

REVISITING SHAKESPEARE'S SONNETS: A QUEER-FORMAL READING OF GENDER IDENTITY

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Abstract

This study aims to review the construction of gender identity in Shakespeare's sonnets in the context of contemporary gender theory and queer reading. A descriptive qualitative method is applied with a Formalism approach combined with queer theory (Butler, 1990; Sedgwick, 1990) and Marxist feminism (Federici, 2012). The primary data consists of five selected sonnets, Sonnet 20, 57, 62, 18, and 55, which are analyzed using close reading techniques, textual interpretation, and contextual analysis. The research steps include: (1) selecting sonnet texts based on the relevance of gender themes, (2) identifying formal elements (diction, structure, symbols), (3) analyzing meaning and power relations in the discourse of love and identity, and (4) drawing conclusions based on the theory used. The results of the study show five main findings. First, Sonnet 20 displays an ambiguous representation of gender, showing the shifting roles between masculine and feminine. Second, Sonnet 18 and Sonnet 87 depict homoerotic desire and power relations that transcend heteronormative norms. Third, Sonnet 57 shows the emotional ambiguity and identity of the poet as a passive subject and admirer. Fourth, Sonnet 62 reveals Time, Mortality, and the Search for Eternal Identity, while fifth, Sonnet 55 shows language, symbols, and performativity as spaces for identity formation. This study concludes that Shakespeare views identity as a fluid social and linguistic construction, and makes poetry a space for negotiation between love, time, and human existence.

Keywords: *formalism; gender ambiguity; gender identity; performativity; queer theory; Shakespeare's sonnets.*

1. Introduction

Literary works have always served as a mirror of the complexity of human experience, including the search for identity, the meaning of love, and the individual's position within the social order (Semayeva, 2025). Among the world's literary heritage, William Shakespeare's Sonnets hold a particularly important place, offering profound reflections on the relationship between language, desire, and identity. Although written in the 16th century, Shakespeare's sonnets convey ideas that feel strikingly modern, particularly in their representation of gender and the poet's ambiguity of identity.

During the Renaissance, constructions of gender and sexuality were constrained by rigid social norms, in which male and female roles were positioned within a hierarchical patriarchal structure (Najm, 2025; Shelnutt-Beam, 2024). In the Sonnets, Shakespeare instead presents a language of affection and admiration for a young man, which is rife with homoerotic symbols, tenderness, and emotional vulnerability. This phenomenon opens up a new reading space that is more in line with contemporary theories and thinking on gender identity. On this basis, this study aims to review Shakespeare's sonnets using a modern literary theory approach in order to obtain a fresher and more relevant understanding of the discourse on gender identity.

This title was chosen because Shakespeare's Sonnets hold great potential for rereading through the perspective of gender identity. Shakespeare is not only a poet of love, but also a keen observer of human complexity (Akter, 2024). He depicts a male figure using language usually used to praise women and this shows both aesthetic and ideological courage in challenging the binary boundaries of masculine-feminine. Furthermore, reading the theme of gender identity in the Sonnets has high relevance to the development of 21st-century literary theory that highlights the issues of gender performativity, homoerotic desire, and the social construction of identity (Iloanwusi, 2025). Through this research, Shakespeare is not only seen as a classical poet, but also as a pioneer of modern discourse on the fluidity of human identity (Paterson, 2020; Sun, 2023).

Previous studies on Shakespeare and gender have largely focused on biographical readings or historical contextualization of sexuality, often separating textual analysis from theoretical engagement. Few have explored how the linguistic structure of the sonnets themselves participates in constructing gender identity through the performative power of language. This research fills that gap by integrating a close formalist reading of poetic form: rhyme, imagery, and metaphor with queer theoretical perspectives that interrogate how desire and identity are enacted through discourse. This synthesis allows for a more holistic understanding of how textual form and ideological content mutually shape the gendered subject in the sonnets.

