

A Phenomenological Perspective on Shakespeare's Dark Lady Sonnets

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Shakespeare's Sonnets 127 to 152, also referred to as the "Dark Lady Sonnets," explores a complex love interest characterized by descriptions of obsession, lust, and infidelity between the speaker and the Dark Lady. Applying a phenomenological perspective to the "Dark Lady Sonnets" can serve to interpret the intersectionality between the experiences of the characters, the author, and the audience. However, the ambiguity surrounding the Dark Lady allows for an even broader range of interpretations based on the perceived identity of the character. Therefore, a phenomenological analysis of Shakespeare's "Dark Lady Sonnets," differentiated by the potential identities of the characters, will provide insight into the intricate and varied interpretation of the sonnets.

1. The Dark Lady Sonnets

Shakespeare's Sonnets, published in 1609, include 154 individual narratives, each composed of 14 lines following a specific rhyme scheme and written in iambic pentameter. The sonnets can be categorized into two distinct sequences: the Fair Youth sequence (Sonnets 1-126) and the Dark Lady sequence (Sonnets 127-152). The "Fair Youth Sonnets" explores the relationship between the speaker, presumed to be Shakespeare, and a young man referred to as the Fair Youth. Sonnets 153 and 154, sometimes referred to as stand-alone sonnets, explore the idea of conflicting desires and emotions associated with infidelity and temptation (Edmondson and Wells).

The "Dark Lady Sonnets" focuses on a complicated and passionate relationship between the speaker and the woman referred to as the "Dark Lady." There is limited documentation as to their origin. However, they are believed to have been written between 1590 and early 1600

(Laperle; Wilson). These sonnets are grounded in the Elizabethan era's socio-cultural expectations of love and relationships. However, within these works, Shakespeare explores the darker aspects of love and desire, delving into themes of lust, betrayal, and the complexities of human relationships (Wilson). The language used in these sonnets is often more raw, direct, and sometimes even explicit compared to his other works, reflecting the intensity and passion of the emotions involved and challenging the normative culture of the time (Kohn-Foley).

2. Phenomenology

The concept of phenomenology was introduced in the late 19th and early 20th century by philosopher Edmund Husserl. Husserl situated phenomenology as a means to examine and describe conscious experiences. His thinking shifted from the traditional philosophical approaches of the time that focused on metaphysics. His work drew attention to the immediate, first-person experiences of the individual and how they relate to the world (Bernet; Seeburger).

Husserl's seminal work, "Logical Investigations," provided a framework for phenomenology as it introduced the concept of phenomenological reduction, or "epoche," which involved suspending assumptions and judgments about the external world to focus solely on the phenomena as they appear in consciousness (Bernet). By temporarily setting aside one's preconceptions, beliefs, and judgments about the text and its themes, an individual can concentrate on the immediate experience of the text, including how it evokes emotions, thoughts, and images in their consciousness (Seeburger). This enables a more open-minded and unbiased exploration of the text.

After engaging with the text holistically, phenomenological reduction allows the individual to reflect on their own experiences related to the text, a process also known as reflexivity or bracketing. Engaging in this process allows the individual to uncover underlying themes, motives, or the author's intentions, all while acknowledging the subjective nature of their

interpretations (Bernet; Seeburger). Taking a phenomenological reduction approach to analyzing literature can result in audience members acknowledging their varied responses and interpretations. This process can result in the realization of the validity of one's individual perspective.

Another key concept within the phenomenological paradigm is intentionality, which refers to the conscious understanding of the human condition (Dowling). Those who subscribe to phenomenology believe that all experiences are subjective and that the "truth" is based on how individuals prescribe meaning to that experience. Specifically, an analysis grounded in intentionality provides insight into how characters direct their consciousness toward objects, events, or other characters within the story. In a literary analysis, it can be used to explore the narrative, including characters' intentions, desires, and motivations, and how they shape their audience reactions. As a result, it can be used to speculate on the author's motives for engaging the audience with specific ideas, concepts, or symbols and facilitate an understanding of how these intentional acts shape the overall meaning of the work.

