**Shakespeare’s Sonnets**

**Context**

**Life and Times of William Shakespeare**

Likely the most influential writer in all of English literature and certainly the most important playwright of the English Renaissance, William Shakespeare was born in 1564 in the town of Stratford-upon-Avon in Warwickshire, England. The son of a successful middle-class glove-maker, Shakespeare attended grammar school, but his formal education proceeded no further. In 1582, he married an older woman, Anne Hathaway, and had three children with her. Around 1590 he left his family behind and traveled to London to work as an actor and playwright. Public and critical success quickly followed, and Shakespeare eventually became the most popular playwright in England and part owner of the Globe Theater. His career bridged the reigns of Elizabeth I (ruled 1558-1603) and James I (ruled 1603-1625); he was a favorite of both monarchs. Indeed, James granted Shakespeare’s company the greatest possible compliment by endowing them with the status of king’s players. Wealthy and renowned, Shakespeare retired to Stratford, and died in 1616 at the age of fifty-two. At the time of Shakespeare’s death, such luminaries as Ben Jonson hailed him as the apogee of Renaissance theatre.

Shakespeare’s works were collected and printed in various editions in the century following his death, and by the early eighteenth century his reputation as the greatest poet ever to write in English was well established. The unprecedented admiration garnered by his works led to a fierce curiosity about Shakespeare’s life; but the paucity of surviving biographical information has left many details of Shakespeare’s personal history shrouded in mystery. Some people have concluded from this fact that Shakespeare’s plays in reality were written by someone else—Francis Bacon and the Earl of Oxford are the two most popular candidates—but the evidence for this claim is overwhelmingly circumstantial, and the theory is not taken seriously by many scholars.

In the absence of definitive proof to the contrary, Shakespeare must be viewed as the author of the 37 plays and 154 sonnets that bear his name. The legacy of this body of work is immense. A number of Shakespeare’s plays seem to have transcended even the category of brilliance, becoming so influential as to affect profoundly the course of Western literature and culture ever after.

**The Sonnets**

Shakespeare’s sonnets are very different from Shakespeare’s plays, but they do contain dramatic elements and an overall sense of story. Each of the poems deals with a highly personal theme, and each can be taken on its own or in relation to the poems around it. The sonnets have the feel of autobiographical poems, but we don’t know whether they deal with real events or not, because no one knows enough about Shakespeare’s life to say whether or not they deal with real events and feelings, so we tend to refer to the voice of the sonnets as “the speaker”—as though he were a dramatic creation like Hamlet or King Lear.

There are certainly a number of intriguing continuities throughout the poems. The first 126 of the sonnets seem to be addressed to an unnamed young nobleman, whom the speaker loves very much; the rest of the poems (except for the last two, which seem generally unconnected to the rest of the sequence) seem to be addressed to a mysterious woman, whom the speaker loves, hates, and lusts for simultaneously. The two addressees of the sonnets are usually referred to as the “young man” and the “dark lady”;in summaries of individual poems, I have also called the young man the “beloved” and the dark lady the “lover,” especially in cases where their identity can only be surmised. Within the two mini-sequences, there are a number of other discernible elements of “plot”: the speaker urges the young man to have children; he is forced to endure a separation from him; he competes with a rival poet for the young man’s patronage and affection. At two points in the sequence, it seems that the young man and the dark lady are actually lovers themselves—a state of affairs with which the speaker is none too happy. But while these continuities give the poems a narrative flow and a helpful frame of reference, they have been frustratingly hard for scholars and biographers to pin down. In Shakespeare’s life, who were the young man and the dark lady?

**Historical Mysteries**

Of all the questions surrounding Shakespeare’s life, the sonnets are perhaps the most intriguing. At the time of their publication in 1609 (after having been written most likely in the 1590s and shown only to a small circle of literary admirers), they were dedicated to a “Mr. W.H,” who is described as the “onlie begetter”of the poems. Like those of the young man and the dark lady, the identity of this Mr. W.H. remains an alluring mystery. Because he is described as “begetting” the sonnets, and because the young man seems to be the speaker’s financial patron, some people have speculated that the young man *is* Mr. W.H. If his initials were reversed, he might even be Henry Wriothesley, the Earl of Southampton, who has often been linked to Shakespeare in theories of his history. But all of this is simply speculation: ultimately, the circumstances surrounding the sonnets, their cast of characters and their relations to Shakespeare himself, are destined to remain a mystery.

**The Sonnet Form**

A *sonnet* is a fourteen-line lyric poem, traditionally written in iambic pentameter—that is, in lines ten syllables long, with accents falling on every second syllable, as in: “Shall *I* com*pare* thee *to* a *sum*mer’s *day*?”The sonnet form first became popular during the Italian Renaissance, when the poet Petrarch published a sequence of love sonnets addressed to an idealized woman named Laura. Taking firm hold among Italian poets, the sonnet spread throughout Europe to England, where, after its initial Renaissance, “Petrarchan” incarnation faded, the form enjoyed a number of revivals and periods of renewed interest. In Elizabethan England—the era during which Shakespeare’s sonnets were written—the sonnet was the form of choice for lyric poets, particularly lyric poets seeking to engage with traditional themes of love and romance. (In addition to Shakespeare’s monumental sequence, the *Astrophel and Stella* sequence by Sir Philip Sydney stands as one of the most important sonnet sequences of this period.) Sonnets were also written during the height of classical English verse, by Dryden and Pope, among others, and written again during the heyday of English Romanticism, when Wordsworth, Shelley, and particularly John Keats created wonderful sonnets. Today, the sonnet remains the most influential and important verse form in the history of English poetry.

Two kinds of sonnets have been most common in English poetry, and they take their names from the greatest poets to utilize them: the *Petrarchan* sonnet and the *Shakespearean* sonnet. The Petrarchan sonnet is divided into two main parts, called the *octave* and the *sestet.* The octave is eight lines long, and typically follows a rhyme scheme of ABBAABBA, or ABBACDDC. The sestet occupies the remaining six lines of the poem, and typically follows a rhyme scheme of CDCDCD, or CDECDE. The octave and the sestet are usually contrasted in some key way: for example, the octave may ask a question to which the sestet offers an answer. In the following Petrarchan sonnet, John Keats’s “On First Looking into Chapman’s Homer,” the octave describes past events—the speaker’s previous, unsatisfying examinations of the “realms of gold,” Homer’s poems—while the sestet describes the present—the speaker’s sense of discovery upon finding Chapman’s translations:

*Much have I travell’d in the realms of gold,  
And many goodly states and kingdoms seen;  
Round many western islands have I been  
Which bards in fealty to Apollo hold.  
Oft of one wide expanse have I been told  
That deep-brow’d Homer ruled as his demesne;  
Yet did I never breathe its pure serene  
Till I heard Chapman speak out loud and bold:  
Then felt I like some watcher of the skies  
When a new planet swims into his ken;  
Or like stout Cortez when with eagle eyes  
He star’d at the Pacific—and all his men  
Look’d at each other with a wild surmise—  
Silent, upon a peak in Darien.*

The Shakespearean sonnet, the form of sonnet utilized throughout Shakespeare’s sequence, is divided into four parts. The first three parts are each four lines long, and are known as quatrains, rhymed ABAB; the fourth part is called the couplet, and is rhymed CC. The Shakespearean sonnet is often used to develop a sequence of metaphors or ideas, one in each quatrain, while the couplet offers either a summary or a new take on the preceding images or ideas. In Shakespeare’s Sonnet 147, for instance, the speaker’s love is compared to a disease. In the first quatrain, the speaker characterizes the disease; in the second, he describes the relationship of his love-disease to its “physician,”his reason; in the third, he describes the consequences of his abandonment of reason; and in the couplet, he explains the source of his mad, diseased love—his lover’s betrayal of his faith:

