Understanding Sonnets and Shakespeare

A comprehensive exploration of sonnets, metaphors, and the life and works of William Shakespeare, the most widely admired and respected writer in the English language.

작성자: 찬길 박

What is a Sonnet?

A lyric poem comprising 14 rhyming lines of equal length: iambic pentameters in English. The rhyme schemes of the sonnet follow two basic patterns.

The Italian sonnet (also called the Petrarchan sonnet after the most influential of the Italian sonneteers) comprises an 8-line 'octave' of two quatrains, rhymed **abbaabba**, followed by a 6-line 'sestet' usually rhymed **cdecde** or **cdcdcd**. The transition from octave to sestet usually coincides with a 'turn' (Italian, *volta*) in the argument or mood of the poem. In a variant form used by the English poet John Milton, however, the 'turn' is delayed to a later position around the tenth line. Some later poets—notably William. Wordsworth—have employed this feature of the 'Miltonic sonnet while relaxing the rhyme scheme of the octave to *abbaacca*. The Italian pattern has remained the most widely used in English and other languages.

The English Sonnet Structure

The English sonnet (also called the Shakespearean sonnet after its foremost practitioner) comprises three quatrains and a final couplet, rhyming **ababcdcdefefgg**. An important variant of this is the Spenserian sonnet (introduced by the Elizabethan poet Edmund Spenser), which links the three quatrains by rhyme, in the sequence **ababbcbccdcdee**. In either form, the 'turn' comes with the final couplet, which may sometimes achieve the neatness of an epigram.

Shakespearean Sonnet

Three quatrains + couplet

Rhyme scheme: ababcdcdefefgg

Turn occurs in final couplet

Spenserian Sonnet

Three linked quatrains + couplet

Rhyme scheme: ababbcbccdcdee

Linked quatrains create continuity

The History and Evolution of Sonnets

Originating in Italy, the sonnet was established by Petrarch in the 14th century as a major form of love poetry, and came to be adopted in Spain, France, and England in the 16th century, and in Germany in the 17th. The standard subject-matter of early sonnets was the torments of sexual love (usually within a courtly love convention), but in the 17th century John Donne extended the sonnet's scope to religion, while Milton extended it to politics.

Although largely neglected in the 18th century, the sonnet was revived in the 19th by Wordsworth, Keats, and Baudelaire, and is still widely used. Some poets have written connected series of sonnets, known as sonnet sequences or sonnet cycles: of these, the outstanding English examples are Sir Philip Sidney's *Astrophel and Stella* (1591), Spenser's *Amoretti* (1595), and Shakespeare's *Sonnets* (1609); later examples include Elizabeth Barrett Browning's *Sonnets from the Portuguese* (1850) and W. H. Auden's 'In Time of War' (1939). A group of sonnets formally linked by repeated lines is known as a crown of sonnets.

What is Metaphor?

When the comparison is implicit, describing something as if it were something else, it is called a metaphor(490/837).

Metaphor, the most important and widespread **FIGURE OF SPEECH**, in which one thing, idea, or action is referred to by a word or expression normally denoting another thing, idea, or action, so as to suggest some common quality shared by the two. In metaphor, this resemblance is assumed as an imaginary identity rather than directly stated as a comparison: referring to a man as that pig, or saying he is a pig is metaphorical, whereas he is like a pig is a **SIMILE**. Metaphors may also appear as verbs (a talent may blossom) or as adjectives (a novice may be green), or in longer **IDIOMATIC** phrases, e.g. to throw the baby out with the bath–water.

The Power and Function of Metaphor

The use of metaphor to create new combinations of ideas is a major feature of **POETRY**, although it is quite possible to write poems without metaphors. Much of our everyday language is also made up of metaphorical words and phrases that pass unnoticed as 'dead' metaphors, like the branch of an organization.

A mixed metaphor is one in which the combination of qualities suggested is illogical or ridiculous (see also catachresis), usually as a result of trying to apply two metaphors to one thing: those vipers stabbed us in the back.

Modern analysis of metaphors and similes distinguishes the primary literal term (called the 'TENOR') from the secondary figurative term (the 'vehicle') applied to it: in the metaphor the road of life, the tenor is life, and the vehicle is the road.

