HALF CENTURY and more has elapsed now since T. S. Eliot declared
*Hamlet* to be "most certainly an artistic failure."¹ "What is deficient in
*Hamlet,*" Eliot went on to say, is that "Hamlet (the man) is dominated by
an emotion which is inexpressible, because it is in excess of the facts as
they appear." The overwhelming mood of Hamlet is disgust,
"disgust . . . occasioned by his mother, but . . . his mother is not an
adequate equivalent for it; his disgust envelops and exceeds her." Hamlet
lacks, in Eliot's renowned phraseology, an "objective correlative," or a
reasonably understandable rationale for his mood, lacking which we are
reduced to guessing at some catastrophe in Shakespeare's personal life
concerning which Hamlet is his author's too-cryptic surrogate. "We
must simply admit that here Shakespeare tackled a problem which
proved too much for him. Why he attempted it at all is an insoluble
puzzle; under compulsion of what experience he attempted to express
the inexpressibly horrible, we cannot ever know."

One source of Hamlet's black mood can be quite reasonably traced
into Shakespeare's biography: the death of his only son, Hamnet, in
August, 1596, at the age of eleven and a half. Worsening his
immediate grief (which evidently influenced the writing of *King John,*
then under composition), Shakespeare was pinning his hopes for a
Shakespeare family dynasty on the boy, and was thereafter moved to
offer special financial considerations to whichever daughter produced
a male heir (they never did). Just possibly, in addition, the death of
Shakespeare's father in September, 1601, may have affected the
writing of *Hamlet.*

¹ This comment and the following quotations from T. S. Eliot are
taken from the essay on "Hamlet and His Problems" (originally published
Co., 1950), pp. 121-26. though this happenstance may well have occurred after the play was
finished. Either way, the death of an only son or a beloved father would
certainly suffice to explain Hamlet's savage mood with respect to death—his monologue on suicide, his puns and songs with the gravedigger, his black laughter about a king going a progress (a royal tour) through the guts of a beggar. For Shakespeare and Hamlet alike, the objective correlative is there.

It is the other component of Hamlet's disgust, his attitude toward sex, that entails a mysteriously missing motivation. Hamlet's rage towards his mother, and his even more brutal treatment of Ophelia, driving the girl into madness and apparent suicide, are not at all understandably motivated, and this fact is what has given rise to the search for some explanation outside the play itself, that is, in the creative mind that made it. Given this situation, the best place we can look for clues is in Shakespeare's Sonnets, that extraordinary emotional diary which is about all we possess in the way of Shakespearean self-revelation. Mr. Eliot himself located the only clue he could find to Hamlet's strange mood (and Shakespeare's behind it) in the Sonnets, though he found the mystery yet unsolvable: "Hamlet, like the sonnets, is full of some stuff that the writer could not drag to light . . ."

What I propose to do in this paper is precisely to drag some of the stuff of the Sonnets into the light, and by a combination of whatever background facts we know plus some common sense speculation on the actual contents of the Sonnets—especially the never-anthologized ones—we may better define the emotional catastrophe Mr. Eliot was looking for. In doing this, we can not only comprehend Hamlet's otherwise inexplicable mood but can gain a sense of how Shakespeare's master theme of Betrayal (of Love, or Trust) emerged from the Sonnets and took possession of his other greatest works through the following decade—plays like Othello, Julius Caesar, Macbeth, King Lear, Cymbeline, Troilus and Cressida, Coriolanus, Timon of Athens, The Winter's Tale, The Tempest.