Husserl's contributions have been applied to a variety of disciplines, including philosophy, psychology, sociology, and the social sciences (Dijan). Because phenomenology is not dependent upon science or generalization, it can provide a framework for understanding the structures and meanings of individual experiences as well as the associated beliefs, values, and assumptions related to the first-person narrative (Wajnar and Swanson). It can also be used as a framework for interpreting literature through an emphasis on the subjective experience of the characters as well as the structure of the text (Popa). The process of analyzing a literary work from a phenomenological perspective involves examining the subjective experiences portrayed by the characters. This includes their perceptions, emotions, intentions, and the ways in which they interact with the world around them.

3. The Dark Lady's Identity

“The Dark Lady Sonnets” reflect a complex and enigmatic portrayal of an unnamed and seductive woman, often characterized as being dark, passionate, and intriguing. As Shakespeare never reveals the identity of the Dark Lady, the literature suggests multiple theories. The primary theory in the literature is that the Dark Lady was a historical figure with a social or romantic association with Shakespeare (Huges). Other theories that could give insight into the identity of the Dark Lady is that she is not an individual at all but rather a symbol of a social commentary or an artistic device to explore complex emotions and relationships. Given that a phenomenological analysis that considers all aspects of this character will also involve discourse with regard to the identity of the Dark Lady, it is important to the process.

According to Wilson, it was speculated that the identity of the “Dark Lady” could have been several women of the time, including Mary Fitton. The speculation linking Mary Fitton to the Dark Lady in Shakespeare's sonnets is primarily based on circumstantial evidence and prior interpretations of the sonnets. Fitton’s connection to Shakespeare stems from her role in the Elizabethan court, where she served as a lady's maid to at least two queens. Records from the time period suggest that Fitton engaged in a rumored affair with William Herbert, the Earl of Pembroke, to whom Shakespeare dedicated a compilation of plays published in 1623.

Hughes outlines other anecdotal evidence that points to another historical figure, Emilia Lanier, who was more likely the object of the Dark Lady. Lanier was an English Poet who was also connected to the court of Queen Elizabeth. While there are no direct references to Emilia Lanier in the Sonnets, the speculation of her identity as the Dark Lady revolves around the parallels between her life and certain descriptions or experiences mentioned, including Lanier's Italian heritage, her relationships, and her status as nobility in Elizabethan times (Green). One of these projected associations is in Sonnet 133, for example, wherein lines such as "Beshrew that

heart that makes my heart to groan" and "Bid me discourse, I will enchant thine ear" hint at a certain level of social interaction and perhaps manipulation, suggests such an association. Other associations suggested by Hughes include a reference to her being an expert keyboard player in Sonnet 128, that she was in a committed relationship in Sonnet 152, and that she was considerably younger than the author of Sonnet 138.

A primary aspect of the "Dark Lady Sonnets" is the portrayal of a conflicting narrative that shifts between adoration, frustration, desire, and anguish. As such, it creates a tapestry of emotions that invites exploration into the inner world of the perceived identity of the character (Yeasmin). This could lead to the speculation that the Dark Lady is a symbolic character based on general sociocultural expectations and experiences of women. As a contextual representation, the Dark Lady would not emerge with a single identity. Rather, she would represent women's inner thoughts and desires that could not be articulated or acted upon during the Elizabethan era. During the time that Shakespeare wrote the Dark Lady sonnets, socio-cultural expectations of women were grounded in religious beliefs, social hierarchies, and traditional gender roles. Women would not have been allowed to express their sexual desires (Gardiner and Gardiner). Therefore, rather than a passionate relationship between the speaker and a single woman, the discourse could signal that the sonnets are about the oppression of women and the expectation that sexual desires would be suppressed. Within this interpretation, the Dark Lady would not have an individual identity but one that collectively addresses the oppression of women.

Sonnet 130 presents a realistic and somewhat unconventional depiction of the Dark Lady, contrasting her with the idealized beauty standards of the time. She is described in a way that defies traditional conventions of praising a lover's physical appearance. Specifically, the Sonnet reads,

If now be white, why then her breasts are dun;

If hairs are to be sires, black wires grow on her head.

