

The Symbolic Meanings of Roses in Shakespeare's Sonnets

DONG Yuping

University of Shanghai for Science and Technology, Shanghai, China

The paper explores the symbolic meanings of roses in Shakespeare's sonnets. In Shakespeare's 154 sonnets, the rose imagery is placed in a dominant position among all the other flower imagery. In general, rose is one of the most conventional images in the sonnet. But in addition to the traditional symbol of beauty and love, rose in the sonnet shows more symbolic meanings: a symbol of vitality and reproduction, a symbol of friendship and devotion, and a symbol of fidelity and immortality. The symbolic rose, to a great extent, reflects the Renaissance humanist Shakespeare's values and ideals of humanism. By successfully employing the rose imagery, Shakespeare extols the virtues of reproduction, displays his faith in the immortality of his verse, and conveys the message of appreciating and cherishing the beauty, goodness, and truth.

Keywords: rose, sonnet, beauty, reproduction, immortality

William Shakespeare (1564-1616), the greatest writer in the English language and the world's pre-eminent playwright, has produced 37 plays from 1588 to 1613. Shakespeare has made outstanding achievements in drama and has also distinguished himself as a great poet by writing some non-dramatic poems. Shakespeare has written two long narrative poems, *Venus and Adonis* (1592-1593) and *The Rape of Lucrece* (1593-1594), and 154 sonnets (1593-1600).

Shakespeare's 154 sonnets include various kinds of flower imagery, varying from the flowers in general to the specific flowers, such as violet, marigold, lily, rose, etc. Among all the flower imagery, the rose imagery stands out as being more dominant than the other flowers. As is known to all, rose has earned the tribute of "The queen of flowers" and "the UK Royal National Rose Society (RNRS) has some fossils of rose foliage considered to be many millions of years old" (Beales et al., 1998, p. 34). Rose is the national flower of the United Kingdom (UK), which beauty is universal and unanimous. In the long human history, rose has been playing an important part in people's life. "The rose is one of the most omnipresent and powerful symbols in all literature, in addition to being one of the most complex for us to understand, especially across the mist of time" (Buchmann, 2015, p. 226). In Shakespeare's 154 sonnets, the rose imagery has appeared several times in different context. Helen Vendler, a scholar on Shakespeare's sonnets research, points out in her great work *The Art of Shakespeare's Sonnets*: "Although large allegorical images (beauty's rose) are relatively stable in the Sonnets, imagery is meaningful only in context; it cannot be assigned secure symbolic import except with respect to the poem in which it occurs" (Vendler, 1997, p. 23). To understand the symbolic meanings of rose in Shakespeare's sonnets in a meaningful way, we need to analyze the rose imagery in context at length.

Beauty and Life: A Symbol of Youth and Reproduction

Traditionally, rose is a symbol of love and beauty. By employing rose as his first flower imagery at the very beginning of his sonnets, Shakespeare puts rose in a prominent position. From the rose imagery in the first sonnet, we get some hints about the theme of the 154 sonnets: love and beauty.

From fairest creatures we desire increase,
That thereby beauty's rose might never die,
But as the ripper should by time decease,
His tender heir might bear his memory;
But thou contracted to thine own bright eyes,
Feed'st thy light's flame with self-substantial fuel,
Making a famine where abundance lies,
Thyself thy foe, to thy sweet self too cruel. (Shakespeare, 1999, p. 1)

In the first place, superficially rose symbolizes the pure beauty of his fair friend, the beauty of his youth and vitality. But beauty is but a blossom and beauty fades like a flower. In this sense, rose is both the symbol of beauty and the metaphor of fast-fading beauty. In order to prevent rose from withering and overcome the transience of human life, that is to say, not to allow "within thine own bud buriest thy content" (Shakespeare, 1999, p. 1), Shakespeare's speaker compares the fair youth to a candle and a rose:

...he is a candle contracted to the flame of his bright eyes; or he is a rose refusing to unfold his bud. The first symbolizes the refusal of the spirit; the second, the refusal of the flesh. The first creates famine; the second, waste. (Vendler, 1997, p. 48)

In order to avoid famine and waste, Shakespeare's speaker persuades his fair friend not to bury his potential fatherhood before the tender rosebud is open. Letting his rose open means reproducing himself by getting married. As a result, "his tender heir" might keep hope alive and keep him alive, too. "Leaving thee living in posterity" (Shakespeare, 1999, p. 6). Producing young can keep beauty's rose immortal, although all men are mortal. His immortality and his happiness exist in marriage and his offspring. "Or ten times happier be it ten for one" (Shakespeare, 1999, p. 6). Ten children can bring him happiness 10 times. The willingness of passing on his physical as well as spiritual beauty to the next generation fully reveals the virtues of reproduction.

Reproduction also represents kindness. As the saying goes, kindness comes of will. If the youth is willing to get married, that is to say, to be kind to himself: "Be as thy presence is, gracious and kind,/ Or to thyself at least kind-hearted prove" (Shakespeare, 1999, p. 10). His beauty can survive the ravages of time: "That beauty still may live in thine or thee" (Shakespeare, 1999, p. 10). Being kind to himself also means being kind to others: "And many maiden gardens, yet unset,/ With virtuous wish would bear your living flowers" (Shakespeare, 1999, p. 16). Many unplanted virgin lands of the maidens await his seeds. A virgin bride awaits her bridegroom. To beget children, or to become the father of children, is a virtuous act.

In the second place, on a deep level, the rose imagery in Sonnet 1 is mysterious and has the implied meaning of female reproductive organ. Implicitly, rose has the implication of reproductive system of a beauty. Explicitly, "Shakespeare's insistence on the eye as the chief sexual organ is everywhere present in the Sonnets, as in the plays" (Vendler, 1997, p. 15). In the first sonnet, the rose imagery and the eye imagery appear together. As far as rose is concerned, although the first 17 sonnets are addressed to an aristocratic youth with feminine characteristics, rose has a strong connection with women. Rose can also be interpreted from the perspective of

women. We all know that "Rose" is a general name for women. People often associate "rose" with feminine beauty. In the first two lines of the opening quatrain, Shakespeare states that: "From fairest creatures we desire increase,/ That thereby beauty's rose might never die" (Shakespeare, 1999, p. 1). From the context, to be more specific, "beauty's rose" can be boldly interpreted as "womb"—the internal organ of women where babies develop. Moreover, in this line, "die" refers to "beauty's death" which has a close connection with tomb. Throughout the 154 sonnets, "womb" is used together with the word "tomb" several times. Logically, womb and tomb form a sharp contrast. In Sonnet 3, Shakespeare provides a plain explanation for the relationship between them: "Thou dost beguile the world, unbless some mother./ For where is she so fair whose unearned womb/ Disdains the tillage of thy husbandry?/ Or who is he so fond will be the tomb/ Of his self-love to stop posterity?" (Shakespeare, 1999, p. 3). "Womb" stands for life, while "tomb" for death. The speaker warns his friend that if he ignores the untilled womb of a woman and leaves her unblessed with motherhood by refusing to play the part of husband, his self-love will be bound to lead his sweet self to tomb. "Husbandry" here means farming, especially when done carefully and well. Shakespeare skillfully uses the phonetic puns "husbandry" and "husband" to persuade his fair friend to get married and reproduce a child in a clever way. Without a "tender heir" (Sonnet 1) or a "fair child" (Sonnet 2), he will "make worms thine heir" (Shakespeare, 1999, p. 6). The new worm imagery appears among the womb and tomb imagery. The image of worm provides a moving and somewhat horrible scene among the still picture presented by the images of womb and tomb. In Sonnet 146, the speaker also expresses the same meaning: "Shall worms, inheritors of this excess,/ Eat up thy charge? Is this thy body's end?" (Shakespeare, 1999, p. 146). Shakespeare's speaker warns his fair friend that: "Thy unused beauty must be tombed with thee,/ Which, used, lives th' executor to be" (Shakespeare, 1999, p. 4). Besides, the symbolic meanings of life and death, Shakespeare also enjoys combining the pair images of womb and tomb together in new context: "Making their tomb the womb wherein they grew?" (Shakespeare, 1999, p. 86). His ripe thoughts (his verses) that remain unborn in the womb are like lives that remain dead in tomb. Such metaphor with the same rhyme expresses the subtle meanings in a very impressive way. To sum up, the womb and tomb imagery which continuously runs through the 154 sonnets casts a new light over the beauty's rose.