*My love is as a fever, longing still  
For that which longer nurseth the disease,  
Feeding on that which doth preserve the ill,  
The uncertain sickly appetite to please.  
My reason, the physician to my love,  
Angry that his prescriptions are not kept,  
Hath left me, and I desp’rate now approve  
Desire is death, which physic did except.  
Past cure am I, now reason is past care,  
And frantic mad with evermore unrest,  
My thoughts and my discourse as madmen’s are,  
At random from the truth vainly expressed;  
For I have sworn thee fair and thought thee bright,  
Who art as black as hell, as dark as night.*

In many ways, Shakespeare’s use of the sonnet form is richer and more complex than this relatively simple division into parts might imply. Not only is his sequence largely occupied with subverting the traditional themes of love sonnets—the traditional love poems in praise of beauty and worth, for instance, are written to a man, while the love poems to a woman are almost all as bitter and negative as Sonnet 147—he also combines formal patterns with daring and innovation. Many of his sonnets in the sequence, for instance, impose the thematic pattern of a Petrarchan sonnet onto the formal pattern of a Shakespearean sonnet, so that while there are still three quatrains and a couplet, the first two quatrains might ask a single question, which the third quatrain and the couplet will answer. As you read through Shakespeare’s sequence, think about the ways Shakespeare’s themes are affected by and tailored to the sonnet form. Be especially alert to complexities such as the juxtaposition of Petrarchan and Shakespearean patterns. How might such a juxtaposition combination deepen and enrich Shakespeare’s use of a traditional form?

**Themes, Motifs & Symbols**

**Themes**

**Different Types of Romantic Love**

Modern readers associate the sonnet form with romantic love and with good reason: the first sonnets written in thirteenth- and fourteenth-century Italy celebrated the poets’ feelings for their beloveds and their patrons. These sonnets were addressed to stylized, lionized women and dedicated to wealthy noblemen, who supported poets with money and other gifts, usually in return for lofty praise in print. Shakespeare dedicated his sonnets to “Mr. W. H.,” and the identity of this man remains unknown. He dedicated an earlier set of poems, *Venus and Adonis* and *Rape of Lucrece*, to Henry Wriothesly, earl of Southampton, but it’s not known what Wriothesly gave him for this honor. In contrast to tradition, Shakespeare addressed most of his sonnets to an unnamed young man, possibly Wriothesly. Addressing sonnets to a young man was unique in Elizabethan England. Furthermore, Shakespeare used his sonnets to explore different types of love between the young man and the speaker, the young man and the dark lady, and the dark lady and the speaker. In his sequence, the speaker expresses passionate concern for the young man, praises his beauty, and articulates what we would now call homosexual desire. The woman of Shakespeare’s sonnets, the so-called dark lady, is earthy, sexual, and faithless—characteristics in direct opposition to lovers described in other sonnet sequences, including *Astrophil and Stella*, by Sir Philip Sidney, a contemporary of Shakespeare, who were praised for their angelic demeanor, virginity, and steadfastness. Several sonnets also probe the nature of love, comparing the idealized love found in poems with the messy, complicated love found in real life.

**The Dangers of Lust and Love**

In Shakespeare’s sonnets, falling in love can have painful emotional and physical consequences. Sonnets 127–152, addressed to the so-called dark lady, express a more overtly erotic and physical love than the sonnets addressed to the young man. But many sonnets warn readers about the dangers of lust and love. According to some poems, lust causes us to mistake sexual desire for true love, and love itself causes us to lose our powers of perception. Several sonnets warn about the dangers of lust, claiming that it turns humans “savage, extreme, rude, cruel” (4), as in Sonnet 129. The final two sonnets of Shakespeare’s sequence obliquely imply that lust leads to venereal disease. According to the conventions of romance, the sexual act, or “making love,” expresses the deep feeling between two people. In his sonnets, however, Shakespeare portrays making love not as a romantic expression of sentiment but as a base physical need with the potential for horrible consequences.

Several sonnets equate being in love with being in a pitiful state: as demonstrated by the poems, love causes fear, alienation, despair, and physical discomfort, not the pleasant emotions or euphoria we usually associate with romantic feelings. The speaker alternates between professing great love and professing great worry as he speculates about the young man’s misbehavior and the dark lady’s multiple sexual partners. As the young man and the dark lady begin an affair, the speaker imagines himself caught in a love triangle, mourning the loss of his friendship with the man and love with the woman, and he laments having fallen in love with the woman in the first place. In Sonnet 137, the speaker personifies love, calls him a simpleton, and criticizes him for removing his powers of perception. It was love that caused the speaker to make mistakes and poor judgments. Elsewhere the speaker calls love a disease as a way of demonstrating the physical pain of emotional wounds. Throughout his sonnets, Shakespeare clearly implies that love hurts. Yet despite the emotional and physical pain, like the speaker, we continue falling in love. Shakespeare shows that falling in love is an inescapable aspect of the human condition—indeed, expressing love is part of what makes us human.

**Real Beauty vs. Clichéd Beauty**

To express the depth of their feelings, poets frequently employ hyperbolic terms to describe the objects of their affections. Traditionally, sonnets transform women into the most glorious creatures to walk the earth, whereas patrons become the noblest and bravest men the world has ever known. Shakespeare makes fun of the convention by contrasting an idealized woman with a real woman. In Sonnet 130, Shakespeare directly engages—and skewers—clichéd concepts of beauty. The speaker explains that his lover, the dark lady, has wires for hair, bad breath, dull cleavage, a heavy step, and pale lips. He concludes by saying that he loves her all the more precisely because he loves *her* and not some idealized, false version. Real love, the sonnet implies, begins when we accept our lovers for what they are as well as what they are not. Other sonnets explain that because anyone can use artful means to make himself or herself more attractive, no one is really beautiful anymore. Thus, since anyone can become beautiful, calling someone beautiful is no longer much of a compliment.

**The Responsibilities of Being Beautiful**

Shakespeare portrays beauty as conveying a great responsibility in the sonnets addressed to the young man, Sonnets 1–126. Here the speaker urges the young man to make his beauty immortal by having children, a theme that appears repeatedly throughout the poems: as an attractive person, the young man has a responsibility to procreate. Later sonnets demonstrate the speaker, angry at being cuckolded, lashing out at the young man and accusing him of using his beauty to hide immoral acts. Sonnet 95 compares the young man’s behavior to a “canker in the fragrant rose” (2) or a rotten spot on an otherwise beautiful flower. In other words, the young man’s beauty allows him to get away with bad behavior, but this bad behavior will eventually distort his beauty, much like a rotten spot eventually spreads. Nature gave the young man a beautiful face, but it is the young man’s responsibility to make sure that his soul is worthy of such a visage.

**Motifs**

**Art vs. Time**

Shakespeare, like many sonneteers, portrays time as an enemy of love. Time destroys love because time causes beauty to fade, people to age, and life to end. One common convention of sonnets in general is to flatter either a beloved or a patron by promising immortality through verse. As long as readers read the poem, the object of the poem’s love will remain alive. In Shakespeare’s Sonnet 15, the speaker talks of being “in war with time” (13): time causes the young man’s beauty to fade, but the speaker’s verse shall entomb the young man and keep him beautiful. The speaker begins by pleading with time in another sonnet, yet he ends by taunting time, confidently asserting that his verse will counteract time’s ravages. From our contemporary vantage point, the speaker was correct, and art has beaten time: the young man remains young since we continue to read of his youth in Shakespeare’s sonnets.

Through art, nature and beauty overcome time. Several sonnets use the seasons to symbolize the passage of time and to show that everything in nature—from plants to people—is mortal. But nature creates beauty, which poets capture and render immortal in their verse. Sonnet 106 portrays the speaker reading poems from the past and recognizing his beloved’s beauty portrayed therein. The speaker then suggests that these earlier poets were prophesizing the future beauty of the young man by describing the beauty of their contemporaries. In other words, past poets described the beautiful people of their day and, like Shakespeare’s speaker, perhaps urged these beautiful people to procreate and so on, through the poetic ages, until the birth of the young man portrayed in Shakespeare’s sonnets. In this way—that is, as beautiful people of one generation produce more beautiful people in the subsequent generation and as all this beauty is written about by poets—nature, art, and beauty triumph over time.