Types of Metaphor

- Conventional metaphors (everyday language)
- Poetic metaphors (creative, literary)
- Extended metaphors (developed throughout text)
- Mixed metaphors (illogical combinations)

Components of Metaphor

- Tenor (the subject being described)
- Vehicle (the figurative term applied)
- Ground (shared qualities between tenor and vehicle)
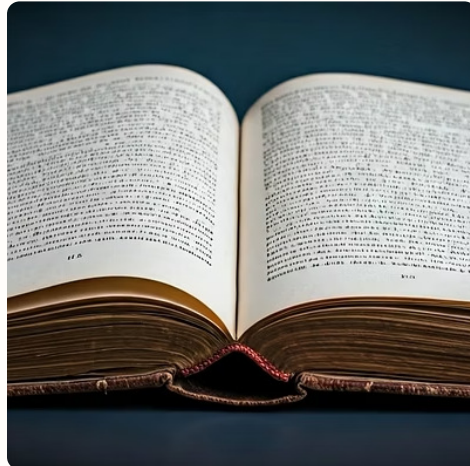
Who is Shakespeare?

William Shakespeare is the most widely admired and respected writer in the English language. He is as significant a literary figure as the great writers of antiquity: Homer, Plato, Virgil. Only a handful of 'modern' authors can feasibly be seen as his equal: Dante, Cervantes, Molière, Tolstoy. He towers above his British contemporaries: Christopher Marlowe, Ben Jonson and John Webster.

There are few writers of stature, both in Britain and abroad, who have not claimed Shakespeare as a powerful and overwhelming influence. He has generated more works of criticism than any other writer, and he is still the most performed playwright in the world. He is also the most frequently quoted writer in the world and many of his new coinages have passed into the language.

Shakespeare's Enduring Legacy

Shakespeare created some of the stage's most enduring characters: Falstaff, Hamlet, Shylock, Richard III, Ariel and Caliban. His works have been turned into operas by Verdi and Wagner and paintings by Delacroix, Turner and Dante Gabriel Rossetti. His plays have been filmed by Orson Welles, Laurence Olivier, Jean-Luc Godard and Akira Kurosawa. He remains the largest creative presence in Western culture.

However, in his own lifetime, things were different. Shakespeare was one of a number of talented playwrights operating in London between 1580 and 1610. Although his plays were always popular, Shakespeare was rarely singled out as the 'greatest' of Elizabethan writers. Perhaps because of this, few documents relating to Shakespeare's life survive. There are a few comments by rival dramatists and a number of legal documents about his marriage and later life. However, this gives no clear indication of his temperament or personality.

Shakespeare's Elusive Personality

There are next to no clues about Shakespeare's personality in the plays. Keats claimed that Shakespeare had 'negative capability', that is to say, he could give equal dramatic weight to opposing points of view. However, this means that it is impossible to say anything about Shakespeare's politics or principles. Some critics have claimed that Shakespeare is a conservative, because he seems to show that royalty and hierarchy are central to the organic health of society. However, other critics have pointed to Shakespeare's implicit sympathy with outsider figures, like Shylock the Jew in *The Merchant of Venice*. In *Coriolanus*, his most political play, he finds both virtues and vices in the tyrannical Coriolanus and the democratic Tribunes.

Because of this elusive quality, some writers and critics have suggested that Shakespeare did not actually exist. He was a 'front' for a committee of writers and actors. Certainly, his plays often seem to be the work of many hands. In particular, the comic interludes in his works have a different linguistic and rhythmic cadence to his more ornate poetic scenes.

