

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.

Sonnet 130 is the poet's pragmatic tribute to his uncomely mistress, commonly referred to as the dark lady because of her dun complexion. The dark lady, who ultimately betrays the poet, appears in sonnets 127 to 154. Sonnet 130 is clearly a parody of the conventional love sonnet, made popular by Petrarch and, in particular, made popular in England by Sidney's use of the Petrarchan form in his epic poem *Astrophel and Stella*.

If you compare the stanzas of *Astrophel and Stella* to Sonnet 130, you will see exactly what elements of the conventional love sonnet Shakespeare is light-heartedly mocking. In Sonnet 130, there is no use of grandiose metaphor or allusion; he does not compare his love to Venus, there is no evocation to Morpheus, etc. The ordinary beauty and humanity of his lover are important to Shakespeare in this sonnet, and he deliberately uses typical love poetry metaphors against themselves.

In Sidney's work, for example, the features of the poet's lover are as beautiful and, at times, more beautiful than the finest pearls, diamonds, rubies, and silk. In Sonnet 130, the references to such objects of perfection are indeed present, but they are there to illustrate that his lover is not as beautiful -- a total rejection of Petrarch form and content. Shakespeare utilizes a new structure, through which the straightforward theme of his

lover's simplicity can be developed in the three quatrains and neatly concluded in the final couplet.

Thus, Shakespeare is using all the techniques available, including the sonnet structure itself, to enhance his parody of the traditional Petrarchan sonnet typified by Sidney's work. But Shakespeare ends the sonnet by proclaiming his love for his mistress despite her lack of adornment, so he does finally embrace the fundamental theme in Petrarch's sonnets: total and consuming love.

One final note: To Elizabethan readers, Shakespeare's comparison of hair to 'wires' would refer to the finely-spun gold threads woven into fancy hair nets. Many poets of the time used this term as a benchmark of beauty, including Spenser:

SUMMARY

Sonnet 130 is like a love poem turned on its head. Usually, if you were talking about your beloved, you would go out of your way to praise her, to point all the ways that she is the best. In this case, though, Shakespeare spends this poem comparing his mistress's appearance to other things, and then telling us how she doesn't measure up to them. He goes through a whole laundry list, giving us details about the flaws of her body, her smell, even the sound of her voice. Then,

Line 1

My mistress' eyes are nothing like the sun;

- Here we are introduced for the first time to the main character in this poem, the speaker's "mistress."
- Today, when we use the word "mistress," it's usually to refer to a woman who is dating a married man. In Shakespeare, though, it was more general, like "my love" or "my darling."
- The speaker jumps right into his anti-love poem, letting us know that this lady's eyes aren't like the sun. Well, so what? We wouldn't really expect them to be, would we?
- As we read the next few lines though, we see that the comparison is a standard way of praising a beautiful woman in a poem. It's like saying, "her eyes are like sapphires."
- Our speaker is refusing to fall back on clichés though, instead telling us that this simile doesn't apply at all.

Line 2

Coral is far more red than her lips' red;

- If you imagined a stereotypically beautiful woman, like a model in a magazine, she'd probably have red lips, right?
- Certain kinds of very red coral are polished and used to make jewelry so if you compared lips to coral, you'd be thinking of the most beautiful, shiny red thing you could imagine.
- Nope, says the speaker, that doesn't sound like my girlfriend's lips at all.

Line 3

If snow be white, why then her breasts are dun;

- Next come the mistress's breasts.
- They get pretty much the same treatment as her lips.
- If the reddest red is like coral, then the whitest white is the color of snow. A poet could praise a woman for having skin as white as snow.
- Not here, though. This woman's skin isn't white, or even cream colored. Instead, the speaker calls it "dun," a sort of grayish-brown color.
- Be sure to notice the little changes here. In the first two lines, we hear only that the woman isn't like these other things (the sun, coral).
- Now we get an actual description, an adjective ("dun") that applies to her. Unfortunately, it just makes her sound uglier. Dun is a word often used to describe the color of a horse, and definitely not the kind of thing a woman would be thrilled to hear about her breasts.

Line 4

If hairs be wires, black wires grow on her head.

