

Shakespearean Sonnets

Name: _____

Key Terms & Concepts:				
Shakespearean (English) sonnet		Petrarchan (Italian) sonnet		sonnet structure
quatrain	couplet	iambic pentameter	inverted syntax	volta

In both sonnets below, the speaker addresses his beloved when he says “you” and “thou.”

Sonnet 55 is a poem about time, about the speaker’s beloved, and about poetry itself.

What attitudes does the speaker express toward time, toward his beloved, and toward the poem itself? Consider elements such as structure, imagery, and diction.

Sonnet 55

Not marble, nor the gilded monuments
Of princes, shall outlive this powerful rhyme;
But you shall shine more bright in these contents
Than unswept stone besmeared with sluttish time.
When wasteful war shall statues overturn,
And broils root out the work of masonry,
Nor Mars his sword nor war’s quick fire shall burn
The living record of your memory.
‘Gainst death and all oblivious enmity
Shall you pace forth; your praise shall still find room
Even in the eyes of all posterity
That wear this world out to the ending doom.
So, till the judgment that yourself arise,
You live in this, and dwell in lovers’ eyes.

- 5
- 6. **broils** - disturbances
- 9. **all-oblivious enmity** – the enmity of being forgotten
- 10
- 12. **the ending doom** – Judgment Day
- 13. **till . . . arise** – until the judgment day when you rise from the dead
- 14. **this** – this poem

Sonnet 73 examines the speaker’s view of himself and of his relationship with his beloved.

How does the speaker view himself and view his relationship with his beloved?
Consider elements of the poem such as structure, metaphor, imagery, diction, and tone.

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 ruined choirs where late the sweet birds sang.
In me thou see’st 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 deathbed whereon it must expire,
Consumed with that which it was nourished by:
This thou perceiv’st, which makes thy love more strong,
To love that well which thou must leave ere long.

The Lighter Side

The following sonnets are both about the speaker’s “mistress”—i.e., his female lover.

Notice what feelings, attitudes, and insights he expresses about her, about himself, and about their relationship.

In Sonnet 130 below, what is the speaker’s attitude toward his mistress?

Does he express praise and admiration for her beauty, or not?

Consider the author’s use of rhetoric, structure, simile, metaphor, and tone.

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. 5
 I have seen roses damasked, red and white,
 But no such roses see I in her cheeks;
 And in some perfumes is there more delight
 Than in the breath that from my mistress reeks.
 I love to hear her speak; yet well I know
 That music hath a far more pleasing sound: 10
 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.

This sonnet plays on conventional comparisons used to express admiration of women in Petrarchan poetry.

3 **dun** – dull grayish brown
 4 **wires** – (as the conventional sonnet mistress is said to have hair spun of gold)
 5 **damasked** – mingled; soft, smooth

8 **reeks** – emanates (this word had no negative connotation until the 1700s)

11 **go** – walk

14 **she** – woman
belied – proved false or contradicted

Also, in what sense is Sonnet 130 not just about love, but also **about poetry**?

Through it, what does Shakespeare **say** about poetry and, specifically, about love poetry?

In Sonnet 138 below, what is the speaker’s attitude toward his relationship with his mistress?

(On what is their relationship based, and how does he feel about this fact?)

Consider the importance of structure, rhetoric, pun & ambiguity, paradox, and tone.

Sonnet 138

When my love swears that she is made of truth,
 I do believe her, though I know she lies,
 That she might think me some untutored youth,
 Unlearnèd in the world’s false subtleties.
 Thus vainly thinking that she thinks me young, 5
 Although she knows my days are past the best,
 Simply I credit her false-speaking tongue;
 On both sides thus is simple truth suppressed.
 But wherefore says she not she is unjust?
 And wherefore say not I that I am old? 10
 O, love’s best habit is in seeming trust,
 And age in love loves not to have years told.
 Therefore I lie with her and she with me,
 And in our faults by lies we flattered be.

