

REVIEW PAPER

SHAKESPEARE IN POPULAR CULTURE: SHAKESPEARE'S SONNET 130 AS AN INSPIRATION FOR AMERICAN TEEN DRAMA TELEVISION SERIES MY SO-CALLED LIFE

Ismet Dilaver¹ , Nejla Babić² 

¹ International Burch University, Sarajevo, Bosnia and Herzegovina

² International Burch University, Sarajevo, Bosnia and Herzegovina

Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to Ismet Dilaver, International Burch University, Sarajevo, Bosnia and Herzegovina. E-mail: ismet.dilaver9@gmail.com and Nejla Babić, International Burch University, Sarajevo, Bosnia and Herzegovina. E-mail: b-nejla@hotmail.com

ABSTRACT

William Shakespeare is regarded as one of the most popular authors of all times, and today his works serve as inspiration for many popular adaptations, productions, and citations. Although modern movies usually use one of Shakespeare's plays as the main source of inspiration, in this paper, we will show how Shakespeare's sonnet sequence (1609) with the main focus on sonnet 130, also known as "My mistress' eyes are nothing like the sun," influenced the creation of an American teen drama television series My So-Called Life (1994). Besides the obvious example of sonnet 130 citation in episode 12 of My So-Called Life, we will refer to many other similarities between the two while underlying all the differences between them as well. Further, the nature of this essay requires closer perusal of Shakespeare's own life since it still represents one of the greatest mysteries in the world of literature, which also reflects on his works. At the same time, his Sonnet Sequence is no exception.

Keywords: William Shakespeare, Sonnet Sequence, My So-Called Life, Shakespeare in Popular Culture, Movies



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Introduction

William Shakespeare is one of the most popular authors world-wide, not only in the English-speaking world. When we think of Shakespeare in popular culture, the first thing that comes to our mind are plays such as *Romeo and Juliet* and *Macbeth*, rather than his poetry. Adaptations of Shakespeare's plays into movies and their relation to popular culture is a topic that has been researched before. (Gerzic, 2008; Keller, & Stratyner, 2004). However, Shakespeare's sonnets have served as inspiration for a variety of popular films, including *Dead Poets Society* (1989), inspired by Sonnet 130, *In a Lonely Place* (1950), inspired by Sonnet 29, and *Sense and Sensibility* (1995), inspired by Sonnet 116. One of the best examples of a TV show inspired by a Shakespeare sonnet is an American drama TV series called *My So-Called Life* (1994). Many of Shakespeare's writings are mysterious in their core, as well as Shakespeare himself, since there are many speculations even about his death. Many people still believe that Shakespeare faked his death, and continued writing and publishing under a different name, but that has never been scientifically proved. Still, even though his life was a mystery, and we know just a little about it, we still know more about Shakespeare than about any other person that lived at the time.

In this paper, we will juxtapose Shakespeare's Sonnet 130, "My Mistress' eyes are nothing like the sun," and the American TV series *My So-Called Life* (1994), in order to show similarities between these two works belonging to completely different genres. In order to prove our statement, we will rely on textual analysis and close reading method, while we will also rely on findings of other researchers in the field of Shakespeareology.

As one of the most well-known authors of all time, perhaps even the most well-known, Shakespeare's name and work have been entrenched in popular culture, for worse or for better, for centuries. According to IMDB, the world's most popular film and television database, and the British Film Institute (BFI), there are more than 100 adaptations of Shakespeare's works developed for film alone, starting as late as the 1935 film *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, and as recent as 2021's adaptation *The Tragedy of Macbeth*, starring Denzel Washington. And this is not including stage shows, television shows, music, literature - all that have been influenced by the Bard, which are innumerable.

A popularity and influence over stories lasting centuries in this way is no easy feat, and begs the question of how something can achieve such widely canonized status. Each time a play is newly adapted to the stage with a new set of actors, the play itself is reinterpreted. This may be one of the reasons why Shakespeare's work has sparked such longevity, and a readiness for others to adapt his work in different ways. So today, as a consequence of the timeless quality of his work, their elements are seen everywhere, even in small incremental elements, and not only through his plays, but his poetry as well.

Additionally, though sometimes regarded as a symbol of high-brow artistry, "undeniably the Bard of high literature" Shakespeare has also always blurred the line between "high and low, elite and popular, revealing the multiple (and sometimes colliding) meaning of these terms" (Shaughnessy, 2007, p. 6) This is because William Shakespeare, the person before he became an icon, was not himself one of the elite, and wrote in vernacular "generally comprehensible to most English speakers centuries later" (Shaughnessy, 2007, p. 7).

