



Examining Implicit and Explicit Meanings in Shakespeare's Sonnet 43: A Pragmatic Study

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Abstract

The primary aim of this paper is using (Relevance Theory) to examine the relation between explicit and implicit meaning in Shakespeare's Sonnet 43. Linguistically speaking, relevance theory is a theory established by Sperber and Wilson (1986/1995) and modified by Wilson and Sperber (2004) and more precisely it is a cognitive-pragmatic theory. Additionally, the used data in this paper is (Shakespeare's Sonnet 43) that published in the "Young Man" sequence of the 1609 Quarto. In this respect, this paper adopts a qualitative as well as an analytical approach to analyze (Shakespeare's Sonnet 43). The current paper finds explicature indicators in the sonnet's lexicon of eyes, light, and night, and leads to the underlying implications that create implicature, for example, associating darkness with closeness. Using the Oxford English Dictionary in collaboration with the (Relevance Theory), paper this shows that the lyrical strength of (Shakespeare's Sonnet 43) lies in the cognitive benefits produced by low processing effort, which fulfill the criterion of maximum relevance of Wilson and Sperber (2004). indicate that Relevance paper The results of this Theory not only reveals the internal processes of meaning formation in Sonnet but also makes an additional conceptual breakthrough in pragmatic literary ,٤٣ analysis .



المستخلص :

الهدف الأساسي من هذه الدراسة هو توظيف نظرية الملاءمة لفحص العلاقة بين المعنى الصريح والمعنى الضمني في قصيدة شكسبير ذات الأربعة عشر بيتاً رقم (٤٣) . ومن الناحية اللغوية، تعد نظرية الملاءمة نظرية معرفية تداولية وضعها سبيربر وويلسون (١٩٨٦/١٩٩٥) وطوّرت لاحقاً على أيديهما (٢٠٠٤). النص الأدبي المستخدم في هذه الدراسة هو القصيدة رقم ٤٣ من سلسلة «الشاب» المنشورة في طبعة ١٦٠٩. وفي هذا السياق، اعتمدت الورقة منهجاً نوعياً وتحليلياً لتحليل النص. تكشف الدراسة عن مؤشرات صريحة في معجم القصيدة مرتبطة بالعينين والضوء والليل، وتؤدي هذه المؤشرات إلى معانٍ ضمنية تثير دلالات إضافية، مثل الربط بين الظلام والقرب. ومن خلال الاستعانة بقاموس أوكسفورد الإنجليزي مع نظرية الملاءمة، يتضح أن قوة النص الشعري في هذه القصيدة تكمن في الفوائد الإدراكية الناتجة عن قلة الجهد المعرفي المطلوب للمعالجة، وهو ما يحقق معيار «الملاءمة القصوى» عند سبيربر وويلسون (٢٠٠٤). وتشير نتائج هذه الدراسة إلى أن نظرية الملاءمة لا تكشف فقط عن العمليات الداخلية لتوليد المعنى في القصيدة رقم (٤٣)، بل تضيف أيضاً إسهاماً مفاهيمياً جديداً في مجال التحليل الأدبي التداولي.

Keywords: Shakespeare, Sonnet 43, Relevance Theory, explicature, implicature, pragmatics

1. Introduction

In recent decades, pragmatics has increasingly become influential in literary scholarship, primarily because it focuses on the contextual procedures through which meaning is communicated and received. While thematic patterning, formal design, and historical framing remain the central concerns of most traditional studies of Shakespeare's sonnets, contemporary criticism, by contrast, seeks to explain how readers construct significance from textual signals through guided inference, thereby introducing an innovative pragmatic perspective (Burke 2010).

In this regard, Relevance Theory (Sperber and Wilson 1986/1995) proves especially suitable for such a pragmatic purpose, since it conceptualizes communication as a negotiated balance between explicit statement and implicit meaning. Indeed, Relevance Theory, developed by Sperber and Wilson (1986/1995), offers a strong cognitive-pragmatic model for analyzing communication as a calibrated interplay between explicitly encoded content and context-sensitive implicature. More precisely, the theory distinguishes between



explicit meanings—the content made explicit through contextual enrichment—and implicit meanings inferred beyond the literal (Carston 2002).