By combining the two words "beauty" and "rose" together, Shakespeare expresses both the explicit and implicit meanings of rose. From Sonnet 1 to Sonnet 154, Shakespeare has used the same expression as "beauty's rose" (Sonnet 1) frequently, for instance, beauty's field (Sonnet 2), beauty's use (Sonnet 2), beauty's legacy (Sonnet 4), beauty's effect (Sonnet 5), beauty's treasure (Sonnet 6), beauty's waste (Sonnet 9), beauty's doom and date (Sonnet 14), beauty's pattern (Sonnet 19), beauty's form (Sonnet 24), beauty's brow (Sonnet 60), beauty's dead fleece (Sonnet 68), beauty's veil (Sonnet 95), beauty's truth (Sonnet 101), beauty's summer (Sonnet 104), sweet beauty's best (Sonnet 106), beauty's name (Sonnet 127), beauty's successive heir (Sonnet 127), so on. Such expressions as the beauty's rose are vividly used in the sonnet sequences. Take "beauty's brow" as an example: "Time doth transfix the flourish set on youth,/ And delves the parallels in beauty's brow,/ Feeds on the rarities of nature's truth,/ And nothing stands but for his scythe to mow" (Shakespeare, 1999, p. 60). Shakespeare describes the destructive force of time. "Time begins its attack on beauty at one localized site of loveliness, the brow" (Vendler, 1997, p. 285). Beauty's brow truly reflects "the rarities of nature's truth". "Time begins its attack on nature at the most distinctive and rare representations of nature's genius" (Vendler, 1997, p. 285). The destructive action of time is so forceful that time destroys natural beauty by digging wrinkles cruelly. Time is a relentless enemy of beauty. In Sonnet 19, Shakespeare has conveyed the same feeling: "O, carve not with thy hours my love's fair brow" (Shakespeare, 1999, p. 19). In this line, "fair brow" is

an equivalent to "beauty's brow". The various elegant variations of beauty envelop the 154 sonnets in an atmosphere of beauty. Instead of wasting beauty's rose, people especially the fair youth in the first 17 sonnet sequences must learn to cherish and reproduce the beauty by means of getting married and procreation.

Furthermore, Sonnets 127-152 are addressed to a dark lady, whom the speaker seems to love and hate simultaneously. The beauty of the woman is so unconventional that the speaker feels a strong attraction for her. In Sonnet 130, the rose imagery is used to challenge artificial comparisons: "I have seen roses damasked, red and white,/ But no such roses see I in her cheeks,/ And in some perfumes is there more delight/ Than in the breath that from my mistress reeks" (Shakespeare, 1999, p. 130).