It may seem strange that such an undertaking is deemed necessary with so much scholarship on the Sonnets on record, yet a large scale ignorance or evasion of the Sonnets' implications has continued in force, to my observation. A fastidious discretion on the part of many Shakespeare scholars appears to have played a considerable part in the problem, as though a homosexual experience were too unsavory a subject to be contemplated in connection with Shakespeare. Rather than consider seriously such implications in a number of these poems, scholars have often preferred to advance any alternative view that might be at all arguable. M. M. Reese, for example, grounds his reading on the Platonic tradition that "the friendship of a man for a man was deeper and nobler than his love for a woman"; this, Mr. Reese says, "was the romantic convention of classic literature which the Renaissance had enthusiastically revived."² (C. S. Lewis, although feeling that "this does not seem to be the language of full-blown pederasty," nonetheless found nothing as warm as Shakespeare's passion in his understanding of this Elizabethan
convention: "His language is too lover-like for that of ordinary male friendship."³)

More recently, in 1963, A. L. Rowse makes bold to settle the whole question forever in one grand statement: "There is not the slightest trace of homosexuality in Shakespeare or even interest in the subject."⁴ Earlier scholars like Chambers and Kittredge, while not so confident as Rowse about Shakespeare's sexual orthodoxy, have largely limited their observations to the careful innuendos allowable to their upbringing in the gentle tradition; or conversely, a few rebels like Oscar Wilde and Samuel Butler have gone galloping off into fantasies of interpretation subservient to their own psychic needs.⁵ All this is historically understandable, but while taking due note of E. K. Chambers' warning that "more folly has been written about the sonnets than about any other Shakespearean topic,"⁶ we should feel free in these days of Portnoy and Myra Brekinridge to take a perfectly open approach to the subject.


George Lyman Kittredge, in _The Complete Works of Shakespeare_ (Boston: Ginn and Co., 1936), p. 1492, says, "In treating the Sonnets as material for Shakespeare's biography, we should not forget that we are dealing with the supreme dramatist." Probably Kittredge was influenced by Sidney Lee's argument in _A Life of Shakespeare_ (1898) that the people in the Sonnets are fictional. A discussion of Oscar Wilde's and Samuel Butler's theories about the Sonnets appears in S. Schoenbaum's _Shakespeare's Lives_ (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1970). In the _Blackwood's Edinburgh Magazine_ of July, 1889, Wilde identified the golden boy of the Sonnets as a lovely boy actor named Willie Hughes who played those nubile nymphs, Viola, Rosalind, Juliet, etc., in the all-male company. Samuel Butler, inspired by Wilde's conjecture, conjured up a young sailor named Willie Hughes, with whom Shakespeare had a single furtive "pederastic interlude" that proved the basis of the Sonnets. Butler's own homosexual anguish—his recent betrayal by a male lover—seems unmistakable in this instance, according to Schoenbaum. Ironically, Lord Alfred Douglas, Wilde's Judas, published a volume in 1933 supporting Wilde's theory.


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O BEGIN with the "known" background, scholars pretty largely agree upon the following information: that the Sonnets were written over
about a five-year period when Shakespeare was in his thirties; that they deal with their author's love relationship with at least two people, one of them a young man and the other a "dark lady"; and that they were intended to be a private expression of emotion (a pirated edition appeared in 1609). Internal evidence—especially Sonnets 40, 41, 42, and 144—shows that the young man and the lady eventually developed a liaison with each other, thereby plunging the poet into the bottommost depths of humiliation and despair, and intensifying the feeling of Betrayal that would later emerge as Shakespeare's lifelong obsession. From this point on, the facts become less certain, and controversy rages. To avoid sinking into the quicksand of endless argument, let us limit our background inquiry to a couple of questions and then look into some specific poems.

First, the question of how many lovers the Sonnets are addressed to seems best answered by the traditional subdivision: Sonnets 1-126 appear addressed to a single young man, with the remaining poems addressed to the dark lady. If there were more than one young man involved, as some have argued, it would seem strange that Shakespeare would apologize for his redundancy, as he does in Sonnet 76—

> Why is my verse so barren of new pride?  
> So far from variation or quick change?  
> . . .  
> O, know, sweet love, I always write of you,  
> And you and love are still my argument. . .

—and again in Sonnet 108:

> What's new to speak, what new to register,  
> That may express my love or thy dear merit?  
> Nothing, sweet boy; but yet, like prayers divine,  
> I must each day say o'er the very same . . . .