**Stopping the March Toward Death**

Growing older and dying are inescapable aspects of the human condition, but Shakespeare’s sonnets give suggestions for halting the progress toward death. Shakespeare’s speaker spends a lot of time trying to convince the young man to cheat death by having children. In Sonnets 1–17, the speaker argues that the young man is too beautiful to die without leaving behind his replica, and the idea that the young man has a duty to procreate becomes the dominant motif of the first several sonnets. In Sonnet 3, the speaker continues his urgent prodding and concludes, “Die single and thine image dies with thee” (14). The speaker’s words aren’t just the flirtatious ramblings of a smitten man: Elizabethan England was rife with disease, and early death was common. Producing children guaranteed the continuation of the species. Therefore, falling in love has a social benefit, a benefit indirectly stressed by Shakespeare’s sonnets. We might die, but our children—and the human race—shall live on.

**The Significance of Sight**

Shakespeare used images of eyes throughout the sonnets to emphasize other themes and motifs, including children as an antidote to death, art’s struggle to overcome time, and the painfulness of love. For instance, in several poems, the speaker urges the young man to admire himself in the mirror. Noticing and admiring his own beauty, the speaker argues, will encourage the young man to father a child. Other sonnets link writing and painting with sight: in Sonnet 24, the speaker’s eye becomes a pen or paintbrush that captures the young man’s beauty and imprints it on the blank page of the speaker’s heart. But our loving eyes can also distort our sight, causing us to misperceive reality. In the sonnets addressed to the dark lady, the speaker criticizes his eyes for causing him to fall in love with a beautiful but duplicitous woman. Ultimately, Shakespeare uses eyes to act as a warning: while our eyes allow us to perceive beauty, they sometimes get so captivated by beauty that they cause us to misjudge character and other attributes not visible to the naked eye.

Readers’ eyes are as significant in the sonnets as the speaker’s eyes. Shakespeare encourages his readers to see by providing vivid visual descriptions. One sonnet compares the young man’s beauty to the glory of the rising sun, while another uses the image of clouds obscuring the sun as a metaphor for the young man’s faithlessness and still another contrasts the beauty of a rose with one rotten spot to warn the young man to cease his sinning ways. Other poems describe bare trees to symbolize aging. The sonnets devoted to the dark lady emphasize her coloring, noting in particular her black eyes and hair, and Sonnet 130 describes her by noting all the colors she does not possess. Stressing the visual helps Shakespeare to heighten our experience of the poems by giving us the precise tools with which to imagine the metaphors, similes, and descriptions contained therein.

**Symbols**

**Flowers and Trees**

Flowers and trees appear throughout the sonnets to illustrate the passage of time, the transience of life, the aging process, and beauty. Rich, lush foliage symbolizes youth, whereas barren trees symbolize old age and death, often in the same poem, as in Sonnet 12. Traditionally, roses signify romantic love, a symbol Shakespeare employs in the sonnets, discussing their attractiveness and fragrance in relation to the young man. Sometimes Shakespeare compares flowers and weeds to contrast beauty and ugliness. In these comparisons, marred, rotten flowers are worse than weeds—that is, beauty that turns rotten from bad character is worse than initial ugliness. Giddy with love, elsewhere the speaker compares blooming flowers to the beauty of the young man, concluding in Sonnets 98 and 99 that flowers received their bloom and smell from him. The sheer ridiculousness of this statement—flowers smell sweet for chemical and biological reasons—underscores the hyperbole and exaggeration that plague typical sonnets.

**Stars**

Shakespeare uses stars to stand in for fate, a common poetic **trope**, but also to explore the nature of free will. Many sonneteers resort to employing fate, symbolized by the stars, to prove that their love is permanent and predestined. In contrast, Shakespeare’s speaker claims that he relies on his eyes, rather than on the hands of fate, to make decisions. Using his eyes, the speaker “reads” that the young man’s good fortune and beauty shall pass to his children, should he have them. During Shakespeare’s time, people generally believed in astrology, even as scholars were making great gains in astronomy and cosmology, a metaphysical system for ordering the universe. According to Elizabethan astrology, a cosmic order determined the place of everything in the universe, from planets and stars to people. Although humans had some free will, the heavenly spheres, with the help of God, predetermined fate. In Shakespeare’s Sonnet 25, the speaker acknowledges that he has been unlucky in the stars but lucky in love, thereby removing his happiness from the heavenly bodies and transposing it onto the human body of his beloved.

**Weather and the Seasons**

Shakespeare employed the **pathetic fallacy**, or the attribution of human characteristics or emotions to elements in nature or inanimate objects, throughout his plays. In the sonnets, the speaker frequently employs the pathetic fallacy, associating his absence from the young man to the freezing days of December and the promise of their reunion to a pregnant spring. Weather and the seasons also stand in for human emotions: the speaker conveys his sense of foreboding about death by likening himself to autumn, a time in which nature’s objects begin to decay and ready themselves for winter, or death. Similarly, despite the arrival of “proud-pied April”(2) in Sonnet 98, the speaker still feels as if it were winter because he and the young man are apart. The speaker in Sonnet 18, one of Shakespeare’s most famous poems, begins by rhetorically asking the young man, “Shall I compare thee to a summer’s day?” (1). He spends the remainder of the poem explaining the multiple ways in which the young man is superior to a summer day, ultimately concluding that while summer ends, the young man’s beauty lives on in the permanence of poetry.

**Sonnet 1**

*From fairest creatures we desire increase,   
That thereby beauty’s rose might never die,   
But as the riper should by time decease,   
His tender heir might bear his memory:   
But thou, contracted to thine own bright eyes,   
Feed’st thy light’st flame with self-substantial fuel,   
Making a famine where abundance lies,   
Thyself thy foe, to thy sweet self too cruel.   
Thou that art now the world’s fresh ornament   
And only herald to the gaudy spring,   
Within thine own bud buriest thy content   
And, tender churl, makest waste in niggarding.   
Pity the world, or else this glutton be,   
To eat the world’s due, by the grave and thee.*

**Summary**

The first sonnet takes it as a given that “From fairest creatures we desire increase”—that is, that we desire beautiful creatures to multiply, in order to preserve their “beauty’s rose”for the world. That way, when the parent dies (“as the riper should by time decease”), the child might continue its beauty (“His tender heir might bear his memory”). In the second quatrain, the speaker chides the young man he loves for being too self-absorbed to think of procreation: he is “contracted” to his own “bright eyes,” and feeds his light with the fuel of his own loveliness. The speaker says that this makes the young man his own unwitting enemy, for it makes “a famine where abundance lies,” and hoards all the young man’s beauty for himself. In the third quatrain, he argues that the young man may now be beautiful—he is “the world’s fresh ornament / And only herald to the gaudy spring”—but that, in time, his beauty will fade, and he will bury his “content” within his flower’s own bud (that is, he will not pass his beauty on; it will wither with him). In the couplet, the speaker asks the young man to “pity the world”and reproduce, or else be a glutton who, like the grave, eats the beauty he owes to the whole world.

**Commentary**

The first sonnet introduces many of the themes that will define the sequence: beauty, the passage of human life in time, the ideas of virtue and wasteful self-consumption (“thou, contracted to thine own bright eyes”), and the love the speaker bears for the young man, which causes him to elevate the young man above the whole world, and to consider his procreation a form of “pity” for the rest of the earth. Sonnet 1opens not only the entire sequence of sonnets, but also the first mini-sequence, a group comprising the first seventeen sonnets, often called the “procreation” sonnets because they each urge the young man to bear children as an act of defiance against time.

