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EXAMINING THE THEME OF LOVE AND SEDUCTION IN DONNE'S *THE FLEA* AND SHAKESPEARE'S *SHALL I COMPARE THEE TO A SUMMER'S DAY?* A COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS

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Abstract:

This paper has provided a comparative analysis of Shakespeare's 'Shall I Compare Thee to a Summer's Day' and Donne's 'The Flea'. The main aim has been to unearth some of the parallels that could be drawn between the two poetic works, as well as the authors' points of divergence. It is further notable that the analysis has focused on the specific theme of love and seduction. In the findings, Shakespeare's Shall I Compare Thee to a Summer's Day is easier to understand and more accessible while The Flea is a deep and layered poem. Regarding the theme of love and affection, the aspects of language and style form the major point of Donne and Shakespeare's divergence in relation to the theme of love and affection. On the one hand, The Flea depicts a shadowy and oppressive feeling (via dark imagery). On the other hand, Shall I Compare Thee to a Summer's Day has a positive ambience and is warm - due to positive and vivid imagery that Shakespeare embraces. A major similarity in the poems is that they are driven by human power, with both authors keen to find partners. Thus, the poems are strangely similar works, but they are at odds. In summary, The Flea and Shall I Compare Thee to a Summer's Day are comparable because they focus on love and seduction and the theme's associated mysterious forces but the authors' conclusions are made from different perspectives.

Key Words: Love, seduction, human power, positive ambience.

1.0 Introduction

In the English verse, John Donne and William Shakespeare were renowned, early masters. Their body of work exhibited creative metaphor, skillful turn of phrase, and textual dexterity. Also, their poetry's praise of lovers while referring to nature's commonplace objects made them unique from conventional love poetry. With love affecting everyone and present in everyday life, the two poems suggest that the theme is inescapable. In *Shall I compare thee to a summer's day*, Shakespeare describes a woman's beauty to such an extent that he ends up debating on whether or not he should compare it (the beauty) to a summer's day. His feelings for the woman are also strong, and the obvious contrasts and complements depict his emotions. He also indicates that the beauty of his lover is unlikely to fade. From this stance, it is evident that Shakespeare holds an attitude towards the theme of love as that which is worth displaying openly.

On the other hand, Donne's *The Flea* treats love as a delicate topic and assumes an argumentatively and liberalistic structured persuasion to emotion. Particularly, Donne uses the flea, a pest, to associate with a coy and pure mistress; with the central motivation being a quest to finish the courtship he has with her. As such, Donne's poem is similar to Shakespeare's work in such a way that they both refer to the dominant theme of love. However, Shakespeare's *Shall I compare thee to a summer's day* emphasizes emotional love while Donne's *The Flea* emphasizes physical love. It is further notable that in Donne's *The Flea*, the love poem depicts human bodies as microcosms to such an extent that when individuals are in love, other issues in the world do not matter much. Instead, the enraptured lovers perceive themselves as the only existing beings. Despite this difference, the two poems exhibit commonality whereby the authors emphasize that love needs to be displayed openly. This paper provides a comparative analysis of the poems.

2.0 Focusing on The Theme of Love and Seduction in Donne's *The Flea* and Shakespeare's *Shall I Compare Thee to a Summer's Day*?

Shall I Compare Thee to a Summer's Day and *The Flea* emerge as different poems, but they are very similar. The dominant theme in both poems concerns love and seduction. Whereas this commonality suggests that parallels could be drawn between Donne and Shakespeare's works, the two authors assume different stances in approaching the theme. As a core theme in Donne's *The Flea*, the subject of love and seduction is presented in such a way that the mistress continually rejects his advances. However, Donne is keen to ensure that they copulate. The author says, "It sucked me first, and now sucks thee... And in this flea our two bloods mingled be... A sin, nor shame, nor loss of maidenhead" (3-4, 6). In a quest to better Donne's chances, he writes the poem to the mistress. Indeed, *The Flea* forms a darkly seductive work through which comparisons of previous and current relationships between the mistress and Donne could be made; with the relationships compared further to the case of a flea. The author says, "And in this flea our two bloods mingled be" (4).

It is further notable that Donne's seduction of the mistress is that which is marked by curiosity. He proceeds to indicate that through the flea's blood, they are linked. He states further that the linkage is so strong that it almost surpasses a marriage tie. The author says, "It sucked me first, and now sucks thee... And in this flea our two bloods mingled be" (3, 4). Donne proceeds to seduce his mistress by indicating that given the linkage they already have (through the blood of the flea), sex should not be much of a moral issue. With the linkage perceived to be eternal and so strong that it surpasses marriage vows made in formal religious institutions, Donne illustrates that sex with his mistress is unlikely to bring a loss of manhood or shame. He says, "A sin, nor shame, nor loss of maidenhead" (6).