Consequently, in literary reading this model reveals how poetry's compact and figurative phrasing recruits the reader's inferential work and thus produces distinctive interpretive payoffs (Pilkington 2000). In this sense, Shakespeare's sonnets are particularly appropriate for such an approach, because they consistently play on metaphor, ambiguity, and context-determined implication. In other words, these sonnets are especially well suited for this type of analysis, as they involve extended manipulation of figures, ambiguity, and implication grounded in contextual interpretation.

Moreover, Shakespeare's Sonnet 43 provides an especially revealing example, since it reverses ordinary perception: the speaker paradoxically "sees" the beloved more brightly in sleep and darkness than during the day. Thus, this inversion foregrounds the images of light and sight against implicit currents of longing, lack, and imaginative presence. When examined through the lens of Relevance Theory, the cues of the poem illustrate how these layers intersect to guide the reader toward an optimally relevant interpretation.

Furthermore, Sonnet 43 stands out as an unusually rich case for pragmatic analysis. Specifically, the poem reverses natural optics—when asleep and in darkness, the absent beloved is most "seen," whereas daylight diminishes perception. As a result, this reversal highlights the dynamic interaction between images of light and vision on one level and, on another, evokes suggestive themes of desire, absence, and representational presence.

On this basis, therefore, four major research questions guide the current paper, as illustrated below:

1. How does Sonnet 43 communicate explication (as described by Sperber and Wilson) through its phrasing, syntax, and use of words related to light and sight?
2. What kinds of implicatures can the poem be taken to induce, in Relevance-Theoretic terms?
3. How does the poem's concern with sight, lack, and lust deepen the relation between plain text and hidden content?
4. How adequately satisfactory and valuable is Relevance Theory for uncovering multiple levels within Shakespeare's poetic discourse?



Taken together, these questions demonstrate, on one hand, the compactedness of Sonnet 43 in its layered significance; on the other hand, however, they also reveal broader methodological affinities that Relevance Theory shares with general pragmatic approaches to literary criticism.

2. Historical Background

2.1 Relevance Theory

Historically, Relevance Theory was developed in the mid-1980s when Dan Sperber and Deirdre Wilson sought to provide a cognitively naturalistic account of Grice's intuition that comprehension involves recognition of speaker intention. In their own words, their proposal "flesh[es] out one of Grice's key claims," asserting that communication is essentially tied to "the presentation and identification of intentions" (Wilson & Sperber 2004, p. 608). Accordingly, Relevance Theory does not assume a code model of communication—where speakers encode and hearers decode messages—but rather an inferential model in which utterances offer evidence from which addressees infer speaker meaning (Sperber & Wilson 1986).

Two key principles anchor the framework of this theory which are: The Cognitive Principle of Relevance states that "human cognition tends to be geared to the maximisation of relevance," whereas the Communicative Principle of Relevance maintains that "every ostensive stimulus conveys a presumption of its own optimal relevance" (Wilson & Sperber 2004, pp. 610, 612). Together, these principles explain why hearers expect inputs to be worth processing and how such expectations guide comprehension.

To refine further Grice's distinction between "what is said" and "what is implicated," Sperber and Wilson introduced two categories. Firstly, explicature refers to the explicitly communicated content after pragmatic enrichment. Their classic formulation reads: "A proposition communicated by an utterance is an explicature if and only if it is a development of a logical form encoded by the utterance" (Sperber & Wilson 1995, p. 182). Secondly, implicatures represent further inferences beyond that explicit content.

