



Sonnets of Shakespeare

Study Guide by Course Hero



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👁 Book Basics

AUTHOR

William Shakespeare

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1609

GENRE

Fiction

AT A GLANCE

Shakespeare is credited with writing 154 sonnets, which were published in a single volume in 1609. This study guide looks at 30 of the most famous sonnets. In the tradition of courtly love, sonnets were written from a male lover to a female beloved, as in the cases of the English poets Edmund Spenser (1552/3–99) and Sir Philip Sidney (1554–86), both writing just prior to and contemporary with Shakespeare. Although it is not clear to whom Shakespeare's sonnets are addressed, it is

usually thought that most of the first 126 sonnets seem to address a fair youth (sometimes referred to as a handsome young man), while most of the latter sonnets were addressed to a dark lady. Although many of the sonnets use the conventions and rhetorical stances of courtly love, there is no way of knowing whether they are expressions of genuine romantic love by Shakespeare for a particular person.

🕒 In Context

The Sonnet

The sonnet is a highly stylized, fixed verse form invented by Italian Renaissance poets in the 13th century; the word *sonnet* derives from the Italian word *sonetto*, meaning "little song." All sonnets have 14 lines and follow a fixed rhyme scheme. English sonnets feature iambic pentameter, which consists of five two-syllable metrical "feet" in which the first syllable is unstressed and the second syllable is stressed. A sonnet develops a single sentiment or idea, and generally has a clarification or "turn" of thought somewhere in the latter half, usually either at the 9th or 13th line.

The Petrarchan sonnet, named after the Italian poet Petrarch (1304–74), divides the 14 lines into two sections: an eight-line stanza, known as an octave, which rhymes ABBAABBA, and a six-line stanza, known as a sestet, which rhymes CDCDCD, CDEEDE, CDECDE, CDCCDC, or CDEDCE. In this type of sonnet, the octave develops a question, problem, or tension, and then the sestet offers an answer to the question, a solution to the problem, or a release of the tension. In the Petrarchan sonnet the turn in the discussion or argument occurs at the transition from the octave to the sestet. This turn of thought is known as the *volta*.

The sonnet was brought to England by poets Sir Thomas

Wyatt (1503–42) and Henry Howard, Earl of Surrey (1517–47) in the 16th century. Sonnets written in English that follow this format are called Italian or Petrarchan sonnets even if they don't follow the Petrarchan rhyme scheme exactly.

English poets developed a distinct rhyme scheme in which the first three quatrains, or groups of four lines, possessed independent rhyme schemes, and were followed by a rhyming couplet. Edmund Spenser used the rhyme scheme ABABBCBCCDCDEE, and [Shakespeare's](#) rhyme scheme, ABABCDCEFEFGG, became popular with subsequent poets. While some English sonnets are Petrarchan in structure in that they possess an octave, a volta, and a sestet, the English (also known as the Elizabethan or the Shakespearean) rhyme scheme lends itself to a structure in which the question, problem, or tension is developed in the first 12 lines, and then the answer, solution, or release comes in the final couplet. Some of Shakespeare's sonnets have the Petrarchan development of ideas, with a volta in line 9, such as sonnets 18, 23, and 29. Others develop a problem in the first 12 lines and offer the resolution in the final couplet, such as sonnets 30 and 55. Still others, such as sonnets 73 and 116, develop a distinct but related idea or conceit (fanciful expression or elaborate metaphor) in each of the three quatrains and then offer a conclusion in the final couplet.

Sonnets, following the medieval tradition of courtly love, were often written to an idealized ladylove or to someone the speaker or poet admired. Groups of sonnets dedicated to a particular woman are called sonnet sequences. Petrarch wrote his sonnets to a woman named Laura. The 16th-century English poet Sir Philip Sidney wrote his sonnets to someone he called Stella, and his sonnet sequence is called *Astrophel and Stella* (1591). Sir Edmund Spenser, also a 16th-century English poet, wrote his sonnets to Elizabeth Boyle, who later became his wife; his sonnet sequence is called *Amoretti* (1595). In the case of Shakespeare, most scholars believe the first 126 sonnets are directed to a male friend who was possibly a wealthy patron, sometimes known as the fair youth or the handsome young man, while most of the latter sonnets are directed to a mysterious dark lady.

Courtly Love

Courtly love was a highly conventionalized code of behavior for noble ladies and their male lovers that became prevalent in the literature of Western Europe during the later Middle Ages. Its

origins in Europe stem from the troubadour poetry of southern France in the 11th century. Troubadours were poet-musicians who traveled primarily around France, and in some instances Northern Italy, singing about unrequited love and tales of knighthood. The tradition spread from France across the continent and into Britain. There, it influenced Arthurian romance (stories about King Arthur and his knights) and the writings of English writer Geoffrey Chaucer (c. 1342–1400), among others.

A courtly lover is typically a knight, and the object of his love is a noble lady who is beautiful, pure, and virtuous, but usually unattainable for him. This might be so because she is superior to him in social status, because she is already married, or because she is simply indifferent to the courtly lover. Still the courtly lover idealizes his beloved, treating her as his sovereign for whom he performs all sorts of noble deeds even though he can never hope to actualize his love for her. The fact that he continues to love someone so superior to him and so unattainable works to ennoble him. In other words, her very unattainability renders his love for her more pure and virtuous. Even if she were to favor his devotion, her purity and his respect for it might prevent him from wishing to consummate their love.

Because a courtly lover generally can never hope to consummate his love, he is eternally suffering. Courtly lovers were known to be continually sighing, weeping, trembling, growing pale, and finding themselves unable to sleep, as if they had a "delightful disease." It was a common conceit that a courtly lover would wander around at night, crying and composing poems or songs for his love.

The themes and imagery of courtly love are foundational to the sonnet tradition begun by Petrarch. His sonnets were likely written for a lady named Laura, whom Petrarch had fallen in love with but who refused him because she was already married. Hence, Petrarch was in the position of a courtly lover, writing poems to his lady in the hope that she might somehow read or hear of his feelings for her. The literary tradition of courtly love was revived in England in the 16th century when writing sonnets became fashionable in aristocratic circles.

It is conjectured that Sir Philip Sidney, like Petrarch, wrote his sonnets to a woman who had refused to marry him, Lady Penelope Devereux. He named his sonnet sequence *Astrophel and Stella*, which means "star-lover" and "star," the latter being an appropriate descriptor for a lady out of a courtly lover's

reach. Shakespeare's contemporary Edmund Spenser was an anomaly in that he ultimately married Elizabeth Boyle, the object of his sonnet sequence, *Amoretti*.

Shakespeare parodies the tropes of courtly love in his play *Romeo and Juliet* (written 1594–96). At the beginning of the play, Romeo suffers for his love of a lady, Rosaline, who is completely indifferent to him (and who never makes an appearance in the play). Because of his scorned feelings, he continually weeps and wanders around at night, sleepless. His friends see him as a pathetic, laughable character. When he goes to the Capulets' ball in hopes of glimpsing Rosaline, he instead sees Juliet and begins dancing with her. Their first conversation, which takes the form of a perfect Shakespearean sonnet, is fraught with the assumptions and attitudes of courtly love. Romeo apologizes for "profan[ing] with my unworthiest hand / This holy shrine," meaning Juliet's hand. He addresses her as if he is a pilgrim and she is a saint. By calling Juliet a saint, Romeo establishes her greater purity and her higher status in contrast to him, a lowly pilgrim. Since the purpose of a pilgrimage was to purify oneself, the assumption here is that a pilgrim is by nature full of sin. The notion that he would "profane" her hand by touching it reflects his reverence for her purity. However, the fact that Juliet welcomes his touch and allows him to kiss her demonstrates that unlike Romeo's relationship with Rosaline, this will not be a courtly love relationship. And the fact that their conversation takes the form of a sonnet is a reminder that sonnets were part of the language of courtly love.

Unlike those of Sidney or Spenser, Shakespeare's sonnets do not constitute a single sonnet sequence directed to a lady. Most of them seem to be addressed to a handsome young man, often referred to as the fair youth. While Shakespeare does use many of the tropes and images of courtly love, especially in the first 126 sonnets, he diverges from the tradition of courtly love because his sonnets elevate the status of the poet. Also, many of the sonnets break with the tradition of courtly love because they are directed to a man instead of a woman and because the lady the later sonnets are addressed to is anything but pure and unattainable but, in fact, cruel and harsh.

Object of the Sonnets

While it was conventional for a poet to write his sonnets for or directed to a lady who was the object of his love, both to honor

and flatter her and to let others know of the depth of his love, the object of Shakespeare's sonnets is less clear. The first 126 sonnets seem to be directed to a handsome young man, often referred to by critics as the fair youth, who is presumably of noble birth. Of the last 28 sonnets, most seem to be directed to or about a dark lady: a lady with dark hair, dark eyes, and a dark complexion, who is cruel and unfaithful to the speaker, who is hopelessly in love with her.

The identity of the fair youth is a mystery. There have been various speculations, but no conclusions. Some have interpreted these sonnets as evidence of a homosexual relationship between Shakespeare and the object of the sonnets. This idea has made some readers uncomfortable. Indeed, one publisher who in 1640 brought out a new edition of the sonnets changed the pronouns in many of the sonnets to make it seem as if they had been addressed to a woman. Another theory is that both the fair youth and the dark lady were not real people but fictional personae that Shakespeare creates as the objects of his sonnets.

Another possibility, however, is that the relationship of the speaker to the subject is representative of a very idealized form of friendship. A number of scholars have noted that there was a "cult of friendship" in the Renaissance, which held that friendship between men was the most ideal form of friendship and superior to the love between a man and a woman. Several critics have noted that the term *lover* in Shakespeare's day didn't necessarily contain a sexual connotation and was used to describe nonsexual relationships between males. The love illustrated in the fair youth sonnets is based on the notion that the speaker identifies with the fair youth; this sort of love for an admirable male friend can be seen as an ennobling force not unlike the traditional notion of courtly love.

In any case, the fair youth described in these sonnets is "fair" in the double sense of the word as it is used throughout Shakespeare's poetry: he is both outwardly attractive and inwardly virtuous, and in both senses an inspiration to all who observe him. The first 17 sonnets, sometimes known as the "procreation sonnets," urge the subject to have children in order to pass on his beauty. Some sonnets, like 29 and 30, speak of the power he has to completely change the speaker's state of mind. Others, like 75 and 87, compare the subject to riches or a gift, and still others, like 97 and 98, attribute to the subject the power to change the seasons. Throughout most of the first 126 sonnets, the fair youth, the subject of these sonnets, is portrayed as beautiful, virtuous, and inspiring.

Beginning with [Sonnet 127](#), however, the subject of the sonnets, and the person to whom many are directly addressed, seems to be a dark-complected, dark-haired lady with whom the speaker is in love but who is at times heartless and manipulative. Some of the earlier sonnets in this sequence express the speaker's pride in the looks of the dark lady. Sonnet 127 seems to celebrate the lady's dark features and criticizes those who cover their natural complexions with cosmetics. And in [Sonnet 130](#) the speaker considers his dark-skinned, dark-haired mistress better than all the fair-complected ladies celebrated in other sonnets. A number of the sonnets in this sequence suggest a physical relationship between the speaker and the lady, which, in comparison to the idealized relationship of the speaker to the fair youth, seems more base and animalistic. Indeed, [Sonnet 129](#), which does not mention the lady, is completely focused on the problem of lust. Some of these sonnets accuse her of being false and wicked, suggesting that she is dark in both a literal and figurative sense; that is, the opposite of "fair." For examples, see sonnets 133, 137, 138, and 147.

Author Biography

Childhood and Family Life

The childhood of William Shakespeare is a murky area for scholars since few records of his early activities exist. Very little is known about his birth, education, or upbringing. However, according to Church records, he was baptized on April 26, 1564, in Stratford-upon-Avon, England, which leads scholars to the conclusion that he was born on April 23 of that year. Birth records were not usually kept in Shakespeare's time, although Church records—baptisms, weddings, burials—were kept fastidiously by clergy.

Shakespeare's family was solidly middle class, and he would have had a typical education for an English boy of his time at a public school endowed by Elizabeth I, which would have included studying the Latin language and Roman and Greek classical literature. At age 18, Shakespeare married Anne Hathaway, a woman eight years his elder who was already pregnant with their daughter Susanna. Anne gave birth to twins—Judith and Hamnet—a few years later. Church records reveal Hamnet died in childhood.

Theatrical Life

Shakespeare moved to London to pursue a career as an actor and playwright, and over time, he achieved success. He became a shareholder in the open-air Globe Theatre in London and had widespread fame as a playwright, whose works included romantic and classically inspired comedies, histories, and tragedies. He is credited with writing at least 37 plays and over 150 sonnets.

Throughout his career Shakespeare and his fellow actors were supported by the patronage of the nation's monarchs—first by Elizabeth I (1533–1603), under whose reign Shakespeare's company was known as The Lord Chamberlain's Men. When James I (1566–1625) assumed the throne in 1603, the company was renamed The King's Men. Although many of Shakespeare's plays were written for performance at the Globe, The King's Men also performed at the nearby Blackfriars Theatre, a smaller indoor space, after 1608.

Sonnets

Sonnet writing became something of a fad among court circles in the 1590s. The primary intent was to share the poems, not publish them. Shakespeare and his contemporaries would circulate handwritten copies among friends and patrons, certain groups of rich, noble, well-educated people.

