieval ages.

In the specific process of dealing with the relationship between nature and man as poeticized in this quatrain, this transition has turned out to be a great challenge for man to have an overall understanding of the actual cognitive conflicts between middle zeitgeists and renaissance spirits. In the light of the elaboration of George Henrik Von Wright (1976) regarding the relationship in the triad of man, nature and supernatural in medieval humanism, it has been figured out definitely that “man is not important as a determining factor, but is himself determined by nature and supernatural (p. 7).” On the basis of the reflection of the challenge man has to take in the summer portrayed in this quatrain, this unaddressed cognitive plight has been insightfully imprinted on the poetic portrait of the images of summer to highlight dominative power of the unchangeable and unavoidable natural laws he has to be faced with. To this extent, the poeticization of those images in this quatrain has broadened his cognitive horizon with regards to the inadequateness in showing concern for his dignity. In other words, it is this portrait that reminds readers of the great necessity for man to work hard for the feasible transformation of nature and the essential protection and promotion of his dignity.

#### **4. The Poetic Crystallization of Character’s Immortal Pursuits in *Sonnet 18***

Since *Sonnet 18* is contextualized in the inconsistency between an old social and cultural context and a new one, it has been loaded with the poet’s profound rumination of many new poetic insights as crystallized to address the numerous mortal problems at that age indebted to his adequate absorption of the theoretical ingredients from humanist insights. In response to man’s immortal expectation, the poet has made great efforts to identify this immortal feasibility in his poetic production. Of course, the acquisition and application of this feasibility cannot be separated from his accumulation of those humanist insights in reference to the reasonable interweavement of the cognitive framework of this sonnet. On the way to this immortal feasibility, he establishes the connections between this cognitive

framework and the adventurous courses those humanist thoughts have to take in their poetical presentation as exemplified in what to be quoted below from the third quatrain of this sonnet to make an analysis of the crystallization of man's immortal pursuits.

*But thy eternal summer shall not fade,  
Nor lose possession of that fair thou ow'st,  
Nor shall death brag thou wander'st in his shade,  
When in eternal lines to time thou grow'st, (18: 9-12)*

According to what has been figured clearly in the conclusion of Liu Lei (2016), the third line in the third quatrain of this sonnet has referred to the image of death when the character is preoccupied with the perpetual pursuits of the humanism whose the cognitive and epistemological components have been imprinted on the social and cultural traits during the renaissance humanism (p. 97). As a matter of fact, this begins with the transient existence of summer and man depicted in the first two quatrains of this sonnet according to the social and cultural context of the religious humanism prevailed in previous time. As deviated from the pessimism in the transient image of the summer and man in its first two quatrains, the third one tends to subvert the dominance of the natural laws and the death propounded in medieval humanist view. According to the pessimistic attitude towards man in this view, he is doomed to be unable to meet his immortal needs when he is faced with the threat of death in the context of a social and cultural crisis or revolution.

However, it has been made possible in the poetic imagination of this sonnet exemplified evidently in the presentation of immortality of the summer of its character, that of his fairness, his great success in resistance against death and his eternal continuation with time in spite of the increases of his wrinkles. According to the cognitive foundation laid in this humanist imagination, his immortal pursuits are likely to be crystallized in the mountainous tides of time as long as he has the confidence and brilliance to take high risks to seek for this immortal existence when he is faced with the shadow of his doomed death. In the case of the strong pessimistic influence of renaissance humanism on the poet regarding the configuration of the thematic framework of this sonnet, one of the high risks to be taken in this process is to make an indecisive choice between the persistent belief in nature and that in man whose creative power in poetic production even if it can be made full use of to provide a cognitive foundation for the crystallization of his immortal pursuits.

In reference to the transient beauty of summer and dignity of man portrayed in the first quatrain of this sonnet and the unavoidability of their mortality in its second quatrain as a result of the inevitable prevention of the pessimistic impact of nature on man's belief, it has to be noticed that this quatrain serves as a turning point of this sonnet. In the supernatural empowerment of the imagination enriched in the production of this quatrain, it seems to be hopeful that the light humanism has thrown on the poet's mind has made him take into account man's immortal pursuits optimistically indebted to his essential understanding of the inevitable shift of the gloom in medieval pessimistic humanism to the glory in the growing popularization of the early modern optimistic humanism. From the point of view

of the implications of this thematic transformation, it can be perceived that this shift stands for the failure of religious humanism regarding its devaluation of man and the success of renaissance humanism directed at the valuation of him.