1 **made of truth** – (1) totally honest; (2) completely faithful
 2 **lies** – (playing on the **physical** meaning invoked in line 13)
 3 **That** – so that
 4 **subtleties** – guile, craftiness, duplicity
 5 **vainly** – (1) pointlessly, (2) self-indulgently

7 **Simply** – (1) naively, (2) unhesitatingly

9 **wherefore says she not** – why doesn’t she say that
unjust – (1) untruthful, (2) unfaithful

11 **love’s best habit is** – love looks best when dressed
 12 **told** – (1) counted, (2) revealed

13 **lie** – (1) tell lies, (2) physically “lie down” in the Biblical sense

I. The Sonnet – What is it?

A 14-line poem written in *Iambic pentameter* (a poetic rhythm) that follows a specific organization or structure

- ❑ Rhyme Scheme

ABAB *CDCD* *EFEF* *GG*

- ❑ Structure & Logic

3 *quatrains* (units of 4 lines) & 1 *couplet* (a unit of 2 lines)

The 1st *quatrain* introduces a *problem or conflict*, and *subsequent quatrains* further *develop* this problem or conflict.

After the third quatrain, a *volta* or *turning point* occurs in the closing *couplet*, which offers some kind of concluding *insight* or *resolution* to the problem.

- ❑ Rhythm & Meter -

Iambic pentameter = 10 syllables per line,
following a specific rhythmic pattern

II. Iambic pentameter – What is it, and why should I care?

- ❑ The most popular pattern of rhythm in English – the “Iamb”

An “IAMB” = 1 unstressed syllable, followed by 1 STRESSED syllable

e.g., because beCAUSE be **cause**

- ❑ Meter – the number of times this pattern is repeated in a single line

PENTAmeter = a pattern of 5 “IAMBS” per line

When **my** love swears that **she** is made of truth,
I **do** be- lieve her, **though** I know she lies,

- ❑ Adding or removing a syllable – Why does Shakespeare do these things?

- Place an **accent** over some words? – to add a syllable

e.g., Unlearnéd in the world’s false subtleties

- Make a **contraction** with other words? – to take away a syllable

e.g., 'Gainst death and all oblivious enmity

There are two main types of sonnets: **English** (or Shakespearean) and **Italian** (or Petrarchan)

English or Shakespearean Sonnet		Italian or Petrarchan Sonnet	
Rhyme scheme	Organization / structure	Rhyme scheme	Organization / structure
A B A B ----- C D C D ----- E F E F ----- G G	1 st quatrain 2 nd quatrain 3 rd quatrain <i>volta or turning point</i> 1 concluding couplet	A B B A ----- A B B A ----- C OR C OR D D some C E similar C C variation D D C E	1 octave (or 2 quatrains) <i>volta or turning point</i> 1 sestet (or 2 tercets)

As the sonnet developed, so did a tradition in which the speaker would compare his beloved to all things beautiful under the sun, and to things divine and immortal as well. Below is a typical Shakespearean sonnet of the time (though it is a sonnet *not* written by Shakespeare) that uses lofty comparisons to praise a beloved woman.

FROM FIDESSA by Bartholomew Griffin (1596)

My Lady's hair is threads of beaten gold;
 Her front the purest crystal^o eye hath seen;
 Her eyes the brightest stars the heavens hold;
 Her cheeks, red roses, such as seld^o have been;
 Her pretty lips of red vermilion dye; 5
 Her hand of ivory the purest white;
 Her blush Aurora^o, or the morning sky.
 Her breast displays two silver fountains bright;
 The spheres, her voice; her grace, the Graces^o three;
 Her body is the saint that I adore; 10
 Her smiles and favours, sweet as honey be.
 Her feet, fair Thetis^o praiseth evermore.
 But Ah, the worst and last is yet behind:
 For of a griffin^o she doth^o bear the mind!

^o the word "that" should be inserted here
^oseld – seldom
^oAurora - the goddess of dawn in Roman mythology
^oGraces – the 3 Greek goddesses of joy, charm, & beauty
^oThetis – a Greek sea goddess
^ogriffin – a creature with head & wings of eagle & body of lion
^odoth – does

1) What do you think of the *metaphors* (and the allusions) that the speaker uses to describe the beauty of his beloved? Which metaphors are startling because they are original, and effective? In contrast, which metaphors are weak, inappropriate, or ineffective?

2) Also, notice the *volta* (or turning point) in the poem – where it occurs and why. Do you understand the **syntax** of the final line, as well as the **pun** involved in it?