Shakespeare probably wrote his sonnets in the 1590s. Prior to the sonnets, Shakespeare had enjoyed great success with his two book-length poems, *Venus and Adonis* (1593) and the *Rape of Lucrece* (1594). The entire group of 154 sonnets was published in 1609 by Thomas Thorpe, along with the poem "A Lover's Complaint"—which may or may not have been written by Shakespeare—and dedicated to "Mr. W.H." Thomas Thorpe wrote the dedication, and it is likely he acquired and published the sonnets without Shakespeare's permission. However, scholars are still divided on whether Shakespeare consented to the publication of the sonnets, arguing that he may have even arranged the sonnets' order in the collection. There is much speculation but no definite conclusion about the identity of Mr. W.H.

Retirement and Legacy

In 1610 or 1611, Shakespeare retired, moving back to Stratford-upon-Avon. Despite his retirement from London life, the playwright continued to do some writing, contributing to *Henry VIII* and *Two Noble Kinsmen* as well as to another play, *Cardenio*, now lost. Scholars believe these final works to be collaborations with John Fletcher (1579–1625), another playwright.

Shakespeare most likely died on April 23, 1616, leading to the romantic notion he was born and died on the same date, although there are no records of the exact date of either event. He was 52 at his death and was buried on April 25 at Holy Trinity Church in Stratford-upon-Avon. Over 400 years after his death, Shakespeare is still regarded as the greatest playwright of the English-speaking world.

Plot Summary

[Shakespeare](#) is credited with writing over 150 sonnets. This study guide looks at 30 of the most famous ones.

Sonnet 1

In this first of the procreation sonnets, the speaker urges the subject to have children, observing that the most beautiful creatures ought to pass their beauty to their offspring. But the subject, by refusing to have children, consumes his own beauty wastefully and deprives the world of his beauty. The speaker then urges the subject to have pity on the world by having children.

Sonnet 2

Again, in an effort to urge the subject to have children, the speaker warns the subject that when he turns 40, his beauty will be gone. At that point, it would be a good use of his beauty if he will have had a child to inherit his beauty. It would be like a rebirth for him when he is old.

Sonnet 18

The speaker begins this Petrarchan sonnet by asking rhetorically if he should compare the subject to a summer's day. He asserts that there would be no point to doing so because the subject is superior in many ways: his beauty is more mild, temperate, and long-lasting. His beauty will never diminish because he will live on into the future in this sonnet.

Sonnet 23

This Petrarchan sonnet begins with an octave in which the speaker compares himself to an unskilled actor who cannot recite his lines or a wild beast too full of rage: he cannot properly express his love because of the strength of his feeling. He then asks that his writings be allowed to convey his love, for love has the ability to hear with eyes.

Sonnet 27

The speaker explains that when he tries to sleep after his body has become weary from travel, his mind starts on a tiring journey, as his thoughts go to the subject. This practice keeps him awake in the dark so that he imagines an image of the subject in his mind, lighting up and beautifying the dark night. Day and night, the speaker finds no rest thinking of the subject.

Sonnet 29

The speaker begins this Petrarchan sonnet by explaining in the octave that when he feels sad, despised, and outcast from God's favor, wishing he had the advantages that other people have, he thinks of the subject, and then his mood suddenly becomes light and happy. Just the memory of the subject's love makes the speaker feel rich as a king.

Sonnet 30

The speaker explains that when he thinks about all the regrets and sadness he has about the past, he cries for things that once made him sad—dead friends and lost items. He again becomes upset about past injuries and becomes newly upset

about sad things he'd already gotten over. But then if he happens to think of the subject, his mood changes completely and he becomes happy again.

Sonnet 33

In this sonnet, the speaker doesn't directly address the subject, but refers to him metaphorically in the third person. The speaker remarks that on many mornings he has seen the sun create beauty on earth and then be clouded over before sunset. In a similar way, his beloved shines on him for a moment and then is obscured by clouds. But the speaker still loves him: if the actual sun in the sky can be clouded over, then "suns" on the earth (beautiful people) can be as well.

Sonnet 55

In this Shakespearean sonnet, the speaker proclaims that nothing made of stone or gold will outlive this poem. The subject will live on, because of this poem, much longer than stone monuments. Wars and upheavals will overturn statues and structures of brick and stone, but nothing will destroy this poem, which celebrates the beloved subject. The subject will live on to be praised by future generations until Judgment Day.

Sonnet 60

The speaker observes that our lives proceed like waves lapping toward the shore. The newborn child matures into a man. Time gives men wrinkles and ultimately consumes all living things. But the speaker's sonnet will live on and praise the subject well into the future.

Sonnet 65

The speaker asks, if nothing in the world—not metal nor stone nor earth nor sea—is immortal, how can delicate beauty hope to survive the ravages of time? Nothing can, unless his love will be remembered in the future because of this sonnet.

Sonnet 73

In this Shakespearean sonnet, the speaker addresses the subject using a different conceit in each of the three quatrains to make the same point. He says that the subject can see the speaker getting older, like trees in late autumn, like twilight at the end of a day, like a glowing fire about to go out. The speaker asserts that all of this inspires the subject to love the speaker well while there is still time to do so.

Sonnet 75

The speaker tells the subject that the subject is as essential to him as food or water. He clings to the subject like a miser to money, unsure of whether it's better to enjoy the subject in privacy or to allow others to see the speaker reveling in his wealth. Sometimes the speaker is sated just looking at the subject; other times the speaker is starved for a glimpse of the subject. The speaker either yearns for the subject or gluts himself upon the sight of the subject every day.

Sonnet 87

The speaker bids the subject farewell because he can't hope to continue to possess the subject now that the subject knows how valuable he is. The subject can set himself free from the speaker because the speaker doesn't have a permanent claim upon the subject; the speaker possesses the subject only because the subject allows the speaker to do so, and the speaker really doesn't deserve the gift that the subject is. The speaker reflects that the subject must have originally given himself to the speaker out of poor judgment, but now the subject has better judgment. The speaker reflects that having the subject was a dream but now he has awakened to reality.

Sonnet 94

This is another sonnet in which the speaker does not directly address the subject. Instead, he makes a series of observations about cold, powerful people. He notes that those who can emotionally hurt others but don't seem to be capable of being moved deserve the blessings of heaven. They have perfect control of their appearance and are superior to

everyone else. But they must not be selfish. Just as a beautiful summer flower, if it lives only for itself, it can become infected by disease and therefore more hideous than the lowest weed, so even the sweetest things can become foul through foul deeds.

Sonnet 97

In this sonnet, the speaker once again directly addresses the subject and says that being away from him has been like experiencing winter, even though the parting occurs in the warmest part of the year. But all the rich growth and harvest are pointless without the subject, who seems to belong to the warm weather. When the subject is away, the birds don't sing at all, or sing only gloomily, so that it seems like winter.

Sonnet 98

The speaker notes that he has been away from the subject during springtime when April makes everything seem beautiful and happy, but no aspect of spring could cheer him up or appeal to him. The beautiful flowers are only weak copies of the subject's beauty. Even though it is spring, it seems like winter without the subject.

Sonnet 104

The speaker tells the subject that the subject never seems to age at all. However, the speaker speculates, it may be that the subject's beauty is slowly, imperceptibly diminishing but the speaker's eyes aren't noticing it. Coming to a sudden realization, the speaker warns future generations that the most beautiful thing in the world will have died before they were ever born.

Sonnet 106

The speaker says that when he reads old stories praising knights and ladies of the past, he realizes that the ideal beauties they tried to describe would perfectly describe the subject as he is now. The speaker concludes that writers of the past were anticipating or prophesying the subject's arrival, but they didn't have the ability to fully describe the subject's

beauty. And, the speaker adds, we who see the subject today are also struck with wonder but are incapable of praising him adequately.

Sonnet 116

The speaker says that he wishes never to prevent the marriage of true minds. He then goes on to define what true love is: true love doesn't change when one of the parties changes or moves. Rather, it is a fixed mark that is unaffected by outside forces, like the North Star, which mariners use for navigation. Love doesn't change over time, although youthful beauty does. True love lasts forever. The speaker then claims that if he is not telling the truth, then he never wrote anything and no one has ever been in love.

Sonnet 127

In this first of the dark lady sonnets, the speaker doesn't address anyone, but instead makes a series of observations. He notes that in the past, black was not considered beautiful, but now it is, and that beauty has been slandered with illegitimacy. That's because women use cosmetics to artificially make fair what is foul. So the speaker says that he has chosen a mistress with black eyes, which seem to be dressed in mourning for those who falsely use cosmetics to disguise their natural darkness. But her black eyes look so good, everyone seems to admire them.

Sonnet 129

This sonnet, in which the speaker does not identify himself or address a subject, is much like a sermon against the sin of lust. The speaker asserts that having sex diminishes one's soul. He goes on to claim that lust causes people to be evil, savage, intemperate, and untrustworthy; the moment people have sex, they hate what they've done, and they act crazy before, during, and after fulfilling their sexual desire. Before they act, they think it will be good, but then afterward they realize they are wrong. The speaker concludes that everyone knows this about lust, but they can't help themselves from pursuing it.

Sonnet 130

This sonnet, in which the speaker describes but does not directly address his mistress, satirizes the kind of overblown praise typical in the sonnets of other writers of the day. The speaker begins by claiming that his mistress doesn't fit any of the classical standards of beauty: her eyes are not bright, her lips are not red, her skin is not white, her hair is not blonde and delicate, her cheeks are not rosy, her breath is not sweet, her voice is not musical, her step is not light. But she's a real woman, and he says he loves her better than any of those other ladies who are made to seem so wonderful through poets' false comparisons.

Sonnet 133

The speaker complains to his mistress about her treatment of him and his friend, both of whom are hopelessly in love with and cruelly used by her. He begins by cursing the cruel woman who hurts both him and his friend. He says he is already suffering from being obsessed with her; why does she have to do the same to his friend? He says he has already lost his own senses. He begs her to take his heart prisoner and let his friend go free, promising that he will be in charge of his friend. But then he suddenly realizes that if his mistress imprisons him, she will have power over his friend as well.

Sonnet 137

In this sonnet, the speaker complains about his mistress to Cupid, the Roman god of love. He asks Cupid what he did to make the speaker's eyes look at something bad and think that it's good. He further asks why Cupid let his heart be guided by his untrustworthy eyes and fall in love with outward appearance, and why his heart should think that his mistress is just for him, when apparently everyone enjoys her? He concludes that both his eyes and his heart have made big mistakes in judgment.

Sonnet 138

In this sonnet, the speaker does not address his mistress, but describes the state of their relationship. He says that when his

lover swears she is honest and true, he acts like he believes her so that she'll think he is young and innocent. That way, she will believe he is young when he is actually old. He notes that they both are lying. The best way for love to proceed, he acknowledges, is for lovers to act as if they trust each other. Thus, he lies to her, and she lies to him, and they are both soothed by each other's lies.

Sonnet 146

In a departure from discussions of his mistress, the speaker addresses his own soul. He asks his soul, which resides inside his sinful body, why it suffers so but spends so much on its outward appearance, for the body is only temporary and will ultimately be eaten by worms. He could live a more spiritual life by starving the body and feeding the soul. That way, he reasons, the soul would have eternal life and defeat death.

Sonnet 147

In this sonnet, the speaker uses a conceit comparing his love for his mistress to an illness. He says that his love is like a sickness that wants to consume only what will prolong it. His reason, doctor to his love, has abandoned him because he is being unreasonable. He desire seems to be dooming him to death. He is now incurable, restless, and babbling like a madman so much so that he has sworn his mistress is beautiful and good, when in reality she is evil and dark.

Sonnet 153

The speaker retells a Greek myth. The Roman god of love Cupid, lying down to sleep, puts down the torch he uses to make people fall in love. A follower of the Roman goddess of wild animals and the hunt, Diana, takes his torch and plunges into a spring, which turns the water into a healing hot springs. The speaker's mistress's eyes relight his torch of love. He comes to the hot springs to be cured of a malady, but the only cure lies in his mistress's eyes.

Sonnet 154

In this sonnet, the speaker retells the same myth told in [Sonnet 153](#) with slight differences. In this version, Cupid lies asleep, with the torch with which he makes people fall in love by his side. A virginal nymph comes by and puts the torch out in a nearby spring, which heats the water, creating a hot springs where people come for cures. The speaker, hopelessly in love with his mistress, comes to the hot springs for a cure, but he has since learned that no water will cool the passion of love.

🔍 Poem Summaries

Shakespeare is credited with writing over 150 sonnets. This study guide looks at 30 of the most famous of the sonnets.

Sonnet 1

Summary

Sonnet 1 makes a case for having children. The sonnet begins by making a general statement of what "we" (the world, or people in general) want to see beautiful people do: reproduce. The speaker mentions propagation ("increase") in the first line as a way to preserve "beauty's rose," the rose being the quintessential symbol of youthful beauty. We want the most beautiful creatures to reproduce to perpetuate their beauty. Thus, as beautiful creatures age and die, their beauty may continue through their heirs.

But the speaker notes that the subject, in refusing to have children, is limiting his beauty, burning up his substance like a candle's flame, leaving a lack of future beauty, and thereby acting as his own enemy. The speaker says that the subject, who is one of the most beautiful objects in the world and a rival to the beauty of spring, buries his potential beauty within himself, and because he is being so miserly with his beauty, he is creating great waste. The speaker then urges the subject to show some pity for the world. If he refuses to have children, he will simply consume, like a glutton, the beauty the world deserves.