The logical structure of Sonnet 1is relatively simple: the first quatrain states the moral premise, that beauty should strive to propagate itself; the second quatrain accuses the young man of violating that moral premise, by wasting his beauty on himself alone; the third quatrain gives him an urgent reason to change his ways and obey the moral premise, because otherwise his beauty will wither and disappear; and the couplet summarizes the argument with a new exhortation to “pity the world” and father a child. Some of the metaphoric images in the poem, however, are quite complex. The image of the young man contracted to his own bright eyes, feeding his “light’s flame” with “self-substantial fuel,”for instance, is an extremely intricate image of self-absorption, and looks forward to the final image of Sonnet 73, in which old age is depicted as the snuffing of a fire by the ashes of the wood it was once “nourished by”—almost its self-substantial fuel.

**Shakespeare’s Sonnets**

William Shakespeare

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**Sonnet 18**

*Shall I compare thee to a summer’s day?   
Thou art more lovely and more temperate:   
Rough winds do shake the darling buds of May,   
And summer’s lease hath all too short a date:   
Sometime too hot the eye of heaven shines,   
And often is his gold complexion dimm’d;   
And every fair from fair sometime declines,   
By chance or nature’s changing course untrimm’d;   
But thy eternal summer shall not fade   
Nor lose possession of that fair thou owest;   
Nor shall Death brag thou wander’st in his shade,   
When in eternal lines to time thou growest:   
So long as men can breathe or eyes can see,   
So long lives this, and this gives life to thee.*

**Summary**

The speaker opens the poem with a question addressed to the beloved: “Shall I compare thee to a summer’s day?” The next eleven lines are devoted to such a comparison. In line 2, the speaker stipulates what mainly differentiates the young man from the summer’s day: he is “more lovely and more temperate.” Summer’s days tend toward extremes: they are shaken by “rough winds”; in them, the sun (“the eye of heaven”) often shines “too hot,” or too dim. And summer is fleeting: its date is too short, and it leads to the withering of autumn, as “every fair from fair sometime declines.”The final quatrain of the sonnet tells how the beloved differs from the summer in that respect: his beauty will last forever (“Thy eternal summer shall not fade...”) and never die. In the couplet, the speaker explains how the beloved’s beauty will accomplish this feat, and not perish because it is preserved in the poem, which will last forever; it will live “as long as men can breathe or eyes can see.”

**Commentary**

This sonnet is certainly the most famous in the sequence of Shakespeare’s sonnets; it may be the most famous lyric poem in English. Among Shakespeare’s works, only lines such as “To be or not to be” and “Romeo, Romeo, wherefore art thou Romeo?” are better-known. This is not to say that it is at all the best or most interesting or most beautiful of the sonnets; but the simplicity and loveliness of its praise of the beloved has guaranteed its place.

On the surface, the poem is simply a statement of praise about the beauty of the beloved; summer tends to unpleasant extremes of windiness and heat, but the beloved is always mild and temperate. Summer is incidentally personified as the “eye of heaven” with its“gold complexion”; the imagery throughout is simple and unaffected, with the “darling buds of May” giving way to the “eternal summer”,which the speaker promises the beloved. The language, too, is comparatively unadorned for the sonnets; it is not heavy with alliteration or assonance, and nearly every line is its own self-contained clause—almost every line ends with some punctuation, which effects a pause.

Sonnet 18 is the first poem in the sonnets not to explicitly encourage the young man to have children. The “procreation” sequence of the first 17 sonnets ended with the speaker’s realization that the young man might *not* need children to preserve his beauty; he could also live, the speaker writes at the end of Sonnet 17,“in my rhyme.” Sonnet 18, then, is the first “rhyme”—the speaker’s first attempt to preserve the young man’s beauty for all time. An important theme of the sonnet (as it is an important theme throughout much of the sequence) is the power of the speaker’s poem to defy time and last forever, carrying the beauty of the beloved down to future generations. The beloved’s“eternal summer” shall not fade precisely because it is embodied in the sonnet: “So long as men can breathe or eyes can see,” the speaker writes in the couplet, “So long lives this, and this gives life to thee.”

**Sonnet 60**

*Like as the waves make towards the pebbled shore,   
So do our minutes hasten to their end;   
Each changing place with that which goes before,   
In sequent toil all forwards do contend.   
Nativity, once in the main of light,   
Crawls to maturity, wherewith being crown’d,   
Crooked elipses ’gainst his glory fight,   
And Time that gave doth now his gift confound.   
Time doth transfix the flourish set on youth   
And delves the parallels in beauty’s brow,   
Feeds on the rarities of nature’s truth,   
And nothing stands but for his scythe to mow:   
And yet to times in hope my verse shall stand,   
Praising thy worth, despite his cruel hand.*

**Summary**

This sonnet attempts to explain the nature of time as it passes, and as it acts on human life. In the first quatrain, the speaker says that the minutes replace one another like waves on the “pebbled shore,” each taking the place of that which came before it in a regular sequence. In the second quatrain, he tells the story of a human life in time by comparing it to the sun: at birth (“Nativity”), it rises over the ocean (“the main of light”),then crawls upward toward noon (the “crown” of “maturity”), then is suddenly undone by “crooked eclipses”, which fight against and confound the sun’s glory. In the third quatrain, time is depicted as a ravaging monster, which halts youthful flourish, digs wrinkles in the brow of beauty, gobbles up nature’s beauties, and mows down with his scythe everything that stands. In the couplet, the speaker opposes his verse to the ravages of time: he says that his verse will stand in times to come, and will continue to praise the “worth”of the beloved despite the “cruel hand” of time.

**Commentary**

This poem is organized very neatly into the quatrain/quatrain/quatrain/couplet structure that defines the Shakespearean sonnet. Each quatrain presents a relatively self-contained metaphorical description of time’s passage in human life, while the couplet offers a twist on the poem’s earlier themes. In the first quatrain, the metaphor is that of the tide; just as waves cycle forward and replace one another on the beach, so do minutes struggle forward in “sequent toil.” In the second quatrain, the focus shifts from the passage of time to the passage of human life, using the metaphor of the sun during the span of a day: first it crawls forward out of the sea (an image linking this quatrain to the previous one), then is crowned with maturity in the sky, then, suddenly, it is darkened by the “crooked eclipses”of age, as time retracts his original gift. In the third quatrain, the metaphor becomes one of time as a personified force, a ravaging monster, who digs trenches in beauty, devours nature, and mows down all that stands with his scythe.

Clearly, these images develop from one another: the first describes the way time passes, the second describes the way a human life passes, and the third describes the way time is responsible for the ravages in human life. Each quatrain is a single four-line sentence, developing a single argument through metaphor: time passes relentlessly, human life is cripplingly short before it quickly succumbs to age and decay, time is the ravager responsible for the downfall of men’s lives. This is one of the great themes of the sonnets. In the couplet, the speaker then stunningly declares that he has found a way to confound time: his verse, despite time’s “cruel hand,” will live on, and continue to praise the worth of the beloved. This is the often-invoked corollary to the great theme of time’s passage: the speaker, disappointed that the young man will not defy time by having children, writes poem after poem about the mighty power of the “bloody tyrant” time, then declares that his poems will remain immortal, and will enable the young man’s beauty to live forever. Sonnets 18, 19, 55, 63, and 65 all follow this formula, and echoes of it appear in countless many other sonnets.