- Now things just get worse.
- If a poet wanted to be sentimental and sweet, he might compare his lover's hair to something soft, smooth, and shiny, like silk. Here though, the mistress's hair is compared to black wires sticking out of the top of her head.
- Keep in mind that the whole point of this poem is to push back against standard ways of talking about women in poems. So it's not necessarily bad that she has frizzy black hair.

Lines 5-6

*I have seen roses damasked, red and white,
But no such roses see I in her cheeks;*

- There's a tricky word here: damasked. Basically it just means a pattern of mixed colors woven into expensive fabric.
- So imagine a rose with a white and red pattern on it, or maybe a bouquet of red and white roses. Our speaker has seen beautiful roses like that, but his mistress's cheeks don't remind him of them at all.
- Maybe some perfectly beautiful woman has cheeks that are white with just a little blush of red, but that's not the woman he's talking about.

Lines 7-8

*And in some perfumes is there more delight
Than in the breath that from my mistress reeks.*

- By now we've got the idea, right?
- The speaker tells us that some perfumes smell better (give more "delight") than this woman's lover's breath.
- Apparently she stinks, too.
- Let's recap quickly: so far the speaker said that his mistress's eyes aren't that great, that her lips aren't that red, that her skin is yellowish, that her hair is like wires, that her cheeks are nothing like roses, and that her breath reeks.
- What a way to start a love poem.

at the end, he changes his tune and tells us about his real and complete love for her.

Lines 9-10

*I love to hear her speak, yet well I know
That music hath a far more pleasing sound;*

- Now, after all of that criticism, the speaker starts to get a little bit nicer.
- He admits that he really does "love to hear her speak." Seems like she was due for a compliment, doesn't it?
- The speaker can't just let it go at that, though, and immediately he starts to back up a little.
- Basically, that "yet" in the middle of line 9 gets us ready for a negative comparison. It's like saying, "You're really great, but..."
- Then, in line 10, we get the negative half of that thought: he thinks that music is "more pleasing" than the sound of her voice.
- Well, maybe that's not so bad after all. If your boyfriend or girlfriend said, "I like music more than the sound of your voice," you might not exactly be thrilled, but it sure beats having him or her tell you that your breath stinks.
- Maybe the speaker is softening up a little bit.

Line 11-12

*I grant I never saw a goddess go;
My mistress when she walks treads on the ground.*

- Here's another thought that is split over two lines. In line 11, the speaker essentially tells us that he's willing to admit that he's never seen a goddess move. (See why Shakespeare's the poet and not us? Listen to how smoothly those words flow together: grant...goddess...go. Nice, huh?)
- Now, when the speaker finishes his thought on line 12, he's not actually being mean at all, just stating the facts. His mistress isn't a goddess, she doesn't fly or soar or float along. She just walks (treads) like a normal person, on the ground.
- A pretentious poet might say: "My love walks like a goddess," but we would know that it isn't true. Has he ever seen a goddess? Maybe the best way to

tell someone you love him or her in a poem is to be simple, honest and straightforward.

Lines 13-14

And yet, by heaven, I think my love as rare

□ *As any she belied with false compare.*

- Now, at long last, we get to the sweet part, but it might take a little bit of translating.
- Here are two lines in plain English: the speaker thinks that his lover is as wonderful ("rare") as any woman ("any she") who was ever misrepresented ("belied") by an exaggerated comparison ("false compare").
- These last two lines are the payoff for the whole poem. They serve as the punch-line for the joke. They drive home the speaker's main point, that unlike other people who write sonnets, he doesn't need flowery terms or fancy comparisons. He can just tell his mistress, plainly and simply, that he loves her for who she is. Awww...

● SONNET 130 ANALYSIS

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● Symbols, Imagery, Wordplay

- Welcome to the land of symbols, imagery, and wordplay. Before you travel any further, please know that there may be some thorny academic terminology ahead. Never fear, Shmoop is here. Check out our...

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● Form and Meter

- There are lots of different ways to write a sonnet, which is basically a kind of short poem. Shakespeare's sonnets have a very specific form, though, and scholars have named that form the "Shakespe...

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● Speaker

- This speaker sounds like the guy at the back of your class who is always cracking jokes. He can't stand to do anything the way other people do, and even when he's supposed to be serious, he has to...