Analysis

This sonnet sets the tone for the first 17 sonnets, all of which urge the subject of the sonnets, presumably a handsome young man, or fair youth, to go forth and procreate in order to pass on his beauty to his children. The sonnet also makes mention of some themes that are common throughout the sonnets: the passage of time and the inevitability of old age, both of which diminish beauty; the impending approach of death; and the folly of wasting one's beauty by not sharing it with the world.

According to Harvard professor and literary critic Helen Vendler (b. 1933), this sonnet can be viewed as a preview of the entire sonnet sequence:

- It brings up a number of values the speaker considers to be positive (beauty, inheritance, memory).
- It contains many common images found in the sonnets (rose, bright eyes, spring).
- It introduces a number of contrasting concepts (abundance versus death; beauty and immortality versus age and death; interior versus exterior).
- It introduces a number of words that will have great resonance throughout the sonnet sequence (*fair, beauty, grave*).

The sonnet begins by stating that the world wants beautiful people to reproduce in order to preserve beauty through propagation. In line 3, the term *riper* refers to an older version of the subject of the sonnet, suggesting crops ready to harvest—the notion of harvest being a common metaphor (comparison) for death in Shakespeare's sonnets. The purpose of propagation, according to line 4, is to pass on one's beauty to future generations.

The second quatrain directly addresses the subject of the sonnet, presumably the handsome young man, accusing him of limiting himself to his own beauty. The phrase *bright eyes* is a common image of youthful beauty. In so doing, he burns up his substance in order to feed the flame of his beauty, like a candle consuming its own wax. Lines 7 and 8 contain the kinds of seeming contradictions or juxtapositions of opposites commonly found in the works of Shakespeare. There is a "famine" in a place of "abundance," and the "sweet self" is "too cruel." The notions of famine and abundance in harvests would have been very familiar to Elizabethan readers. The subject is said to be cruel to himself by refusing to continue his line.

In the third quatrain, the speaker asserts that the subject's beauty rivals that of the spring (an example of the tradition in sonnet writing of comparing the subject's beauty to aspects of nature). The speaker further suggests that the subject is burying his "content" in his own bud; that is, a flower that has not yet blossomed (which, in this case, stands for having children). The word *content* here has a double meaning: first, it means that which he contains, presumably his potential offspring; and second, happiness or contentment. The speaker addresses the subject with the oxymoronic *tender churl*, the latter word meaning both "miser" and "low-bred person,"

accusing him of the apparently oxymoronic action of "mak[ing] waste" by "niggarding," or being stingy.

In the final couplet, the speaker begs the subject to "Pity the world" by having children, or else he will, like a glutton, eat up his own beauty by dying without leaving children, whose beauty the world deserves to enjoy.

Sonnet 2

Summary

In Sonnet 2 the speaker begins by directly addressing the subject, saying that when he turns 40 years old, his youthful beauty, now widely admired, will be greatly diminished. If at that point the subject were asked what happened to all of his beauty, it would be a pointless shame to say that it lies in his eyes, which are now deeply sunken from the effects of aging. The first quatrain uses metaphors of war and nature to describe the effects of aging on the subject: 40 winters will "dig deep trenches" into the beautiful "field" of the subject's brow, and the "proud livery," or uniform, of youth will become no more than a "weed," a tattered garment, with a possible play on a weed growing in the field. The speaker then describes two scenarios in the second and third quatrains that could occur when the youth reaches 40. In the second quatrain, the speaker says what a shame it would be to say that the treasure of youth was spent to produce nothing better than "deep-sunken eyes."

It would be a much more praiseworthy use of his beauty, the speaker says, to be able to say that he has produced a child. This will be evidence that he used his beauty wisely, justifying his life in his old age; the child, by inheriting his beauty, will prove that he is the subject's heir. In this way, there will be a rebirth for the subject when he is old.

Analysis

Sonnet 2 continues the theme begun in Sonnet 1, which is that the subject, the fair youth or young man to whom many of the sonnets are addressed, should have children to pass on his beauty. It's written in the form of an argument, as if the speaker is using logic to convince the subject of a thesis.

The phrase *all-eating shame*, which refers to the idea that the subject is consuming his beauty by living a life of pleasure and not producing an heir, brings to mind the image in Sonnet 1 of the flame consuming the candle. Furthermore, the phrase *lusty days* in line 6 is a possible pun on *lustful*, suggesting that the youth might be wasting his time purely in pursuit of pleasure.

In the third quatrain, the speaker describes a scenario in which the subject has made better "use" of his beauty (with a possible sexual double meaning) by having an heir. The phrase *sum my count* uses an accounting metaphor, which occurs several times throughout the sonnets. The phrase *make my old excuse* means that the heir will, when the subject is old, justify the way he has spent his beauty.

The final couplet contains two examples of Shakespeare's predilection for using apparently opposite terms in close proximity. In line 13, by producing an heir, the speaker says the subject will be "new made" when he is "old." Line 14 not only rhymes with but also echoes the sense of line 13 by using another pair of opposites: the subject's blood will "warm" when he feels "cold."

Sonnet 18

Summary

Sonnet 18 begins with the speaker asking the subject if the speaker should compare the subject's beauty to that of a summer's day. There would be no point to doing so, the speaker asserts, because the subject is so far superior. There can be harsh winds in May, and summer doesn't last very long. Sometimes the sun is too hot; at other times, clouds obscure it. Besides, everything that is beautiful at some point becomes less beautiful, either as a result of chance or the regular course of nature. But the subject's beauty will never diminish, nor will it be forgotten when he dies, because he will live in this sonnet, in "eternal lines to time." As long as people are alive and can read, this sonnet will keep the subject alive in the memories of people in the future.

Analysis

Sonnet 18, possibly the most famous in the entire sequence, follows the Petrarchan format in that it poses a problem in the

octave, or first eight lines, and then offers a solution in the sestet, or last six lines, although the solution doesn't become completely clear until the final couplet. The rhetorical question of the first line invokes the long tradition of sonnet writers and courtly lovers in praising the beauty of the ladies they write about by comparing them to the beauties of nature. But for the octave, or first eight lines of Sonnet 18, Shakespeare's speaker makes the case that there is no point in this practice. He comes up with four reasons why summer isn't perfect: wind (stretching the definition of summer to include May), brevity, heat, and clouds. Then he asserts that anything that's beautiful at some point becomes less so. In line 7 Shakespeare plays with the meaning of *fair* in using the word twice. In the first case it seems to mean "beautiful thing," but it can also mean "beautiful woman." In the second case it means "beauty."

The sestet, or final six lines, of this Petrarchan sonnet begins with "But," indicating the volta, or turn. The speaker has just made the case that summer is transient, but the subject possesses "eternal summer," meaning eternal beauty, which is clearly unnatural. The reader at this point begins to detect a mystery or puzzle that will not be solved until a few lines later. The speaker further asserts that the subject will not "wand[er]" in the "shade" of the personification of death, meaning that the subject of the poem will not be lost in the shadows of death—he will not be overshadowed or forgotten. The reason he will not be forgotten is because he will grow in "eternal lines to time," which becomes another piece of the puzzle to be solved. Finally, the couplet solves the mystery by asserting that as long as "this" (which is either this particular sonnet or the entire collection of sonnets) can be read and seen by men, then the subject will be kept alive. Now the reader understands that the "lines" mentioned in line 12 are the lines of the sonnet.

This self-conscious reference to the words of the sonnet is a common motif in the sonnets of Shakespeare and other English sonnet writers. It is very common for a poet to write about the difficulty and the importance of writing. Indeed, Sir Philip Sidney's *Astrophel and Stella* sonnet sequence begins with a sonnet that offers a detailed description of the process of writing a sonnet.

In the case of Sonnet 18, the message is that it is through art—something created by humans—that this mortal human subject will live forever. This attitude, that art can outlive the subject and the writer of the sonnet, is characteristic of humanism. Humanism is a key Renaissance outlook reflecting a confident belief in the achievements of human beings.

Sonnet 23

Summary

The speaker compares himself to an unskilled actor who, because of stage fright, is unable to play his part or recite his lines. He then compares himself to a wild animal so filled with rage that it loses spirit. Like these, he does not trust himself to speak the proper words to celebrate his love for the subject, and his ability to express himself seems to weaken because of the strength of feeling he has. In the sestet, the speaker asks that his books (presumably his poems) be allowed to express his love since he cannot speak. Although dumb, they will receive better reciprocation than those who can so easily speak of their love. The final couplet urges the listener to learn to read where love cannot express itself orally, for love should have the ability to hear with its eyes.

Analysis

The speaker here seems to take on the persona of a suffering courtly lover addressing his beloved. In the octave of the Petrarchan sonnet, the speaker lays out his problem: he has so much feeling that he cannot express his love. The speaker seems oppressed by the difficulty of expressing his love. This is a trope, common among other English sonnet writers, that comes from the courtly love tradition. In courtly love, love can be a painful burden. The speaker begins by comparing himself to an actor, a common metaphor in Shakespeare's poetry since Shakespeare himself was an actor. The actor is not merely going through the motions of reciting lines. He has too much feeling to perform the part, to say the proper words. Shakespeare characteristically expresses the speaker's dilemma in contrasting words and images. The speaker is full of fear in line 2 and then rage in line 3, and the strength of his love causes weakness in line 4.

Some versions of this sonnet use the word *looks* instead of *books* in line 9, which would imply that one must judge the speaker's love from the way he looks, or appears, which would seem to be a continuation of the actor metaphor begun in line 1. "Love" in the last line could also refer to Cupid, the Roman god of love, who, though blind, is supposedly able to hear with his eyes. In any case, the notion of hearing with eyes seems to complement the speaker's desire to somehow speak in silence.

Sonnet 27

Summary

"Weary with toil" and travel, the speaker goes to bed to rest his body, but then his mind begins a tiring journey. His thoughts start on a long, "zealous pilgrimage" toward the subject, keeping his sleepy eyes open and staring into the darkness, "which the blind do see." His soul's imagination presents an image of the subject to his mind, appearing like a jewel and beautifying the horrid, dark night. By day his limbs, or body, and by night his mind find no rest for the subject and for himself.

Analysis

The speaker in this sonnet is acting the part of the courtly lover constantly tormented with the thoughts of his beloved, who is presumably far away or out of reach. Like many a courtly lover, the speaker is exhausted. He cannot sleep because he cannot stop thinking of his beloved. The sonnet deals in a classic dichotomy that occurs in many Elizabethan poems, that of the body versus the soul. The weariness and travail of the body are paralleled by those of the soul (or mind).

The mind's journey is of an elevated nature: it is a pilgrimage. In medieval and Renaissance times, a pilgrimage was a long journey during which the traveler sought to travel not only over a distance but also from a lowly, sinful state to a higher, more spiritual state. The goal of the pilgrimage is the beloved. As is typical in the courtly love tradition, the beloved is seen as more spiritually elevated than the lover.

This spiritual journey keeps the speaker's weary eyelids open, staring into the darkness, where he sees an image of his beloved that shines like a jewel. The darkness is described in paradoxical wording, as that "which the blind do see." This contradiction of seeing what the blind can see implies that the speaker's spiritual state is very dark indeed and that his love has caused him much confusion. As is ever the case in such soul/body dichotomies, the soul is more powerful. The soul creates images, which, though they are manifestations of the imagination, keep the speaker's weary body awake. Pondering his lover as a shining jewel appearing in the darkness illuminates the speaker's mind, utterly transforming it.

Sonnet 29

Summary

In this Petrarchan sonnet, the speaker describes himself in a state of despondency. When he is out of luck and despised by others—feeling like a cursed outcast, out of God's favor—wishing he had others' skills or wisdom or friends, if he just accidentally thinks about the subject, then his mental state rises. The speaker says his mood becomes like "the lark at break of day arising" to sing "hymns at heaven's gate." Just the memory of the subject's love makes him feel so lucky and wealthy that he wouldn't trade his situation even to be a king.

Analysis

The speaker in this sonnet might be said to exist in the tradition of courtly love in that he is suffering and his beloved has great powers of inspiration and comfort. It is a Petrarchan sonnet, because the octave, or first eight lines, describes the dilemma or problem of the speaker's sad state. And then the sestet, or last six lines, illustrates what brings him out of his sad state to a mood of joy. The volta, or turn, occurs, as is typical, in line 9 with the word *Yet*. This is one of three of Shakespeare's sonnets in which the entire poem is a single sentence.

It's unclear whether there is a real cause to the speaker's low feelings, but he feels out of favor with fortune and other men. The former might be a reference to the Roman goddess Fortuna, who arbitrarily determines human beings' fates by spinning her great wheel. The goddess is traditionally contrasted with divine providence or wisdom. Since God won't listen to his prayers, the speaker feels cursed and powerless, and he becomes envious of others' *art* (skill) and *scope* (mental ability). The lark in Elizabethan poetry is traditionally thought of as rising from the earth and singing to herald the morning. The simile, or comparison, involving the lark illustrates how light his soul has become at the thought of his beloved, as if he has flown from earth to the gate of heaven. The final couplet discusses love in monetary terms, a recurring metaphor in Shakespeare's poetry.