The Authorship Question

Some critics claim Shakespeare's works were written by someone else

Alternative Candidates

Francis Bacon, Christopher Marlowe, and Edward De Vere proposed as authors

Scholarly Consensus

Most academics accept Shakespeare as the true author of the works

Stylistic Evidence

Similar principles at work across the canon suggest one primary author

Shakespeare's Early Life

William Shakespeare was born in April 1564. Nobody is certain about the exact date, only that he was baptised on 26th April at the Holy Trinity Church, Stratford-upon-Avon. His mother, Mary Arden, had had two children before William, but they had died in infancy. His father, John Shakespeare, had moved to Stratford in 1552, and by the time of Shakespeare's birth, he was a successful businessman, specialising in making and selling gloves.
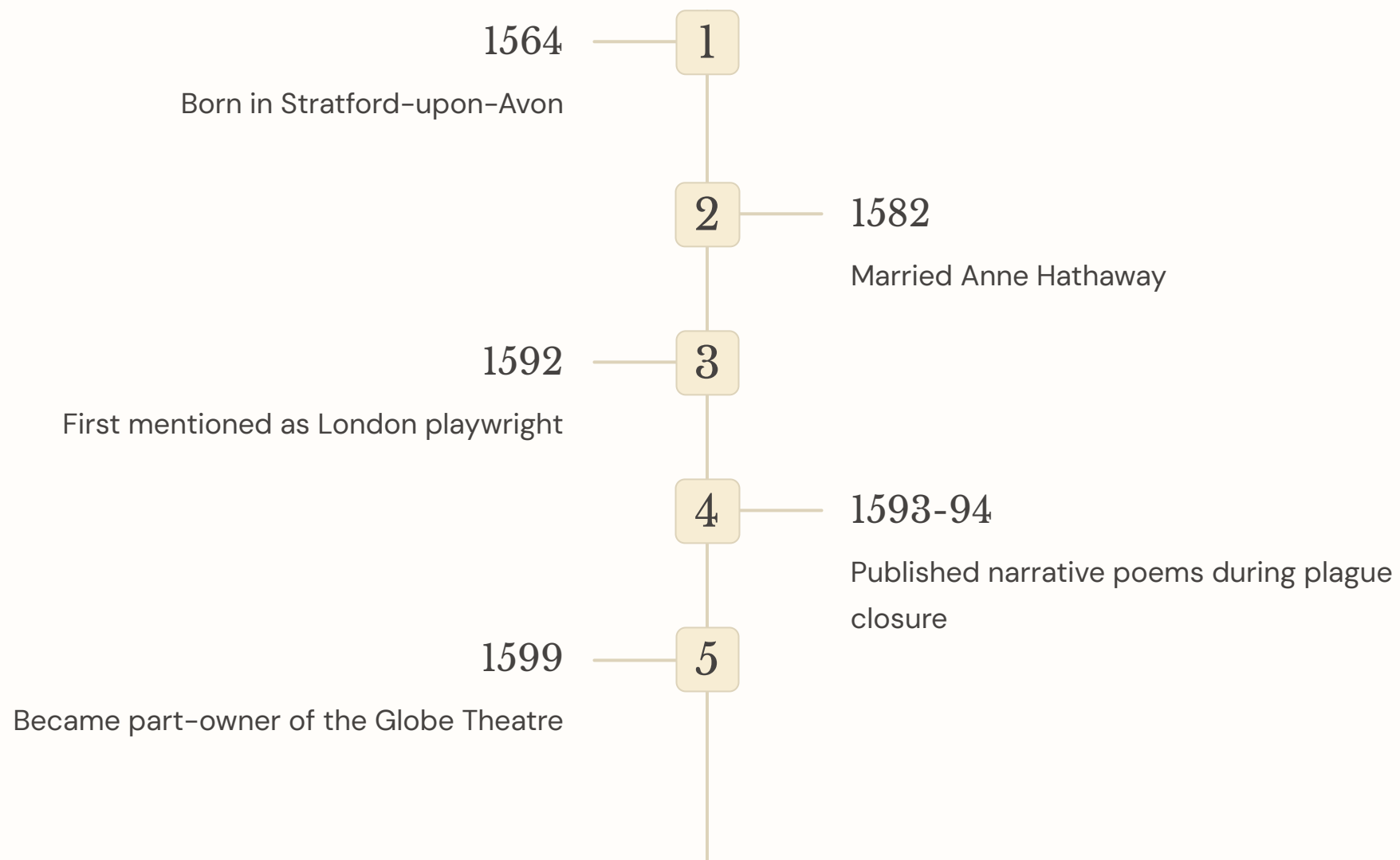
In the 1560s, John Shakespeare became an active municipal politician, serving as chamberlain (1561), alderman (1565) and mayor (1568). Because of this, it is likely that William and his siblings were granted a solid middle-class provincial education. It is possible that Shakespeare attended King's New School, near the Guild Hall in Stratford.

The next significant fact that is known about Shakespeare concerns Anne Hathaway, a woman eight years his senior. She became pregnant by him in the summer of 1582 and a 'shotgun' wedding was arranged in November 1582. Their daughter Susannah was born in May 1583. Most critics seem to agree that Shakespeare and Anne Hathaway did not have a particularly close or happy marriage. They had only two more children (twins called Hamnet and Judith) and they spent few of the next thirty years together. In his will, Shakespeare famously left Anne his 'second-best bed'.