In the Sonnet 130, "roses damasked" refer to damask-roses that are a mixture of red and white which is a symbol of beauty. Damasked roses are a kind of precious rose, which beauty lies in the soft texture of silk with a pattern visible on both sides. The speaker has seen such kind of velvet roses, mingled red and white, but he does not see such pleasantly smooth and soft roses in his mistress cheeks. Moreover, there is less delight in his mistress' breath than in the perfumes made from roses. The speaker remains neutral in describing the complexion and breath of his mistress. He takes a down-to-earth attitude towards the beauty of this black-haired and dun-breasted lady. In his depiction, there is no poetic and romantic atmosphere. He only presents an objective portrait of his mistress. Instead of being attracted by a conventional beauty, he finds his love is rare and real. In the couplet, the speaker declares that: "And yet, by heaven, I think my love as rare/ As any she belied with false compare" (Shakespeare, 1999, p. 130). By contrastive comparison, all common things to our surprise turn out to be excellent, to be more interesting and more valuable. Shakespeare employs the key word "rare" to end the sonnet and shows the speaker's appreciation of the dark lady. In the subsequent Sonnets 131 and 132, the color black is held in high esteem: "Thy black is fairest in my judgment's place" (Shakespeare, 1999, p. 131). "Then will I swear beauty herself is black" (Shakespeare, 1999, p. 132). The dark lady is not conventionally beautiful, but her charm greatly attracts the speaker. Uniqueness beauty lies in the beholder's eyes. His lover has such a unique place in his heart that she even defeats damask-roses, for beauty lies in the lover's eyes.

In contrast to the beauty of the dark lady, Shakespeare speaks highly of the handsomeness of the young man in Sonnet 67: "Why should false painting imitate his cheek/ And steal dead seeing of his living hue?/ Why should poor beauty indirectly seek/ Roses of shadow, since his rose is true?" (Shakespeare, 1999, p. 67).

Shakespeare's speaker thinks his fair friend is "beauty's pattern" (Sonnet 19), i.e., a model of beauty. For this reason, cosmetics put on people's face imitate his friend's rosy cheek. Lifeless appearance forms a contrast with "living hue". Moreover, second-rate beauty also imitates his friend. "Since his rose is true", rose is a symbol of first-rate beauty, which is genuine, not artificial.

Love and Sweetness: A Symbol of Friendship and Devotion

In addition to beauty, love is also a theme in 154 sonnets. Shakespeare highly praises fresh and eternal love: "My love looks fresh, and Death to me subscribes" (Shakespeare, 1999, p. 107). "So that eternal love in love's fresh case/ Weighs not the dust and injury of age" (Shakespeare, 1999, p. 108). Shakespeare's speaker thinks fresh love can make death acknowledge him to be his superior. If people can keep their love fresh and always enjoy the first conception of love even when they no longer possess their youthful appearance, love will remain intact and lead to eternity. In Sonnet 109, rose imagery is used to symbolize his beloved: "For nothing this wide universe I call/ Save thou, my Rose; in it thou art my all" (Shakespeare, 1999, p. 109).

The speaker's devotion to his friend is sincere. By capitalizing the word "Rose" in Sonnet 109, Shakespeare changes it into a proper noun which is a popular name for girls. With the female characteristics, the word "rose" has all sorts of pleasant associations with a fair maiden and a red rose, which has the connotation of pure love and beautiful romance. "...my Rose; in it thou art my all". In the wide universe, a rose is all the speaker has. Rose is a symbol of friendship and a symbol of love that conquer all things. The speaker's emotion towards friendship and love is so strong that he cannot help expressing the same feelings with the same words again and again. In the couplet of Sonnets 36 and 96, he uses the exact lines repeatedly: "...I love thee in such sort/ As, thou being mine, mine is thy good report" (Shakespeare, 1999, pp. 36, 96). His inexpressible feelings have revealed his love philosophy: Love is the true reward of love. Mutual love has an inextricable connection between the speaker and his Rose. With the rose imagery, friendship and love described by the author are so heart-touching that readers lead to believing the fact that sincere friendship and true love have strong vitality and everlasting impact on the warm and loving hearts. Believe love and have love.

In the other sonnets, the speaker has addressed his Rose "My Love" directly and lovingly several times instead of using "you" or "thou". "My love" means "my beloved". For instance, "Take all my loves, my love, yea take them all" (Shakespeare, 1999, p. 40). From the Sonnet 63 to the Sonnet 66, Shakespeare's speaker has used "my love" continuously to address his beloved. His sincere love and friendship flow like a river without end: "Against my love shall be as I am now" (Shakespeare, 1999, p. 63). "That Time will come and take my love away" (Shakespeare, 1999, p. 64). "That in black ink my love may still shine bright" (Shakespeare, 1999, p. 65). "Tired with all these, from these would I be gone,/ Save that to die, I leave my love alone" (Shakespeare, 1999, p. 66). The speaker displays the intensity of his emotions towards his friend. With the eye of his mind, the speaker looks at his friend intently.