It is understandable then that the naturally accessible people's author would only become increasingly popular through modern mediums which allow even more people to have access and the ability to adapt his works. The medium of film, for example, "has greatly expanded both the field of Shakespeare's adaptation to modern life and the global dissemination of Shakespeare performance" (Shaughnessy, 2007, p. 230). Because of this global dissemination and longevity referred to previously, a work by Shakespeare is a work which we may see in the highest forms of art, which may be regarded for the more privileged of us. The plays staged will be enjoyed by the utmost purists even today, but they will also be present for any household, if they watch a movie or even simply turn on the TV. This accessibility has only widened the influence of his writing, especially among young people. (Rokison-Woodall, 2013).

When talking about the beginning of "Shakespeare in Popular Culture", it is often related to 1959 with, as is suggested in *Shakespeare and Elizabethan Popular Culture: Arden Critical Companion*, "C. L. Barber's highly influential account of the relationship between with festive custom and Shakespeare's dramatic forms" (Rhodes & Gillespie, 2006. p. 3). However, such a statement should be taken incredulously, since Shakespeare and his

works were cited and alluded to in English popular culture even during his lifetime, and ever since. We further need to underline that Shakespeare in popular culture does not refer only to Shakespeare's influence over literary texts, but instead, he is omnipresent. According to Laboni Battacharya's paper titled "Interrogating 'Shakespop': The Politics of Tasteful Pop Culture", Shakespeare's figure is present in the form of "memes, T-shirts, or contestations over Shakespeare's seriousness on social media websites" (Battacharya, 2017, p. 67). Still, more importantly, she concludes that:

Postmodern proliferation of Shakespop is not an inherently democratizing phenomenon, but one that conceals its origins in access, privilege and power. Not only does it conceal these origins, it successfully creates a system of signification whereby those who enjoy popular derivations of Shakespeare are coded as being doubly accomplished, which ironically consolidates rather than deconstructs Shakespeare's cultural authority. (Battacharya, 2017, p. 68).

Objectives of the study

The primary purpose behind this study is to scrutinize and juxtapose Shakespeare's sonnet 130, "My mistress' eyes are nothing like the sun," and the American TV show My So-Called Life in various regards. To do so, we will rely mainly on textual analysis, comparative analysis, and image analysis. Besides relying on the Sonnet Sequence, and TV series in the analysis, we will also refer to two images and interpret them in relation to this paper. By examining and summarizing the research associated with the two selected works, this study intends to respond to the following research questions:

1. Is Shakespeare still a source of inspiration in modern TV shows/movies?
2. Are Shakespeare's poems alluded to in modern adaptations and his plays?
3. Are there any similarities between Shakespeare's sonnet "My mistress' eyes are nothing like the sun" and My So-Called Life, other than the apparent citation?

Shakespeare's Sonnets and their reference in My So-Called Life

Shakespeare's sonnet sequence, first published in 1609, consists of 152 sonnets in total, and is frequently seen as being divided into two parts. The first part includes the first 126 sonnets, known as the Fair Youth sonnets, which describe the beauty of a young man. The second part, from sonnet 127 to the end of the sequence is known as the Dark Lady sonnets. All Shakespeare's sonnets have the same structure, they are comprised of fourteen lines, three quatrains and a couplet, and the rhyming scheme is abab cdcd efef gg. These sonnets cover variety of topics such as love, beauty, aging, discrimination, mystery, and so on. Further, there are different interpretations of Shakespeare's sonnets since each of them is full of literary devices, which gives us a chance to interpret each line in different ways. Shakespeare's sonnet sequence opposes to Petrarchan sonnets such as Phillip Sidney's "Astrophil and Stella" which idealized conventional idea of beauty which refers to fairness.

The sonnet we will focus on in this paper belongs to the second group of the sequence, and is centered on the Dark Lady. Sonnet 130, "My mistress' eyes are nothing like the sun," expounds the beauty of Shakespeare's dark mistress, as the poem shows:

My mistress' eyes are nothing like the sun;
Coral is far more red than her lips' red;
If snow be white, why then her breasts are dun;
If hairs be wires, black wires grow on her head.
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.
I love to hear her speak, yet well I know
That music hath a far more pleasing sound;
I grant I never saw a goddess go;
My mistress, when she walks, treads on the ground.