Subsequent research consolidated the theory's psychological orientation. Wilson and Sperber open a later synthesis with the reminder that "when people speak, their words never fully encode what they mean," and that comprehension proceeds by "inference guided by precise expectations of relevance" (Wilson & Sperber 2012, p. 1). Moreover, the framework expanded empirically. For example, in discourse studies Blakemore (2002) demonstrated how markers



constrain inferential routes to relevance, noting that relevance is a property “of an interpretation which is mentally represented,” not of discourse as such (p. 6). Likewise, in literary pragmatics Pilkington (2000) argued that poetic language orchestrates weak implicatures to yield distinctive “poetic effects,” thereby giving critics a means to connect textual cues with graded cognitive payoffs.

Taken collectively, these developments situate Relevance Theory as a Grice-inspired, cognitively grounded explanation of how explicit and implicit meaning are built in real-time interpretation across both conversation and literature

2.2 Shakespeare's Sonnet 43

It is First printed in Thomas Thorpe's 1609 quarto, Shakespeare's sequence of 154 sonnets is typically organized into two movements: the first 126 to a young man and the final 28 to the “Dark Lady” (Booth, 1977). Read within this arc, Sonnet 43 occupies a transitional position. Following Sonnet 42's meditation on betrayal and absence, it foreshadows a run of poems in which desire becomes more intense precisely because it is shadowed by separation and loss.

Sonnet 43 opens with a striking paradox: “When most I wink, then do mine eyes best see.” The line frames a meditation on how absence sharpens imaginative vision. Daylight diminishes the beloved's presence, while sleep and darkness render him vivid; the poem's lexicon of eyes, shadows, and dreams explores the ways love recalibrates perception. As many readers have observed, this inversion of vision registers both the beloved's physical absence and the psychological intensity of desire (Vendler, 1997).

The sonnet's reception history has been entangled with larger debates about addressees. Some critics place it within the “Young Man” sequence rather than the “Dark Lady” group, citing its continuity with earlier lyrics of absence and longing (Kerrigan, 1986). Others emphasize its participation in the Renaissance Petrarchan tradition, where paradox and oxymoron—seeing through blindness, presence secured by absence—are conventional expressive strategies (Dubrow, 1989).

What distinguishes Sonnet 43, however, is its subtle coordination of explicit and implicit meaning.

Previous Studies

Scholarly work on Shakespeare's sonnets has most often taken biographical, thematic, or structural approaches. Booth's influential edition underscores the



sequence's linguistic density and resistance to paraphrase, noting how paradox and compression complicate interpretation (Booth, 1977). Vendler (1997) extends this line of inquiry through sustained close readings that foreground the poems' rhetorical patterning and imagistic design. While indispensable, these studies typically stop short of framing interpretation within a systematic pragmatic model.

Recent criticism has moved toward linguistically informed accounts of Shakespeare's language. Neely (2004) examines how choices at the level of discourse construct gender and desire, demonstrating the role of pragmatic positioning in characterization. Burke (2010) situates Shakespeare's style within early modern social and performative contexts, highlighting the interaction of speech acts and power. Although consonant with pragmatic analysis, such work rarely places Relevance Theory at the center of its method.

Within literary pragmatics more broadly, Pilkington (2000) pioneered the application of Relevance Theory to poetry, arguing that aesthetic response often arises from the orchestration of weak implicatures. Clark (2013) develops this insight, showing how relevance-based inference models readers' interpretive strategies. These contributions establish the promise of Relevance Theory for literary study, but their primary examples tend to come from modern or contemporary texts rather than Renaissance lyric.

Applications to Shakespeare exist but are uneven. Burton (2009) employs pragmatic concepts to illuminate conversational implicature in the plays, demonstrating how audience inferences are guided by dialogue. Work on the sonnets is comparatively sparse, though Hidalgo-Downing (2000) offers a relevance-theoretic account of metaphor that is directly applicable to Shakespeare's figuration.

A clear gap therefore remains: despite extensive literary scholarship on the sonnets and productive relevance-theoretic accounts of poetry in general, few studies apply Relevance Theory in a focused way to a single Shakespeare sonnet. By reading Sonnet 43 through the lens of explicature and implicature, the present study addresses this gap and shows how a pragmatic framework can sharpen and extend established interpretive insights.