The main approaches are the Formalism Approach and Queer Reading (Stanley Wells, 2020 and Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, 1990). The rationale for combining these two approaches lies in their complementary strengths: while Formalism focuses on the autonomy and structure of the text, revealing how aesthetic devices generate meaning, Queer Theory provides the ideological and interpretive framework to uncover how those very structures encode desire, power, and identity. By uniting both perspectives, this study situates Shakespeare's poetic language as not only a site of artistic innovation but also of subversive gender performance.

In addition to these two main approaches, this research also uses supporting interdisciplinary theories, namely: Gender Performativity Theory - Judith Butler (1990); *Queer and Homosocial Desire* - Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick (1990); *Marxist Feminism and Reproductive Labor* – Federici S. (2012) and *Cultural Identity Theory* - Hall, S., & du Gay, P. (Eds.). (1996). By combining these theories, this research not only dissects the structure of poetic language but also explores the ideological dimensions behind the representation of gender and identity. The primary source for this research is William Shakespeare's sonnets:

Sonnet 18, Sonnet 20, Sonnet 57, Sonnet 62, and Sonnet 55 (Edmonson & Wells, 2020). These five sonnets were selected based on their relevance to issues of gender and identity:

- a. Sonnet 20 depicts a "master-mistress" figure who challenges gender boundaries.

- b. Sonnet 57 demonstrates the poet's power relations and emotional devotion.
- c. Sonnet 62 presents self-reflection and the conflict between ego and love.
- d. Sonnet 18 explores symbols of beauty and eternity.
- e. Sonnet 55 emphasizes the power of language and symbols over the transience of time.

Secondary sources include recent related texts that discuss the Formalism and Queer Reading approaches to Shakespeare's works. This study uses a qualitative descriptive method, aiming to describe and interpret the text's meaning in depth. This method allows for a comprehensive reading of the linguistic, social, and ideological dimensions of the text without becoming trapped in quantitative generalizations.

This study focuses on five main points of analysis directly related to the construction of gender identity in the Sonnets: Gender Representation in the Sonnets; Homoerotic Desire and Power Relations; Emotional Ambiguity and the Poet's Identity; Time, Transience, and the Quest for Immortality; Identity and Language; Symbols and Performativity in Identity Formation. The goal is to reinterpret Shakespeare's work through the lens of contemporary theories of gender and identity; uncover the ideological meanings behind the language structure and form of the sonnets; and demonstrate the relevance of the Sonnets to modern discourses on the fluidity of identity and power relations. The benefits include enriching literary studies with an interdisciplinary perspective, connecting the classical heritage with modern critical theories, and demonstrating that Shakespeare's work remains alive and contextual in reading contemporary humanitarian issues.

2. Literature Review

Revisiting Shakespeare's Sonnets: A Queer-Formal Reading of Gender Identity: this title indicates that the focus of this research is not simply reading the sonnet as a literary work, but also examining how gender, identity, and power relations are constructed and displayed in the text. To this end, the research combines the Formalism and Queer Reading approaches, highlighting gender ambiguity and homoerotic relations, each developed by its respective authors:

1. **The Formalism Approach**, pioneered by Edmondson, P., & Wells, S. (2020), emphasizes the analysis of the text and structure of the poem as both an aesthetic and ideological medium. Using the Formalism Approach, the researcher examines how Shakespeare's sonnets function as spaces for subverting the meanings of gender and identity.
2. **Queer Reading**, pioneered by Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick (1990), highlights gender ambiguity, emotional relations, and homoeroticism disguised under patriarchal norms. In this research, Queer Reading is used to analyze the relationship between the poet and the Fair Youth, as well as the gender performativity displayed in the sonnet.

In addition to these two main approaches, this research also utilizes supporting interdisciplinary theories, namely:

1. **Gender Performativity Theory** – Judith Butler (1990). Butler asserts that gender is the result of repeated social actions and performances, not a fixed biological identity. This theory helps interpret gender ambiguity in Shakespeare's sonnets (Kakoliris, 2025; Scheibmayr, 2024).
2. **Queer and Homosocial Desire** – Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick (1990). Besides being an approach, Sedgwick's theory emphasizes the often-observed emotional relationships

between men, making it relevant for reading the dynamics of homoerotic affection in the sonnet (Crnic, S. (2025).