Aiming to portray the beauty of his dark mistress in his poem, Shakespeare uses blazon as the central device, cataloguing various parts of her body in turns. He compares her beauty only to natural elements: he compares her eyes to the sun, her lips to red coral, and her cheeks to red roses. This short sonnet is characterized by bountiful use of literary devices, where the first stanza is already marked by a simile: "My mistress' eyes are nothing like the sun." Alliteration is also prominent with the repetition of the consonant /r/: "Coral is far more red than her lips' red", while the poem closes with a couplet marked by irony: "And yet, by heaven, I think my love as rare / As any she belied with false compare" (line 13, 14). Shakespeare here explains that he loves his mistress because she is real, not because she can be compared to natural beauty. That is where the resemblance between the sonnet and the TV show occurs.

*My So-Called Life*¹ (1994) is an American teen drama television series comprised of only one season with nineteen episodes. The central character is a fifteen-year-old girl, Angela Chase, and the TV series explores different themes such as love, school violence, drug use, alcoholism, and more through the life of the main character and her friends. *My So-Called Life* has many elements that can be related to Shakespeare's sonnet sequence, and to Sonnet 130 in particular, which is directly cited in episode 12 of the series.

However, before we get into further discussion about the differences and similarities between Shakespeare's Sonnet 130 and *My So-Called Life*, we should first point out that not all researchers have positive attitudes towards contemporary adaptations, productions, and citations of William Shakespeare's original works. In their book titled *Shakespeare, Not Shakespeare*, Christy Desmet, Natalie Loper, and Jim Casey argue that many modern adaptations of Shakespeare's works are represented in a way that "Shakespearean text is no longer considered sacred and no one obsesses over what is 'really Shakespeare,' many potential consumers of the Bard still reject 'low' art adaptations or performances that dramatically alter or abandon Shakespeare's original" (Desmet, Loper, & Casey, 2017, p. 2). Furthermore, they claim that many productions and adaptations are not really "Shakespeare," because they were drastically changed (Desmet, Loper, & Casey, 2017).

In the modern form it takes, the stories of Shakespeare have been transformed to be adapted to modern living, with some arguing that this has corrupted the essence of what makes great literature, as opposed to mediocre entertainment. Donaldson, for example, questions this line between the two, when he writes that "like the Elizabethan stage, the contemporary arts of digital image-making [...] trouble the margin between representation and originary creation, between licit and illicit forms of artistic endeavor, between "white" or natural magic (which is only technology, [...]) and something beyond ordinary technique..." (Boose, & Burt, 1999, p. 107). An appropriate example where we can demonstrate this is a very popular cartoon movie *The King Lion* (1994) which often gets connected to Shakespeare's *Hamlet* (1603), since both of them deal with an uncle who is portrayed as the antagonist. While again, some people argue that this movie resembles the action present in *MacBeth* (1606), underlying that the plot between the two is almost identical.

But in the advent of globalization, it has become impossible to attempt to maintain an authentic view of Shakespeare's work. And the stories will only be further passed down, and further adapted holding their far-reaching influence, no matter whether this be commended or derided. In his analysis of the film *Orange County*, Richard Burt notes how adaptations of Shakespeare's work in today's age "significantly blur if not fully deconstruct distinctions between local and global, original and copy, pure and hybrid, indigenous and foreign, high and low, authentic and inauthentic, hermeneutic and post-hermeneutic," due to how all pervading and omnipresent these ideas have become (Boose, & Burt, 1999, p. 15). Beyond this, this criticism does not apply to *My So-Called Life* also because this TV series involves direct citation, not production or adaptation, thus it preserves Shakespeare's text in its pure, original form, while also taking influence in its own narrative storytelling.

In episode 12 of *My So-Called Life*, the teacher, Mr. Kamitski, reads Shakespeare's *Sonnet 130*, and calls on his students to analyze the poem, which like the rest of the Dark Lady sonnets, talks about the beauty of his mistress. As Ismet Dilaver² explained in his paper titled "Hidden Messages in Shakespeare's *Sonnet 127*," Shakespeare's Dark Lady was represented in his sonnets as the ideal of beauty.

1 *My So-Called Life* (1994) was made by Winnie Holzman, it was produced by Marshall Horskovitz and Edward Zwick. It was released by ABC productions.