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- *Setting*

- Though no setting is explicitly stated, we're imagining this poem set in a courtroom. We know it's a love poem and all, but listen to the way it's presented. The speaker gives us this list of evide...

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- *Sound Check*

- So you might think we're nuts, but we think this poem sounds like a cat's feet as it moves across a room. Just listen to the way these lines stop and start. The first line picks up speed, patters a...

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- *What's Up With the Title?*

- None of Shakespeare's sonnets have titles, so we refer to them by number, in this case, 130. These numbers come from the order in which the poems were first published in 1609. The order actually ma...

- *Calling Card*

- We can tell right off the bat that this is a Shakespearean sonnet. That form (14 lines of iambic pentameter with the last two lines rhyming) is a dead giveaway. There are lots of different themes i...

- *Tough-O-Meter*

- Once you get the hang of Shakespeare's language, and figure out the joke (he's actually trying to be nice!), this poem should be pretty fun and easy.

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- *Brain Snacks*

- *Sex Rating*

- He does mention her breasts (line 3), but in general this is pretty family-friendly love poetry.

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- Sonnet 130 Themes

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- Love

- Like many of Shakespeare's sonnets, this poem is an expression of love. In order to express your love, you have to talk about it, define it, examine it. In telling his mistress that he loves her, o...

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- Appearances

- "Appearances" is a major theme in Sonnet 130, since our speaker spends a lot of the poem talking about what's wrong with his mistress's looks. He does a pretty complete dissection of her face, her...

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- Women and Femininity

- In Sonnet 130, the theme "Women and Femininity" is connected to the idea of appearances. This poem is all about female beauty and our expectations and stereotypes about the way women ought to look....

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- Literature and Writing

- The theme of "Literature and Writing" is sort of flying under the radar in this poem, but we think it's important. The whole point of this poem is to gently mock the clichéd love poems written...

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SONNET 130 THEME OF LOVE

- [BACK](#)

- [NEXT](#)

Like many of Shakespeare's sonnets, this poem is an expression of love. In order to express your love, you have to talk about it, define it, examine it. In telling his mistress that he loves her, our speaker also has to give us an idea about what his love is like. This poem is partly about where love comes from, what motivates our feelings of affection for someone else. Specifically, it's about finding love in spite of (or maybe even because of) physical flaws.

Questions About Love

1. How does the speaker of the poem define his love for his mistress?
2. How is this love poem different from other ones you have read? What do those differences say about the idea of love in this poem?
3. Does this guy seem like a jerk to you? Is this really what a person is supposed to sound like when he professes his love?
4. What if the order of lines in this poem were reversed? What if the speaker started out by telling the girl he loves her, only then going on to the negative points? How would this change our experience of the poem?

Chew on This

Try on an opinion or two, start a debate, or play the devil's advocate. The speaker of this poem keeps his reasons for loving this woman to himself. He makes it clear that her appearance isn't crucial, but most of his positive feelings about her remain a mystery.

This poem reveals an ambiguous kind of love, one that seems heartfelt and sincere, but also tinged with a kind of harsh anger. The conflict between these two feelings is never fully resolved.

"Appearances" is a major theme in Sonnet 130, since our speaker spends a lot of the poem talking about what's wrong with his mistress's looks. He does a pretty complete dissection of her face, her body, and her smell. He doesn't say anything at all about her personality, but instead sticks to his laundry list of problems with her appearance. This gives Shakespeare a chance to poke fun at our obsession with looks and to show how ridiculous it is to ask any person to live up to some ideal of perfect beauty.

Questions About Appearances

1. Do you notice flaws in the people that you love? Do you ever tell them about these imperfections?
2. Do you think that true love requires you to be honest about things like appearance? Or do you think that love requires the kind of flattering little lies that the speaker refuses to tell?
3. Is this poem making you want to brush your teeth and get a haircut? It's kind of doing that for us, to be honest.
4. Are there parts of this poem that seem to go too far, that are overly critical of this woman's appearance?

Chew on This

Try on an opinion or two, start a debate, or play the devil's advocate.

By pushing his criticisms of his mistress's appearance to the edge, the speaker makes his return to the theme of love even more effective. The contrast between mockery and love is what drives the poem.

Even though the speaker eventually says how much he loves her, he has said such nasty things about his mistress that it makes him hard to believe. He has damaged his credibility.