In line with what has been impressed in the sovereignty of the impact of the natural laws on man's humanity and dignity due to the popularization of religious humanism in the previous historical period, the trivialization of man's values in a biblical sense has been subverted completely in this quatrain as in renaissance to highlight the perpetuation of the same values of man on the basis of the cognitive empowerment of renaissance humanism. In other words, the victimization of man as epitomized in the domination of the natural laws has been replaced by the vindication of this successful shift through the imaginative versification of his values and virtues that have been immortalized in this successful transformation. This thematic transformation has laid a good preparation for the elaboration of the role poetic production tends to play in the immortalization of man's values and virtues as indicated in the following couplets.

*So long as men can breathe, or eyes can see,*

*So long lives this, and this gives life to thee. (18, pp. 13-14)*

Superficially, the poetic power particularized in those couplets has been widely emphasized in the critical practices pertaining to the interpretation of this sonnet. In terms of the devaluation of man in religious humanism, man is biblically guilty and sinful so that has to be saved to be endowed with his afterlife due to his inferiority to his creator who has been endowed with a divine superiority over him upon birth. According to this religious perspective, man is nothing but a sinner whose minds and souls have been stained. Essentially, this is not the case because man's immortalization rest most on the sufficient development of his creative power as epitomized in the poetic lines of this sonnet. It seems to be true that it is those poetic lines that give rise to his immortality. However, what needs to be argued herein is that it is not those poetic lines but his creative power in creating those poetic lines that gives him a second life indebted to his thorough acquisition of the independence from his creator and his success in making him his creator. In this sense, the true humanist implication of those couplets is that it is unnecessary for man to be saved by his creator but indispensable for him to be liberated from the cognitive imprisonment of previous religious humanism. For the obtainment of this liberty, the poet has shared with a variety of renaissance humanists in his poetic experiment a strong interest "in the new, the unknown, and the futuristic (Szönyi, 2018, p. 5)" to fulfill their intellectual values when there is an indispensable must for them to conduct their scientific experiments while serving as scientists, their educational experiments as educators or their artistic experiments as artists. In a profounder sense, what the poet has conducted in trying this transformation is in a position to considered as not just a poetic experiment but also a thought experiment as he has distinguished himself from the rest of poets in his instillation into this sonnet insightful thoughts to give his creative poetic response to man's great expectation for immortality.

In a word, it can be known clearly from the thematic transformation in the third quatrain of this sonnet that based on the respective analysis of the crystallization of man's humanity and dignity exemplified in its first two quatrains owing to the illumination acquired from renaissance humanism, this transformation has made it evident in its third quatrain and couplets that the immortal pursuits of man have taken their courses in the social and cultural contexts of this sonnet indebted to the poet's strong intention to poeticize his humanist inspiration to dignify and signify the values and virtues of man after having experienced a discouraging depression from the devaluation of man at middle ages.

## 5. Conclusion

Grounded on the close reading of *Sonnet 18* and the reference to its social and cultural contexts during renaissance, it has been found clear from in the analytical process that the humanity, dignity and immortal pursuits of man have turned out to be entailed in the expectation of the intellectual prosperity in poetic production. In accordance with the analytical findings indicated in those three fold, it can be concluded that the essential and quintessential humanist insights in terms of the central conceptualization of the humanity, dignity and immortal pursuits of man have been crystallized in the concise and curious poeticization of this sonnet due to the poet's insightful capacity to capture the declining inclination of religious humanism and the rising one of renaissance humanism. In this sense, this sonnet can be viewed as a poetic summarization of the humanist insights popularized at that historical moment to highlight the great humanist importance to be placed on the interactive essence of the on-going invisible corporation and communication between man and nature whether an appropriate balance between them achieved or not. To be specific, the poeticization of those humanist insights in this sonnet is the presentation of the developmental process of humanism from the dominance of religious humanism to the eventual acceptance of renaissance humanism due to the full awareness of the sustainable values to meet the central needs of man in this cognitive revolution.

On the whole, this study will provide a reference for the further rumination and revelation of the imaginative immortalization of the creative power of man and that of humanist insights in poetic production and their respective relevancies to the imaginative centralization on the intellectual essence and quintessence of humanism when there is a must to give an interpretation of this sonnet or the rest of Shakespearean sonnet.

Although great efforts have been made to have a good access to the humanist insights versified in the production of this sonnet, it remains a little pitiful that the analysis is not in-depth enough due to the inadequate understanding of the poetic emphasis placed on the power of man and that of his rich poetic imagination in the incorporation of humanist illuminations into poetic production.

Moreover, it can also be considered as a meaningful analytical experiments conducted to dig out the profound implications of a single sonnet in a single paper from the perspective of humanism rather than to work out a critical mashup due to the stoppage at its superficial meanings in analyzing a wide variety of sonnets in a single paper according to various theoretical concepts.

Cautious as the analyses and syntheses of this study tends to be, pitiful mistakes are likely to be made in showing unintentional disrespect for previous critical forebears and present scholars in Shakespearean studies. If it is the case in this study, forgiveness and tolerance will be gratefully expected of them.

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