From the above analysis, we know that Shakespeare's speaker has built a magnificent building of friendship and love by directly addressing his friend "my love". However, among all the "my love", Shakespeare's speaker sends a single red rose to his friend to show his single-mindedness. "My Rose" is used only once in the 154 sonnets. The single-flowered rose is so precious that "My Rose" shows the speaker's devotion to his beloved. In 154 sonnets, the speaker again and again mentions the uniqueness of his friend: "And only herald to the gaudy spring" (Shakespeare, 1999, p. 1), "only" here means peerless. While being a devoted friend, the speaker is so single-minded about his friend that he singles his fair friend out for praise: "Since all alike my songs and praises be/ To one, of one, still such, and ever so" (Shakespeare, 1999, p. 105). Man is the soul of the universe, and his rose is the soul of his own universe.

With the flower imagery, Shakespeare succeeds in using personification to describe the speaker's feelings towards his beloved: "Nor did I wonder at the lily's white,/ Nor praise the deep vermilion in the rose;/ They were but sweet, but figures of delight,/ Drawn after you, you pattern of all those" (Shakespeare, 1999, p. 98).

In Sonnet 98, "the poet here remembers an April separation, in which springtime beauty seemed to him only a pale reflection of the absent beloved" (Luo, 2009, p. 91). Shakespeare's speaker mentions two beautiful flowers lily and rose with the emphasis on their colors. Lily is white and rose is deep red. Although their hue is very pleasing and agreeable, they could not rid the speaker of the mood of despondency when the speaker has been away from the youth since the spring. The speaker neither wonders at the lily's whiteness nor praises the rose's redness, for both of them merely imitate his absent friend's white skin and rosy cheeks. Instead of being

the essence of the young man, they are only the shapes of delight. All in all, his fair friend is the model for all lilies and roses (Luo, 2009, p. 93). The speaker misses his friend so deeply and colorfully that his feeling of missing is characterized by aesthetically pleasing color combination. The sonnet is fragrant with scents of strong affection.

In Sonnet 99, the speaker further illustrates his strong emotion of missing his beloved with the images of various flowers especially roses:

The lily I condemned for thy hand,
 And buds of marjoram had stol'n thy hair;
 The roses fearfully on thorns did stand,
 One blushing shame, another white despair;
 A third, nor red nor white, had stol'n of both,
 And to his robb'ry had annexed thy breath;
 But for his theft, in pride of all his growth
 A vengeful canker eat him up to death. (Shakespeare, 1999, p. 99)

In Sonnet 99, flowers are the remembered images of the youth. Shakespeare explicitly gives a full description of flowers, yet implicitly he describes humans (Dong, 2008, p. 74). Lily is compared to his friend's clean hand and buds of marjoram are compared to his curly hair. Among all the flowers, roses are highlighted in four lines by means of personification. Roses are placed in the high rung of the emotion ladder. Roses stand for complicated disposition, while other flowers only represent handsome appearance. The first rose which is blushing signifies the mood shame with its redness. The other white rose shows the mood despair with its whiteness. The third rose mingled with red and white combines two moods together. Moreover, the air is fragrant with the scent from the roses that are actually robbed from the breath of the young man. The word "breath" even gives us some hints of erotic feeling. Shakespeare uses the adverb "fearfully" to describe two negative emotions shame and despair vividly. Three roses stand fearfully on thorns after stealing the moods from the young man. The abstract feeling is conveyed concretely with the images of roses. A real man with real character is standing visually in front of the readers. But from Sonnet 98, we know that the young man is the pattern of all beauty, all the beautiful flowers mentioned in the Sonnet 99 are the thieves. It is quite natural that they are doomed to failure. A cankerworm takes revenge on the flowers by eating them up to death. Although the whole process is amusing, flowers especially roses behave in a naughty but witty way. The speaker regards his beloved as such a perfect person that he shows his deep appreciation and strong devotion towards the youth affectionately. Maybe in his innermost heart, he even dreams of being a rose to share the emotion and the breath from his beloved.