The identity of the golden boy has been a vexing question, but the preponderance of evidence has come down very largely to a choice between two candidates: the Earl of Southampton, to whom Shakespeare dedicated his early poems *Venus and Adonis* and *The Rape of Lucrece*; or Lord Pembroke, the later patron of Shakespeare to whom the First Folio was dedicated. Both individuals were extremely attractive, both during their teens resisted strong pressure to get married (Sonnets 1-17, the "Procreation Sonnets," were so-called because they beg the young man to get married and have children), and both have appropriate initials (Henry Wriothesley, William Herbert) that might connect with the Sonnets' dedication in 1609 "To Mr. W. H."7

Georg Brandes, E. K. Chambers, and Dover Wilson, highly respected scholars all, have favored Pembroke, which would mean that
the Sonnets were written in the late 1590's and early 1600's (Lord Pembroke was born in 1580); Alden Brooks, A. L. Rowse, and others have favored Southampton, born in 1573 and thus in his late teens when Shakespeare came under his patronage. According to A. L. Rowse—he who found "not the slightest trace" of homosexuality in Shakespeare—Southampton would have presented the more queenly appearance of the two:

Anyone who studies the portrait made of Southampton when he was nineteen will see how striking his beauty was. There are the familiar golden tresses, which he retained for some years more, falling over his left shoulder, the haughty aristocratic look on the face, a perfect oval, delicate features, lightly arched eyebrows, sensitive nostril, small mouth. It is a feminine appearance, yet there is . . . masculinity in the assertive stare of the eyes. . . . There is something that gives an unfavourable impression—a touch of obstinacy and fixation, in the eyes and pouting lip, a look of self-will.

A face such as this might quite reasonably be correlated with those strange opening lines of Sonnet 20: "A woman's face with Nature's own hand painted/Hast thou, the master-mistress of my passion." Southampton's parental situation, fatherless and mother-dominated, also happens to fit a very frequent psychic profile of male homosexuals, according to Freud and other psychologists. Finally, the first seventeen or "Procreation" Sonnets seem to parallel not only the general situation of "Venus and Adonis" (dedicated to Southampton) in showing a youth totally resistant to female charms, they also convey the same sentiments in almost the same phrases. Think how smoothly lines

The initials of Southampton's name, Henry Wriothesley, are reversed In the Sonnets' dedication, "To Mr. W. H.," but this could be either a printer's error or perhaps a code designation, like the name-play in Sonnets 20 and 135, which give us the name "Will Hughes" as a composite clue to "W. H."s identity. The use of a commoner's title, "Mr.", rather than an aristocratic form of address also complicates the issue; this too may have been a tactic in screening the lover's identity. In any case, we can deal with the Sonnets well enough without knowing the names in question.


9 Shakespeare: A Biography, p. 140.

171-74 of Venus and Adonis would fit into any of the first seventeen Sonnets, for example:
By law of nature thou art bound to breed,
That thine may live when thou thyself art dead;
And so, in spite of death, thou dost survive,
In that thy likeness still is left alive.

In this corner, then, we register a vote for Southampton as the mystery boy. But his identity doesn't really matter very much; for us, what matters is the quality of the passion that Shakespeare invested in this relationship, and the evident effect of the whole experience on his art. If perhaps the boy's mother or guardian had commissioned Shakespeare to write the early Sonnets in an effort to get the lad interested in marriage, it would seem that by the time Shakespeare had passed the "Shall I compare thee to a summer day" stage and begun calling the youth "the master-mistress of my passion," the poet himself was in danger of becoming part of the problem rather than fostering a solution.

To be sure, this same Sonnet 20 does platonically eschew the young man's genital apparatus, Nature (Shakespeare tells him) having "prick'd thee out for woman's pleasure," thereby adding "one thing to my purpose nothing." Nonetheless, some rather uncommon chemical affinities seem to be at work here, and by Sonnet 35, those affinities have produced what can only be reasonably adduced as bitter sexual jealousy. Vladimir Nabokov has written,

"I cannot help feeling there is something essentially wrong about love . . . . What is this mysterious exclusiveness? One may have a thousand friends, but only one love-mate."10

Here in Sonnet 35, where the friend is repeatedly imaged as a beautiful surface that conceals putrid filth and corruption, what motive other than sexual possessiveness might warrant such an eruption? Why else the belabored forgiveness, for that matter?—

No more be grieved at that which thou hast done:
Roses have thorns, and silver fountains mud;
Clouds and eclipses stain both moon and sun,
And loathsome canker dwells in sweetest bud.

