

A Comparison of Literary Devices in Shakespearean Sonnets and Poetry

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When it comes to poetry, two distinct periods stand out in literary history: the Elizabethan era, during which William Shakespeare composed his renowned sonnets, and the contemporary era, which boasts a plethora of diverse and innovative poetic works. While both periods offer captivating poetry, the literary devices employed in Shakespearean sonnets and modern poetry differ significantly. This essay aims to explore and compare the use of literary devices in Shakespearean sonnets and modern poetry, shedding light on the unique characteristics that define each era's poetic style.

Structure and Form

Shakespearean sonnets, typically composed of 14 lines and following a specific rhyme scheme (ABAB CDCD EFEF GG), adhere to a strict structure that allows for the development and resolution of thematic ideas within a confined framework. In contrast, modern poetry often experiments with form and structure, breaking free from traditional conventions to explore unconventional layouts, line breaks, and stanza formations.

For example, E.E. Cummings, a prominent modern poet, is known for his unconventional use of punctuation, capitalization, and spacing in poems like "l(a" and "anyone lived in a pretty how town." By eschewing traditional form, Cummings conveys complex emotions and ideas in a visually striking and unconventional manner that challenges readers' expectations.

Imagery and Symbolism

Shakespearean sonnets often rely on vivid imagery and elaborate symbolism to evoke emotion and convey complex themes. The use of metaphors, similes, and personification enriches the sonnets, inviting readers to engage with the text on a deeper level. Consider Sonnet 18 ("Shall I compare thee to a summer's day?"), where Shakespeare compares a beloved to the beauty of summer, creating a timeless and romantic image that resonates with readers.

In modern poetry, imagery and symbolism are also prevalent, but the approach differs in its subtlety and abstraction. Poets like Sylvia Plath and T.S. Eliot employ surreal and fragmented imagery to explore themes of alienation, despair, and disillusionment. In Plath's poem "Daddy," for instance, the recurring imagery of the father figure as both a Nazi and a vampire symbolizes the poet's conflicted emotions towards her deceased father, highlighting the power of symbolism in conveying personal and universal truths.

Shakespearean sonnets often convey a formal and elevated tone, characterized by intricate language, rhyme, and meter. The use of iambic pentameter and traditional poetic diction imbues the sonnets with a sense of grandeur and timelessness, reinforcing the enduring appeal of Shakespeare's works.

In contrast, modern poetry embraces a wider range of tones and voices, reflecting the diversity and complexity of contemporary experiences. Poets like Langston Hughes and Maya Angelou infuse their work with a musical rhythm and colloquial language, creating a sense of intimacy and immediacy that resonates with readers from diverse backgrounds.

Conclusion

While Shakespearean sonnets and modern poetry differ in their use of literary devices, both offer rich and compelling insights into the human experience.

The formal elegance of Shakespeare's sonnets and the experimental spirit of modern poetry showcase the evolution and diversity of poetic expression over time. By comparing and contrasting these two distinct literary traditions, we gain a deeper appreciation for the power of language and the enduring impact of poetry on the human soul.