Throughout the 154 sonnets, in most cases, Shakespeare's speaker yields to the ravages of time. He thinks time devours all things. In Sonnet 64, he admits that: "Ruin hath taught me thus to ruminat,/ That Time will come and take my love away" (Shakespeare, 1999, p. 64). "My Love" here means both the person he loves and the feeling of love he experiences. But Shakespeare's speaker still positively holds the view that true love is bound to triumph over time: "Love's not Time's fool, though rosy lips and cheeks/ Within his bending sickle's compass come;/ Love alters not with his brief hours and weeks,/ But bears it out even to the edge of doom" (Shakespeare, 1999, p. 116). "Rosy" is the adjective for the word rose, which refers to the pink color in appearance. "Rosy lips and cheeks" display a person's outward beauty. Time's sickle may destroy a person's appearance, but time will never make a fool of true lover. True love will last forever.

Truth and Virtue: A Symbol of Fidelity and Immortality

In addition to beauty and love, rose also signifies truth in Shakespeare's sonnet. Truth in his sonnets can be generally classified into two categories: fidelity and immortality. Fidelity refers to the quality of being loyal to people and the quality of being faithful to one's partner (Hornby & Zhao, 2014, p. 767). In general term, it shows the sincerity of friends or spouse, but to be more specific in Shakespeare's words he uses "constant heart". Shakespeare's speaker compliments his fair friend on his "constant heart". In the couplet of Sonnet 53, his friend's fidelity is highly acclaimed: "In all external grace you have some part,/ But you like none, none you, for constant heart" (Shakespeare, 1999, p. 53). Shakespeare's speaker has endowed his true friend with such a "constant heart" that luckily, in the subsequent Sonnet 54, he succeeds in finding an appropriate object—rose to reflect faithfulness and loyalty of his friend. "Traditionally, roses signify romantic love, a symbol Shakespeare employs in the sonnets, discussing their attractiveness and fragrance in relation to the young man" (Shakespeare, 2017, p. 11). By focusing on the fragrance of roses, he reinforces the fidelity of his love and the immortality of his verse:

54
 O, how much more doth beauty beauteous seem,
 By that sweet ornament which truth doth give!
 The rose looks fair, but fairer we it deem
 For that sweet odor which doth in it live.
 The canker blooms have full as deep a dye,
 As the perfumed tincture of the roses,
 Hang on such thorns, and play as wantonly,
 When summer's breath their masked buds discloses;
 But, for their virtue only is their show,
 They live unwooded, and unrespected fade,
 Die to themselves. Sweet roses do not so;
 Of their sweet deaths are sweetest odors made.
 And so of you, beauteous and lovely youth,
 When that shall vade, my verse distills your truth. (Shakespeare, 1999, p. 54)

In Shakespeare's opinion, rose is a perfect combination of both outward fair and inward worth. In nature, rose is a sweetly scented flower. In Sonnet 54, Shakespeare's speaker extols the pleasant smell of roses to such an extent that he associates the sweet perfume of roses with truth.

In the first quatrain of Sonnet 54, he explicitly puts forward the argument: Truth is the sweet ornament or the crown of beauty, which makes an already beautiful thing more beautiful or even stunningly beautiful. Then, he cites rose as an example to elaborate his view in a figurative way. Rose is a flower which contains both beauty and fragrance. The reason why the fragrance of rose will enhance the beauty of rose is that the pleasant smell is an inseparable companion to rose. As the saying goes, beauty without virtue is like rose without fragrance. Fragrance is the inner beauty of rose, which will make rose look fairer. So truth is to the beauty what sweet smell is to the rose. "The canker blooms have full as deep a dye,/ As the perfumed tincture of the roses,/ Hang on such thorns, and play as wantonly,/ When summer's breath their masked buds discloses;" (Shakespeare, 1999, p. 54).