3. **Marxist Feminism and Reproductive Labor** – Silvia Federici (2012). Federici explains that affective and emotional labors are also forms of reproductive labor. This theory is used to analyze the power relations and emotional devotion of the poet in the sonnets (Akhter, 2025).
4. **Cultural Identity Theory** – Hall, S., & du Gay, P. (1996). This provides an in-depth exploration of questions surrounding cultural identity, including how identity is formed and questioned in contemporary social and cultural contexts. Hall and other contributors address various dimensions of the identity crisis and offer theoretical and substantive insights into its contemporary manifestations (Reichert, E. (2021; Platonov, 2024).

This research then makes novel contributions in three main aspects: 1) It combines Formalism and Queer Reading approaches with interdisciplinary gender and identity theory. 2) It reads Shakespeare's Sonnets as a performative text that shapes identity, not simply represents it, 3) It offers a reading that is more relevant to the social context and gender discourse of the 21st century.

Various previous studies have emphasized the importance of reading Shakespeare's Sonnets from a gender and queer perspective. Some studies highlight the gender ambiguity in the sonnets, where the poet's persona displays both masculine and feminine characteristics, thus challenging patriarchal constructions of the Elizabethan period. Other studies highlight homoerotic desire, particularly the poet's relationship with the Fair Youth, which is subtly conveyed through poetic language.

Studies of Formalism emphasize the importance of the sonnet's form and structure as a medium for ideological expression, functioning not only as an aesthetic but also as a space for subversively negotiating the meaning of gender and identity.

Most research remains limited to a single approach, either Formalism or queer, thus failing to capture the interdisciplinary dimension that unites form, meaning, and social performance. This study attempts to fill this gap by combining Formalism, Queer Reading, and interdisciplinary theory.

A critical gap still persists: previous studies have rarely explored how poetic form and gender performativity interact dynamically to construct identity through linguistic repetition and structural ambiguity. Furthermore, earlier works often focus on textual aesthetics or symbolic readings, without situating them within broader socio-political and cultural frameworks of identity performance. This study, therefore, advances a new critical synthesis by bridging textual formality and performative gender discourse, reinterpreting Shakespeare's sonnets as sites of ideological negotiation rather than static literary artifacts.

This can be seen in other related works.

1. **Abonyi, C. (2022), *Women and Nature: Image and Imaginary Hybridization in Shakespeare's Sonnets.***

Abonyi's research analyzes the symbolic relationship between women and nature in Shakespeare's Sonnets, specifically sonnets 18 and 104, using an ecofeminist approach. Abonyi assumes that women and nature are often represented in parallel, both positioned as objects of beauty and exploitation by masculine power. The ecofeminist theory used is inspired by Val Plumwood (2002) and Carolyn Merchant (1995), who highlight the connection between patriarchal domination of women and exploitation of nature. The results of the study reveal an ambiguity: on the one hand, Shakespeare's poetry glorifies the

beauty of women and nature, but on the other, it also reproduces patriarchal views that place both in subordinate positions.

The relevance of Abonyi's research to this study lies in its foundational reading of gender representations in the sonnets. This study extends this analysis to the realm of gender identity, highlighting how feminine and masculine representations reflect social constructions. Furthermore, this study adds the dimensions of gender performativity and discursivity through Judith Butler's theory, thus going beyond symbolic or aesthetic readings to understanding gender identity as the result of repeated social actions and expressions.

2. Knecht, R. (2021). *Shakespeare's Sonnets as Reproductive Labor*.

Knecht reads Shakespeare's sonnets with a focus on the theme of procreation, particularly the Procreation Sonnets (1–17). She views these texts not simply as advice about procreation, but as reflections on the cultural, social, and artistic work of reproduction. Her approach combines Marxist and feminist approaches, incorporating Federi'i's (2012) concept of reproductive labor, which positions reproductive work including women's roles within the family as a form of social labor that is often overlooked. The results show that these sonnets reproduce patriarchal ideology by positioning women as the medium for the continuity of the lineage and the poet's aesthetic immortality.