Sonnet 30

Summary

In this sonnet the speaker describes a moment of melancholy reflection in which he holds court in his mind and "summon[s] up remembrance of things past." When he thinks silently of the past, he regrets not having what he once wanted, and once again becomes sad about things that made him sad in the past. He cries for friends who have died and for loves he has lost, and he bemoans the absence of things that are gone. He can once again "grieve at grievances" he has already gotten over, and he can recount them as if they have just newly occurred. But if he thinks of the person he loves as he does this, he feels as if he has lost nothing, that "All losses are restored and sorrows end."

Analysis

As in Sonnet 29, this sonnet is addressed to a friend or beloved whose very being has the power to completely change the speaker's state of mind. This is a Shakespearean, or English, sonnet. It develops a problem quatrain by quatrain that is then resolved in the final couplet. The first quatrain uses a conceit, or imaginary circumstance, comparing his remembrance of the past to a court session in which the judge "summon[s] up" sad things from the past. In the second quatrain, Shakespeare uses an accounting conceit to discuss the sad things the speaker is remembering. In line 7 he mentions "love's long since canceled woe" as if it were a canceled debt. In line 8 he mentions the "expense of many a vanished sight." In lines 10–12, he says he can "tell o'er / The sad account" of things he'd already bemoaned and "new pay" his debt. The accounting conceit continues into the final couplet, where "All losses are restored."

Shakespeare creates a somber mood in this sonnet partly through his use of alliteration and repetition of both words and sounds. The sibilance (sound of s) of line 1—"sessions of sweet silent"—evokes the sound of whispering in a quiet courtroom. Sad alliterative echoes resound throughout the poem: *sigh* and *sought* in line 3; *weep* and *woe* and "love's long" in line 7. In line 4 there is alliteration of the w sound, accentuating the sorrowful words *woes*, *wail*, and *waste*, where Shakespeare also uses his characteristic pairing of opposites: "with old woes

new wail." The echoes intensify in each line of the third quatrain: "grieve at grievances" in line 9, "woe to woe" in line 10, "fore-bemoanèd moan" in line 11, and "pay as if not paid" in line 12.

But all sadness vanishes when the speaker thinks of the friend addressed in the final couplet. As in Sonnet 29, the mere thought of the beloved completely changes the mood or state of mind of the speaker.

Sonnet 33

Summary

The speaker says that on many mornings he has seen the brilliant sun—a "sovereign eye"—create heavenly beauty on earth by shining on mountains, meadows, and streams. But the divine sun almost immediately allows ugly clouds to hide the divine face from the world. Thus disgraced, the sun sneaks off to the west to set. In this same way, the speaker's sun (his beloved) shines one morning upon the speaker, but only for a moment, before the clouds of his region hide him from the speaker. But this doesn't diminish the speaker's love for his beloved at all. If heaven's sun in the sky can occasionally lose some of its brightness, then the suns (beloved people) of the world can do the same.

Analysis

This sonnet takes the familiar rhetorical position that the beloved is much greater than the speaker and exists in a higher realm. The speaker makes an analogy between the actual sun in the sky in the octave and his own "sun," his beloved, in the sestet. The sun, as described in the first quatrain, is exalted and powerful. It "flatter[s] the mountain tops," "kiss[es] with golden face the meadows," and turns ordinary "pale streams" gold "with heavenly alchemy." During medieval and Renaissance times, alchemy was believed to be a process whereby common metals could be turned into gold. So the sun here seems to have that power. Yet this powerful sun allows its face to be obscured by clouds, which is seen as a loss to the world.

In the sestet, the speaker asserts that just this sort of thing occurs with his own "sun," his beloved. This might indicate

some problem in the relationship with the beloved, which has led to some distance between the speaker and the beloved that causes the speaker pain. Referring to one's beloved as being bright, or some sort of celestial body, is a common convention in Renaissance sonnets, in which brightness stands for beauty. Furthermore, the beloved is often described as being more powerful and greater than the speaker, and to exist on a higher plane. This seems to be indicated by the "region cloud" mentioned in line 12. The atmosphere was believed to be layered in regions or spheres, and the beloved seems to exist in a higher region or sphere than the speaker. In the final line the phrase *suns of the world* may be a pun on "sons." In the same line, *stain* suggests a darkening, but could also refer to moral corruption.

Sonnet 55

Summary

In this Shakespearean sonnet the speaker boldly asserts that nothing, not even royal monuments of marble or gold, will live longer than this poem. Commemorated by this poem, the subject's beautiful image shall live on, unsullied, unlike stone monuments that become dirty over time. While wars—"Mars his sword"—will overturn statues and upheavals will bring down buildings of stone, no war or fire will destroy this poem, which celebrates and commemorates the subject. In spite of death and hatred, he will live on to be praised by future generations until the end of time. So, until Judgment Day when he will rise from the dead, he will live on in this poem, and in the eyes of lovers, who will read this poem.

Analysis

This sonnet, which is Shakespearean in structure, very boldly asserts that it will exist forever. It is, in this way, reminiscent of Sonnet 18, which also predicts its own immortality. This sort of confidence, and belief in the power of art, is typical of the humanistic outlook of Renaissance poets. According to this poem, poetry can confer eternal life.

Shakespeare makes a point of contrasting the longevity of his poem to that of marble, stone, and masonry, which are materials typically thought to withstand the ravages of time. In

the world of this sonnet, stone, which is used to mark graves and memorialize great people, seems more temporary than poetry. Even objects of stone can be overturned, whereas the words of a poem can presumably be memorized by future generations. "Mars his sword" refers to the sword of Mars, the Roman god of war. The passage of time seems to be marked by war and turmoil in contrast to the beauty of the beloved celebrated in the poem. Shakespeare predicts that the poem will last until Doomsday, or Judgment Day, which, in Christian cosmology, is the day at the end of time when all dead souls will rise to be judged in heaven. While the theme that a work of art is immortal, or will at least outlast a human generation, is commonly found in literature, Shakespeare is one of the few to claim literature's transcendence over other art forms.

Sonnet 60

Summary

Sonnet 60 is a meditation on the passage of time. The first quatrain uses a conceit of waves advancing on a shore to represent the minutes of one's life, which march relentlessly toward death. The second uses metaphors of light, suggesting that people are born in light, which only diminishes as they age: "Nativity, once in the main of light." The word *nativity* stands for the newborn, which is portrayed "in the main of light." The newborn child, once the focal point of light, slowly grows older, and once mature, the child's glory is threatened by eclipse. The third quatrain uses metaphors of agriculture: time "delves the parallels in beauty's brow"; that is, time digs furrows, or wrinkles, in the brow of youth. Time feeds on nature and mows with a scythe, or weapon with a sharp blade, all living things.

Analysis

Like so many other of Shakespeare's sonnets, Sonnet 60 muses on the nature of mortality. The sonnet is Shakespearean in structure, and each quatrain comments on the passage of time. Time, which had given the speaker youth and beauty, now creates wrinkles in his brow and consumes all living things. The image of the "parallels in beauty's brow" echoes the "deep trenches in ... beauty's field" mentioned in Sonnet 2. The image of the scythe suggests not only the passage of time but also the idea of a harvest. Time is often

personified as Father Time, holding a sickle or scythe, with which he harvests lives (see Sonnet 116), an image that is linked to the image of the Grim Reaper. This personification originated with the titan Kronos in ancient Greek mythology, whose symbol was a scythe, and who was linked to agriculture. The final couplet offers the only optimistic thought in the sonnet: that the sonnet itself will live on into the future, keeping the memory of the beloved alive, similar to sonnets 18 and 55.

Sonnet 65

Summary

Sonnet 65 is another meditation on the passage of time. Time is personified as a person who can steal beauty, "Time's best jewel," and hide it in his treasure chest. The speaker asks, if nothing in the world—not metal or rock or earth or sea—is immortal, how can beauty, which is so delicate and weak, hope to survive the ages? What is strong enough to hold back Time's "swift foot"? How can the sweet breezes of summer hold out against the ravages of time when even rocks and steel gates weaken over time? How can the best thing in the world, beauty, be hid from the ravages of time? What can hold time back and prevent it from stealing beauty? Nothing can, unless, by a miracle, the speaker's love will still be remembered because of this sonnet's "black ink," or words.

Analysis

Time, in Sonnet 65, is once again personified, as in sonnets 60 and 116. The reference to Time's "swift foot" in line 11 suggests that time is relentlessly advancing. Sonnet 65 is Shakespearean in structure and is another sonnet that bemoans mortality and the march of time, but, like sonnets 18, 55, and 60, it seems to hold the humanistic belief that only poetry can survive through the ages. Like Sonnet 55, Sonnet 60 acknowledges that nothing can last over time, not structures of metal or stone or even aspects of nature like the earth and sea. The problem that has been described over the course of three quatrains is given possible resolution in the final couplet, which expresses the hope the words of the sonnet will keep the memory of the beloved alive. And like many others of Shakespeare's sonnets, this sonnet celebrates beauty.

Sonnet 73

Summary

In this Shakespearean sonnet, the speaker addresses the subject, presenting a different conceit in each quatrain that describes the speaker getting old. He says that the subject can see late autumn in the speaker, the time of year when few leaves cling to the bare tree branches amid the cold winds. The subject can also see the twilight of a day after sunset, just before the approach of night, and a fire that has burned itself down to a few glowing coals that will soon be extinguished by the ashes on which they lie. The subject sees these things in the speaker, which inspire him to love the speaker well now while the subject still has him.

Analysis

One of Shakespeare's most famous sonnets, Sonnet 73 is clearly Shakespearean in structure and focuses, as many of the sonnets do, on mortality. Each of the three quatrains has a conceit in which the speaker, addressing the beloved, compares himself to some aspect of nature that is approaching the end of its natural cycle: in other words, it is about to die. In the first quatrain, he compares himself to the nearly bare branches of trees in the cold winds of late autumn. The branches are now absent of the birds that would assemble and sing in choirs in warmer weather.

In the second quatrain he compares himself to the last moment of twilight that will be soon replaced by black night. Night is referred to as "Death's second self," or an image of death. This contrasting of an image or shadow to the original that it emulates is based on the notion of the Platonic idea and occurs frequently in Elizabethan poetry. The image looks like the original, and can often fool the eye, but it is weaker or somehow less potent than the original. This is the case with night and death. Both are seen as dark or black, and both cause living creatures to sleep. But the sleep of death is permanent, whereas the sleep of night is temporary.

The conceit in the third quatrain compares the speaker to a fire that was once roaring but is now merely glowing coals on a bed of "ashes of his youth." There is situational irony (opposition between expectation and reality) in the fact that

what had once fueled the fire (wood) is now the fire's deathbed (ashes). In the final couplet, the word *this* refers to the understanding or realization about the mortality of the speaker, described in the previous three quatrains. The final line urges the beloved to seize the day and love the speaker while he is still alive.

Sonnet 75

Summary

The speaker says to the subject that he is as essential to the speaker's thoughts as food is to life or as water to the earth. Because of the peace the subject brings the speaker, he clings to the subject like a miser to his money. Like a miser, the speaker happily enjoys his treasure, and then immediately fears someone will steal it from him. One moment he prefers to be with the subject alone—"counting best to be with you alone"—and the next he likes it even better when others can see the speaker enjoying the subject. One moment he is sated by looking at the subject, and the next he is starved for a glimpse of him. The speaker does not seek any delight except what the subject can provide. In this way, he either yearns for the subject or, "gluttoning on all," overindulges himself on him every day.

Analysis

Sonnet 75 describes the speaker's obsessive need for the beloved, primarily using two conceits that compare his love to the way a miser feels about his wealth and to the attitude of a glutton toward his food. Like a miser, the speaker is afraid that his wealth will be taken from him, but he has a dilemma: Is it better to enjoy one's wealth in private ("counting best to be with you alone," with a pun on "counting" as a miser would do), or to be seen by others while enjoying one's wealth?

Lines 9–14 contain the gluttony conceit: the speaker is either satiated with the beloved or starved for lack of a look. Lines 11–12 illustrate the speaker's obsessions: he is solely focused on the beloved, and nothing else matters.

Sonnet 87

Summary

In this sonnet the speaker bids the subject farewell, acknowledging that the subject is too valuable ("thou art too dear") for the speaker to own and that the subject knows how much he's worth. The speaker says, "The charter of thy worth gives thee releasing," allowing the subject to set himself free from the speaker. The speaker's ties to the subject are not permanent. He acknowledges that his hold on the subject is a gift he doesn't really deserve. Realizing there is no reason for him to be given this beautiful gift, he surrenders his claim to it.

When the subject first gave himself to the speaker, the subject did not realize his own worth, or else misjudged the speaker. So the subject's wonderful gift, given because of poor judgment, returns to him now that he has better judgment. The speaker's possession of the subject has been like a dream: when he is asleep he feels like a king, but when awake, he sees the reality of his situation is not like his dreams at all.

Analysis

Sonnet 87 uses the language of the law and property rights to discuss the speaker's rights, or lack thereof, to maintain his relationship with the beloved. The speaker at the start releases the beloved, acknowledging that the beloved is too dear, too valuable for the speaker to possess. The phrase *thou art too dear* also suggests that the beloved has been "dear" in the sense of "costly." Perhaps the beloved has been literally expensive, draining the speaker's finances, or emotionally expensive, creating worry, frustration, or fatigue. Shakespeare uses the word *charter* in line 3, which denotes a legal document listing rights and privileges. The speaker asserts that his "bonds," or legal covenants, are "determinate," or limited in duration. These word choices and comparisons create a cold, distant tone, fitting for the end of a relationship.