Shakespeare's Rise to Prominence

Between 1585 and 1592, next to nothing is known about Shakespeare's movements. The unreliable biographer John Aubrey claimed that he became a schoolmaster. Other critics have suggested that he joined the army. However, what is beyond doubt is that sometime before 1592, he decided to join a troupe of players. It is possible that he joined that the Queen's Men in the late 1580s. What is more certain is that by 1592 he had established himself as an actor and writer. There is an unflattering reference to him as an 'upstart crow' in Robert Greene's *Groatsworth of Wit* (1592).

In the early 1590s, the theatres were closed due to plague. In consequence, Shakespeare produced two narrative poems. These are generally seen as Shakespeare's earliest work, although it is possible that *Henry VI*, *The Comedy of Errors* and *Titus Andronicus* were written before them. Both *Venus and Adonis* (1593) and *The Rape of Lucrece* (1594) were dedicated to the Earl of Southampton. This has fuelled speculation by critics that Southampton and Shakespeare enjoyed a homosexual relationship at some time in the early 1590s. Critics have also read homoerotic meanings into the sonnets, which were written in this period, but not published until 1609.

1564 — **1**

Born in Stratford-upon-Avon

2 — **1582**

Married Anne Hathaway

1592 — **3**

First mentioned as London playwright

4 — **1593-94**

Published narrative poems during plague closure

1599 — **5**

Became part-owner of the Globe Theatre

Shakespeare's Early Works

Venus and Adonis is a 1194-line narrative poem, based on an episode in Ovid's *Metamorphoses*. It is about the obsessive love of the goddess Venus for the unwilling Adonis. Although it is rarely read today, it was hugely popular in Shakespeare's lifetime, going through nine reprints by 1616 and confirming the Elizabethan and Jacobean trend for long mythological poems, like Marlowe's *Hero and Leander*. *The Rape of Lucrece* followed in 1594. Also based on Ovid's writings, this is much darker in tone than *Venus and Adonis*. It depicts the cruel rape of Lucrece by the headstrong Tarquin, and Lucrece's subsequent despair and suicide.

The sonnets, on the other hand, are still read and enjoyed. The most enduring are probably Sonnet 18 ('Shall I compare thee to a Summer's day?'), Sonnet 29 ('When in disgrace with fortune and men's eyes'), Sonnet 55 ('Not marble, nor the gilded monuments'), Sonnet 116 ('Let me not to the marriage of true minds') and Sonnet 130 ('My mistress' eyes are nothing like the sun').

Shakespeare's Sonnets

Shakespeare's sonnets were printed in 1609 and probably date from the 1590s. Most of them trace the course of the writer's affection for a young man of rank and beauty: the first 17 urge him to marry to reproduce his beauty. The complete sequence of 154 sonnets was issued by the publisher Thomas Thorpe in 1609 with a dedication to "Mr W. H., the onlie begetter of these insuing sonnets".

Mr W. H. has been identified as (among others) William, Lord Herbert, afterwards earl of Pembroke, or Henry Wriothesley, earl of Southampton, and further as the young man addressed in the sonnets. Another view argues that Mr W. H. was a friend of Thorpe, through whose good offices the manuscript had reached his hands–"begetter" being used in the sense of "getter" or "procurer".

Other characters are alluded to in sequence including a mistress stolen by a friend (40–42), a rival poet (78–80 and 80–86), and a dark beauty loved by the author (127–52). Numerous identifications for all the "characters" involved in the sequence, as well as for Mr W. H., have been put forward. Perhaps the most ingenious and amusing of these is Wilde's *The Portrait of Mr W. H.*

The Fair Youth

Sonnets 1–126 address a beautiful young man, urging him to marry and reproduce his beauty, then expressing deep affection

The Dark Lady

Sonnets 127–152 describe a dark-haired, dark-eyed woman with whom the poet has a complicated relationship