I have seen roses damasked, red and white...

And yet, by heaven, I think my love is rare

As any, she belied with false compare.

In this passage, the “dark” may not have been referring to her features but to thoughts that did not represent pure feminine virtues like chastity, modesty, and obedience, which aligns with the perspective that the Dark Lady represents the oppression of women and the suppression of expressions of love, lust, and desire.

The Sonnets have also been the object of racial critique. While they do not explicitly address race, an interpretation could reveal racial undertones implicit in descriptions such as Sonnet 130 (Wilson). For example, the references to her darker complexion or non-traditional physical attributes might carry subtle racial implications, reflecting societal biases or prejudices prevalent in the Elizabethan and Jacobean eras. Additionally, the language and imagery used to describe the Dark Lady, which contrasts with idealized beauty standards, invite discourse about how racial attitudes might have influenced Shakespeare's portrayal of this character.

Another interpretation in opposition to the Dark Lady's identity as an individual person is that she is simply an artistic device. Magnusson describes that an alternative argument to the sonnets being a reflection on Shakespeare's life may be that they are simply a story meant to entertain. They speculate that the sonnets could be “exquisitely self-contained poems, to be valued primarily for their artistic play of words’ (para 3). Through this perspective, it is argued that Shakespeare intended to provide the audience with innovative linguistic experiences and unique narrative structures (Vendler) rather than with a storyline. Within this context, the interaction between the characters and the speaker is designed to illustrate contrasts that create a dramatic arc in the narrative.

The discourse surrounding the identity of the Dark Lady has been broad and deep—the ambiguity of this identity of the “Dark Lady” results in various interpretations of the work. The Dark Lady's perceived identity will shape the Sonnets' phenomenological analysis. As such, an important aspect of this process will be a focus on the intentionality and phenomenal reduction of the analyst.

4. A Phenomenological Perspective on the Dark Lady Sonnets

A phenomenological analysis of literature can be used to uncover the layers of meaning embedded within a text. Through a phenomenological analysis, the characters' social interactions and experiences can be used to reflect issues of life, freedom, and authenticity (Dowling). The author's language can also give insight into how the characters understand their world. These narratives provide the means to evoke emotions within the reader that cause them to reflect on their own subjective experiences (Wonjnar and Swanson). As such, applying phenomenology to literary works has drawn some criticism (Langdrige). For example, a phenomenological analysis requires the reader to be a subjective bystander. This subjectivity can lead to diverse and sometimes competing interpretations of a literary work. However, in terms of the Dark Lady Sonnets, this individual subjectivity can provide a framework for discourse surrounding the meaning of the complex text and the various interpretations that have been posited.

Phenomenologically, “The Dark Lady Sonnets” can be seen as a portrayal of the speaker's shifting subjective experiences in relation to the Dark Lady rather than a direct representation of her essence. The speaker oscillates between adoration and condemnation, expressing a profound emotional ambivalence. This is exemplified in Sonnet 130, as the speaker professes a deep love despite the Dark Lady's imperfections that transcend conventional beauty standards of the time. This complexity of emotions reflects the intricate and multifaceted nature of human experience, showcasing the interplay between love, desire, and disillusionment that

can be influenced by the audience's own subjective experiences. As such, purposeful use of the phenomenological tools of intentionality and phenomenological reduction can provide insight into the analysis of the narrative.

Applying intentionality to analyze Shakespeare's Dark Lady Sonnets, as described by Dowling, can facilitate an examination of the intentional and directed nature of the narrative and reveal the complexities of emotions, perceptions, and motivations associated with the relationship between the speaker, presumably Shakespeare, and the Dark Lady character. As the Dark Lady becomes the focal point of the narrative, through intentionality, an individual can begin to be aware of how their thoughts, emotions, and perceptions are explicitly directed towards the Dark Lady as the object of desire, frustration, and contemplation. As phenomenological intentionality also involves understanding how the speaker perceives and interprets the Dark Lady (Dowling), it will require reflection on how the identity of the Dark Lady is perceived.

