

SONNET 53

*What is your substance, whereof are you made,
That millions of strange shadows on you tend?
Since every one hath, every one, one shade,
And you, but one, can every shadow lend.
Describe Adonis, and the counterfeit
Is poorly imitated after you;
On Helen's cheek all art of beauty set,
And you in Grecian tires are painted new.
Speak of the spring and foison of the year,
The one doth shadow of your beauty show,
The other as your bounty doth appear;
And you in every blessed shape we know.
In all external grace you have some part,
But you like none, none you, for constant heart.*

THEME

Of the One Eternal Substance are all things made, yet the world is only a mere shadow of the Creator who shall endure forever.

GLOSSARY

What is your substance, whereof are you made, That millions of strange shadows on you tend? Since every one hath, every one, one shade, And you, but one, can every shadow lend.

What is your essence, of what are you made, that countless shadowy manifestations are your servitors, since every one has but a single reflection, and You, the Single Essence, can manifest everything that is.

Describe Adonis, and the counterfeit Is poorly imitated after you; On Helen's cheek all art of beauty set, And you in Grecian tires are painted new.

Describe Adonis, the ideal beauty, and the material world is a poor imitation. On the face of Helen is the paragon of beauty imitated, and you clothed in all the Greek ideals and qualities are newly portrayed.

Shakespeare's Sonnets and the Bible

Speak of the spring and foison of the year, The one doth shadow of your beauty show, The other as your bounty doth appear; And you in every blessed shape we know.

Speak of springtime and the harvest of the year. The one is but a poor imitation of your true Beauty, the other is a representation of Your endless Bounty, and You in every blessed aspect of creation we recognize.

In all external grace you have some part, But you like none, none you, for constant heart.

All external manifestations of beauty contain some essence of these, but You, oh Eternal Unique, are ever-changeless Love.

COMMENTARY

“What is your substance, whereof are you made, That millions of strange shadows on you tend?” Shakespeare asks the question similarly found in Isaiah: “To whom then will ye liken me, or shall I be equal? saith the Holy One.” (Isa. 40:25) All created things are but shadows that attend to the Lord (“*That millions of strange shadows on you tend.*”) “O Lord, how manifold are thy works! in wisdom hast thou made them all: the earth is full of thy riches.” (Ps. 104:24) “These wait all upon thee; that thou mayest give them their meat in due season.” (Ps. 104:27) “Thou sendest forth thy spirit, they are created: and thou renewest the face of the earth.” (Ps. 104:30) “For by him were all things created, that are in heaven, and that are in earth, visible and invisible, whether they be thrones, or dominions, or principalities, or powers: all things were created by him, and for him: And he is before all things, and by him all things consist.” (Col. 1:16-17) The play on light and shadows is found in Genesis: “In the beginning God created the heaven and the earth. And the earth was without form, and void; and darkness was upon the face of the deep. And the Spirit of God moved upon the face of the waters. And God said, Let there be light: and there was light. And God saw the light, that it was good: and God divided the light from the darkness.” (Gen. 1:1-4) God is the eternal “*constant heart,*” but the creation of “*strange shadows*” is only temporary. “Thy kingdom is an everlasting kingdom, and thy dominion endureth throughout all

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generations.” (Ps. 145:13) “Heaven and earth shall pass away, but my words shall not pass away” (Matt. 24:35) “The grass withereth, the flower fadeth: but the word of our God shall stand for ever.” (Isa. 40:8) “For we are strangers before thee, and sojourners, as were all our fathers: our days on the earth are as a shadow, and there is none abiding.” (1 Chr. 29:15)

Sonnet 53 begins a new segment of inquiry and commentary by the author. In previous Sonnets, the focus has been often upon the nature of right and wrong, the soul’s development and yearning, the relationship of the soul and Spirit, and the spiritual journey. Having come to this juncture in Sonnet 52, the focus in upcoming Sonnets is more upon the nature of God, or Spirit Itself, and the Divine relationship to His creation and man. Sonnet 54 continues this theme.

“Sonnet 53 - Commentary and Analysis”
by Ira B. Zinman

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