The Rival Poet

Several sonnets mention another poet who competes for the patron's attention and favor
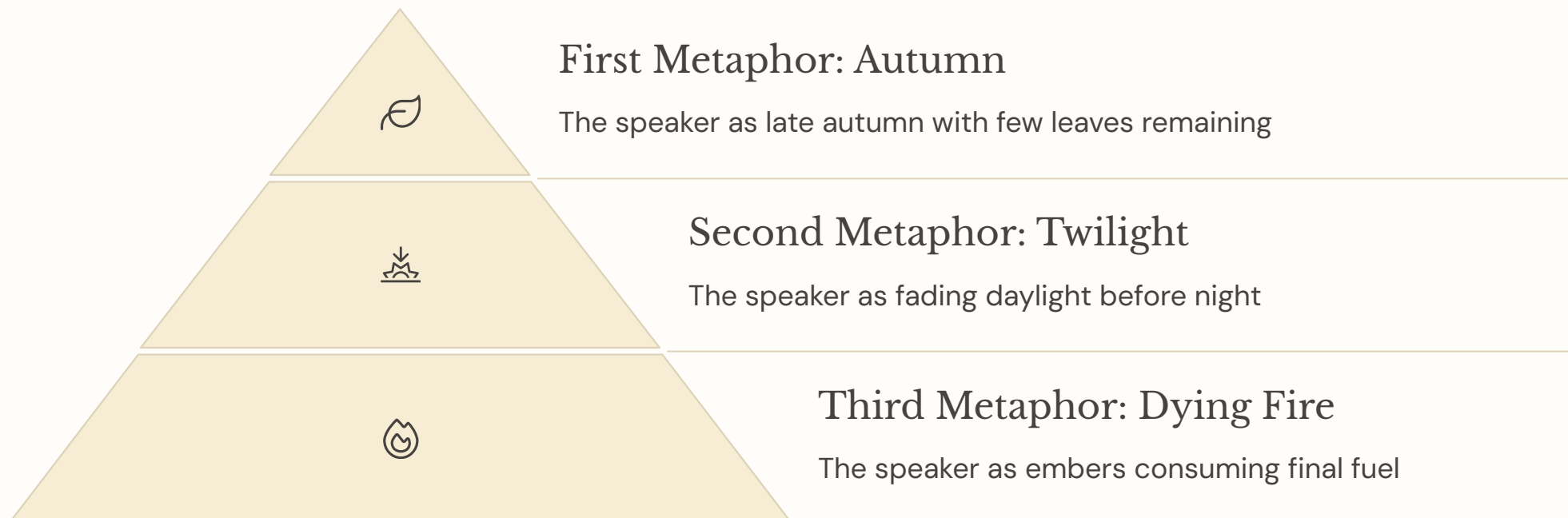
Shakespeare's Sonnet 73

That time of year thou mayst in me behold

When yellow leaves, or none, or few, do hang

Upon those boughs which shake against the cold,

Bare ruined choirs, where late the sweet birds sang.

In me thou see'st the twilight of such day

As after sunset fadeth in the west;

Which by and by black night doth take away,

Death's second self, that seals up all in rest.

In me thou see'st the glowing of such fire,

That on the ashes of his youth doth lie,

As the deathbed whereon it must expire,

Consumed with that which it was nourished by.

This thou perceiv'st, which makes thy love more strong,

To love that well which thou must leave ere long.

1609

Metaphor in Sonnet 73

The first four lines of "That time of year" evoke images of the late autumn, but notice that the poet does not have the speaker say directly that his physical condition and age make him resemble autumn. He draws the comparison without stating it as a comparison: You can see my own state, he says, in the coming of winter, when almost all the leaves have fallen from the trees. The speaker portrays himself indirectly by talking about the passing of the year.

The poem uses metaphor; that is, one thing is pictured as if it were something else. "That time of year" goes on to another metaphor in lines 5–8 and still another in lines 9–12, and each metaphor contributes to our understanding of the speaker's sense of his old age and approaching death. More important, however, is the way the metaphors give us feelings, an emotional sense of the speaker's age and of his own attitude toward aging. Through the metaphors we come to understand, appreciate, and to some extent share the increasing sense of urgency that the poem expresses.

First Metaphor: Autumn

The speaker as late autumn with few leaves remaining

Second Metaphor: Twilight

The speaker as fading daylight before night

Third Metaphor: Dying Fire

The speaker as embers consuming final fuel

The Structure of Metaphor in Sonnet 73

Our emotional sense of the poem depends largely on the way each metaphor is developed and by the way each metaphor leads, with its own kind of internal logic, to another, even as later metaphors build on earlier ones.