**Sonnet 73**

*That time of year thou mayst in me behold   
When yellow leaves, or none, or few, do hang   
Upon those boughs which shake against the cold,   
Bare ruin’d choirs, where late the sweet birds sang.   
In me thou seest the twilight of such day   
As after sunset fadeth in the west,   
Which by and by black night doth take away,   
Death’s second self, that seals up all in rest.   
In me thou see’st the glowing of such fire   
That on the ashes of his youth doth lie,   
As the death-bed whereon it must expire   
Consumed with that which it was nourish’d by.   
This thou perceivest, which makes thy love more strong,   
To love that well which thou must leave ere long.*

**Summary**

In this poem, the speaker invokes a series of metaphors to characterize the nature of what he perceives to be his old age. In the first quatrain, he tells the beloved that his age is like a “time of year,” late autumn, when the leaves have almost completely fallen from the trees, and the weather has grown cold, and the birds have left their branches. In the second quatrain, he then says that his age is like late twilight, “As after sunset fadeth in the west,”and the remaining light is slowly extinguished in the darkness, which the speaker likens to “Death’s second self.” In the third quatrain, the speaker compares himself to the glowing remnants of a fire, which lies “on the ashes of his youth”—that is, on the ashes of the logs that once enabled it to burn—and which will soon be consumed “by that which it was nourished by”—that is, it will be extinguished as it sinks into the ashes, which its own burning created. In the couplet, the speaker tells the young man that he must perceive these things, and that his love must be strengthened by the knowledge that he will soon be parted from the speaker when the speaker, like the fire, is extinguished by time.

**Commentary**

Sonnet 73 takes up one of the most pressing issues of the first 126 sonnets, the speaker’s anxieties regarding what he perceives to be his advanced age, and develops the theme through a sequence of metaphors each implying something different. The first quatrain, which employs the metaphor of the winter day, emphasizes the harshness and emptiness of old age, with its boughs shaking against the cold and its “bare ruined choirs” bereft of birdsong. In the second quatrain, the metaphor shifts to that of twilight, and emphasizes not the chill of old age, but rather the gradual fading of the light of youth, as “black night” takes away the light “by and by”. But in each of these quatrains, with each of these metaphors, the speaker fails to confront the full scope of his problem: both the metaphor of winter and the metaphor of twilight imply cycles, and impose cyclical motions upon the objects of their metaphors, whereas old age is final. Winter follows spring, but spring will follow winter just as surely; and after the twilight fades, dawn will come again. In human life, however, the fading of warmth and light is not cyclical; youth will not come again for the speaker. In the third quatrain, he must resign himself to this fact. The image of the fire consumed by the ashes of its youth is significant both for its brilliant disposition of the past—the ashes of which eventually snuff out the fire, “consumed by that which it was nourished by”—and for the fact that when the fire is extinguished, it can never be lit again.

In this sense, Sonnet 73 is more complex than it is often considered supposed by critics and scholars. It is often argued that 73 and sonnets like it are simply exercises in metaphor—that they propose a number of different metaphors for the same thing, and the metaphors essentially mean the same thing. But to make this argument is to miss the psychological narrative contained within the choice of metaphors themselves. Sonnet 73 is not simply a procession of interchangeable metaphors; it is the story of the speaker slowly coming to grips with the real finality of his age and his impermanence in time.

The couplet of this sonnet renews the speaker’s plea for the young man’s love, urging him to “love well” that which he must soon leave. It is important to note that the couplet could not have been spoken after the first two quatrains alone. No one loves twilight because it will soon be night; instead they look forward to morning. But after the third quatrain, in which the speaker makes clear the nature of his “leav[ing] ere long,” the couplet is possible, and can be treated as a poignant and reasonable exhortation to the beloved.

**Sonnet 94**

*They that have power to hurt and will do none,   
That do not do the thing they most do show,   
Who, moving others, are themselves as stone,   
Unmoved, cold, and to temptation slow,   
They rightly do inherit heaven’s graces   
And husband nature’s riches from expense;   
They are the lords and owners of their faces,   
Others but stewards of their excellence.   
The summer’s flower is to the summer sweet,   
Though to itself it only live and die,   
But if that flower with base infection meet,   
The basest weed outbraves his dignity:   
For sweetest things turn sourest by their deeds;   
Lilies that fester smell far worse than weeds.*

**Summary**

The first eight lines of this very difficult sonnet are devoted to the description of a certain kind of impressive, restrained person: “They that have pow’r to hurt” and do not use that power. These people seem not to do the thing they are most apparently able to do—they “do not do the thing they most do show”—and while they may move others, they remain themselves “as stone,” cold and slow to feel temptation. People such as this, the speaker says, inherit“heaven’s graces” and protect the riches of nature from expenditure. They are “the lords and owners of their faces,” completely in control of themselves, and others can only hope to steward a part of their“excellence.”

The next four lines undergo a remarkable shift, as the speaker turns from his description of those that “have pow’r to hurt and will do none” to a look at a flower in the summer. He says that the summer may treasure its flower (it is “to the summer sweet”)even if the flower itself does not feel terribly cognizant of its own importance (“to itself it only live and die”). But if the flower becomes sick—if it meets with a “base infection”—then it becomes more repulsive and less dignified than the “basest weed.” In the couplet, the speaker observes that it is behavior that determines the worth of a person or a thing: sweet things which behave badly turn sour, just as a flower that festers smells worse than a weed.

**Commentary**

Sonnet 94 is one of the most difficult sonnets in the sequence, at least in terms of the reader’s ability to know what exactly the speaker is talking about. He jumps from an almost opaque description of these mysterious people who “have pow’r to hurt and will do none” to an almost inexplicable description of a flower in the summer. The two parts of the poem seem almost unconnected. In order to understand them, both on their own and in relation to one another, it is necessary to understand something about the tradition out of which the first 126 sonnets were written.

In Elizabethan England, it was very difficult for poets to make money simply by writing and selling their poetry. Many writers sought out aristocratic patrons, who supported them in return for the prestige of having a poet at their beck and call. Very often, poets courted their patrons, and ensured their places in their patrons’ good graces, by writing fawning verses in praise of the patron’s beauty, valor, power, and so on. The first 126 of Shakespeare’s sonnets, while not exactly fawning praise aimed at an infinitely higher-up aristocrat (the speaker often seems quite intimate with the young man), do come from this tradition of patronage and praise. The speaker’s lengthy invocations to the beloved’s beauty, sweetness, and worth, and the occasional intimations of power differences between him and his beloved (as in Sonnet 87, where the speaker says that the young man is “too dear for my possessing”),hint at this tradition. Certain other poems—such as the sequence from 82 to 86, in which the speaker reacts to the presence of a rival poet competing for his patron’s favors—express it outright. Sonnet 94 is a reaction to the conditions of the speaker’s patronage.

An aristocrat was in no way obligated to treat the poet he supported as an equal; in fact, his superiority was in some ways the entire point of the exchange. The speaker, genuinely in love with the young man, is forced to relate to him not as an equal, but as an inferior. To him, the young man can often seem cold, distant, and grave, and the speaker, who loves him, is forced to try to explain this behavior in a way that will enable him to continue loving the young man. The solution is to praise his very distance and reserve: he is not only “unmoved, cold, and to temptation slow,” he is “the lord and owner” of his face, and the inheritor of “heaven’s graces.”But praise of this chilly detachment seems inadequate (after all, the speaker’s tone seems to imply that he *has* been hurt by the young man’s behavior, so how can he say that the young man “will do none”?), so he makes his argument even more oblique by turning to the metaphor of the flower.

The summer’s flower, like the cold aristocrats of the first two quatrains, is beautiful only in and for itself; it has no interest in the fact that the summer loves it, because “to itself it only live and die.” Like the summer, the speaker hopes he can love the young man simply for his beauty without expecting anything in return. But he is forced to acknowledge that the young man is not so neutral and inactive: he *has* committed hurtful deeds, which act like a “base infection” in the flower to render it lower than a weed. The couplet brilliantly brings the two parts of the poem into full relation: the first line refers specifically to the first part of the poem (“Sweetest things turn sourest by their deeds”—as opposed to the perfect creatures who “do not do”hurtful deeds), and the second half refers to the metaphor of the flower (“Lilies that fester”—a sour deed—”smell far worse than weeds”).

The major themes of this poem are continued in the far simpler Sonnet 95, in which the metaphoric relation between the hurtful, aristocratic young man and the festering flower is developed: “How sweet and lovely dost thou make the shame / Which, like a canker in the fragrant rose, / Doth spot the beauty of thy budding name!”