In Shakespeare's *Shall I Compare Thee to a Summer's Day*, the poem deviates from the flea's nature but still presents the subject of love and seduction. In this poem, the central direction is that Shakespeare does not demonstrate what he wants (as in the case of Donne). Instead, he uses *Shall I Compare Thee to a Summer's Day* to indicate what he feels about the issue of love and seduction. Also, Shakespeare's declaration of his eternal love is achieved when he likens it to heaven. Particularly, he employs personification to demonstrate his relationship as that which is reflective of eternal summer. The author says, "But thy eternal summer shall not fade" (9). Similarly, Shakespeare's *Shall I Compare Thee to a Summer's Day* demonstrates that with time, beauty declines. He says, "And summer's lease hath all too short a date... every fair from fair sometime declines" (4, 7). In so doing, he emphasizes the need for his lover to support him in the love while the beauty lasts. Despite the differences in Donne and Shakespeare's poetic illustrations, the two works demonstrate the authors' love from their respective mistresses as a central objective.

Whereas similarity in the poems concerns the central subject that involves the theme of love and seduction, the style and language employed by Shakespeare and Donne are different. For instance, Donne's *The Flea* reflects a visually dark poem when he employs dark imagery to present the intended message to the audience. To achieve this objective, he refers to the "Purpled thy nail..." (20), and "living walls of jet" (15); aspects that end up creating the poem's funeral theme capable of inducing depressive and dark atmospheres. Notably, Donne uses this dark imagery purposely to aid in persuading the mistress to acknowledge the gloomy nature of the life that surrounds her at that time, and that he is better placed to improve it. Hence, dark imagery as a persuasive agent is used to support Donne's quest to induce love into the mistress' life.

The issue of style and language as a major point of divergence between the two poems is also evident when Shakespeare's *Shall I Compare Thee to a Summer's Day* succeeds in inducing a joyous atmosphere - having employed positive and vivid imagery. Specifically, Shakespeare uses "a summer's day" (1) to refer to their love. The love that he has with the mistress is also timely in such a way that it comes after winter and the author proceeds to state that neither a force of death nor evil will stall the progress of

their love. He says, "...Nor shall death brag thou wand'rest in his shade" (11). From the perspective of the reader, such positive and vivid imagery that Shakespeare employs to present the theme of love and seduction ends up creating uplifting emotions. Also, Shakespeare succeeds in establishing a linkage between the sun and the reader's imagination via the choice of words. Some of the words that depict this linkage include "shines" (5), "gold" (6), and "temperate" (2). Based on these affirmations regarding the divergence in the style and language used by Donne and Shakespeare, it is worth inferring that both poems address the theme of love and affection but *The Flea* depicts a shadowy and oppressive feeling (via dark imagery) while *Shall I Compare Thee to a Summer's Day* has positive ambience and is warm - due to positive and vivid imagery.

Another difference is that Donne's *The Flea* presents the central theme of love and seduction via evidence of interaction involving the mistress and the author. On the one hand, Donne's advances are rejected. On the other hand, he succeeds in personifying the mistress' decision to kill the flea by saying, "Purpled thy nail, in blood of innocence?" (20). The eventuality is that the relationship between the mistress and Donne changes. Particularly, there is a shift from lust to sorrow; depicted further by Donne's emotions. The author says, "Just so much honor, when thou yield'st to me... Will waste, as this flea's death took life from thee" (26, 27). By saying so, Donne's sorrowful reaction to the mistress' killing of the flea suggests that her decision to reject his advances (just like the dead flea that has the blood of the two) might translate into a greater loss for both parties rather than be a loss only on Donne's side.

3.0 Conclusion

In the two poems, the intermediate form associated with the theme of love and seduction is presented. Under analysis and from afar, Shakespeare's *Shall I Compare Thee to a Summer's Day* emerges as a work that is not only easier to understand but also more accessible. The poem is successful in conveying the author's emotions, intended to be understood by the lover. On the other hand, Donne presents a deep and layered poem. Occurring in a short space, *The Flea* conveys a lot of information. Based on the comparative analysis in this paper, the major difference between the two works concerns the issues of language and style. *The Flea* depicts a shadowy and oppressive feeling (via dark imagery) while *Shall I Compare Thee to a Summer's Day* has positive ambience and is warm - due to positive and vivid imagery. An additionally notable aspect is that the human drive powers the two poems, especially due to the authors' quest to find partners. Also, Donne and Shakespeare's works express the inner emotions of the poets in relation to mysterious forces surrounding the theme of love and seduction. Hence, the poems emerge as strangely similar works, yet they are at odds. Overall, *The Flea* and *Shall I Compare Thee to a Summer's Day* are worth comparing because Donne and Shakespeare are concerned with the central theme of love and seduction, but the conclusions that they make regarding this subject are established from different perspectives.

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Note: This research is funded by the Deanship of Scientific Research at Zarqa University-Jordan