The relevance of Knecht's research to this study lies in uncovering the power dimension within gender relations in the texts. This study expands on these findings by highlighting how gender representations relate not only to social or reproductive functions but also to the poet's identity and self-expression, transcending heteronormative boundaries. The similarities lie in the attention to gender relations and power, while the differences lie in the focus on gender as performativity and identity as linguistic construction, placing this research within a contemporary post structural and cultural framework.

3. Wells, S. (2022). *Shakespeare and Sonnet Form*.

Wells examines the form and structure of Shakespeare's sonnet, including the quatrain, couplet, and iambic pentameter, and their role in revealing affective and gender ambiguity in the poem. This formal analysis demonstrates that poetic form is not a neutral vessel, but contributes to the shaping of meaning and the expression of the poet's identity. The approach used is a combination of Formalism and queer reading, with reference to structural theory and homoerotic discourse in the Sonnets (Barthes, 1966; Butler, 1990). The results show that the sonnet form allows Shakespeare to both disguise and express ambiguous affection for the young male figure, which can be read as a manifestation of gender identity and non-normative affection.

The relevance of Wells's research to this study lies in its foundational reading of form and language as performative means of gender. This study utilizes this idea by examining how the choice of diction, imagery, and poetic structure serve as a means of shaping the poet's identity. The similarity lies in the attention to gender and identity, while the difference is that this study combines form analysis with Butler's performativity theory and Hall's cultural identity theory, thus expanding it to the social and ideological realm, not just the formalistic one.

From the three studies above, it is concluded that studies of Shakespeare's Sonnets in the past five years have highlighted issues of gender, aesthetics, and identity from diverse perspectives: ecofeminism, Marxism, formalism, race studies, and queer theory. However,

no study has comprehensively combined the Formalism approach (Wells, 2022) with the Queer Reading approach (Sedgwick, 1990) to read Shakespeare's sonnets in a contemporary manner.

By this, this research makes novel contributions in three main aspects:

1. It combines Formalism and Queer Reading approaches with interdisciplinary gender and identity theory.
2. It reads Shakespeare's Sonnets as a performative text that shapes identity, not simply represents it.
3. It offers a reading that is more relevant to the social context and gender discourse of the 21st century.

To strengthen the international scope of this study, recent works such as Li (2025) *The Reinvention of Gender Identity in As You Like It from the Perspective of Gender* and Hamamra (2019) *Performative Utterances and Gender Performance in Shakespeare's Richard III* are incorporated. These studies reaffirm the growing relevance of queer-formal approaches in global Shakespeare scholarship and further support the novelty of integrating textual form with gender performativity in literary analysis. Li's (2025) study demonstrates how Shakespeare's plays destabilize binary notions of gender by transforming performative identity into a site of creative resistance, where linguistic play and disguise reveal the instability of fixed subject positions. Similarly, Hamamra (2019) exposes how speech acts in *Richard III* operate as performative tools that construct and deconstruct gendered authority, emphasizing the fluid intersection between language, power, and identity. Both works underscore the dialogic nature of Shakespearean language; how poetic and dramatic form not only reflects but actively produces gendered meanings. In this context, the present study extends their insights by moving beyond dramatic texts to the sonnet form, arguing that Shakespeare's lyric voice also performs identity through linguistic rhythm, metaphor, and structural ambiguity, thereby connecting the aesthetics of form to the politics of self-representation.

3. Research Method

This study uses a descriptive qualitative approach with an orientation toward contemporary literary studies and gender identity theory, aiming to explore the meaning, representation, and construction of gender identity in Shakespeare's Sonnets. The primary data for this study are five Shakespearean sonnets: Sonnets 20, 57, 62, 18, and 55, chosen because they showcase the complex themes of love, identity, and gender expression.

These particular sonnets were selected based on their explicit linguistic and thematic engagement with gender fluidity, homoerotic affection, and the poetic negotiation of selfhood. Sonnet 20, for instance, directly addresses a gender-ambiguous master-mistress; Sonnet 57 highlights devotion and subservience that destabilize power hierarchies; Sonnet 62 centers on self-love and narcissistic reflection; Sonnet 18 idealizes beauty beyond gender boundaries; and Sonnet 55 affirms poetic immortality as a means of identity preservation. Together, they represent the most cohesive corpus within the Shakespearean sonnets that problematizes binary notions of masculinity and femininity, making them especially relevant to the study of gender performativity.