In line 7 Shakespeare introduces the "gift" metaphor, suggesting that the beloved gives himself as a gift to the speaker. But legal language interrupts this idea when the speaker asserts that he cannot retain the "patent," or title to possession, so the gift must be returned to the beloved. Clearly, from the speaker's point of view, the two lovers do not

belong together in the long term. The speaker is careful not to lay blame on the lover the speaker is ultimately rejecting and seems to be trying to convince himself that the beloved was once a gift or a happy circumstance in the speaker's life.

In the final couplet the speaker compares his possession of the beloved to a dream, as dreams "flatter" by creating scenarios that people wish to be true. While dreaming this dream, the speaker feels like a king, but now he is awake to reality. This end couplet offers no turn of thought, resolution, or contradiction but, instead, supplies another reason to reinforce the speaker's decision that the relationship must end.

Sonnet 94

Summary

In this sonnet the speaker neither refers to himself nor directly addresses a subject but instead seems to state a moral lesson. The speaker talks about the kind of people who deserve the blessings of heaven and do not waste the beauties of nature. These kinds of people have the power to hurt others emotionally but don't wish to do so. Those who do not wish to do what they seem capable of doing seem unmovable, unemotional, and not subject to temptation, although they cause emotional reactions in others. They have perfect control of their outward appearances; everyone else is but a servant in comparison to them. Then the speaker says a summer flower is sweet but lives only for itself. But if that flower becomes infected by disease, even the lowest weed could surpass the flower. Even the sweetest things can become foul by performing foul deeds. The most beautiful flower, if diseased, is worse than any weed.

Analysis

This very enigmatic, unusual sonnet makes no use of the pronouns *I* or *you* and seems to be a meditation on a certain type of superior, self-contained personality. The octave discusses this type of person directly, while the sestet comments on such people through an implicit comparison to flowers. The octave discusses these people, who are in complete control of their emotions and appearance. They move, or emotionally affect, others, but seem unaffected

themselves, superior to everyone else. The sestet contains a conceit that warns that even the most beautiful flowers can become diseased and therefore worse than the lowest weeds. Applied to the people mentioned in the octave, this idea suggests that those self-controlled, unemotional people who seem so superior could become low and despicable by performing wicked deeds.

Sonnet 97

Summary

In this sonnet the speaker reflects on a period when he and the subject have been separated. "How like a winter hath my absence been / From thee" the speaker declares. Next, the speaker reveals that though the subject's absence has made it seem like winter—cold, dark, and bare—in actuality, the time the speaker has been away from his beloved is during the summer when the weather is warm and there are many ripe crops and fruits available from the spring planting. But all this rich growth, and the increase the speaker tries to look forward to in the coming autumn, still seems pointless without the beloved. The speaker says autumn is like "widowed wombs after their lords' decease." In the present, the speaker can partake in none of the usual pleasures of summer. When the beloved is away, the birds don't even sing. Or, if they do sing, they do so in a way that is so gloomy that the leaves begin to turn pale thinking winter is approaching.

Analysis

This sonnet discusses a time in which the speaker is separated from the beloved, and the absence is compared to winter. Interestingly, while in most of the sonnets Shakespeare uses end-stopped lines, which are lines of poetry that end with punctuation indicating a pause, the first two lines of this sonnet are enjambed. An enjambed line continues the thought in the line before and suggests that two lines are connected even though they are "broken" into separate lines. The phrase *my absence been* at the end of line 1 is enjambed with the words *From thee* in line 2. However, it is first necessary to read the first two lines independently from each. Line 1 is only about how the subject's absence has felt like winter. Line 2, which is "From thee, the pleasure of the fleeting year!", read separately

from line 1 suggests that the speaker takes pleasure from the subject throughout the year—any year, whether together or apart. Read together, for the enjambment, the lines emphasize the speaker's feeling for the subject, and how unbearably long the separation feels to the speaker.

Shakespeare uses metaphors of fatherhood, pregnancy, and birth in this sonnet, but he creates imagery in which these typically fruitful and joyful concepts are instead linked with death and stagnation. He compares the bounty of nature to "widowed wombs," meaning wombs with fetuses whose fathers are dead. All the beautiful produce of autumn is sad and fatherless, too. Thinking ahead to autumn represents hope for the speaker, but then the speaker likens this brief hope to the "hope of orphans" and "unfathered fruit," which is no hope at all. Orphans' parents cannot return from the grave, and fruit that is "unfathered" won't produce. These images of stagnation effectively convey the level of the speaker's misery in the absence of the beloved. The poem also makes a sharp distinction between the speaker's exterior environment and the speaker's inner emotional state, showing how powerful emotions can be. The rich, fertile growth that occurs in nature during the warm weather seems pointless to the speaker.

Sonnet 98

Summary

Sonnet 98, like the previous sonnet, describes a period when the speaker and subject have been separated. The speaker says that he has been away from the subject during the spring when beautiful April makes everything seem so lovely and young that even cranky old Saturn laughs and plays. However, neither the songs of the birds nor the smells of the flowers could make the speaker cheerful, nor does he pick any flowers, or admire the lily or the rose. They are pleasant, but they are only poor copies of something really beautiful; the subject is the original from which all these poor images are made. Even though it is spring, it seems like winter, and all of these beautiful things seem to be just shadows or poor copies of the subject.

Analysis

Like Sonnet 97, Sonnet 98 describes a time when the speaker and beloved have been separated. Again, although it is actually springtime, the absence makes it seem like winter. April is personified as a youth dressed in colorful clothing, who inspires even old, melancholy Saturn (a Roman god normally associated with winter) to be joyous. The speaker enjoys neither the lily nor the rose, both classic flowers associated with youth and beauty. In lines 11 and 12, Shakespeare invokes the notion of the Platonic ideal that occurs frequently in Elizabethan poetry. All the beauties of nature are to the speaker but shadows, or weak copies of the original (the "pattern") of all beauty, the beloved himself. Plato (428/427 BCE–348/347 BCE), an ancient Greek philosopher, is known for his theory of forms in which earthly reality is but a shadowy illusion of real eternal concepts, such as beauty, truth, and virtue.

Sonnet 104

Summary

Sonnet 104 is another that deals with the passage of time. The speaker remarks that the subject never seems to grow old. He looks exactly the same as he did when the speaker first met him three years ago. But then the speaker realizes that the subject's beauty may be diminishing imperceptibly, like the movements of the hands of a clock. His beauty may be altering, but the changes are too subtle for the speaker's eyes to detect them. The speaker then warns future generations that the epitome of beauty will have died before they were ever born!

Analysis

This sonnet, which is Petrarchan in form, comments on the imperceptibility of change over time. The octave makes the case that the beloved has not changed in appearance after three years. Shakespeare uses a characteristic echo at the end of line 2, with "when first your eye I eyed." The final three words are nearly homophones, the first being the noun *eye*, referring to the beautiful eye of the beloved. In Elizabethan poetry, eyes are often singled out when describing someone's

beauty. The second of the three homophones is the pronoun referring to the speaker, while the third is the past tense of eye, which in this case means to see or notice.

The volta occurs in line 9, with the word *Ah*, where the speaker realizes the appearance of the beloved may be changing subtly, with a motion as slow and hard to notice as that of the movement of the hands of a clock. The speaker thinks the beloved's beauty "still doth stand," but his "eye may be deceived." The notion that someone's eye may be deceived, that someone may not be able to tell the difference between appearance and reality, is a common theme in a number of Elizabethan poems, including Shakespeare's sonnets 27 and 98. Now that the speaker realizes that subtle changes in the beloved's beauty may be occurring, in the final couplet he issues a warning to generations of people not yet born that the height or epitome of all beauty, his beloved, will have died before they were even born.

Sonnet 106

Summary

The speaker says that when he reads in old stories descriptions of fair creatures and the beautiful old rhymes praising ladies and knights of the past, he finds that in the descriptions of the beauties—their hands, feet, lips, eyes, and brows—the ideal beauties they try to describe would perfectly describe the subject now. He asserts that all their praises were anticipating the subject as he is today, and because they were merely prophesying, they didn't have the skill to fully describe his beauty. He concludes that those who see the subject today are struck with wonder, but they are incapable of praising him adequately.

Analysis

Sonnet 106 fits into a tradition of poetry in which the poet claims to be unable to write a poem that adequately describes its subject, which it then, paradoxically, manages to do. The sonnet uses language that intentionally evokes the medieval past. The word *chronicle* suggests ancient stories, often in verse, of times in the past; *wight* was an archaic word in Shakespeare's time, for human beings; and *ladies* and *knights*

refer to the age of chivalry. The kinds of figures described in this type of ancient poetry were not real individuals, but "types," or ideal characters.

As many other sonnets do, Sonnet 106 also attributes great power to beauty. In line 3 the speaker says that "beauty" helped to make actual poetry or "rhyme" beautiful. In other words, the beauty of the content affected the beauty of the poetry. But the ancient chroniclers never saw the speaker's beloved: they were merely "divining" or conjecturing what he might be like. Referring to poets of the speaker's day, Shakespeare asserts they do not have the words to adequately describe him either. Therefore, this sonnet seems to be exploring the limitations of art to truly express beauty.

Sonnet 116

Summary

This Shakespearean sonnet doesn't address the beloved, but instead sets out to define true love:

*Let me not to the marriage of true
minds
Admit impediments. Love is not
love
Which alters when it alteration
finds
Or bends with the remover to
remove.*

The speaker begins by declaring that he hopes he may never allow any obstacles to prevent the marriage of true minds. He asserts that love is not true love if it changes when one of the parties changes. True love is, instead, a fixed idea that doesn't move or change, like a mariner's beacon or sea mark that is unaffected by storms. It is like the polestar, which, although human beings don't know what the star is made of, it is a fixed point that ships can navigate by. Love isn't the plaything of Father Time, although the physical characteristics people tend

to fall in love with when young ("rosy lips and cheeks") can be altered by the processes of time. Love doesn't change over the brief course of human life, but instead lives eternally, even until Doomsday. The speaker then claims that he can't be wrong about what he has just asserted: if he is wrong about what he has just written, then he has never written anything and no one has ever been in love.

Analysis

One of Shakespeare's most famous sonnets, Sonnet 116, which is in the Shakespearean format, is a discussion of the Platonic ideal of love: it is constant and unchanging, and it transcends brief human life. The "marriage of true minds" refers to a bonding of the souls of constant, faithful people who are neither fickle nor changeable. The first quatrain seeks to define true love; in doing so, Shakespeare uses echoing diction: "Love" and "love" in line 2, "alters" and "alteration" in line 3, and "remover" and "remove" in line 4, as if illustrating the marriage of true minds through these pairings of words.

The second quatrain uses a conceit of navigation on the seas, first referring to a sailor's "mark," which might be a geographical feature, church steeple, beacon, or some other permanent object, which is never moved or altered by storms. Shakespeare then mentions the North Star, or the polestar, which is used by lost ships ("wand'ring bark[s]") to find their way.

The third quatrain invokes the figure of Father Time, who is associated with the scythe or sickle with which he cuts down, or harvests, lives. Love is said not to be "Time's fool," or court jester, a figure who would be at the beck and call of a powerful person. The Platonic ideal is evoked again in the mention of "rosy lips and cheeks," which are the outward manifestations of the characteristics with which someone falls in love, but they do not constitute true love themselves. Love is unchangeable, but physical looks are transient. The reference to Doomsday, or the end of time, evokes Sonnet 55, which promises to preserve the memory of the beloved until the end of time. The final line of the sonnet is a rhetorical ploy: by writing, in effect, "If I'm wrong, then I've never written anything," the speaker suggests that it is logically impossible for anyone to disbelieve him.

Sonnet 127

Summary

In Sonnet 127 the speaker discusses the way blackness and darkness have been viewed. In times past, black was not considered beautiful ("not counted fair"), or if it was, it was not called as such. But now black is considered to be beautiful: "But now is black beauty's successive heir." Then, the speaker says beauty is slandered with bastardy, or illegitimacy, since women put cosmetics on their faces—"Fairing the foul with art's false borrowed face"—making what is ugly beautiful through artificial means. True beauty has been bastardized and called into question. The speaker says that he has therefore chosen a mistress whose eyes are black and seem to be in mourning for those who use makeup to falsely disguise their natural darkness ("Sland'ring creation with a false esteem"), distorting what nature has created by covering it up with artificial cosmetics. Her black eyes look so suited to mourning that everyone says that's the way beauty should look.

Analysis

Sonnet 127 is the first of what is known as the dark lady sonnets, poems that praise a woman who is described as having dark hair, dark eyes, and perhaps dark skin, in contradiction of the classical standards of beauty celebrated by Shakespeare's contemporaries, which included blonde hair, blue eyes, and pale, white skin with slightly rosy cheeks.

The word *fair* was used to refer to pale skin considered the standard of feminine beauty, but it also meant "beautiful," which complicates the meaning of some lines of this sonnet. To complicate things further, "fair" also meant "good," the opposite of "foul." There is clearly a play on the word *fair* in line 1: black was not considered beautiful, but it also was not considered pale-skinned. In line 2 the speaker asserts that if black were considered "fair," or beautiful, "it bore not beauty's name," meaning either that people did not call it beautiful or that it was not a legitimate heir of "beauty."