The poem represents an unusually intricate use of images to organize a poem and focus its emotional impact. Each metaphor contributes to the overall theme of mortality and the passage of time, but does so through different imagery that progressively intensifies the sense of approaching death:

1. The autumn metaphor shows a seasonal decline that will eventually renew
2. The twilight metaphor shows the daily cycle moving toward darkness
3. The fire metaphor shows final consumption with no possibility of renewal

This progression creates a powerful emotional journey that culminates in the final couplet's assertion that awareness of mortality strengthens love.

Shakespeare's Major Plays

Shakespeare wrote approximately 37 plays spanning multiple genres. His works are traditionally divided into comedies, histories, and tragedies, with some later plays classified as romances.

Notable Comedies

- *A Midsummer Night's Dream*
- *Much Ado About Nothing*
- *As You Like It*
- *Twelfth Night*
- *The Merchant of Venice*

Notable Histories

- *Richard III*
- *Henry IV* (Parts 1 & 2)
- *Henry V*
- *Richard II*
- *King John*

Notable Tragedies

- *Hamlet*
- *Macbeth*
- *King Lear*
- *Othello*
- *Romeo and Juliet*

Shakespeare's final works, including *The Tempest* and *The Winter's Tale*, are often classified as romances or problem plays, featuring elements of both comedy and tragedy with themes of reconciliation and redemption.

Shakespeare's Enduring Influence

Shakespeare's influence extends far beyond literature into virtually every aspect of culture. His works have been translated into every major language and are performed more frequently than those of any other playwright. His characters have become archetypes, his plots the basis for countless adaptations, and his language has enriched English with thousands of phrases and words still in common use.

37+
Plays Written
Spanning comedies, tragedies, histories, and romances

154
Sonnets Published
Exploring themes of love, beauty, mortality, and time

1,700+
New Words
Words coined or first recorded in Shakespeare's works
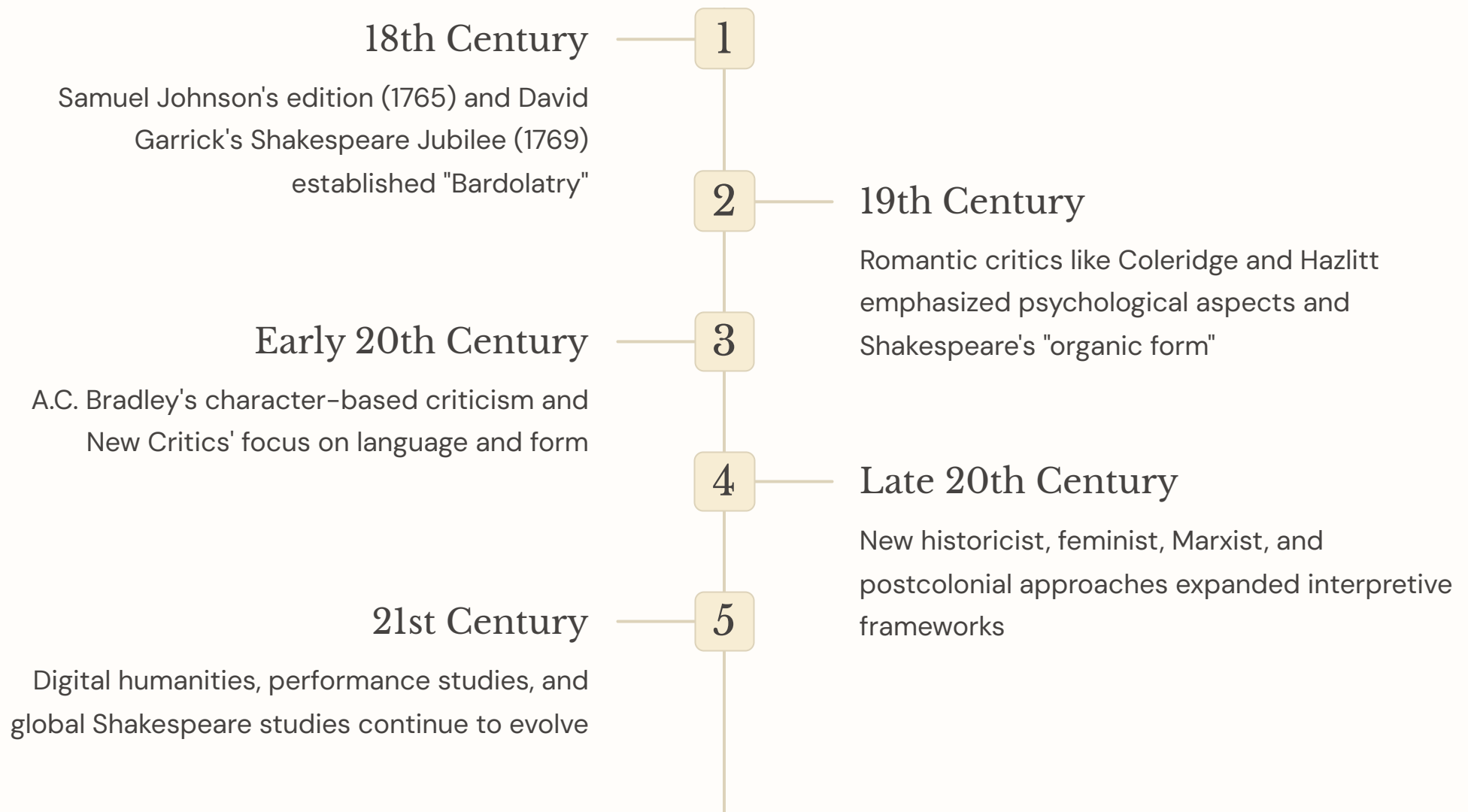
400+
Years of Influence
Continuous cultural impact since the 16th century