**Sonnet 97**

*How like a winter hath my absence been   
From thee, the pleasure of the fleeting year!   
What freezings have I felt, what dark days seen!   
What old December’s bareness every where!   
And yet this time removed was summer’s time,   
The teeming autumn, big with rich increase,   
Bearing the wanton burden of the prime,   
Like widow’d wombs after their lords’ decease:   
Yet this abundant issue seem’d to me   
But hope of orphans and unfather’d fruit;   
For summer and his pleasures wait on thee,   
And, thou away, the very birds are mute;   
Or, if they sing, ’tis with so dull a cheer   
That leaves look pale, dreading the winter’s near.*

**Summary**

The speaker has been forced to endure a separation from the beloved, and in this poem he compares that absence to the desolation of winter. In the first quatrain, the speaker simply exclaims the comparison, painting a picture of the winter: “How like a winter hath my absence been / From thee, the pleasure of the fleeting year! / What freezings have I felt, what dark days seen! / What old December’s bareness everywhere!” In the second quatrain, however, he says that, in reality, the season was that of late summer or early autumn, when all of nature was bearing the fruits of summer’s blooming. In the third quatrain, he dismisses the “wanton burthen of the prime”—that is, the bounty of the summer—as unreal, as the “hope of orphans.”It could not have been fathered by summer, because “summer and his pleasures” wait on the beloved, and when he is gone, even the birds are silent. In the couplet, the speaker says that the birds may sing when the beloved is gone, but it is with “so dull a cheer”that the leaves, listening, become fearful that winter is upon them.

**Commentary**

The seasons, so often invoked as a metaphor for the passage of time in the sonnets, are here metaphorized, and function as a kind of delusional indication of how deeply the speaker misses the company of the beloved. As the second quatrain reveals, the speaker spends some time apart from the beloved in “summer’s time,” in late summer, when the natural world is heavy with the fruits of the summer. But without the young man’s presence, the world of abundance and plenty instead resembles “old December’s bareness,” not the pleasures of summer attendant upon the young man’s presence.

The linguistic richness of this poem is the cause of its prominence and popularity among the sonnets. With an economy of imagery, the speaker manages to evoke the “freezings” and “dark days” of winter, the warmth and luxury of the “teeming autumn, big with rich increase,” and, in the third quatrain, the uneasy coexistence of the two in the lonely speaker’s mind. The poem makes use of its strong alliteration (“fleeting” and “freezings”, “dark days” and“December”, “time” and “teeming”, “widowed wombs”, “or*ph*ans”and “un*f*athered fruit”) to give it linguistic weight and pacing, and its lines seem stuffed full with of evocative words.

Probably because of this sensory and imagistic luxury, Sonnet 73 has become the ancestor of a great many other important poems, most notably Keats’s ode “To Autumn.” Its sense and its images are also present in Keats’s sonnet “When I have fears that I may cease to be,” Wallace Stevens’s “The Snow Man” and “No Possum, No Sop, No Taters,” many of Robert Frost’s autumn lyrics, and other important poems.

**Sonnet 116**

*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:   
O no! it is an ever-fixed mark   
That looks on tempests and is never shaken;   
It is the star to every wandering bark,   
Whose worth’s unknown, although his height be taken   
Love’s not Time’s fool, though rosy lips and cheeks   
Within his bending sickle’s compass come:   
Love alters not with his brief hours and weeks,   
But bears it out even to the edge of doom.   
If this be error and upon me proved,   
I never writ, nor no man ever loved.*

**Summary**

This sonnet attempts to define love, by telling both what it is and is not. In the first quatrain, the speaker says that love—”the marriage of true minds”—is perfect and unchanging; it does not “admit impediments,” and it does not change when it find changes in the loved one. In the second quatrain, the speaker tells what love is through a metaphor: a guiding star to lost ships (“wand’ring barks”) that is not susceptible to storms (it “looks on tempests and is never shaken”). In the third quatrain, the speaker again describes what love is not: it is not susceptible to time. Though beauty fades in time as rosy lips and cheeks come within “his bending sickle’s compass,”love does not change with hours and weeks: instead, it “bears it out ev’n to the edge of doom.” In the couplet, the speaker attests to his certainty that love is as he says: if his statements can be proved to be error, he declares, he must never have written a word, and no man can ever have been in love.

**Commentary**

Along with Sonnets 18 (“Shall I compare thee to a summer’s day?”) and 130 (“My mistress’ eyes are nothing like the sun”), Sonnet 116 is one of the most famous poems in the entire sequence. The definition of love that it provides is among the most often quoted and anthologized in the poetic canon. Essentially, this sonnet presents the extreme ideal of romantic love: it never changes, it never fades, it outlasts death and admits no flaw. What is more, it insists that this ideal is the only love that can be called “true”—if love is mortal, changing, or impermanent, the speaker writes, then no man *ever* loved. The basic division of this poem’s argument into the various parts of the sonnet form is extremely simple: the first quatrain says what love is not (changeable), the second quatrain says what it is (a fixed guiding star unshaken by tempests), the third quatrain says more specifically what it is not (“time’s fool”—that is, subject to change in the passage of time), and the couplet announces the speaker’s certainty. What gives this poem its rhetorical and emotional power is not its complexity; rather, it is the force of its linguistic and emotional conviction.

The language of Sonnet 116 is not remarkable for its imagery or metaphoric range. In fact, its imagery, particularly in the third quatrain (time wielding a sickle that ravages beauty’s rosy lips and cheeks), is rather standard within the sonnets, and its major metaphor (love as a guiding star) is hardly startling in its originality. But the language *is* extraordinary in that it frames its discussion of the passion of love within a very restrained, very intensely disciplined rhetorical structure. With a masterful control of rhythm and variation of tone—the heavy balance of “Love’s not time’s fool” to open the third quatrain; the declamatory “O no” to begin the second—the speaker makes an almost legalistic argument for the eternal passion of love, and the result is that the passion seems stronger and more urgent for the restraint in the speaker’s tone.

**Sonnet 129**

*The expense of spirit in a waste of shame   
Is lust in action; and till action, lust   
Is perjured, murderous, bloody, full of blame,   
Savage, extreme, rude, cruel, not to trust,   
Enjoy’d no sooner but despised straight,   
Past reason hunted, and no sooner had   
Past reason hated, as a swallow’d bait   
On purpose laid to make the taker mad;   
Mad in pursuit and in possession so;   
Had, having, and in quest to have, extreme;   
A bliss in proof, and proved, a very woe;   
Before, a joy proposed; behind, a dream.   
All this the world well knows; yet none knows well   
To shun the heaven that leads men to this hell.*

**Summary**

This complex poem grapples with the idea of sexual desire as it exists in longing, fulfillment, and memory. (That is to say, it deals with lust as a longing for future pleasure; with lust as it is consummated in the present; and with lust as it is remembered after the pleasurable experience, when it becomes a source of shame.) At the beginning of the poem, the speaker says that “lust in action”—that is, as it exists at the consummation of the sexual act—is an “expense of spirit in a waste of shame.” He then devotes the rest of the first quatrain to characterizing lust as it exists “till action”—that is, before the consummation: it is “perjured, murd’rous, bloody, full of blame / Savage, extreme, rude, cruel, not to trust.”

In the second quatrain, the speaker jumps between longing, fulfillment, and memory. No sooner is lust “enjoyed” than it is“despised.” When lust is longing, the fulfillment of that longing is hunted “past reason”; but as soon as it is achieved, it becomes shameful, and is *hated* “past reason.” In the third quatrain, then, the speaker says that lust is mad in all three of its forms: in pursuit and possession, it is mad, and in memory, consummation, and longing (“had, having, and in quest to have”)it is “extreme.” While it is experienced it might be “a bliss in proof,” but as soon as it is finished (“proved”) it becomes “a very woe.” In longing, it is “a joy proposed,” but in memory, the pleasure it afforded is merely “a dream.” In the couplet, the speaker says that the whole world knows these things well; but nevertheless, none knows how to shun lust in order to avoid shame: “To shun the heaven that leads men to this hell.”