Notions of bastardy and inheritance are used metaphorically in the sonnet. Bastardy refers to the practice of labeling a person legitimate or illegitimate depending on whether or not the person is born to parents who are legally married. In

Shakespeare's time, matters of legitimacy affected inheritance rights. In line 3 "black" is called the legitimate heir (with a possible pun on "hair") of beauty. The metaphor of bastardy and inheritance continues in lines 4, 5, and 12 in which beauty is depicted as bastardized, or illegitimate, because of the use of cosmetics. The speaker seems to despise the notion of using cosmetics to disguise the complexion, describing it as an action that "sland[ers] creation with a false esteem." The speaker is effectively likening wearing cosmetics to spreading rumors and lies, having a false sense of high self-worth, and carrying the shame of being an illegitimate child.

Shakespeare uses juxtaposition and echo throughout the sonnet to highlight some of the key concepts. In line 3, his inverted word order seems to force together the words *black beauty*, as if to create a new definition of beauty, when in reality, the word *black* is the subject of the verb *is* that precedes it. The word *successive* (meaning "legitimate") in line 3 is paralleled by its opposite counterpart, *bastard* in the same position in line 4. Line 6 juxtaposes the antonyms *fair* and *foul* with the use of the neologistic, or use of a new word, *fairing*, which seems to be a variant echo of the common word *fouling*. This pairing evokes the famous lines from Act 1, Scene 1 of *Macbeth* (written 1606–07), in which the Weird Sisters chant, "Fair is foul and foul is fair," indicating that they will be creating such confusion that people will not know good from evil. This seems to be the kind of confusion that has been created by the use of cosmetics: "Sweet beauty hath no name, ... / But is profaned."

Many editors see the repetition of *eyes* in lines 9 and 10 as an error, and substitute *brows* for one or the other occurrence. It would seem to make more sense if the poem read, for example, "my mistress' eyes are raven black, / Her [brow] so suited," meaning that her brows are wearing the same color as her eyes. In any case, the eyes are mourning those who, because they are not born fair, feel they have to use cosmetics to appear so. Finally, in line 13, "becoming of their woe" can mean that her eyes wear the color suited to mourning, or that her black eyes are becoming, or attractive looking.

Sonnet 129

Summary

This sonnet refers neither to the speaker nor the subject, but appears as a sermon against the sin of lust. To act upon lust is to use one's spirit ("Th' expense of spirit") in a disgraceful, wasteful way. Lust causes people to be dishonest, murderous, bloody, blameworthy, savage, intemperate, coarse, cruel, and untrustworthy. The moment someone experiences the fulfillment of their lust—for example, engages in sex—they will hate it immediately. A person pursues the object of their lust past the point of reason, and then hates the object of their lust past reason, as if it is a bait that, when swallowed, makes the person crazy. People act unreasonably both in pursuit of the objects of their lust and also when they have them, and they act unreasonably after they have had the enjoyment of their lust. Lust seems like a wonderful ecstasy to experience, but once it has been tried out, it is a cause for despair. Before someone experiences the fulfillment of their lust, they think it must be a joy; after having done so, it seems as if it is all a delusion. Everyone knows this, but no one knows how to avoid pursuing the supposed joys of lust only and avoid being left full of sorrow.

Analysis

Sonnet 129, another of the most famous of the sonnets, is very different in tone from many of the sonnets that come before it in that it doesn't deal with beauty, nor does it express the plight of a courtly lover or directly address a beloved, or even make use of a single personal pronoun. Instead, it acts as a sermon that warns against the lust for sex, which, in Christian doctrine of the time, was considered a sin. A common belief at the time was that a human being consists of a heavenly part (the soul) and an earthly part (the body), the latter of which is prone to sin and which has the potential to corrupt the soul. When the first line mentions an "expense of spirit," it refers to giving up a part of the soul for bodily pleasures.

The first line, in defining lust as an "expense of spirit," refers to the Elizabethan belief that when someone (particularly a male) has an orgasm, he transforms some of his vital spirit into semen, which he then expends. The belief was that a person had a finite amount of vital spirit, so that having too much sex would lead to an early death because each time someone had an orgasm, they would shorten their life by one day: in other words, they would die a little bit. For this reason, the phrase *to*

die in Elizabethan literature often has the double meaning of "to have sex." For example, in *Romeo and Juliet*, after Romeo has spent the night with Juliet, he says, "I must be gone and live, or stay and die." So the notion that someone is expending their spirit by having sex is quite literally intended.

A major idea in this sonnet is that lust causes someone to act without reason. It was believed in the time of Shakespeare that will and reason were the causes of human action. Reason, or understanding, is the faculty that recognizes what is good. But both will and reason were corrupted by the biblical fall from grace and are prone to evil, especially as a result of lust.

Sonnet 130

Summary

In Sonnet 130 the speaker describes his mistress as though comparing her to all the conventional standards of beauty typically found in sonnets. However, he says that his mistress' eyes are *not* bright and beautiful, and her lips are *not* red, but a very dull pink. The skin of her breasts is a dull grayish-brown, and her hair is black, thick, and wiry. She doesn't have rosy cheeks. Her breath is not at all like sweet perfume but emanates from her earthily. Although he likes to hear her speak, her voice is not delightfully musical. And, the speaker says, he has never seen how a goddess walks, but when his mistress walks, she steps heavily on the ground. Despite all of this, he thinks his love is as special as any of the other ladies who seem so much superior to her because of the false comparisons that have been made by other poets to describe their beauty.

Analysis

Sonnet 130 is probably one of the most famous of the dark lady sonnets because of its humor and its detailed description of the speaker's beloved. In its description of a mistress who is far from the ideal of beauty usually celebrated in the poetry of the time, readers can indirectly construct a portrait of the ideal woman: bright (probably blue) eyes, red lips, fair skin, blond hair, rosy cheeks, sweet breath, a musical voice, and a light, ethereal step. The speaker's description of his love not only identifies her as having traits that elsewhere seem to fit the

picture of the dark lady (dark eyes, dark skin, dark hair), but it also pokes fun at the unrealistic descriptions of ladies common in the poetry of courtly love. The descriptions of women in such poetry are of an ideal woman, not a particular woman. There are no individuating characteristics. So all the ladies celebrated in sonnets and the poetry of courtly love have bright eyes, fair skin, red lips: there is no variation from the ideal. Furthermore, women are always compared to and characterized as goddesses. In this sonnet Shakespeare not only describes a dark-haired, dark-complected woman, but he also describes a realistic woman.

Sonnet 133

Summary

In Sonnet 133 the speaker expresses the pain he feels that both he and his friend are suffering for their attraction toward the same cruel mistress. He begins by cursing her for hurting the hearts of him and his friend: "Beshrew that heart that makes my heart to groan / For that deep wound it gives my friend and me." He asks, isn't it enough to torment me without tormenting my friend too? She has already separated him from his senses by making him become so obsessed with her: "Me from myself thy cruel eye hath taken." And now she has made his friend even more obsessed: "And my next self thou harder hast engrossed." So the speaker is deprived of his friend, of his own senses, and of the object of his affection: a triple torment multiplied three ways that he must thwart. The speaker begs his mistress to take his heart prisoner in her cold bosom and to let his friend's heart go. The speaker wants to be the guard over his friend's heart. But then the speaker realizes this is no solution for his friend. The mistress will yet be harsh to his friend because the speaker, and all that is in him, including his affection for his friend, is held in her jail.

Analysis

Sonnet 133 describes a mistress who has stolen the speaker's heart but is so cruel and harsh to him that he has lost his senses. To make things worse, his friend, the beloved youth of the earlier sonnets, has also similarly fallen for her and is similarly tormented. Because the youth is such a dear friend ("my next self"), the speaker feels the loss especially keenly.

The notion that the youth is a second self, or a copy, of the speaker indicates how close and similar they are. As if to emphasize the doubling of the wrong inflicted by the mistress, Shakespeare several times echoes key words to make them prominent: "that heart that makes my heart to groan" in line 1; "slave to slavery" in line 4; and "Me from myself" in line 5.

Throughout the sonnet, the mistress is portrayed as a cruel torturer and oppressor who imprisons both the speaker and his friend. The octave contains several terms indicating pain and suffering, and the sestet involves an elaborate conceit of imprisonment. The words *prison*, *ward*, *bail*, *guard*, and *jail* all work to build the prison conceit. The eye of the mistress is labeled "cruel," presumably because it doesn't light on the speaker with favor. In the language of Elizabethan poetry, lovers fall in love by looking deeply into each other's eyes. While the speaker and his friend are in love with this mistress, her eye is "cruel" because she doesn't return the speaker's gaze.

Sonnet 137

Summary

In Sonnet 137 the speaker complains to Cupid, the Roman god of love, for allowing him to fall in love with his mistress. He calls Cupid a "blind fool," asking him what he has done to the speaker's eyes so that when they look at something, they don't really see what is there. The speaker says his eyes know what beauty is and where it is situated, but they take bad things to be good things. If the speaker's eyes, whose judgment has been corrupted by being overly partial toward outward looks, exist in the world of superficial looks, why has Cupid tied the speaker's eyes to the judgment of his heart? In other words, why has Cupid made the speaker fall in love with outward appearance? Why should his heart think something to be its private property that it well knows is public domain? Or why should his eyes, if they see the truth, deny it in order to make something bad seem good? Both his eyes and his heart have been greatly mistaken in judging what is good and right, and as a result, they are given over to this plague of making false judgments.

In line 6 the reference to "the bay where all men ride" is not only a metaphor describing a ship at anchor in a bay but also

involves a pun meaning "copulation," suggesting that the mistress gives herself to a number of other men. This idea is reinforced by the land metaphors used in lines 9–10 in which the speaker acknowledges that the woman, like common land, is open to all, and not "a several plot," a privately held piece of land for the sole use of the speaker. In lines 11–12, the speaker asks why his lying eyes deny this, and "put fair truth" on a "foul ... face."

The final couplet acknowledges that both eyes and heart have misjudged. In the last line, "And to this false plague are they now transferred," the phrase *false plague* may refer to the practice of misjudging, although it might also refer to the mistress herself, who has deceived the speaker.

Analysis

In Sonnet 137 the speaker bemoans the fact that he has fallen in love with his mistress's outward appearance. A number of Elizabethan sonnets deal with the connection between the eyes and the heart. A common notion about love in Elizabethan poetry is that lovers first fall in love through the eyes—because of physical attraction—which then affects the heart, where true love lies. For example, in Edmund Spenser's Sonnet 37, men's eyes are tricked into falling in love with women's appearances, leaving their hearts vulnerable. In this sonnet, the speaker complains that his eyes, attracted to physical beauty, are misleading his heart to fall for his mistress. The sonnet opens by addressing Cupid, the god of love, who causes people to fall in love. Cupid, though blind, is supposed to know what true love is, the implication being that love is blind and does not depend on outward appearance. But the speaker's eyes have been fooled and have completely lost the ability to exercise good judgment, therefore taking something bad to be good. This is similar to the state of affairs in Sonnet 129, which states that lust causes someone to lose all reason, and Sonnet 133 in which the speaker has been separated from his good sense.

Also, in Sonnet 127 the speaker similarly condemns the act of deception by using artifice to make something foul appear fair.

Sonnet 138

Summary

The speaker says that when his lover swears she is being honest with him ("She is made of truth"), he believes her even though he knows she is lying ("know she lies"), so that she will think he's young and unworldly, innocent of the cynical ways of people with long experience of the world. Because of this practice, he foolishly believes she thinks he's young even though he's actually getting on in years: like a simpleton, he believes her lies. Both he and his mistress are lying. But why doesn't she admit she is dishonest? And why doesn't he admit that he's old? The best way for love to proceed is for lovers to seem to trust each other, and older people who are in love don't like to have their ages revealed. Therefore, they lie to each other and make love, and these flattering lies sooth them both about their deficiencies.

Analysis

Sonnet 138 is another of the dark lady sonnets that characterizes the speaker's mistress as impure and deceitful. Unlike the more ideal visions of love presented earlier in the sonnets, the world of lovers presented here is filled with cynicism, cheating, deception, and sex. His mistress claims she is constant and faithful, even though he knows she isn't; and he acts as if he believes her so she'll think he's young and innocent. This is another example of the idea of deception, which appears in sonnets 127 and 137. They are both lying, and they are both fooling themselves; apparently, it is the lying that makes the relationship work. In line 13 Shakespeare makes a pun on the sexual connotation of the word *lie*.

The tension between "truth" and "lies" is introduced at the very start of the sonnet: line 1 ends with "truth" and line 2 with "lies." The first eight lines are focused on the questions of what can be known, using diction that deals with knowledge, belief, and truth: *swears* in line 1, *believe* in line 2, *think* and *untutored* in line 3, *unlearnèd* in line 4, *thinking* and *thinks* in line 5, *knows* in line 6, *credit* in line 7, and *truth* in line 8.

Shakespeare also strategically echoes several words throughout the sonnet. In line 7, "Simply" means "foolishly," but in the very next line, the word *simple* takes on the meaning of "pure" or "actual" truth. Lines 9 and 10 mirror each other with the phrases *wherefore says she not* and *wherefore say not I*, illustrating that both parties are equally guilty. In discussing the

reality that love involves deception, the speaker uses *love* three times in lines 11 and 12: the first time to refer to the practice of being in love ("love's best habit," which can mean either "accustomed behavior" or "clothing"), the second to refer to infatuation ("age in love"), and the third as a verb meaning "wishes" ("loves not to have years told").