Shakespeare's works continue to be studied, performed, and adapted worldwide, with new interpretations constantly emerging that find contemporary relevance in his timeless themes and characters.

Shakespeare in Modern Criticism

There has been a wealth of Shakespeare criticism produced over the last four centuries. Each age has rediscovered Shakespeare, emphasizing different elements in different plays. The two greatest critics of Shakespeare have also been poets: Samuel Johnson and Samuel Taylor Coleridge. However, there have also been useful contributions from other authors, scientists, and scholars.

In the twentieth century, the growth of academia has led to an unprecedented explosion of Shakespeare criticism. In the early part of the century, the best work was still produced by other writers (like T.S. Eliot) and amateur literary critics (like Freud). However, by the 1920s, the study of Shakespeare was professionalized.

18th Century

1

Samuel Johnson's edition (1765) and David Garrick's Shakespeare Jubilee (1769) established "Bardolatry"

19th Century

2

Romantic critics like Coleridge and Hazlitt emphasized psychological aspects and Shakespeare's "organic form"

Early 20th Century

3

A.C. Bradley's character-based criticism and New Critics' focus on language and form

Late 20th Century

4

New historicist, feminist, Marxist, and postcolonial approaches expanded interpretive frameworks

21st Century

5

Digital humanities, performance studies, and global Shakespeare studies continue to evolve

Shakespeare's Legacy in Performance

Shakespeare's plays have been continuously performed for over four centuries, with each generation finding new interpretations and approaches. Although academic studies are widely read on university campuses, they are almost completely unknown to the wider world. The same cannot be said of famous productions of Shakespeare plays, which often reach a huge audience, especially if they are filmed.

There have been several famous interpreters of Shakespeare through the ages. David Garrick was the first to break with the 'formal' tradition of acting Shakespeare in the mid-eighteenth century. In the early nineteenth century, Sarah Siddons and her brother, John Philip Kemble, restored a more formal grace to the tragedies. In the 1880s, 'traditional' performances of Shakespeare were staged by Henry Irving and Beerbohm Tree.

In the early twentieth century, a more natural and unforced manner of acting was popularized by Laurence Olivier and John Gielgud, although to today's audiences, these two actors sound artificial, stilted and out-of-date. Since Olivier, there has been no single dominant acting style. Rather, new interpretations and new acting styles are continually applied to Shakespeare's greatest works.

Classic Film Adaptations

Olivier's *Henry V* (1944), Kurosawa's *Throne of Blood* (1957), and Zeffirelli's *Romeo and Juliet* (1968) established cinematic Shakespeare

Modern Interpretations

Branagh's *Hamlet* (1996), Luhrmann's *Romeo+Juliet* (1996), and Madden's *Shakespeare in Love* (1998) brought Shakespeare to new audiences

Theatrical Innovation

Directors like Peter Brook, Julie Taymor, and Thomas Ostermeier continue to reimagine Shakespeare's works for contemporary audiences worldwide