Certainly, had the patron extended mere spiritual friendship, however warm and possessive, to others, that would not suffice to explain these images of foul corruption that Shakespeare ascribes to the patron's nature—the mud at the fountain's bottom, the loathsome canker that dwells in sweetest bud, and the like. Nor would asexual love correlate with Shakespeare's

10 Vladimir Nabokov, The Real life of Sebastian Knight (Baltimore:
desperate rationalizations of his suffering, his Olympic leap in
Sonnet 42, for example, from "Shakespeare crucified" (on
discovering the dalliance between patron and dark lady) to "joy" in the
metaphysical oneness that joins himself to his lover-rival:

Both find each other, and I lose both twain,
And both for my sake lay on me this cross:
But here's the joy: my friend and I are one;
Sweet flattery! then she loves but me alone.

Memorable, too, is the picture of Shakespeare the insomniac
(Sonnet 61), presumably estranged or at least physically distant from
the lover now and complaining that "thy image should keep open/
My heavy eyelids to the weary night." Is it likely that mere spiritual
communion between the lover and others is causing Shakespeare's
"slumbers to be broken./While shadows like to thee do mock my
sight"? And the closing couplet surely resembles nothing so much as
sexual jealousy in action—that desire for total, permanent, and
exclusive possession which appears to be bound up with the sex
instinct: "For thee watch I whilst thou dost wake elsewhere./From me
far off, with others all too near."

Skipping over the "rival poet" Sonnets (78-86), where the speaker's
jealousy requires no sexual basis, we come to the marvelous Sonnet
94, whose image of the lover as a summer flower turns up a bitter
stench indeed:

But if that flower with base infection meet,
The basest weed outbraves his dignity;
For sweetest things turn sourest by their deeds;
Lilies that fester smell far worse than weeds.

(So apt was that final line to Shakespeare's feeling that it turns up
again in one of the apocryphal plays, Edward III—Act II, scene i—
though the word "smell" has been softened to "seem.")11 The tables turn,
delightfully, in Sonnet 110, where Shakespeare evidently has been
pressed to confess that he's been no angel either, having wallowed in
the same wild promiscuity he cannot abide in his lover and having,
moreover, been caught lying about it:
Alas, 'tis true I have gone here and there,
And made myself a motley to the view,
Gored mine own thoughts, sold cheap what is most dear,
Made old offences of affections new;
Most true it is that I have look'd on truth Askance
and strangely . . .

Press, 1908), p. xx, calls Edward III "In some ways the most extraordinary of all the doubtful plays." He ascribes the latter, inferior half of the play to George Peele, but credits Shakespeare for the passage containing our lilies that fester (II, ii, 451)

The extraordinary thing about this confession, and what gives it its authentic Shakespearean touch, is the magnificent rationalization by which Shakespeare justifies his infidelities—no festering lily, he!—unjust though his lover's wanderings have been. In the first place, says our poet, "by all above,/These blences gave my heart another youth"; in the second—and this is the mind boggler—"And worse essays proved thee my best of love." Who after all can reasonably object to being proved his sweetheart's best lover and how else can it be done but by sampling pastures elsewhere? The perverse creativity behind a line like that bespeaks a mind that might easily give forth an Aaron, an Edmund, or an Iago, with their unanswerable sophistries. Appropriately the poem ends on a note of sweet reconciliation that stands in welcome contrast to the rage, dread, and chagrin animating so many of these sonnets:

Now all is done, have what shall have no end: Mine appetite I never more will grind
On newer proof, to try an older friend,
A god in love to whom I am confined.

(One wonders, in passing, how the Platonic or anti-homosexual interpreters get past this poem; mainly by skipping over it evidently.)