The individual's perception of the "Dark Lady" identity may be facilitated through the reflexive process related to phenomenological reduction as described by Bernet. In this process, self-awareness and self-examination occur, focusing on how the individual's own lived experiences shape their perception of the identity of the "Dark Lady." This plays a crucial role in acknowledging the influence of the individual's background, biases, and assumptions on their interpretations of experiences.

While it is not known if he intended to speak as his own self or take on the persona of another, his experiences likely shaped the sonnets. Like all artists, Shakespeare's work reflected the world in which he lived. For example, Shakespeare lived in a time with specific cultural norms, beliefs, and societal expectations that influenced relationships and love. His understanding of these cultural nuances would have shaped how he portrayed the relationship

between the speaker and the Dark Lady, reflecting societal attitudes towards love and desire of that era. As an artist, his choice of language, metaphors, and imagery was likely influenced not just by personal experiences but also by the artistic styles and conventions of his time.

A phenomenological perspective of the Dark Lady sonnets based on Shakespeare's own subjective experiences can converge with the audience's interpretation based on their unique subjective experiences through the lens of identification. In the "*Rhetoric of Motives*," Burke defined identification as the strategies a rhetor uses to find common ground, identify shared values, or draw on common interests to persuade the audience. They further argue that using these techniques makes the speaker more likable to the audience and, therefore, creates a more persuasive message. In contrast, Haman's definition of disassociation, based on Burke's, suggested that people can form a sense of identification by recognizing a shared enemy or opposition. Plantinga further suggests that by focusing on a shared understanding of what the audience wants to happen through identification, a speaker also creates an incentive for continued engagement and ultimate persuasion. In this way, we can view Shakespeare as the orator who is persuading the audience to feel certain emotions or lean toward value based on how they perceive the meaning of the sonnets.

The ambiguous identity of the Dark Lady results in various interpretations. While the identity of the Dark Lady may be aligned with the analyst's own subjective experiences, they may also purposefully choose an identity based on their perceptions of Shakespeare's motivations. In other words, was Shakespeare referencing a historical figure, was he commenting on the social-cultural expectations of the time, or was he merely creating an artistic work? The flexibility of the phenomenological perspective based on these perspectives is described in the following sections.

4.a. The Dark Lady as a Historical Figure

The meaning of the Dark Lady sonnets can be perceived through the subjective experience of beauty and desire of the individual. Shakespeare's depiction of the Dark Lady's beauty is multifaceted, not just a conventional admiration but a deep, conflicted attraction. This intense emotional response goes beyond physical appearance and delves into the complexity of human desire and passion. Given the explicit nature of the physical and psychosocial descriptions of the Dark Lady, the potential identity of the Dark Lady as a historical figure is plausible. For example, as Dowling describes, approaching the sonnets through intentionality involves exploring Shakespeare's lived experiences and subjective perceptions in relation to the perceived historical character that the Dark Lady represents.

Audience members might empathize differently with the speaker or the Dark Lady based on their own life experiences. For example, someone who has experienced intense, conflicting emotions in a relationship might relate more deeply to the emotional turmoil expressed in the sonnets. These perceptions of the Dark Lady as an individual may be influenced by other worldviews, such as having a literary theory or critical analysis background. In these cases, the individual might perceive the Dark Lady as they grappled with the issues through a theoretical lens, such as feminist theory, psychoanalysis, or postcolonial theory.

An audience member might also have preconceived notions about a specific figure, such as Mary Fitton, based on their knowledge of Shakespeare's relationship with her. For example, a familiarity with the connotation of Fitton's position in the court of Queen Elizabeth could lead an audience member to consider the likelihood that Shakespeare would be drawn to her because of those characteristics.

4.b. The Dark Lady as a Social Commentary

Others may interpret Shakespeare's emotions through different lenses, seeing them as symbolic of broader human experiences rather than specific to a historical figure. Readers with a

background in history or a particular interest in the Elizabethan era might approach the sonnets considering the societal norms, courtly behavior, and historical context of the time. This perspective could enrich their understanding of the social dynamics influencing Shakespeare's portrayal of the Dark Lady and offer insights into the complex interplay between personal experience and societal norms.

