

Q. What are the reasons that lead critics to say that Shakespeare's sonnets are autobiographical in nature.

Or

Do you agree with the view that the sonnets of Shakespeare are autobiographical in theme and content ?

Or

Do you agree with Wordsworth that with the Key (Sonnets) Shakespeare unlocked his heart ?

Ans. Shakespeare's sonnets are a bouquet of fragrant flowers at once wonderful and colourful. These can be enjoyed for their lyric grace and sense of drama. Fact hunting biographical critics have interpreted the sonnets as autobiographical. The Romantic critics launched the autobiographical reading of these sonnets, while earlier critics could not appreciate them thus. This earlier attitude is best illustrated by Kemp Malone who said : "I am confident that these compositions had neither the poet himself nor any individual in view ; but were merely the effusions of his fancy, written upon various topics for the amusement of a private circle, as indeed the words of Meres point out : 'witness his sugared sonnets among his private friends.'

The Romantic View—It was the Romantics who inaugurated the theory that the sonnets were autobiographical. Among the Continental critics the Schlegel brothers were the foremost to propound this theory. F. W. Schlegel wrote : "It is in these minor pieces of Shakespeare that we are first introduced to a personal knowledge of the great poet and his feelings." His brother A. W. Schlegel also concurred with this view and in his inimitable manner said that these sonnets "point most unequivocally the actual situations and sentiments of the poet." Among the English critics Wordsworth was the first to maintain that in these sonnets Shakespeare expresses his own feelings in his own person. In one of his lyrics Wordsworth said that with his key of the sonnets Shakespeare "unlocked his heart."

The post-Romantic view—Among the post-Romantics Browning strikes a dissenting note. He said that no poet should allow the vulgar gaze of the public into the treasured and secret chambers of his soul. But Swinburne hotly contested this pronouncement and asserted the autobiographical worth of these sonnets. Later Furnival dismissed the theory that the sonnets were dramatic and hence impersonal. He said, "No one can understand Shakespeare who does not hold that his sonnets are autobiographical, and

that they explain the depths of the soul of Shakespeare who wrote the plays."

Twentieth Century Views—Twentieth century critics, in the main, accept this autobiographical theory. Bradley is the most important of the 20th century critics whose views must be taken with the greatest respect. He agrees that some of the sonnets may be an exercise of imagination but maintains that the majority of them are personal and autobiographical. He says, "Some of these poems may be mere exercise, of art; that all of them are poems, and not letters, much less affidavits" is true, yet Shakespeare did not invent the whole thing. Clutton Brock believes that the bulk of the earlier sonnets were conventional literary exercises but the later ones had the stamp of the personality.

The assumption of the Autobiographical theory—This autobiographical theory assumes that the sonnets are the authentic records of real events and relationships. The intensity of passion and sincerity of feelings as revealed in these sonnets give us the echo of the heart-beat of the poet, which cannot be expressed unless experienced. The ideal devotion to the Friend may have a conventional touch, but the fiery, fleshly passion expressed so poignantly rings absolutely true.

The Impersonal Theory—However, this is only one side of the spectrum. There are many apologists, and very influential ones at that, of the impersonal theory. To them the sonnets have no existence as human documents. Such critics maintain that Shakespeare had what Keats calls negative capability—a capability to identify himself with all his creations and characters. He can, at the same time, negate or dissociate himself from his creations. The passions of Hamlet, Lear and Othello are unmistakable yet these passions prove Shakespeare's great artistry. Further, sonneteering was in vogue at that time. J. B. Leishman is the most influential critic of this impersonal school. He tries to trace Shakespeare's themes back to Latin, Italian and French patterns. Just as Shakespeare claims that he would confer immortality on his friend, the same way Horace claimed to have conferred immortality upon his friends. Then the idea of immortalising power of poetry is frequent in the Odes of Pindar. Again, Shakespeare's self-dramatisation can be traced back to Ronsard. These striking parallels prove that Shakespeare was within the tradition and not outside it.

The sonnets as Literary Exercises—These apologists of the impersonal theory maintain that these sonnets are the literary exercises of a dramatist. And a dramatist, seldom if ever, airs his own views. The words spoken by Othello are not the view of Shakespeare just as the words spoken by Iago are not his. Campbell, with great emphasis asserts that "beyond some general expression of his natural feelings Shakespeare's sonnets give us no access to his personal history." In one of the sonnets Shakespeare said :

" So all my best is dressing old words new,
Spending again what is already spent.