**Commentary**

The situation of the speaker of this poem is that of a person who has experienced each stage of lust, and who is therefore able to articulate the shame he now feels with reference to his past desire and its consummation. Though the lust of this poem is not explicitly sexual, it is described in highly carnal language—bloody, full of blame, savage, rude, swallowed bait. The most important device of this poem is its rapid oscillation between tenses and times; it jumps between the stages of lust almost uncontrollably, and in so doing creates a composite picture of its subject from all sides—each tinged by the shameful “hell” the speaker now occupies.

Another important device, and a rare one in the sonnets, is the poem’s impersonal tone. The speaker never says outright that he is writing about his own experience; instead, he presents the poem as an impersonal description, a catalogue of the kinds of experience offered by lust. But the ferocity of his description belies his real, expressive purpose, which is to rue his own recent surrender to lustful desire. (The impersonal tone is exceedingly rare in the sonnets, and is invoked only when the speaker seeks most defensively to deflect his words away from himself—as in Sonnet 94, where his tone of impersonal description covers a deep-seated vulnerability.)

**Sonnet 130**

*My mistress’ eyes are nothing like the sun;   
Coral is far more red than her lips’ red;   
If snow be white, why then her breasts are dun;   
If hairs be wires, black wires grow on her head.   
I have seen roses damask’d, red and white,   
But no such roses see I in her cheeks;   
And in some perfumes is there more delight   
Than in the breath that from my mistress reeks.   
I love to hear her speak, yet well I know   
That music hath a far more pleasing sound;   
I grant I never saw a goddess go;   
My mistress, when she walks, treads on the ground:   
And yet, by heaven, I think my love as rare   
As any she belied with false compare.*

**Summary**

This sonnet compares the speaker’s lover to a number of other beauties—and never in the lover’s favor. Her eyes are “nothing like the sun,” her lips are less red than coral; compared to white snow, her breasts are dun-colored, and her hairs are like black wires on her head. In the second quatrain, the speaker says he has seen roses separated by color (“damasked”) into red and white, but he sees no such roses in his mistress’s cheeks; and he says the breath that “reeks” from his mistress is less delightful than perfume. In the third quatrain, he admits that, though he loves her voice, music “hath a far more pleasing sound,” and that, though he has never seen a goddess, his mistress—unlike goddesses—walks on the ground. In the couplet, however, the speaker declares that, “by heav’n,” he thinks his love as rare and valuable “As any she belied with false compare”—that is, any love in which false comparisons were invoked to describe the loved one’s beauty.

**Commentary**

This sonnet, one of Shakespeare’s most famous, plays an elaborate joke on the conventions of love poetry common to Shakespeare’s day, and it is so well-conceived that the joke remains funny today. Most sonnet sequences in Elizabethan England were modeled after that of Petrarch. Petrarch’s famous sonnet sequence was written as a series of love poems to an idealized and idolized mistress named Laura. In the sonnets, Petrarch praises her beauty, her worth, and her perfection using an extraordinary variety of metaphors based largely on natural beauties. In Shakespeare’s day, these metaphors had already become cliche (as, indeed, they still are today), but they were still the accepted technique for writing love poetry. The result was that poems tended to make highly idealizing comparisons between nature and the poets’ lover that were, if taken literally, completely ridiculous. My mistress’ eyes are like the sun; her lips are red as coral; her cheeks are like roses, her breasts are white as snow, her voice is like music, she is a goddess.

In many ways, Shakespeare’s sonnets subvert and reverse the conventions of the Petrarchan love sequence: the idealizing love poems, for instance, are written not to a perfect woman but to an admittedly imperfect man, and the love poems to the dark lady are anything but idealizing (“My love is as a fever, longing still / For that which longer nurseth the disease” is hardly a Petrarchan conceit.) Sonnet 130 mocks the typical Petrarchan metaphors by presenting a speaker who seems to take them at face value, and somewhat bemusedly, decides to tell the truth. Your mistress’ eyes are like the sun? That’s strange—my mistress’ eyes aren’t at all like the sun. Your mistress’ breath smells like perfume? My mistress’ breath reeks compared to perfume. In the couplet, then, the speaker shows his full intent, which is to insist that love does not need these conceits in order to be real; and women do not need to look like flowers or the sun in order to be beautiful.

The rhetorical structure of Sonnet 130 is important to its effect. In the first quatrain, the speaker spends one line on each comparison between his mistress and something else (the sun, coral, snow, and wires—the one positive thing in the whole poem some part of his mistress *is* like. In the second and third quatrains, he expands the descriptions to occupy two lines each, so that roses/cheeks, perfume/breath, music/voice, and goddess/mistress each receive a pair of unrhymed lines. This creates the effect of an expanding and developing argument, and neatly prevents the poem—which does, after all, rely on a single kind of joke for its first twelve lines—from becoming stagnant.

**Sonnet 146**

*Poor soul, the centre of my sinful earth,   
[...] these rebel powers that thee array;   
Why dost thou pine within and suffer dearth,   
Painting thy outward walls so costly gay?   
Why so large cost, having so short a lease,   
Dost thou upon thy fading mansion spend?   
Shall worms, inheritors of this excess,   
Eat up thy charge? is this thy body’s end?   
Then soul, live thou upon thy servant’s loss,   
And let that pine to aggravate thy store;   
Buy terms divine in selling hours of dross;   
Within be fed, without be rich no more:   
So shalt thou feed on Death, that feeds on men,   
And Death once dead, there’s no more dying then.*

**Summary**

The speaker addresses this poem to his soul, asking it in the first stanza why it, the center of his “sinful earth” (that is, his body), endures misery within his body while he is so concerned with maintaining its “paint[ed]” outward appearance—that is, why his soul allows his exterior vanity to wound its interior life. He asks his soul why, since it will not spend long in the body (“having so short a lease” in the “fading mansion”), it spends “so large cost” to decorate it, and he asks whether worms shall be allowed to eat the soul’s “charge” after the body is dead. In the third quatrain, the speaker exhorts his soul to concentrate on its own inward well-being at the expense of the body’s outward walls (“Let that [i.e., the body] pine to aggravate [i.e., increase] thy store”). He says that the body’s hours of “dross” will buy the soul “terms divine”;and admonishes the soul to be fed within, and not to be rich without. In the couplet, the speaker tells the soul that by following his advice, it will feed on death, which feeds on men and their bodies; and once it has fed on death, it will enjoy eternal life: “And death once dead, there’s no more dying then.”

**Commentary**

Sonnet 146, an austerely moralizing self-exhortation to privilege the inner enrichment of the soul over the outer decoration of the body, is also the site of the most virulent textual controversy of any of Shakespeare’s poem in the sequence. The way the poem is printed in its first edition, its first two lines read: Poor soule, the center of my sinfull earth, My sinfull earth these rebbel poweres that thee array.... The repetition of the phrase “my sinful earth” at the start of the second line has long been chalked up to a printer’s mistake; it almost certainly could not have been Shakespeare’s intention to break his meter so egregiously for the sake of such a heavy-handed repetition. (In the 1590s, any text that was to be printed had to be set into the printing press letter by letter, a painstaking and often mind-numbing process that resulted in many mistakes of this nature.) As a result, critics have debated for what seems the better part of four centuries over what the “missing” text might have been. “Trapp’d by these rebel powers”? “Ring’d” by them? “Fenced”? “Foil’d”? “Pressed with”? Possible alternatives are literally endless; most recent editors of the sonnets have avoided conjecture for that very reason.