Secondary data include books, journals, scholarly articles, and critical writings on sonnets, gender theory, and contemporary literature, with primary references being Judith Butler's gender performativity and post-structural and feminist literary theories. Data

collection was conducted through literature review, encompassing text identification, close reading, classification of symbols, diction, and meaning, and contextualization with relevant theories (Creswell & Poth, 2022; Elliott & Timulak, 2021).

Data were analyzed descriptively and interpretively in several stages: thematic analysis that identifies five main themes: Gender Representation in Sonnets; Homoerotic Desire and Power Relations; Emotional Ambiguity and Poet's Identity; Time, Transience, and the Search for Identity Eternity; and Language, Symbols, and Performativity in Identity Formation and interpretation of the meaning of the language, imagery, and structure of the sonnets, the application of Butler's theory and other contemporary thoughts, and drawing conclusions. With this procedure, the research not only examines the text formally, but also reveals how Shakespeare's Sonnets represents the dynamics of identity that are fluid, performative, and continuously negotiated through love, time, and language.

4. Results and Discussion

4.1 Results

An analysis of five sonnets by William Shakespeare (Edmonson & Wells, 2020): Sonnets 20, 57, 62, 18, 55 shows how the poet displays a complex and fluid construction of gender identity. This study emphasizes five main themes: Gender Representation in Sonnets; Homoerotic Desire and Power Relations; Emotional Ambiguity and the Poet's Identity; Time, Transience, and the Quest for Immortality; Identity and Language; Symbols and Performativity in Identity Formation.

1. Gender Representation in Sonnets

Shakespeare's Sonnet 20 is one of the most important texts in discussing gender ambiguity in the Sonnet. In this sonnet, the poet describes the young man he admires as femininely beautiful, yet retaining masculine traits.

"A woman's face with Nature's own hand painted, / Hast thou, the master-mistress of my passion." (Sonnet 20, ll. 1–2)

"Mine be thy love, and thy love's use their treasure." (l. 14) (Edmonson & Wells, 2020).

The opening lines depict a young man with a "female" face, yet the poet refers to him as "master-mistress," a fusion of two gender identities. This expression signifies the fluidity of the boundaries between masculinity and femininity, which, according to Butler (1990), is the result of social performativity, not biological innateness.

The phrase "Mine be thy love, and thy love's use their treasure" suggests a compromise between homoerotic desire and heterosexual norms, as Sedgwick (1985) explains in the concept of male homosocial desire. Shakespeare negotiates the space between emotional love between men and the socio-moral boundaries of his time.

Formally, this sonnet displays a play on diction and sound that emphasizes dual meanings: masculine–feminine, spiritual–physical, and public–private. Here, Shakespeare utilizes the sonnet form to explore fluid gender identities and the limitations of representing love within patriarchal norms.

Sonnet 20 showcases unstable gender constructions and opens up space for queer readings of Shakespeare's work. The poet not only worships beauty, but also questions the social structures that determine how love and desire are "allowed" to be expressed.

2. Homoerotic Desire and Power Relations

Shakespeare not only displays gender ambiguity in the Sonnet, but also highlights the power and desire relationship between the poet and the young man he praises. This

relationship reflects the poet's position as an admiring and idealizing subject, while the young man is in a dominant position both socially and emotionally.

One sonnet that powerfully represents this is Sonnet 57.

*"Being your slave, what should I do but tend
Upon the hours and times of your desire?"* (Sonnet 57, ll. 1–2)
*"Nor think the bitterness of absence sour,
When you have bid your servant once adieu."* (ll. 5–6)
(Edmonson & Wells, 2020).

The opening lines explicitly position the poet as "your slave," a sign of subordination within a power relationship rife with devotion and emotional dependence. This image can be read through the lens of gender performativity theory (Butler, 1990), in which the poet "acts out" a passive and submissive identity within a social framework typically associated with the feminine.