4. Methodology

This paper adopts a qualitative, interpretive design grounded in Relevance Theory. The source text is Shakespeare's 1609 Quarto Sonnet 43; standard modern editions were consulted to create an authoritative reading text (Booth,



1977; Kerrigan, 1986). The model treats the poem as a case of ostensive-inferential communication and it describes how meaning is inferentially developed on the basis of relevance-theoretic principles (Wilson & Sperber, 2004). In line with relevance-theoretic approaches to poetic discourse, the analysis considers the ways in which textual cues encourage inferential processes, without relying on a single 'definitive' reading (Pilkington, 2000).

The analysis of this paper goes into two phases: In the first phase the researcher breaks down the poem into clauses and lines to trace linguistic and imagistic indicators of license for contextual enrichment. Candidate explicatures are then made explicit at this level by reference resolution, disambiguation, saturation and free enrichment on the basis of relevance-theoretic conditions. In the second phase, the study surveys potential ****implicatures**** generated by inferential processes guided by expectations of relevance. These inferences are cataloged and grouped descriptively where appropriate, with attention to how the text constrains and supports them. Throughout, candidate interpretations are evaluated against the principle of optimal relevance, that is, the balance of cognitive effect relative to processing effort (Wilson & Sperber, 2004). In keeping with accounts of poetic communication, particular note is taken of the role of weakly communicated implications in shaping aesthetic response, without anticipating specific thematic outcomes (Pilkington, 2000).

To preserve analytic transparency, all interpretive moves are documented as an audit trail, distinguishing (a) textual evidence, (b) enrichment step, and (c) resulting explicature or implicature. Secondary scholarship is consulted to check the compatibility of procedural assumptions with established editorial and critical practices, but it is not used to predetermine results (Booth, 1977; Kerrigan, 1986). The scope is deliberately narrow: a single-sonnet analysis aimed at demonstrating methodological application rather than offering historical or biographical claims.

5.A Pragmatic Analysis of Shakespeare's Sonnet 43

Relevance Theory, developed by Dan Sperber and Deirdre Wilson (1986/1995; 2004), distinguishes between explicatures (the explicit content clarified through context) and implicatures (inferred meanings). As Robyn Carston (2002) explains, explicatures provide the "what is said," while implicatures expand into "what is meant." Pilkington (2000) extends this to poetry, showing that weak implicatures — overlapping, indeterminate suggestions — generate "poetic effects." Applying this framework to Sonnet 43, and grounding the explicatures in the Oxford English Dictionary (henceforth, OED), reveals how Shakespeare compresses explicit and implicit meaning into a compact, highly economical lyric.



The Opening Quatrain (Lines 1–4)

The paradox “When most I wink, then do mine eyes best see” (l. 1) is clarified by the OED (s.v. wink), which records a historical sense “to close the eyes in sleep.” Explicitly (explicature), the speaker’s vision is sharpest in sleep. This contrasts with line 2: “For all the day they view things unrespected”, where OED (s.v. unrespected) defines the term as “disregarded; not esteemed.” Explicitly, daylight sight is wasted on worthless things.

From these explicatures, the reader infers implicatures: the beloved is more vividly present in dreams than in reality. Following Sperber & Wilson’s principle of optimal relevance, the paradox requires low interpretive effort yet yields high cognitive effect: absence is transformed into imaginative presence.

The Second Quatrain (Lines 3–8)

The oxymoron “darkly bright” (l. 4) exemplifies the need for pragmatic enrichment. While OED (s.v. bright) defines the literal sense as “shining with light,” it also records figurative senses such as “clear” or “vivid (of mental impressions).” The explicature anchors brightness as mental vividness, not physical illumination. Implicature: darkness is the very condition that enables imaginative light.

This paradox is reinforced by the lexical chain shadow, shade, shines, show. The OED (s.v. shadow, shade) defines these as “image, likeness, faint representation.” Explicitly, the beloved appears in dreamlike likenesses. Implicitly, these shadow-forms carry intimacy and sustain longing. As Pilkington (2000) notes, such cues orchestrate weak implicatures, inviting multiple overlapping inferences: shadows are not mere absence but cherished presences.