Regrettably, this little oasis of good feeling in Sonnet 110 cannot last, and the relationship shows continuing signs of deterioration. As far back as Sonnet 36, Shakespeare had complained of the mental pain caused by the secrecy of their connection—a secrecy, incidentally, that seems hard to justify in any terms other than that of a homosexual entanglement, since intense platonic affection among men was not at all taboo in that pleasantly pre-Freudian era:

Let me confess that we two must be twain,
Although our undivided loves are one...
I may not evermore acknowledge thee,
Lest my bewailed guilt should do thee shame,
Nor thou with public kindness honour me,
Unless thou take that honour from thy name....

A secret causes pain because it isolates its bearer, who must forever mask his deepest soul in circumspection. When one considers the precariousness of ordinary marriage, despite the social, religious, and legal sanctions—and in most cases children—binding the contract, who can doubt the double sorrow of a homosexual union, accursed in the light of those same sanctions and with neither children nor public witness to act as a cementing agent? Encompassed thus by the continuous pain of secret-keeping and subject to harrowing bouts of infidelity—both actual and imaginary—
on the part of both lovers, Shakespeare's affair with the golden boy crumbled at last before the most dread onslaught of all: that bugbear of the Sonnets, Time's slow corrosion of physical beauty.

Here we must pause for a moment to reflect on W. H. Auden's much-quoted statement that there is nothing more pathetic than the plight of an aging homosexual. What Auden obviously meant was that homosexual union, lacking the usual social supports, depends all the more strongly on physical attractiveness for love's continuation. Mere external looks may often be the surest guarantee of continued union; and it is tragically clear that the Shakespeare of the Sonnets was progressively losing his. Sonnet 19 offers a keenly painful retrospect on this predicament; here Shakespeare sought to stem Time's ravages by verbal adjuration:

\[\ldots \text{ do whate'er thou wilt, swift-footed Time,} \\
\text{To the wide world and all her fading sweets;} \\
\text{But I forbid thee one most heinous crime:} \\
\text{0, carve not with thy hours my love's fair brow . . . .} \]

Ironically, Shakespeare's final trauma arose precisely from this answered prayer: Time touches the youth only to augment his beauty, while sweeping Shakespeare himself completely outside the arena of sexual competition and selection. Sonnet 68, which may be the weirdest or most puzzling sonnet of them all, gains some clarity from this perspective. Here the speaker looks admiringly at an older man who refuses to use cosmetics ("bastard signs of fair"); the speaker reacts with particular vehemence to the prospect (or advice, perhaps?) of wearing a blond wig or toupee:

\[\text{Thus is his cheek the map of days outworn,} \\
\text{When beauty lived and died as flowers do now,} \\
\text{Before these bastard signs of fair were born,} \\
\text{Or durst inhabit on a living brow;} \\
\text{Before the golden tresses of the dead,} \\
\text{The right of sepulchres, were shorn away,} \\
\text{To live a second life on second head . . . .} \]

Scorning such borrowed beauty, Shakespeare would rather let one's age stand, like the older man's, "Without all ornament, itself and true/Making no summer of another's green . . . ."

To be sure the speaker in the above poem is not necessarily Shakespeare, refusing to bewig and rouge himself, but there is little question that the breakup of Shakespeare's great love affair was caused primarily, in his own judgment, by his failing looks. By the late 1590's, when Shakespeare was in his mid-thirties, thinning hair, deepening ridges in his face, and—given the primitive dentistry of the time—teeth badly rotting or missing would be the normal instance while the golden boy would concomitantly be just now blooming into his
prime, in his early twenties (if Southampton) or his late teens (if Pembroke). Hence Shakespeare, though by no means the feeble old man of his metaphor, depicts himself as dying of old age in the famous Sonnet 73—"That time of year thou mayst in me behold/When yellow leaves, or none, or few, do hang . . . ." It was not the man but the love relationship that was dying, it appears, and with it the man's inmost soul was being extinguished in great pain.

