

An Explication of Shakespeare's Sonnet 9

By Marissa Pinkney, English 405

In Sonnet 9, the speaker is addressing an unidentified man about his fear of marriage. The speaker asks if the man is afraid of marrying a woman only to die and leave her to raise a child by herself. The speaker goes on to tell this man that not marrying is just as bad as marrying, for if he does not marry, the world will be his weeping widow. If he were to marry and have children, then at least his wife would always have the memory of him in their children, but if he remains single, he will regret never having children. In the beginning of the sonnet, the speaker uses a warning tone, to tell this man of what is to come if he does not marry. However, towards the end of the sonnet, the speaker uses more of a condescending tone as if reprimanding him for choosing to live the single life.

In the first three lines readers are introduced to the topic of the sonnet. The speaker makes it clear from the first line that this unknown man is opposed to marriage out of fear of saddening his wife should he die young. In line four, the speaker begins to illustrate the warning tone of the sonnet. The alliterations, “world will wail” in line four and “world will be thy widow” in line five, foreshadow the shame this man will feel—mentioned in the final line of the sonnet. Also, when looking at the word choice in these two lines, readers easily notice this cautionary tone. The speaker says “the world will wail,” meaning everyone will mourn this man’s death, as opposed to just one person—his widow. By

the speaker saying “the world,” he is implying that it will be a much greater pain for the man to die single than if he were married. In lines six through eight, the speaker goes on to explain why the unknown man will cause the world such pain. In line six, he says “no form of thee hast left behind,” foreshadowing the regret and shame this man will feel for not procreating. In leaving “no form” behind, the man is leaving the world without something to remember him by. At least if he were to marry, the beauty of his form will carry on with a child if he were to reproduce.

Line nine is when the speaker shifts to a condescending tone. He compares marriage to the frivolous spending of an “unthrift”—a spendthrift. Once he who spends irresponsibly dies, the world will still have the money that he wastes, merely “shift[ed] but his place” (line 10). Likewise, “beauty,” which is the analogy the speaker uses in line eleven, must also be “spent” or spread for

the world to enjoy it. If the keeper of beauty “wastes” is and keeps it “unused, the user so destroys it” (lines 11-12). Once “beauty” is gone, it is gone forever and the world can never get it back. The speaker compares the qualities of “beauty” and “unthrift” to the man’s life, his gifts, the man’s family name, or a legacy that he carries. Unlike the money the unthrift man spends, this single man’s unspent life will be unattainable once he is gone. Like beauty kept



Figure 8 The Chandos Portrait of William Shakespeare, 1610. National Portrait Gallery.

hidden, once this man's life is gone, the world will never get it back.

If this man were to marry and reproduce, however, then there would be some piece of him left in the world after his death; his life would not go to waste. This connects to what the speaker says in line eight-- if a man dies young, the widow will always have their children to remind her of her husband. The speaker goes on to discuss this through line twelve, basically implying that those who don't use their "beauty" destroy it. In other words, the speaker is telling the man that if he does not marry and reproduce, he will destroy his legacy. Here the speaker looks down on this man for wasting his "beauty" and destroying it.

The speaker ends the sonnet in this same condescending tone. It is in lines thirteen and fourteen where all previous foreshadowing comes to fruition. We see why the speaker warns the unknown man for being opposed to marriage. In line thirteen, the speaker says "no love towards others," suggesting that the man is selfish for not marrying and reproducing. By this man being selfish, he is not only affecting himself, he is affecting the world. It shows that he has a cold heart for putting himself before the world. Shakespeare's use of assonance in the many scornful "o" sounds signifies the disdain he feels for this man's selfishness.

In the last line, the speaker tells the man how his selfishness will haunt him for the rest of his life. With the phrase "murderous shame," the speaker declares that the man will never be able

to live with the decision he makes. If he never marries and reproduces, the "murderous shame" that he will feel will eat at him for the rest of his life. With the use of the word "murderous," the speaker produces an image of an outcast pariah bent on destruction. Not only will this man face regret that will eat at his mind and soul, he will also commit the murder of his legacy by dying without leaving children behind. If this line were compared to lines four through six, it seems as if the speaker is trying to convince this man that not marrying is the worst thing that a man can do. On one hand, this man could make his wife a widow if he dies prematurely. However, if this man does not marry, he will be committing a murderous crime.

It is obvious that it is essential for whomever the speaker is addressing to marry and have children. At first glance of the sonnet, it is easy for readers to assume that the speaker really wants this unidentified man to marry someone. However, when one digs deeper, it appears this sonnet means much more than that. Through the speaker's tone, metaphors, word choice, and alliterations, this sonnet is a serious proponent of life and the legacy produced by marriage. It is very important to the speaker that this man marries in order to reproduce. The way the speaker addresses the man, it is clear that a man who does not procreate is destroying humanity. However, no matter what decision this unidentified man makes, he is doomed. Either his widow will weep or the world will weep.