2 One of co-authors of this paper

Through the Dark Lady, Shakespeare introduced a new definition of beauty as a reaction to an already existing, conventional ideal of beauty, which included fairness (Dilaver, 2021). While creating his own concept of beauty, Shakespeare disapproved the concept of false beauty which comes as a result of make-up overuse. Shakespeare's poetry might be seen as a rebellion against it since the purpose of it is "to remind us that we are beautiful as we are, we should not use make-up to change the way we look because it creates beauty that is fraudulent and unnatural" (Dilaver, 2021, p. 31). In the TV show's classroom discussion, Brian and Jordan, are the only two students who contribute to the class debate:

Mr. Katimski: What kind of girl is Shakespeare describing here? Is... is she the most beautiful girl?

Brian: No.

Mr. Katimski: Is she a goddess? Mmm? Physically perfect? The kind of girl who stops traffic when she walks down the street?

Brian [with a slight chuckle]: No.

Mr. Katimski: So he's not in love with her?

Jordan [barely audible]: Yeah. [Then louder:] He is.

Mr. Katimski: Well, and why is that? Why is he in love with her? What is it? What is it? What is it about her?

Brian: She's not just a fantasy. She's got ... like ... flaws. She's real. (Zick & Herskowitz, 1995)

Both Brian and Jordan are in love with Angela, whom, during this class discussion, they are idealizing the same way Shakespeare idealizes his Dark Lady. While Shakespeare talks more about the new, darker concept of beauty, *My So-Called Life* is more about idealizing the beauty of a girl whom the two boys are in love with. As the above-mentioned excerpt displays, Angela is not "the most beautiful" nor "perfect", but in the eyes of Brian and Jordan, she is the subject of idealization due to her real personality and appearance.

Angela is portrayed as a problematic girl who does everything she is not supposed to do only to spite her parents. Her physical appearance

is displayed as ordinary, while her recently dyed hair (red color) gets everyone's attention. However, Angela's family does not accept her red hair much as people in Shakespeare's time did not accept the beauty of "dark" people as in any way ideal:

Father: Wait! Don't tell me, there is something different.

Sister: We're never dying my hair red.

Angela: It's not red, it's cruising glow.

Father: Oh, well, I can see it now. Social world, wild parties... [to his wife] What I am supposed to say?

Mom: Nothing!

Father: I mean, it's her hair.

Mom: Exactly. And, we'll always be able to spot you... in a crowd. (Zick & Herskowitz, 1995)

This excerpt from the movie displays Angela as "invisible" in her family, even though she has made a drastic change in her appearance.

Visuals in the movie tell us much about the action itself. Drawing, illustrations, and photos are becoming more and more critical in the world of literary text. This is best explained in the example of Shaun Tan's graphic novel *The Arrival* (2006), which tells a story of an immigrant seeking a better place for life. Interestingly, there are no words; the entire story is told in 128 pages of wordless illustrations, demonstrating that visuals can sometimes tell us more than a text or a conversation.

Angela, already in the first episode of the show, reveals that she is in love with Jordan, while she expresses annoyance towards Brian. Even if we just observe images from the show, isolated from their context, we can sense the attraction between them. These images also hide some messages in the form of shading, position, background, light, etc., and if we scrutinize them in the proper way, we can decode these indirect meanings/messages that we are being exposed to while watching the show. These illustrations/visuals have a special role in transmitting the emotional effects onto readers/audience watching it, and the illustration³ exemplifies this. The image/illustration shows Jordan and Angela standing outside looking at each

3 Which can be accessed via the following link: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Tw5r9laayCo>

other. The image is symmetrically divided into the left and right part, and the color contrast between the two sides is conspicuous. Jordan, occupying the left side, is illuminated by light (probably as a result of street lights), while Angela, standing on the right, is effectively rendered black-and-white. The color contrast, again, resembles Shakespeare's poem. The background is out of focus and irrelevant, while the couple is centered, and obviously in love with each other. Yet, the contrasted shadowing makes it clear that the couple does not get together, even if we just look at the image.

Further, another image⁴ which illustrates Brian and Angela, is, again, symmetrically divided into left and right, while this time, it illustrates distinction and separateness. Furthermore, Angela's face is illuminated on the right, while it is shadowed on the left, perhaps hinting that Angela is in between the two guys. This illustration is abundant in emotions where Brian sadly looks down trying to avoid eye contact with Angela, while Angela, looking directly at him, demonstrates that she has no fear of sharing her emotions, or, to be more precise, to let him know that she is not interested in a love relationship with him, while she treasures him as a friend. Both of these images "captured" at the right moment, are brimful in mimics, gestures, texture, but more than anything else, in emotion. As such, they can tell us the entire story in just one simple sight.