In the second quatrain of Sonnet 54, Shakespeare's speaker mentions a new imagery "the canker blooms" to reinforce his view. The canker blooms and roses are comparable in several respects. By comparison, he

shows that the canker blooms bear striking similarities to “the perfumed tincture of the roses” in color, thorns and buds. Despite these similarities, there are some marked differences. He implicitly describes the canker blooms in a disapproving way by means of personification: “Hang on such thorns, and play as wantonly”. Wantonly in old-fashioned way means a person usually a woman behaves in a very immoral way or has many sexual partners, which shows in the sonnet that the wanton play of the canker blooms intends to seduce the sight and arouse an erotic fantasy. The implied meaning is that beauty without morality or morals is worth nothing. The deep-dyed canker blooms brightly attract the eyesight when the summer’s breath lovingly and gently opens their hidden buds. The canker blooms are wantonly swaying in the breeze and are enveloped in an atmosphere of involving sexual desire and magic pleasure. Furthermore, the name of the canker bloom also gives us some hints. Originally, canker means a disease that destroys the wood of plants and trees. But it is acknowledged that, in Shakespeare’s Sonnet 54, canker blooms refer to “dog roses which lack the perfume of the damask rose” (Shakespeare, 1999, p. 54). The canker bloom is a kind of wild rose. In order to depreciate such kind of wild rose, Shakespeare’s speaker tends to exaggerate its “bright” color and “scentless” odor in an artistic way. But actually, dog roses are wild roses with a pale color and a scented smell: “The small, scented flowers are borne singly or in threes, and the color varies from blush white to pink” (Beales et al., 1998, p. 49). The overstatements of the so-called bright color and scentless odor somewhat connect the canker blooms with “fake” roses, not real roses. “But, for their virtue only is their show,/ They live unwooded and unrespected fade,/ Die to themselves. Sweet roses do not so;/ Of their sweet deaths are sweetest odors made” (Shakespeare, 1999, p. 54).

In the third quatrain of Sonnet 54, Shakespeare’s speaker contrasts the dog roses with the real roses sharply. Superficially, both of them share some botanical characteristics, for both of them are a flower that grows on a bush with thorny stems. But the dog rose, or the canker bloom in Shakespeare’s term, is “a common rose of hedgerows in central and western Europe” (Beales et al., 1998, p. 49). Dog rose is so common that “it is not an auspicious garden shrub, perhaps, makes an excellent ornamental hedge” (Beales et al., 1998, p. 49). “But, for their virtue only is their show”, Shakespeare’s speaker points out that the only merit of the canker bloom lies in their outward form or beauty. When the canker blooms are alive, they indulge in self-admiration. When they are withered, they will find themselves in an isolated and unworthy position, for they lack the inward worth: perfume or truth. Therefore, beauty without truth is transient and short lived. On the contrary, real roses symbolize true beauty which is immortal. Real roses are both sweet when they are in or past the prime of their lives or even when they are shriveled. Shakespeare’s speaker contrasts the sweet death of the roses with the bitter death of the canker blooms sharply. The latter dies a miserable death while the former dies a sweet death. The adjective “sweet” is used three times in two short lines to emphasize the pleasant smell and inward beauty of rose. Shakespeare’s speaker even uses superlative degree “sweetest” to modify odors to highly praise the heady perfume of the roses and the worthy sacrifice of the roses. From the comparative degree of “fairer” (Line 3) to the superlative degree of “sweetest” (Line 12), the varying degrees of the key adjectives make the process of distilling perfume increase from the greater strength to the greatest degree, which intensifies the conclusion: immortality. “And so of you, beauteous and lovely youth,/ When that shall vade, my verse distills your truth” (Shakespeare, 1999, p. 54).