The phrase "tend upon the hours and times of your desire" suggests that the poet awaits and adapts to the young man's desires, emphasizing the imbalance between active and passive roles. In the context of queer reading (Sedgwick, 1990), this relationship is not merely romantic but also contains social tensions between love, submission, and positions of power unconventional for male-male relationships during the Elizabethan period.

The Formalist approach (Jakobson, 1960) also reveals that the dictionaries "slave," "servant," and "desire" function as repetitive motifs that reinforce the thematic structure of sacrifice and the inequality of desire. The soft rhyme and rhythmic structure at the beginning of the quatrain shifts to a more assertive one at the end, signaling an emotional transition from submission to an awareness of the social distance between the poet and the young man.

Sonnet 57 demonstrates how Shakespeare uses metaphors of slavery and service to depict complex power relations. The poet is portrayed not only as a lover but also as a subject shackled by social status and emotions. In the context of queer theory, this suggests that love and desire in the Sonnets often transcend gender norms and social hierarchies, forming an identity that is both fluid and shackled by power.

3. Emotional Ambiguity and the Poet's Identity

Besides depicting gender ambiguity and power inequality, this sonnet also highlights the poet's emotional conflict and inner identity. Shakespeare depicts a love fraught with contradictions between admiration and guilt, between longing and rejection. This struggle marks the poet's identity crisis as a subject who loves outside of social norms.

The sonnet that best represents this aspect is Sonnet 62.

*"Sin of self-love possesseth all mine eye,
And all my soul, and all my every part."* (Sonnet 62, ll. 1–2)
*"'Tis thee, myself, that for myself I praise,
Painting my age with beauty of thy days."* (ll. 13–14)
(Edmonson & Wells, 2020).

The opening lines imply that the poet acknowledges the sin of narcissism, the "sin of self-love." In the final lines, he realizes that his love for the young man is actually a reflection of his love for himself: "'Tis thee, myself, that for myself I praise." This statement illustrates

the poet's identity, torn between "I" as the subject and "thou" as the ideal reflection of the idealized self.

From the perspective of the theory of subjectivity and performativity (Butler, 1990), this expression reflects how identity is formed through the repetition of desire, a repetition of desire that negotiates feelings of love, shame, and the need for social recognition. The poet not only reveals love but also struggles to understand who he is in a socially forbidden relationship.

According to Sedgwick (1990) in *Epistemology of the Closet*, this ambiguity is a characteristic of closed desire, a desire hidden behind poetic language. Shakespeare writes from an ambivalent space between recognition and concealment. The symmetrical and structured form of the sonnet serves as a means of "organizing" inner turmoil, indicating that the poem's structure functions as a control mechanism for emotions and identity.

From a formalist perspective (Jakobson, 1960), the three repetitions of the word "myself" in the first two lines serve to emphasize the vortex of identity trapped in self-reflection, demonstrating that the linguistic structure supports a complex psychological theme.

Sonnet 62 presents the poet's identity conflict, colored by emotional ambiguity between love for a young man and love for oneself. Desire here becomes a means of exploring existence and subjectivity. By reading this sonnet through the theories of (Butler, 1990) and Sedgwick (1990), we understand that Shakespeare wrote not only about love, but also about the search for self-identity amidst the pressures of social and gender norms.

4. Time, Transience, and the Quest for Immortality

Shakespeare wrote not only about love and beauty, but also about time as a force that destroys identity. Time is depicted as a destructive agent that erodes the body, beauty, and memories. Through this theme, the poet attempts to immortalize the young man's identity and himself through language and poetry.

One of the most representative sonnets on this theme is *Sonnet 18* ("*Shall I compare thee to a summer's day?*").

*"Rough winds do shake the darling buds of May,
And summer's lease hath all too short a date." (Sonnet 18, ll. 3–4)
"But thy eternal summer shall not fade,
Nor lose possession of that fair thou ow'st;
So long as men can breathe or eyes can see,
So long lives this, and this gives life to thee." (ll. 9–14)
(Edmonson & Wells, 2020).*

The first two lines demonstrate an awareness of the transience of time: "summer's lease hath all too short a date," emphasizing that all physical beauty and human life are transient. In the final two quatrains and the couplet, the poet expresses resistance to this destruction by stating that "thy eternal summer shall not fade."