Sonnet 116—"Let me not to the marriage of true minds/Admit impediments"—sounds Platonic enough, since it speaks of a marriage of minds, but the impediments in question turn out to be something carnal, namely the alterations for the worse in Shakespeare's physical appearance with his loss of "rosy lips and cheeks" to Time's bending sickle in a later quatrain. The poem thus represents a desperate and ultimately pathetic attempt to slow love's decay by mere moral suasion, through proclaiming that real love would not consider such physical change significant: "Love is not love/Which alters when it alteration finds." If the "alteration" here mentioned is indeed in Shakespeare's appearance—and why else would he specify the loss of rosy lips and cheeks a few lines later?—this fact would further confirm that the relationship of these two men is at bottom sexual; if the love were asexual, the loss of rosy looks would in fact make no difference. But as it stands, the poem is in the nature of a protest, a splendid and futile outcry as to how love should, by rights, operate:

Love's not Time's fool, though rosy lips and cheeks
Within his bending sickle's compass come;
Love alters not with his brief hours and weeks,
But bears it out even to the edge of doom.

If only it really worked that way! But Sonnet 126, the last in the golden boy series, confirms the opposite picture:

0 thou, my lovely boy, who in thy power
Dost hold Time's fickle glass, his sickle, hour;
Who hast by waning grown and therein show'st
Thy lovers withering as thy sweet self grow'st . . . .

All Shakespeare can do at this juncture is to render the younger man a warning: you just wait until this happens to you!—

Yet fear her [Nature], 0 thou minion of her pleasure!
She may detain, but still not keep, her treasure:
Her audit, though delayed, answer'd must be,
And her quietus is to [sur] render thee.

The dark lady poems reveal if anything, an even sourer end of the affair, since the poet feels free to recriminate against her without rationalizing her behavior. Whereas Shakespeare had, in marvelous tones of self-pity, invited the young man to "Take all my loves, my love, yea, take them all . . . /I do forgive thy robbery gentle
thief" (Sonnet 40), and had further absolved him in Sonnet 41 ("when a woman woos what woman's son/Will sourly leave her till she have prevail'd?")], no such magnanimity is extended to the woman, "my female evil" of Sonnet 144, who "tempteth my better angel from my side,/And would corrupt my saint to be a devil,/Wooing his purity with her foul pride." ("Pride" was a pun for sexual lust.)

To the contrary, whatever grace of spirit we find in this series tends to accrue to Shakespeare himself, who credits himself—in an interesting contrast to Othello—for knowingly accepting his lady's lies as truth in Sonnet 138:

When my love swears that she is made of truth,
I do believe her, though I know she lies . . . .
O love's best habit is in seeming trust.

And to whatever extent Shakespeare has sinned, the lady has always gone him one better: "In loving me thou know'st I am forsworn,/But thou art twice forsworn . . ." (Sonnet 152). Who can doubt that a mind capable of these slanted perspectives would, when left alone at last with its final true love (art), be well furnished toward the creation of an Edmund, a Lady Macbeth, or a Cressida?

There is little reason to doubt, in any case, the authenticity of Shakespeare's revulsion against sex in Sonnet 129, the famous blast against "lust in action" that reveals a mind moved close to madness by desire, guilt, and frustration. Aside from a few islands of joy, the whole experience of the Sonnets has come pretty largely to fulfill the prophecy laid down at the end of Venus and Adonis, where the goddess, thwarted (by the death of Adonis) from slaking her own desire, pronounces this fierce curse on love among mortals:

. . . lo, here I prophesy,
Sorrow on love hereafter shall attend:
It shall be waited on with jealousy,
Find sweet beginning but unsavory end; Ne'er
settled equally, but high or low,
That all love's pleasure shall not match his woe.
It shall be fickle, false, and full of fraud;
Bud and be blasted, in a breathing-while;
The bottom poison, and the top o'erstraw'd
With sweets that shall the truest sight beguile. . . .