In the couplet, Shakespeare’s speaker uses the word “distill” somewhat to echo back the word “tincture” in the second quatrain. As a matter of fact, “tincture” is a technical term which refers to a substance dissolved in alcohol for use as a medicine (Hornby & Zhao, 2014, p. 2192), which emphasizes the chemical process of

distillation. "Though the sonnets are always openly drifting toward emblematic or allegorical language, they are plucked back into the perceptual, as their symbolic rose is distilled into 'real' perfume" (Vendler, 1997, p. 21). What distillation is to the scent of real roses, the verse is to the inward beauty of true friends. By means of Shakespeare's verse his friend's essence is distilled and his friend will remain immortal in his verse, for Shakespeare is always confident that his verse will conquer the mowing of the time's scythe to praise his friend's worth: "And yet to times in hope my verse shall stand,/ Praising thy worth, despite his cruel hand" (Shakespeare, 1999, p. 60). "The boast of immortality for one's verse was a Renaissance convention and goes back to the classics. It implies, not egotism on the part of the poet, but a faith in the permanence of poetry" (Wu, 2013, p. 101). Through comparison and contrast, rose symbolizes fidelity and immortality in quite a natural way.

Conclusion

In Shakespeare's Sonnet 105, Shakespeare declares that "Fair, kind, and true is all my argument,/ Fair, kind, and true, varying to other words;/ And in this change is my invention spent,/ Three themes in one, which wondrous scope affords" (Shakespeare, 1999, p. 105). The beauty, goodness and truth are the three themes running through 154 sonnets. Rose imagery in Shakespeare's 154 sonnets is used as a perfect imagery to represent the beauty, goodness and truth. Traditionally rose signifies love and beauty. In the sonnet, rose is a symbol of both physical beauty and inner beauty of his fair friend and rose is also used to form a contrast with the rare characteristics of a dark lady. Shakespeare's speaker applies the colors of rose to the complexion of his love, the delightful pattern of rose to the figure of his love and the sweet smell of rose to the virtue of his love. With the rose imagery, the speaker extols his beloved passionately and heartily. The successful use of the rose imagery helps to reveal Shakespeare's values and ideals of humanism. As a Renaissance humanist, Shakespeare places man in an important position of universe and affirms various kinds of emotions of human beings. The rose imagery in Shakespeare's sonnets helps people appreciate and cherish the beauty, goodness and truth all the time.

References

- Beales, P., Cairns, T., Duncan, W., Fagan, G., Grant, W., Grapes, K., ... Williams, T. (1998). *Botanica's roses: The encyclopedia of roses* (Foreword by D. Austin, Introduced by P. Harkness). Australia: Random House Australia Pty Ltd.
- Buchmann, S. (2015). *The reason for flowers*. New York: An Imprint of Simon & Schuster, Inc.
- Dong, Y. P. (2008). The reflection of the theme through the rose imagery in Shakespeare's sonnets. *Journal of University of Shanghai for Science and Technology (Social Science)*, 30(1), 71-76.
- Hornby, A. S., & Zhao, C. L. (2014). *Oxford advanced learner's English-Chinese dictionary* (8th ed.). Beijing: The Commercial Press/Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Luo, Y. M. (2009). *Great sonnets of Shakespeare: Selected and edited with analytic commentary by Luo Yimin*. Beijing: China Renmin University Press.
- Shakespeare, W. (1999). *The sonnets* (Introduction by W. H. Auden, W. Burto, Ed.). New York: the Penguin Group.
- Shakespeare, W. (2017). *Sonnets*. Beijing: China Translation & Publishing House.
- Vendler, H. (1997). *The art of Shakespeare's sonnets*. Cambridge, Massachusetts: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press.
- Wu, W. R. (2013). *History and anthology of English literature*. Beijing: Foreign Language Teaching and Research Press.