From a formalist perspective (Jakobson, 1960), the play with the image of summer becoming eternal is a form of defamiliarization: time, which usually signifies destruction, is reinterpreted as a means of immortality through poetry. The sonnet form, with its strict and rhythmic structure, becomes a medium for "preserving" meaning and identity.

Through Butler's (1990) theory of performativity, the statement "this gives life to thee" can be read as a performative act: the poet creates a new identity for the young man

she loves through language. This identity is not biological, but rather a cultural construction that lives within the text. In this case, poetry becomes a space of resistance to mortality. Meanwhile, from Sedgwick's (1990) perspective, the declaration of love in Sonnet 18 retains a social ambiguity: the poet affirms the youth's immortality not through physical intimacy, but through literary intimacy, an intimacy secure in the realm of language, not social space. This suggests that immortality in this sonnet is not merely aesthetic, but also a form of sublimation of desire that cannot be expressed openly.

Sonnet 18 presents a paradox between transience and eternity. Time, usually the enemy of humanity, is subdued through poetic language. Shakespeare asserts that the identities of both poet and youth can live eternally in the text, not in the body. Thus, this sonnet transforms poetry into a memorial, a means of resistance to destruction, and a way to affirm an identity that is constantly changing but never disappearing.

5. Identity and Language; Symbols and Performativity in Identity Formation.

Beyond themes of love, time, and gender, Shakespeare also constructs the identity of the poet and his beloved through language and symbolism. In the Sonnets, words, metaphors, and poetic structure function not only as tools of expression but also as performative acts, language creating reality.

The sonnet that most clearly demonstrates this function is Sonnet 55. (*"Not marble, nor the gilded monuments"*).

*"Not marble, nor the gilded monuments
Of princes shall outlive this powerful rhyme." (Sonnet 55, ll. 1–2)
"Gainst death and all-oblivious enmity
Shall you pace forth; your praise shall still find room
Even in the eyes of all posterity." (ll. 9–12) (Edmonson & Wells, 2020).*

The first two lines open the sonnet with a sharp contrast between matter (marble, monument) and language (rhyme). Shakespeare asserts that the power of poetic language can transcend the eternity of physical objects. In this context, language becomes a tool for shaping identity and existence, not simply a descriptive medium.

According to Butler (1990), linguistic actions that create the effect of reality are called performative acts: words not only describe but also do something. The phrase "this powerful rhyme" is a form of performative act; by writing, the poet brings to life the figure of his beloved. The identity of the young man in this sonnet is alive not because of his body, but because of the language that is continually repeated and read.

Meanwhile, Sedgwick (1990) sees the relationship between language and desire in Shakespeare's work as a form of textual intimacy, an emotional closeness that can only exist through text. The phrase "your praise shall still find room" reveals a symbolic space where identity and love can continue to exist despite the changing physical world. From a formalist perspective (Jakobson, 1960), the rhyme structure ABAB CDCD EFEF GG reinforces the function of "repetition" as a form of stabilizing meaning. The consistent rhythmic pattern makes poetic language a verbal ritual; each reading rekindles a constructed identity. Thus, Shakespeare uses poetic form as a means of linguistic immortality.

Sonnet 55 demonstrates that language is not merely a tool of representation, but a medium for the creation of identity. Through poetic performativity, the poet challenges mortality and creates symbolic immortality for the figure he admires. In the context of Butler's theory, the act of writing becomes a form of performance that affirms existence;

while in Sedgwick's framework, the poem becomes a safe space where love and identity can continue to exist without being bound by the body or time.

An analysis of Sonnets 20, 57, 62, 18, and 55 shows that Shakespeare presents a fluid and non-binary concept of identity. He rejects the masculine-feminine dichotomy and presents gender as a performative spectrum that constantly shifts according to social and emotional context.

In Sonnet 20, "the master-mistress of my passion," he demonstrates gender ambiguity and the tension between desire and social norms. Sonnets 18 and 87 depict subtle homoerotic relationships, expanding the understanding of love beyond heteronormative boundaries. Meanwhile, Sonnets 55, 57, and 62 emphasize that love, time, and language become spaces for the negotiation of identity and power.