The Third Quatrain (Lines 9–12)

Here, Shakespeare intensifies paradox through “fair imperfect shade,” “dead night,” and “sightless eyes.” Explicitly, these terms are clear: OED (s.v. dead, idiom) glosses dead night as “the stillest part of night,” while OED (s.v. sightless) defines it as “without sight; blind.”

Yet the implicatures proliferate. Fair imperfect shade suggests that incomplete images still sustain love. Dead night implies not only stillness but mortality, amplifying desire. Sightless eyes suggest that true vision lies beyond physical sight. These multiple readings align with Relevance Theory’s idea of weak



implicatures: overlapping meanings that the reader can recover without strain (Sperber & Wilson, 2004).

The Couplet (Lines 13–14)

The antithetical closure — “All days are nights to see till I see thee, / And nights bright days when dreams do show thee me” — functions as a pragmatic summary. Explicitly, OED (s.v. show) defines the verb as “to cause to be seen, to present to view.” Thus, dreams show the beloved and make night as bright as day. Implicitly, the couplet universalizes the paradox: until real sight is possible, imaginative vision outranks literal sight. In Relevance Theory’s terms, the couplet operates as a procedural cue (Blakemore, 2002), signaling how to integrate the poem’s tensions into a coherent conclusion: love recalibrates perception itself.

Across the sonnet, OED-anchored explicatures secure literal meaning — wink (sleep), unrespected (worthless), bright (mental vividness), shadow/shade (likeness), dead night (deepest stillness), sightless (without sight), show (present to view). From these anchors, readers infer implicatures about absence, longing, and imaginative intimacy.

In Sperber & Wilson’s framework, the sonnet demonstrates optimal relevance: small lexical cues trigger wide interpretive inferences with minimal effort. In Pilkington’s literary adaptation, the text orchestrates a field of weak implicatures — absence deepens love, imagination creates presence, longing reshapes time and perception.

Thus, Shakespeare’s Sonnet 43 shows how compact cues, grounded in lexical authority and guided by pragmatic inference, generate layered poetic effects that blend logic, paradox, and emotional truth.

6.

Conclusion

In conclusion, this paper finds that employing the principles of Relevance Theory in conjunction with the Oxford English Dictionary to examine Shakespeare’s Sonnet 43 reveals that a handful of well-chosen words can open onto a remarkably expansive network of meanings. A few targeted enrichments do the heavy lifting: wink becomes sleep-mediated vision; unrespected recasts daylight as a space of negligible value; bright and dark switch from literal light to mental vividness against absence; and shadow or shade settles into the role of cherished likeness. These anchors invite a web of “weak” inferences—absence deepens longing, the imagination steps in where the body cannot, and desire finds its way. The sonnet’s craft furthers the process. Oxymoron, .brightest moments in the dark tight lexical chains, crisp chiasmus, and the punch of that final antithesis all serve



as quiet instructions, guiding the reader toward rich payoff with minimal effort. In that balance of effort and effect, the poem illustrates optimal relevance in action. Analytically, the payoff is twofold. First, by distinguishing between what the poem says outright and what it merely suggests, we gain a clearer map of its workings—how local cues blossom into larger, more nuanced attitudes. Second, this pragmatic lens dovetails with long-standing critical insights: Vendler's focus on "dream-seeing," Booth's celebration of fertile paradox, and countless remarks on the sonnet's dance of shade and shine all track along the same inferential lines.

It is worth stressing that the analysis is never entirely final. Editorial interventions and the reader's own sense of genre can amplify or weaken any particular inference. For this reason, pragmatic inquiry gains real traction only when it is set alongside sound historical and textual research. Even so, the approach charts a clear line from the subtle meaning of a single word to the poem's larger thematic design, a path that can be followed just as effectively in other sonnets and Renaissance lyrics that conjure wide emotional landscapes with remarkably spare language.

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