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VEN so brief a tour of the Sonnets, then, provides strong evidence that Shakespeare's soul was crushed practically to destruction in these tragic encounters. He gave his male friend, in particular, everything
he had, committing his whole being to their relationship, only to be 
rewarded in the end with a great betrayal that evidently cast its shadow 
over nearly everything Shakespeare would write thereafter, tragedies 
and bitter comedies alike. Certain problem plays, like Hamlet, become 
almost unintelligible apart from the light the Sonnets cast upon them. 
Certainly Hamlet's treatment of women, his unaccountable brutality 
toward Ophelia and his gross bullying of his mother ("Nay, but to live/
In the rank sweat of an unseamed bed./Stew'd in corruption, honeying
and making love . . ."—III, iv. 93-95)—this behavior is not 
understandable in terms of anything those feeble, pathetic creatures 
have done to deserve this. (T. S. Eliot's complaint is perfectly just on 
this score.) Hamlet's behavior is reasonable only in the light of what 
happened to Shakespeare in the Sonnets, the poet's bitterness against 
woman in general finding expression in Hamlet's misogyny and 
loathing of sexuality per se. Similarly, characters like Othello, Leontes, 
Coriolanus, and even Lear ("Let copulation thrive!" etc.,—IV, vi, 116) 
are clearly more understandable in the perspective of the Great 
Betrayal of the Sonnets.

The dilemma Eliot poses, then, is not at all hopeless. A close, 
careful reading of all the Sonnets, supported by biography and a 
reasonable exercise of intuition may go a long ways toward divulging 
the secret soul of the Master. But this can happen only in a large and 
open study, not through the common tactic of analysis and 
appreciation of a handful of sonnets in isolation, like gems from a 
broken necklace. Otherwise, the loss of meaning is enormous. 
Shakespeare wrote his deepest being into these poems, his most 
traumatic passions, and if he later developed into the master 
psychologist of the human soul, it is only because his own soul had been 
subject to a fiery crucible of emotions that taught him fear, rage, 
jealousy and their attendant rationalizations as few men have ever 
known them. He also gained something; from it all which is perhaps best 
described in Rollo May's psychology. Speaking of "an element in sex
and love which is almost universally repressed in our culture, namely 
the tragic, daimonic element" (emphasis his), Dr. May proceeds to define 
"daimonic' as "the natural element within an individual, such as the 
erotic drive, which has the power to take over the whole person."12 
Only when a man's soul is thus integrated, unified in one all-consuming 
obsession, can he know the greatest deeps of emotion deserving of the 
epithet tragic:

The daimonic is present in all nature as blind, ambiguous 
power. But only in man does it become allied with the tragic. For 
tragedy is self-conscious, personal realization of being in the 
power of one element . . . . We have only to call to mind Romeo 
and Juliet, Abelard and Heloise, Tristan and Isolde, Helen of 
Troy, to see the power of sexual love to seize a man and a woman,
lift them up into a whirlwind that defies rational control and may destroy not only themselves but others at the same time.

The daimonic element, according to May, encompasses not only erotic monomania (such as we see in the Sonnets) but other master passions—"sex and eros, anger and rage, and the craving for power are examples"\(^\text{13}\)—that are identified with major Shakespearean characters: Othello, Hamlet, Macbeth, Timon of Athens.

To all these things the Sonnets are the key that unlocked Shakespeare's heart, as Wordsworth put it in "Scorn Not the Sonnet." Whether a "god in love" or a lily that festered, the love object in these poems galvanized the poet's soul into unity, providing at the same time the "objective correlative" whose absence made Hamlet's emotional excesses so mystifying to Mr. Eliot. In passing, we might also note with some satisfaction this confirmation of an old truism: that we learn most about the human soul not from normal, healthy folk—those who are likely to become Steinbecks or Masefields—but from the world's weird people, those roiled in the torment of some deep, and most often secret, trauma.

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This and the following quotation are cited from an essay called "Antidotes for the New Puritanism" that appeared in the *Saturday Review* and later in an anthology called *Relevants* (ed. Quinn and Dolan, New York: The Free Press, 1970), p. 318. The essay is condensed from Dr. May's book *Love and Will.*