Through these sonnets, Shakespeare demonstrates that identity is not fixed, but rather a social, emotional, and linguistic construct that is constantly being negotiated. For him, poetry becomes a space where love, time, and language intertwine, forming new meanings about humanity and existence.

Shakespeare's Sonnets not only express the beauty of love, but also function as an ideological and aesthetic experiment that challenges gender boundaries and opens up space for a more inclusive and progressive discourse on identity in contemporary literary studies.

4.2 Discussion

The results of the analysis show that Shakespeare's Sonnets present a fluid and multifaceted gender identity, rejecting the masculine-feminine dichotomy and emphasizing gender as a performative spectrum. Gender ambiguity, power relations, emotional conflict, the transience of time, and the performativity of language intertwine to form a space for ideological and aesthetic experimentation for the poet.

The approaches of formalism, queer reading, and cultural identity help reveal how sonnets are not merely an aesthetic medium but also a means of identity negotiation within the Elizabethan social context. By linking these findings to the theories of Butler (1990), Sedgwick (1990), Federici (2012), and Hall & du Gay (1996), it is clear that Shakespeare wrote not only about love or beauty, but also about self-formation, resistance to social norms, and the ever-evolving construction of identity.

Thus, Shakespeare's sonnets can be read as a space for dialogue between gender representation, power relations, time, and language, as well as a laboratory for understanding the complexity of human identity in the contemporary context.

5. Conclusion

This study revisits Shakespeare's Sonnets from a contemporary perspective on gender identity, utilizing the approaches of Formalism (Wells, 2022) and Queer Reading (Sedgwick, 1990), as well as the support of interdisciplinary theories, including Butler (1990), Sedgwick (1990), Federici (2012), and Hall & du Gay (1996). The analysis of Sonnets 20, 57, 62, 18, and 55 shows that Shakespeare presents gender identity as a fluid, performative, and continually negotiated construction through language, symbols, and emotional relationships.

The results of the study confirm five main aspects of discussion in the selected sonnets: (1) *gender representation* in the Sonnets, which demonstrates gender ambiguity and fluidity; (2) *homoerotic desire* and *power relations*, which reveals the tension between love, subordination, and dominance in the poet's relationship with the object of praise; (3) *emotional ambiguity* and the Poet's Identity, which represents the inner conflict between

love, narcissism, and the need for social recognition; (4) *time, transience*, and the *search for identity immortality*, in which poetic language is used to confront transience and perpetuate identity through literary works; and (5) *identity and language, symbols, and performativity in identity formation*, which asserts that the words, metaphors, and structure of the sonnet function as performative acts that create and affirm a fluid and continually negotiated identity.

Shakespeare's Sonnets is not simply a literary work about love, but also an ideological and aesthetic experiment that challenges the boundaries of patriarchy, opens up space for more inclusive reflections on identity, and is relevant to 21st-century gender discourse.

This research makes novel contributions in three aspects: (1) *combining formalism and queer reading* approaches with interdisciplinary gender and identity theory; (2) *Reading Shakespeare's Sonnets* as a performative text that shapes identity, not just represents it; and (3) Offering a reading that is relevant to contemporary social contexts and gender discourses.

In practical terms, this study enriches Shakespearean scholarship by providing a model for integrating close formal analysis with the politics of identity, demonstrating how poetic structure itself performs ideological work. It also contributes to modern identity studies by showing that early modern texts can still inform current debates about gender fluidity, performativity, and the social construction of the self. Furthermore, the findings offer pedagogical and critical implications for how Shakespeare's works are taught and interpreted in multicultural and postcolonial contexts, emphasizing inclusivity and cross-cultural dialogue.

Future research could expand this interdisciplinary framework through comparative analysis, linking Shakespeare's discourse on gender and performativity to non-Western or Southeast Asian poetic traditions. Such comparative studies would highlight the universality of identity negotiation in literature while revealing the unique cultural ways in which gender and language interact across literary canons.

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