As the sonnets depict the speaker's intense and conflicting emotions towards the Dark Lady as a representation of societal expectations, the poems could reflect the speaker's internal struggle between his genuine feelings and the pressures imposed by societal norms. The speaker's fluctuating emotions, from adoration to self-loathing, might symbolize the internal conflict between his genuine feelings and the societal pressure to conform. His angst and guilt, expressed in the sonnets, could stem from the deviation from accepted social norms, leading to a phenomenological exploration of the inner conflict between personal desires and societal conformity. The tension between his personal desires and the cultural standards of beauty and conduct could be evident in his emotional turmoil.

As the assumed speaker, Shakespeare adds an additional layer of complexity to the phenomenological analysis of the sonnets from the perspective of the Dark Lady as a symbol of socio-cultural expectations of women. Using Phenomenological reduction to suspend one's assumptions and judgments about Shakespeare as a historical figure allows for the conceptualization that the author was using the rhetorical technique of identification to find common ground with the audience to challenge those social expectations. As such, audience members from diverse cultural backgrounds or with different social experiences can interpret the sonnets through their own cultural lens, allowing for the use of intentionality to guide their understanding of relationships, societal expectations, and notions of beauty, which could shape how they perceive the interactions between the speaker and the Dark Lady. By creating a shared

understanding around the perceived oppression of women and suppression of their desires, an interpretation of the sonnets could be that Shakespeare's motivation was to persuade the audience to support change.

4.c. The Dark Lady as an Artistic Device

Another phenomenological perspective on the Dark Lady Sonnets is that Shakespeare was using the Dark Lady to support his artistic motivations. In this case, the Dark Lady's identity is unimportant to the analysis. By discounting the discourse related to the Dark Lady's identity, Shakespeare's motivation could be perceived as inviting the audience to interact solely with the subjective experiences and emotions of the speaker. This allows the sonnets to become a canvas for exploring universal human emotions rather than a specific relationship.

The interpretation of Shakespeare's portrayal of the Dark Lady as an artistic construct from a phenomenological perspective requires purposeful phenomenological reduction on the part of the audience member. It can also be interpreted as a technique in identification, similar to how the Dark Lady challenges the gender expectations of the time. It requires them to put aside their assumptions about the content of the sonnets and focus solely on the artistic value. As a result, the emotions and perceptions that Shakespeare conveys, rather than being tied to a specific individual, reflect the human condition as a whole.

5. Conclusions

The identity of the "Dark Lady" in Shakespeare's sonnets is a subject of speculation and debate. Some theories suggest she might have been a real person from Shakespeare's life, while others propose she could be a composite character representing different themes or ideals. As an alternative, the Dark Lady could be an artistic device without the underlying socio-cultural meaning of the character. In any case, the sonnets can have diverse interpretations based on one's perception of the Dark Lady's identity.

The perception of the Dark Lady as a specific individual in Shakespeare's life leads to a perspective through a biographical lens in which one searches for clues in the sonnets that might relate to the person's character, appearance, or relationship with the poet. The assumed relationship between Shakespeare and the Dark Lady may further influence the analysis if she is perceived as a romantic interest or a source of conflict for Shakespeare. Conversely, if the Dark Lady is viewed more as a symbolic figure representing broader themes like the socio-cultural expectations of women, including oppression based on gender and suppression of sexual desire, the focus might shift from a specific person to universal experiences.

Ultimately, the perception of the Dark Lady's identity can significantly impact the reader's understanding and emotional connection to the sonnets. A phenomenological examination will emphasize certain aspects of the poems, affecting how readers empathize with Shakespeare's words and the depth of their interpretation. It will involve techniques such as Phenomenological reduction, or “epoche,” which involves suspending assumptions and judgments to allow for the individual to reflect on their own experiences related to the narrative. Coupled with an analysis grounded in intentionality, it will provide further insight into the characters' intentions, desires, and motivations, including how they shape their audience reactions. Finally, the concept of identification, a strategy used by the author to find common ground, identify shared values, or draw on common interests to persuade the audience, can be incorporated to further analyze the messages that the author seeks to portray.

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