Other similarities between *My So-Called Life* and *Sonnet 130* include discussion of social problems popular at the time. William Shakespeare "lived in the Elizabethan era where writings of many authors reflected the ideals and beliefs of the Royal family" (Dilaver, 2021, p. 28). Keeping in mind that Queen Elizabeth, who ruled when Shakespeare composed his sonnets, was regularly represented in terms of conventional beauty, we might infer that Shakespeare criticized the trend popular at the time which suggested that we need to be fair in order to be beautiful, while he also denounced the use of cosmetics which made people's skin even whiter and brighter. Or, in other words, we can say that Shakespeare criticizes discrimination of people with darker color of hair, eyes, and skin. Aside from the issue of Angela's dyed hair, *My So-Called Life* talks about contemporary social issues in the 90s including other types of discrimination, as well as drug use, school violence, alcoholism, and so on.

My So-Called Life was cancelled after its first season, and the planned second season was never filmed. Consequently, we will never know what happens in the end: we do not know whether Brian and Angela will be together, or whether Jordan and Angela will be together. Nor do we ever get to know the identity of the woman that inspired Shakespeare's Dark Lady sonnets, still a subject of debate for many critics. Both the television series and Shakespeare's Dark Lady sonnets thus leave us with unanswered questions. This is the part where the TV show and Shakespeare's sonnets resemble, but at the same time, slightly diverge. Sonnets are mysterious when it comes to Dark Lady's identity, while the identity of *My So-Called Life*'s main female protagonist, is known from the very beginning, while the ending of the show creates mystery. We might add here even Shakespeare's own mystery, which replicates almost all of his works, while his sonnet sequence is no exception. Therefore, on one hand, we have speculations about the ending of the television show *My So-Called Life*, while on the other hand, we have many doubts and speculation about Shakespeare and his works. Such as the question of Shakespeare's authorship, where many people believe that someone else, someone better educated, composed all those famous works. Although Shakespeare's authorship is often linked to many different people, "the most interesting of these candidates is Christopher Marlowe" (York, 2012, p. 123).

Even though there are many similarities between *My So-Called Life* and Shakespeare's sonnet, "My mistress' eyes are nothing like the sun." Suppose we exempt the fact that there is an obvious example of a direct citation. In that case, we might infer that one of the most important similarities lies in the main protagonists: The Dark Lady, and Angela, who are both positioned in the focus of all the action. All of these similarities mentioned above point out the resemblance between the two. But still, there are many contrasting elements between them, and they just prove that *My So-Called Life* is not a mere replication of the sonnet, but it is an original work, perfect in all its regards.

Conclusions

Having in mind that Shakespeare is one of the most famous authors of all times, it is no wonder that there are many adaptations, productions, and citations of his works. Even though various modern adaptations are usually inspired by one of

4 Which can be accessed via the following link: <https://gilmoregirlsbook.wordpress.com/2019/12/26/current-project-making-of-my-so-called-life-book/>

Shakespeare's plays, there are also many movies and TV shows that rely on Shakespeare's sonnets as the main source of inspiration.

The American teen drama television series *My So-Called Life* can be related to Shakespeare's Sonnet 130 in different respects, even aside from explicit citation: both of them make the reader think about the ending and/or possible results, and both deal with issues popular at the time of their creation. Further, both of them tackle the concept of black and white (dark and fair). In Shakespeare's poetry it refers to the concept of beauty, while in *My So-Called Life* it refers to mostly to shadowing and illumination.

The conclusion could also be another question: how many movies have we seen without even knowing that they could be related to Shakespeare? Nobody knows the answer to this question, since we see Shakespeare almost everywhere, as Marjorie Garber writes: "Shakespeare makes modern culture and modern culture makes Shakespeare" (Garber, 2009, p. 11). Think of the name Iago, one of many, who has become synonymous with the act of betrayal as strongly as the name Judas. Romeo, Juliet, Lady Macbeth, Hamlet - others of the many instantly recognizable names that conjure up an immediate idea in one's mind. Plot, character, even words themselves Shakespeare has coined which are still in common use today, it hints at a long-lasting, if not eternal, grasp on popular culture.

All the points unearthed by this study infer that Shakespeare is alluded to in various movies, TV series, cartoons, etc., more than ever before. Most importantly, we proved that Shakespeare's plays are not the only source of inspiration for adaptations, citations and productions. However, as we demonstrated in this study, his poems should not be ignored in this regard. Further, this study might serve as an impetus to motivate other researchers to examine movies, shows, cartoons, or even songs related to Shakespeare's works.

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