Sonnet 146

Summary

In this sonnet the speaker addresses his own soul. He asks his unfortunate soul, which dwells in his sinful body and is afflicted by the passions and desires of the body, why it suffers inwardly but spends so much effort and time on its outward appearance. Why does it spend so much on a body that is only temporary? The first six lines contain a conceit of a castle under siege, in which the soul is portrayed as being besieged by rebel powers, the desires of the body, which will not be governed by the soul. The speaker asks the soul why it allows itself to waste away inside its expensively decorated castle walls. He then asks what the point is of spending so much on a decaying mansion on which the soul has such a short lease.

Most of the metaphors of the last eight lines deal with eating and feeding. In line 7, the speaker makes the point that all the money and focus on the body, which is mortal, will go only to feed worms. He then asks rhetorically, is that the purpose of the body? In line 9, the volta, "Then, soul," leads to the solution: ignore the body and feed the soul. He calls the body the "servant" of the soul in line 9, and urges the soul to let the body waste away in order to "aggravate thy store," or increase the soul's spiritual richness. In line 11, he tells the soul to "Buy terms divine," which suggests acquiring eternal life by selling "hours of dross," which refers to the concerns of the flesh. (Dross, the waste matter produced during the smelting process, represents the body here, while the good metal represents the soul.) He urges the soul to gain time in eternity by ridding itself of worthless material things, to feed the inner spirit rather than focusing on the outer appearance. In this way, the soul will feed on death, which feeds on men. And once death is dead, there will be no more dying.

Analysis

Sonnet 146, in its serious tone and spiritual message, is a departure from most of the other sonnets. It is addressed neither to the fair youth nor the dark lady, but to the speaker's soul as he urges himself to lead a more spiritual life as he ages. The sonnet is Petrarchan in structure: the octave describes the problem of focusing too much on the needs of the body, and in the sestet, it makes the case for attending to the needs of the soul.

The sonnet deals with a common dichotomy in Elizabethan poetry: the body versus the soul. The first line addresses the soul as the "center of my sinful earth." The term *earth* in Elizabethan poetry is often used to refer to the human body: Adam, in the Bible, is made from the earth or the dust, and all humans return to the earth when they die. The dichotomy between heaven and earth, between God and humans, is thought to be contained in every human being. Each person has a heavenly part, a soul, and an earthly part, a body. The soul, which comes from God, tends to be more pure, but is often weighed down and corrupted by the body, which, being of the earth, is prone to sin.

Line 13 contains a logical syllogism (major and minor premise followed by a conclusion) that argues when the soul feeds on the death of the body, the soul will therefore feed on and defeat death. The logical conclusion in the final line, "And Death once dead, there's no more dying then," brings to mind the last line of English poet John Donne's (1572–1631) Sonnet 10: "Death, thou shalt die."

Sonnet 147

Summary

The speaker in this sonnet compares his love to a fever that continually longs for that which prolongs his disease. The speaker feeds on what maintains the sickness, and, the speaker says, aiming to please has become his "sickly appetite." His reason, which is his doctor, is angry that his advice is not being followed and has abandoned the speaker. Now desperate, the speaker has proven the notion that desire leads to death, which could have been avoided if he had followed his reason's advice. At this point he is past being

cured and his reason is no longer taking care of him. He has become frantically mad, in a state of unrest; his thoughts and speech sound like those of a madman, straying from the truth foolishly. For proof of this, he has sworn that his mistress is beautiful and good and bright, but in reality she is evil and dark.

Analysis

Sonnet 147 turns the conventional idea of the lovesickness of the courtly lover on its head. In traditional poetry of courtly love, the male lover suffers from a "delightful disease" because he is so in love with his lady and cannot stand to be separated from her. However, in Sonnet 147, another of the dark lady sonnets, the disease is far more malignant. The speaker explains that he continues to love his cruel, dishonest mistress despite the fact that doing so is madness. The phrase *sickly appetite* can mean the appetite of a sick person, but it also has a second meaning of a "sick" or unhealthy appetite for sex, or in other words, lust. Lust was thought to separate someone from reason.

In this sonnet, because the patient is giving in to his lust, reason, personified as his physician, has thrown up his hands and abandoned the patient. The patient now realizes that desire (lust) leads to death. A common belief among Elizabethans was that each orgasm was "a little death." Abandoned by reason, the patient has become a raving madman, babbling things that make no sense, most significantly the assertion that the speaker's mistress is good when she is clearly wicked and cruel.

The final couplet evokes the meanings of "fair" and "foul" found in Sonnet 127. Though in this sonnet *fair* is contrasted with "black as hell" and "dark as night," which is far more intense than the pairings of *fair* and *foul* in Sonnet 127. When the speaker says he has "sworn thee fair," he means both "beautiful" and "good." The word *bright* also suggests "beautiful": in Elizabethan poetic language, goodness is thought to be beautiful and bright, while evil is thought to be ugly and dark. As occurs in several other sonnets (for example, 137 and 138), the speaker confuses what is good with what is bad and what is beautiful with what is ugly, which is the result of losing his mind.

Sonnet 153

Summary

The speaker tells the story of Cupid, the Roman god of love, who once laid down the torch with which he causes people to fall in love by setting their hearts afire. When Cupid falls asleep, a follower of Diana, the virgin goddess of the hunt and the moon, tries to put out the torch in a mountain spring. The torch heats up the water, creating a hot springs, where people come for cures of various ailments. The speaker's mistress's eyes then cause Cupid's torch to spring into flame once again within the speaker, and Cupid, wanting to test it out, insists on touching the speaker's breast. The speaker has come to the hot springs because he is feeling lovesick, but he finds no cure in the hot springs: the only cure is his mistress's eyes.

Analysis

Sonnets 153 and 154 should be read together because they offer two different versions of the same story. Quite unlike most of Shakespeare's sonnets, the subject and tone of Sonnet 153 are much more typical of the sonnets of Shakespeare's predecessors and contemporaries in a few ways. First, the sonnet makes reference to classical mythology by telling the story of Cupid, who causes people (in Renaissance poetry, usually men) to fall in love. Diana is a virgin goddess who vigilantly guards her chastity, so it makes sense that her followers, who would also have been virgins, would have wanted to thwart Cupid. Second, it is traditionally Petrarchan in structure, with a volta occurring at the beginning of line 9, in which the power of the mistress's eye is manifest.

Most importantly, the sonnet regards the mistress as powerful and capable of causing men to fall in love by gazing at them with her eyes. Among Renaissance poets, it was a common notion that the lady who is the object of courtly love (and the subject of the sonnets) has beautiful, bright, powerful eyes that can cause a man to fall in love with her with a single glance. It was thought that Cupid took up residence in the lady's eye, and that her eye beams would be full of the arrows of love. This assumption can be seen in a number of the sonnets of Edmund Spenser (*Amoretti*), most clearly in his Sonnet 16. Indeed, it was thought that lovers truly fell in love when they looked into each other's eyes. A good example of this idea is in

the poem "The Ecstasy" by John Donne. Although Shakespeare doesn't often write about women's eyes in this way, in his satirical Sonnet 130, he indirectly refers to the way typical sonnets refer to ladies' eyes in the line, "My mistress' eyes are nothing like the sun." However, in Sonnet 153, the mistress's eyes are not only beautiful, but also so powerful that they can rekindle Cupid's extinguished fire.

The notion that the speaker is sick and seeks a cure harks back to the tradition of courtly love in which the male lover suffers from a "delightful disease" that can be cured only by being with the object of his love (and which is caused by the separation from his lady, because she is so often distant and elusive). However, the mention of "strange maladies" in line 8 could be a reference to venereal disease, for which hot baths were thought to be a cure.

Sonnet 154

Summary

The speaker retells the story in Sonnet 153 somewhat differently in Sonnet 154. Once, as Cupid was lying asleep—with his torch he incites people to fall in love with by his side—many nymphs who had sworn to remain chaste came by. The most beautiful of the nymphs picked up the torch, and Cupid, who usually has such great power to cause people to fall in love, is suddenly the one disarmed by a virgin who shuns love. She puts out the torch in a nearby spring, which, becoming perpetually hot, transforms into a hot springs where men come for cures. The speaker, slave to his mistress, comes there for a cure, and has thereby proven that the fire of love heats water, but water will not cool the passion of love.

Analysis

While Sonnet 154 retells the same myth told in Sonnet 153, it is not in the traditional structure of the Petrarchan sonnet. So there is no dramatic volta in line 9 where the subject of the sonnet, the mistress, demonstrates her power to incite love. Instead, the most powerful figure in this version of the story is the beautiful nymph who disarms Cupid, "the general of hot desire," thereby defeating love. Furthermore, in this version, the mistress isn't as closely associated with love, for her eye does

not rekindle Cupid's torch, thereby restoring order in the universe as occurs in Sonnet 153; nor does the speaker find a cure in her eyes as he does in Sonnet 153. While Cupid's torch heats the water of the spring, the spring is not a cure for the speaker: the water does not cool the speaker's love for the mistress, with which he is still afflicted. Because this version offers a more negative portrayal of the mistress and of the speaker's chances for a cure, this sonnet seems to be more in keeping with the tone of the dark lady sonnets, which portray the speaker's mistress as cruelly withholding her affection.

“” Quotes

"So long as men can breathe or eyes can see, / So long lives this, and this gives life to thee."

— Narrator, Sonnet 18

The final couplet of Sonnet 18 expresses a sentiment found a number of times throughout the sonnets: that it is through the power of art, specifically this sonnet, that the beauty of the subject, the fair youth, will live on despite the destructive march of time. A consistent theme underlying this sentiment is that, as much as the poet admires his subject, he transcends him in his power to immortalize.

"For thy sweet love remembered such wealth brings / That then I scorn to change my state with kings."

— Narrator, Sonnet 29

The final couplet of Sonnet 29 illustrates the power of the beloved to completely change the speaker's mood, because friendship between the speaker and the fair youth is an example of the Platonic ideal of love. It also illustrates the poet's power to change the mood, a power that he perhaps cannot wield by virtue of his incredible physique but that, by

exhibiting it in writing, he slyly claims himself to be his lover's equal.

"But if the while I think on thee, dear friend, / All losses are restored and sorrows end."

— Narrator, Sonnet 30

The final couplet of Sonnet 30 contains the volta, or turn, of the sonnet, and once again demonstrates the effect the beloved has upon the speaker, as a complete reversal of the speaker's mood occurs.

"Not marble nor the gilded monuments / Of princes shall outlive this powerful rhyme."

— Narrator, Sonnet 55

Like Sonnet 18, Sonnet 55 demonstrates a belief in the power of poetry, more than any works of metal or stone, to keep alive the subject's beauty forever. It's a bold claim for a poet, perhaps even bold enough to win his subject's affection.

"Where, alack, / Shall Time's best jewel from Time's chest lie hid?"

— Narrator, Sonnet 65

In many of the sonnets, the speaker expresses an anxiety that the beauty of the subject will fade or be forgotten over time. Sonnet 65, like sonnets 18 and 55, express the hope that through poetry the subject's beauty will live on. Time works its will on all nature's subjects, but poetry may transcend time.

"This thou perceiv'st, which makes

*thy love more strong, / To love
that well which thou must leave
ere long."*

— Narrator, Sonnet 73

The final couplet of Sonnet 73 sums up the idea developed in the three quatrains that the speaker is getting old and will die soon, which will inspire the subject to love what he is soon to lose. The pain of loss, the speaker argues, makes more exquisite the pleasure of love.

*"For sweetest things turn sourest
by their deeds; / Lilies that fester
smell far worse than weeds."*

— Narrator, Sonnet 94

Sonnet 94 warns that even the most beautiful things can become foul if they are inwardly corrupt. Indeed, the most beautiful things are extreme in all things, including their corruption.

*"How like a winter hath my
absence been / From thee, the
pleasure of the fleeting year!"*

— Narrator, Sonnet 97

The speaker in Sonnet 97 claims that his absence from the subject feels like winter even though it occurs during the warm weather, because all warmth and beauty seems to attend upon the subject. The image is interesting, given that poets normally compare their lovers to spring or summer, whereas here the poet refers to winter and himself, forcing the reader to imagine his subject's warmth and beauty by reminders of its absence.

"They were but sweet, but figures

*of delight, / Drawn after you, you
pattern of all those."*

— Narrator, Sonnet 98

In Sonnet 98, the speaker says that he is unable to enjoy all the beautiful aspects of nature in the absence of the subject because the subject is the original of all beauty, of which all flowers and beautiful things are mere shadows or copies.

*"Love's not Time's fool, though
rosy lips and cheeks / Within his
bending sickle's compass come."*

— Narrator, Sonnet 116

Sonnet 116 asserts that true, ideal love does not alter because of the progress of time, even though youth and beauty may fade.

*"Th' expense of spirit in a waste of
shame / Is lust in action."*

— Narrator, Sonnet 129

To have sex to satisfy lust, according to Sonnet 129, is a shameful waste of a person's spirit, or essence.

*"And yet, by heaven, I think my
love as rare / As any she belied
with false compare."*

— Narrator, Sonnet 130

The speaker in Sonnet 130 parodies the typical sonnets that compare their ladies to goddesses by asserting that his lady—although she is a down-to-earth, real woman—is as lovely

as any of the other ladies who have been made to seem superior by unrealistic comparisons.

