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Sonnet 55: Not marble nor the gilded monuments By William Shakespeare

Not marble nor the gilded monuments
Of princes shall outlive this powerful rhyme,
But you shall shine more bright in these contents
Than unswept stone besmeared with sluttish time.
When wasteful war shall statues overturn,
And broils root out the work of masonry,
Nor Mars his sword nor war's quick fire shall burn
The living record of your memory.
'Gainst death and all-oblivious enmity
Shall you pace forth; your praise shall still find room
Even in the eyes of all posterity
That wear this world out to the ending doom.
So, till the Judgement that yourself arise,

You live in this, and dwell in lovers' eyes.

Sonnet 55 "Not Marble, Nor The Gilded Monuments "

by William Shakespeare

The poem, Not Marble, Nor The Gilded Monuments, by William Shakespeare, is 55 sonnet of 154 sonnets written by Shakespeare. Written in blank verse, the poem has a musical quality that is heightened still further by the use of alliteration here and there. The thought about the futility of monuments and statues is developed and wound up very skillfully. The phrase Not Marble, nor the Gilded Monuments though apparently incomplete spells out all that the poet wishes to convey through the poem. The coinage is self-explanatory and it brings out the futility of statues and monuments highlighting the essentiality of leading exemplary lives to leave behind an indelible impression on humanity. Hence the chosen title is an apt one.

The poet in the poem is highly impressed with the greatness of his friend and addresses this poem to him. Though this great man has not got any ornate statues and monuments built, the poet claims that his memory would outlive the rich and the powerful that make a conscious effort to immortalize themselves. The passage of time and the ravages of war would wipe out the monuments and statues got built by them.

However, 'the living record' of the memory of the poet's friend and his noble deeds would not be obliterated from the pages of literature and the hearts of the admirers. His achievements would leave behind such an indelible impact on people's mind that he will be remembered by posterity till the doomsday when he would rise from the grave and God would reward him with still higher statues.

Theme of Sonnet 55

The sonnet, Not Marble, nor the Gilded Monuments brings out the futility of statues and ornate monuments raised by the rich and the powerful to immortalize themselves. The ravages of time on these monuments defeat the very purpose of building them and rob their architects of the pleasure of being remembered by the generations to come. The poem also brings out the poet's faith in his verse and its ability to outlive the transient monuments.

Analysis of Sonnet 55: "Not marble nor the gilded monuments"

*Not marble nor the gilded monuments
Of princes shall outlive this powerful rhyme,
But you shall shine more bright in these contents
Than unswept stone besmeared with sluttish time.*

The poet in Sonnet 55 says that his verse will survive longer than the marble statues and the gold-plated monuments of the rich and powerful. With the passage of time these monuments would wear a neglected look and unfaithful time would take its toll and leave the monuments perishing. The word ‘marble’ in the above lines stands for the ornate statues of the princes, that they get built to immortalize themselves. In the fourth line of this sonnet, the poet refers to Time as ‘Sluttish, which is a derogatory word and refer to a dirty, untrustworthy woman. The poet in this line calls time ‘sluttish’ as it too is not loyal to anyone. Just as a slut loses her charm and beauty with time, the princes and the powerful people, who enjoy great privileges and popularity at one time lose them and are forgotten with the passage of time.

The ornate monuments and statues that they get erected to perpetuate their names even after their death stand neglected and, eventually, are decayed and get destroyed by war or ravages of time. Hence, time like a slut is not loyal to anyone. However, according to the poet, it is unable to obliterate the impact of poetry that is written in praise of great souls like the poet’s friend. The value oriented lives lived by such people are commemorated in verses which are preserved in the admirers’ memory which even time finds difficult to wipe out.

*When wasteful war shall statues overturn,
And broils root out the work of masonry,
Nor Mars his sword nor war’s quick fire shall burn
The living record of your memory.*

The destructive wars’ chaotic effect would ruin the statues and monuments. However ‘your’ biography recorded in the poet’s verse would outlive the ornate works of art and architecture and both the god of war’s sword and the destructive power of war and time would fail to fade your memory from the minds of people. In the above lines, the poet calls the wars wasteful because they cause widespread death and destruction. The word ‘your’ in the last line of the stanza stands for Shakespeare’s friend or a worthy man who

lived a commendable life, while ‘living record of your memory’ refers to the sonnet that the poet has written in the memory of his friend. It would outlive all the statues and monuments.

*'Gainst death and all-oblivious enmity
Shall you pace forth; your praise shall still find room
Even in the eyes of all posterity
That wear this world out to the ending doom.*

In these lines, the poet says that despite death and the enemies’ prejudice, you would continue to be praised and would live in the memory of people. Even generation to come would remember you and thus you would live in people’ minds till the doomsday. These lines are addressed to a praise-worthy friend of the poet, and when the poet says, “oblivious enmity”, he means the enmity that makes one forget the values of life.

*So, till the Judgement that yourself arise,
You live in this, and dwell in lovers’ eyes.*

Through these two lines, the poet says that on the day of judgment you would arise with the rest of the souls from your grave. Till then you will stay alive in the poet’s works and in the hearts of your admirers. The use of word ‘this’ in the line ‘You live in this’, stands for the poet’s verse that would keep his friend alive till the doomsday, whereas the use of phrase ‘dwell in lover’s eyes’ means that even after ‘he’ is no more, he would live in the memory of his admirers.

On ‘the day of judgement’ when each individual would finally be given his due by god Almighty, ‘he’ would arise along with the rest of the souls from his grave.

Critical Appreciation

The sonnet Not Marble, Nor the Gilded Monument by William Shakespeare opens eyes to a great truth of life that nothing in life is permanent except the immortality that one can achieve through literature. Often successful people seek to immortalize their greatness and fame by erecting statues and monuments for themselves. Sadly enough, such memories are destroyed by the ravages of time that spares none however great or trivial.

There are numerous such historic pieces of evidence lying neglected throughout the world. Often they are destroyed in wars, riots etc. But the truly noble thoughts and deeds never die out. The warmth of love and reverence generated in the human hearts continue to live forever.

The ideas of great souls as Shakespeare, Swami Vivekananda, Dr. B.R. Ambedkar, Mahatma Gandhi, Florence Nightingale and countless other such awakened souls continue to inspire respect and following even today. They do not need the evidence of their greatness through monuments.

Message of Sonnet 55

The poem conveys the messages that great and noble souls leave an indelible impact on the fellow beings and they are remembered by posterity for a long time to come. Monuments and statues, howsoever ornate and rich, fail to immortalize the rich and the powerful.