Apart from the textual controversy, Sonnet 146 presents the relatively simple idea that the body exists at the expense of the soul, so that decorating or adorning the body, or even worrying about its beauty, can only be accomplished at the soul’s expense. The speaker of this sonnet feels trapped by his preoccupation with his outward appearance, and urges himself—by addressing his neglected soul, which he concedes has the decision-making power over the body—to neglect the body as a way to enrich the soul and help it toward heaven (“Buy terms divine in selling hours of dross”). In this sense, Sonnet 146 is one of comparatively few sonnets to strike a piously religious tone: in its overt concern with heaven, asceticism, and the progress of the soul, it is quite at odds with many of the other sonnets, which yearn for and celebrate sensory beauty and aesthetic pleasure.

**Study Questions**

1. Sonnet 18 is one of the most famous poems in the English language. Why do you think this is the case? How does the speaker use natural imagery to create a picture of the young man’s beauty?

2. In Sonnet 1, the speaker argues that the only way for the young man to defy the ravaging power of time is to reproduce, but in later sonnets, he seems to think that the permanence of his poetry will preserve the young man’s beauty for all time. Why is the speaker so concerned with the ravages of time? How do the sonnets portray time? How can they claim to defy it?

3. Discuss the portrayal of beauty in the sequence as a whole. Is beauty an immortal ideal, or is it vulnerable to time? How is beauty valued differently in a poems like Sonnets 1, 18, and 60 than in a poem like Sonnet 146? How does “beauty” contrast with “worth”? How is beauty treated in Sonnet 130?

4. Sonnet 94 is one of the most difficult, and in many ways one of the most ambiguous, of all the sonnets. What are the speaker’s feelings for the people“that have pow’r to hurt and will do none”? What is the significance of the summer’s flower?

5. Compare and contrast two “moral”sonnets, 129 and 146. How does the latter poem’s anxiety about outward appearance relate to the former’s ashamed admission of lust?

6. Discuss the theme of love in the sonnets. Do the young man sonnets express a different ideal of love than the dark lady sonnets? Is the ideal of love described in Sonnet 116—without which the speaker “never writ, nor no man ever loved”— constant throughout the sonnets?

7. Think about the ways in which the speaker uses the sonnet form to embody a series of metaphors. How do poems such as Sonnet 60 and Sonnet 73 divide their metaphors among the various parts of the sonnet?

**The Sonnet and its Structure**  
Both in terms of technical ability and range of content, Shakespeare must be reckoned the most versatile and talented writer to have taken up the pen in the English language. Indeed in the area of sonneteering Shakespeare must be ranked not only as the greatest sonnet writer in English, but also as the principal creator of the English sonnet - known to us in its more common designation as the Shakespearean sonnet. To see the impact he had on the literature of his time it is only necessary to reflect that during the course of the sixteenth century over 300,000 sonnets were written and that of these only 154 were written by Shakespeare, and yet the form itself is named after him.

The sonnet itself was a poetic mode imported from Italy by Sir Thomas Wyatt with his translation of Petrarch's sonnets. The word "sonnet" actually means "little song" and in its Italian form was chiefly identified with the Renaissance humanist Petrarch (1304-1374). He had taken a diffuse lyric and given it a more stable structure.

These lyrics were often bundled together in sequences united by a common theme or subject, which in many cases was that of love - whether requited, unrequited, sought after or rejected. It should however be stressed that the sonnet was not confined to any one theme as we find sonnets written on religious devotion, politics and any variety of other topics. In general, the sonnet can perhaps be viewed as the most inclusive poetic form available.

Indeed it is the case that the sonnet has become defined by its structure. The basic sonnet is a fourteen-line poem in iambic pentameter, in three principal rhyming patterns. The widely imitated Petrarchan sonnet consisted of an octave, or eight-line stanza, followed by a sestet, or six-line stanza. The octave was rhymed **a-b-b-a a-b-b-a**, and the sestet was typically rhymed **c-d-e-c-d-e**. However it was generally felt that this scheme imprisoned the English language as it stressed words in a different fashion to the Italian.

Gradually changes began to be made, Wyatt used the scheme **a-b-b-a a-b-b-a c-d-d-c e-e** that gave a greater degree of space for his poetry, and it also broke the form down into the more recognisable English sonnet structure of three quatrains and a couplet. But it was Henry Howard, Earl of Surrey, who was "the first poet to free the natural rhythms of English speech from the five foot prison of the four iambic line."

His great innovation was to utilise unrhymed iambic pentameter - a form which has become the mainstay of English verse for four centuries. He also established the more common English sonnet structure of **a-b-a-b c-d-c-d e-f-e-f g-g**. This was the form inherited by Shakespeare - the form that he would make his own so that to this day it bears his name.

**Shakespeare's Sonnets**  
The great achievement of Shakespeare's sonnets is their apparently perfect melding of form and function, subject and style. The reader feels an uncanny sense of effortlessness engendered by the poems. We feel that the poems simply tripped off the tongue of the poet and, if so, the sonnets give us a true insight into Shakespeare as a person, rather than Shakespeare the playwright and poet.

They are some of the most selfless poems ever composed, full as they are of the urge to give his beloved life within the medium of language:  
**"So long as men can breathe, or eyes can see,  
So long lives this, and this gives life to thee."**  
Sonnet 18

and:  
**"O! none, unless this miracle have might,  
That in black ink my love may still shine bright."**  
Sonnet 65

It could be claimed that these poems are, in fact, of an ethical nature. They strive for an unheard-of accuracy in the representation of the inner life of the speaker, rejecting any easy compromise with facile emotionalism. This is not to say that they are not artistic - they are, and they employ to a greater degree conceits, metaphor, and linguistic word play than is to be found anywhere else in the English language. The main use of these artistic functions, however, is to stress the impact that one person has on another, and convey in a forceful and imaginative way aspects of a person's identity such as time, decay and beauty:  
**"Shall I compare thee to a summer's day?  
Thou art more lovely and more temperate"**  
Sonnet 18

and:

**"In me thou see'st the glowing of such fire,  
That on the ashes of his youth doth lie,  
As the death-bed whereon it must expire  
Consum'd with that which it was nourish'd by."**  
Sonnet 73

The often-mooted notion of the timelessness of Shakespeare has its source in the marvellous simplicity and beauty of his language in dealing with things which concern us all. His beautiful imagery of life as a fire consuming its youthful strength, and the **"death-bed"** or bed of ashes on which it will die, is powerful because of its sheer homeliness and simplicity. (The images are simple and easy for the reader to identify with.)

In Sonnet 73 Shakespeare creates a meditation on the influence of time both on the speaker and on the beloved. Time is signalled as the subject immediately by his use of the word in the opening line:  
**"That time of year thou mayst in me behold"**

Shakespeare has elegantly made time both the subject and the object of the poem. Time functions here as a dimension of reality, as a metaphor for the lateness of the speaker's life, and as a season of the year. Shakespeare creates backward moving sections of time that hint at the speaker's past, giving him a continuity of existence and of memory, in reaction to which the poem itself will be created.

In the first quatrain, time is embodied in the speaker in the form of an old withering tree and represented as a season:  
**"When yellow leaves, or none, or few, do hang  
Upon these boughs which shake against the cold,  
Bare ruin'd choirs, where late the sweet birds sang."**

In the next quatrain, paralleling the first, the opening line has retreated from the year to the day:  
**"In me thou see'st the twilight of such day  
As after sunset fadeth in the west,"**

Here time is embodied in the speaker in the form of twilight, echoing the lateness of his life, and as the final period of the day, again an embodiment of time. The compounding of such imagery and conceits to explore the relationship of time to the self and the self's reaction to the inevitable process of decay forces the reader into a confrontation with his/her own self. The way in which Shakespeare enables the reader to enter into such a dialogue with himself is his greatness.

The poem ends with a daring couplet:  
**"This thou perceiv'st which makes thy love more strong,  
To love that well which thou must leave ere long."**

Again we are confronted with a plea for an ethical relationship with the other person. The theme is the value of humanity in spite of its transience. This may provide us with enough reason to agree with Dr. Samuel Jonson who declared that: **"Shakespeare is above all other writers, at least above all modern writers, the poet of nature, the poet that holds up to his readers a faithful mirror of manner and of life."**