*"Beshrew that heart that makes
my heart to groan / For that deep
wound it gives my friend and me."*

— Narrator, Sonnet 133

In Sonnet 133, the speaker curses his mistress, who has captured the heart of both him and his friend, and who cruelly makes them suffer by withholding her affection.

*"Thou blind fool, Love, what dost
thou to mine eyes / That they
behold and see not what they
see?"*

— Narrator, Sonnet 137

The speaker apostrophizes love in Sonnet 137, speaking to an inanimate object or a concept as though it were a person, and accuses it of blinding him. Metaphorically, he laments that his passion prevents him from seeing his lover's true nature.

*"For I have sworn thee fair, and
thought thee bright, / Who art as
black as hell, as dark as night."*

— Narrator, Sonnet 147

The speaker in Sonnet 147 concludes that his reason has left him and he has gone mad, because he trusted his senses and they misled him. The dichotomy of reason versus madness is central in Elizabethan poetry, especially when it hinges on the inability to make sound judgments discern on the basis of appearance.

Symbols

Flowers

Because so many of the sonnets are concerned with the Platonic ideal of beauty and its representations in the transitory world of the senses, the flower, the epitome of transient beauty, is a frequent symbol, sometimes appearing as a bud or a particular flower, usually a rose or lily. The flower is regarded as an object that exists solely for the purpose of displaying beauty; its full bloom represents a plant's zenith of beauty. Yet it is also necessarily transient and delicate; like everything in the real, physical world, it is subject to decay.

- [Sonnet 98](#) most directly refers to the notion of the Platonic ideal of beauty in that it identifies the subject as the "pattern of all those," meaning that all the beauties found on earth, epitomized by "the lily's white" and "the deep vermilion in the rose," are "but figures of delight, / Drawn after you."
- [Sonnet 1](#) mentions a rose in its second line, when it expresses the desire that "beauty's rose might never die." Once again, the rose is the crystallization of the concept of beauty into a single object. Furthermore, the subject of Sonnet 1, the fair youth, is urged not to bury his beauty "Within thine own bud" by refusing to have children.
- [Sonnet 18](#), in acknowledging the impermanence of earthly beauty, notes that "Rough winds do shake the darling buds of May," highlighting the weakness and delicacy of flowers. The speaker of the fair youth sequence of the sonnets is always wondering how beauty can be preserved for eternity.
- In [Sonnet 65](#) the speaker asks, "How with this rage shall beauty hold a plea, / Whose action is no stronger than a flower?" The speaker complains angrily that beauty has no more force than a flower to withstand mortality.
- In [Sonnet 94](#) the speaker mentions "The summer's flower" to symbolize someone who is at the pinnacle of beauty, but also warns that objects (and people) of great outer beauty must be vigilant that their inner purity matches their outward appearance, for "Lilies that fester smell far worse than weeds."
- Roses are also used as symbols of human beauty in [Sonnet 130](#), when the speaker mentions "roses ... [in his mistress's] cheeks."

Light

Throughout the sonnets, light stands for beauty and goodness and the knowable world. Things and people that are beautiful are described as being bright. Goodness is thought not to hide itself or deceive the eye, so that whatever is lit up and bright is thought to be good because it can be seen and understood by the human eye and known for what it is. This notion is linked to the word *fair*, which is often used in [Shakespeare's](#) poetry to mean both "beautiful" and "light."

When discussing the epitome of beautiful things in [Sonnet 18](#), the speaker mentions the sun ("the eye of heaven"), and in [Sonnet 33](#), the sun is described as making all the world beautiful with its light; in the same sonnet, the beloved subject is called "my sun." Clearly, the sun is a conventional metaphor for beauty, because in the satirical [Sonnet 130](#), the speaker mentions that, unlike all the other beauties praised in sonnets, his "mistress' eyes are nothing like the sun."

Brightness, the salient quality of the sun, appears as an indicator of beauty and goodness in a number of sonnets. In [Sonnet 27](#), even the mere thought of the beloved subject shines "like a jewel hung in ghastly night." The very word *bright* suggests beauty and goodness: in [Sonnet 1](#), the beloved subject is described as having "bright eyes," both sonnets 55 and 65 promise that he shall "shine bright," and [Sonnet 147](#) expresses the speaker's dismay that he had been fooled into thinking that his mistress is "bright."

Conversely, objects and people described as being dark or black are thought to be foul, wicked, or deceitful. The notion of deception is linked to darkness because the eye cannot see in the dark and cannot know what is there. (There are exceptions, notably in sonnets 127 and 130, which identify the speaker's mistress as having dark skin, dark eyes, and dark hair.) Darkness is by implication portrayed as lacking beauty in [Sonnet 27](#) because it is only the thought of the beloved that "Makes black night beauteous." In [Sonnet 147](#), the speaker calls his cruel, deceitful mistress "black as hell, as dark as night."

The fact that the poet's dark lady is also beautiful confuses the poet. Darkness is associated with evil. Beauty—according to contemporary theories evolved from Plato, Augustine, and Aquinas—must be good or it cannot be beautiful. Her evident

beauty and her clear evidence of cruelty and deceit leave him with conflicting feelings about her, about beauty, and about his own senses and understanding.

Themes

Platonic Ideal of Beauty

The nature of beauty is a prevalent theme throughout [Shakespeare's](#) sonnets. The Platonic ideal of beauty—that true beauty is an eternal and unchanging idea of which the physical world possesses only inferior and temporary copies—is behind much of the praise of the fair youth sonnets. These ideas stem from the work of Greek philosopher Plato (428/427 BCE–348/347 BCE).

Nowhere is the Platonic ideal of beauty more clear than in [Sonnet 98](#) in which the speaker describes his inability to enjoy the beauties of summer in the absence of the subject of these sonnets, who is the original beauty of which the beauties of nature are just weak copies: "They were but sweet, but figures of delight, / Drawn after you, you pattern of all those."

Plato's ideas were adopted and refined by the Christian theologians St. Augustine (354–430 CE) and St. Thomas Aquinas (1225–74 CE). The former postulated that a beautiful object was also unified, meaning it existed in absolute harmony with itself. For Aquinas, a beautiful object inspires contemplation, thus harmonizing the senses and the mind. The reader sees this in such sonnets as 29 and 30, in which merely thinking of the fair youth and the love he represents changes the mood of the speaker from despair to happiness.

Shakespeare applies these notions of beauty in the sonnets in many ways. First, admiring beauty, regardless whether of the boy or the girl, serves as a way for the poet, and eventually the reader, to transcend time and space, reaching closer to the ultimate ideal of beauty, of which both the boy and girl are mere copies. Second, while the beauty of the young woman is evident to the poet through his senses, her nature is wicked, creating for him a conflict and causing him to mistrust not only his physical senses, but more importantly, his understanding of people, goodness, and virtue. Third, the poet in many different

tones ranging from sly to wistful implies that his contemplation of beauty is more important than beauty itself, which will fade.

The notion of what is "fair" is a complex idea that occurs frequently in the poetry of Shakespeare. That the word *fair* has at minimum a double meaning—both beautiful and good (not to mention a third meaning: light-skinned)—creates ambiguity and resonance in a number of the sonnets. According to Platonic ideals, beauty exists as an eternal, unchanging idea that can manifest itself to the senses. In Augustine's theory of beauty as harmony, inner beauty—that is, goodness—should be reflected by outward, physical beauty. Therefore, readers develop the sense that the fair youth described in these sonnets is inwardly good.

Some of the sonnets bear a sense that the beauty of the subject transcends the present moment. [Sonnet 106](#) suggests that the ideal beauty of the subject always exists, claiming that the beautiful figures described in medieval narratives merely prefigure the beauty of the subject: "So all their praises are but prophecies / Of this our time, all you prefiguring."

Although the subject seems to possess a Platonic ideal of beauty, he is, indeed, human, and will therefore age and die. For this reason, a number of the sonnets bewail this fact; the early sonnets urge procreation for the purpose of preserving his beauty, and in several sonnets, the speaker expresses the urgency of preserving this beauty through poetry.

The very premises of the two sequences commonly identified within the 154 sonnets—the fair youth sequence (sonnets 1–126) and the dark lady sequence (Sonnets 127–154)—are reflections of the speaker's attitudes toward beauty. The fair youth is praised for both his inner goodness and outward beauty, but the dark lady is identified as possessing an outward allure that belies her inward wickedness. For this reason, a number of the dark lady sonnets bear a tone of anger or dismay because the speaker's eyes have been fooled into thinking that what is attractive is also good. For example, [Sonnet 147](#) ends thus: "I have sworn thee fair, and thought thee bright, / Who art as black as hell, as dark as night." The notion that outward beauty could be intentionally used to deceive others about inner evil is one that held some fascination for Shakespeare.

Platonic Ideal of Love

Just as there are many views of beauty in the sonnets, so are there many views of love. Perhaps the best expression of the Platonic ideal of love occurs in the famous [Sonnet 116](#): "Let me not to the marriage of true minds / Admit impediments."

The phrase "a marriage of true minds" suggests a Platonic union of souls. True love is constant and unchanging and does not alter or move when conditions change. Nor is true love subject to the changes wrought by time just because human youth and vitality may wane: "Love's not Time's fool, though rosy lips and cheeks / Within his bending sickle's compass come." The kind of love that soothes and ennobles the speaker from despair in sonnets 29 and 30 is a true, constant, unchanging love.

However, the dark lady sequence introduces a baser form of love. Just as a Platonic ideal can be perceived in the physical world only as an inferior copy of the original, physical attraction is only a shadow of true, Platonic love. This is the subject of [Sonnet 129](#), which describes lust, an inferior species of love that far from ennobling a lover causes him to be hateful and mad. Indeed, a number of the dark lady sonnets convey a sense of frustration and despair because the speaker has lost his judgment and reason and has been tricked into desiring what causes him nothing but suffering.

Destructive March of Time

For a poet who places so much importance upon an unchanging, eternal standard of beauty, the decay and decline resulting from the progress of time is a prominent theme from the very beginning of the sonnets. We, as flawed humans, tend to encounter beauty with our senses, and what we can sense is necessarily transient. So the beauty of nature, and of men, is necessarily fleeting. [Sonnet 18](#) acknowledges this when it suggests that the beauty of a summer's day is neither constant nor permanent: "summer's lease hath all too short a date. / ... And every fair from fair sometime declines, / By chance, or nature's changing course untrimmed."

Indeed, the ravages of time are the subtext of the first 17

procreation sonnets. [Sonnet 1](#) expresses the hope "That ... beauty's rose might never die" if the subject has children to carry on his beauty; if he does not, he will feed his "light's flame with self-substantial fuel"; that is, he will take his beauty with him to the grave. [Sonnet 2](#) picks up the theme, warning the subject of the ravages time will wreak upon him by the time he turns 40.

Neither humans nor anything they create are immune to the ravages of time. [Sonnet 55](#) asserts that even monuments of stone and marble are subject to the destructive powers of time: "wasteful war shall statues overturn, / And broils root out the work of masonry." [Sonnet 60](#) bemoans the fact that "our minutes hasten to their end" and that "Time doth transfix the flourish set on youth / And delves the parallels in beauty's brow." [Sonnet 65](#) asks, "How with this rage shall beauty hold a plea, / Whose action is no stronger than a flower?"

Some sonnets seem to sound a warning to the subject or reader to be vigilant to the changes wrought by time. [Sonnet 73](#) suggests that the subject's consciousness of human transience—represented by the conceits of a late autumn day, evening twilight, and a dying fire—should inspire the speaker to love what he might soon lose. And [Sonnet 104](#) acknowledges that time's march is certain though almost imperceptible to the human eye, so that we may fool ourselves: "Ah! yet doth beauty, like a dial hand, / Steal from his figure, and no pace perceived." Taken together, many of the sonnets alert the subject or the reader to treasure what will be wasted by the march of time.

Power of Poetry

While there is little a human being can do to oppose the progress of time, a number of the sonnets dare to suggest there is one thing humans can do to defy time: write poetry. The belief that poems, that these very sonnets, will live on into the future is a very Humanistic outlook, typical of the confidence of the Renaissance and of the Elizabethan period in particular.

This notion occurs a number of times in the sonnets of [Shakespeare](#) as well as those of his contemporaries. Perhaps the most famous instance of such occurs in [Sonnet 18](#), which confidently declares in its final couplet, "So long as men can

breathe or eyes can see, / So long lives this, and this gives life to thee." [Sonnet 55](#) repeats the sentiment, insisting that unlike "marble [and] the gilded monuments / Of princes," this sonnet will live until Doomsday: "So, till the judgment that yourself arise, / You live in this, and dwell in lovers' eyes." [Sonnet 60](#) likewise predicts, "to times in hope my verse shall stand, / Praising thy worth, despite [time's] cruel hand." And [Sonnet 65](#) expresses the hope "That in black ink my love may still shine bright." The subtext of all of these expressions of hope and confidence is the belief that these poems preserve an example of unchanging, ideal beauty.

The stated or implied object of sonnet writers such as Petrarch or Sidney is to either woo or flatter the sonnets' objects, to which the poet offers the poems as a tribute or a sacrifice. Shakespeare clearly intends the same with regard to the fair youth. His intentions in regard to the dark lady are more obscure. However, his frequent reminders that his poems will transcend time even as his subjects' beauty will fade carry a very different tone than that of previous sonnet writers. Instead of flattering his subject, the poems seem rather to flatter the speaker himself, implying that his talent surpasses all of his subjects' beauty and that he should be praised as much if not more than the objects of his adoration.