

Women and Femininity in Shakespeare's Sonnet-130

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Abstract: Sonnet is an expression of love. In order to express our love, we have to talk about it, define it, and 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 physical flaws.

Although the subject of this poem is a woman, the speaker is talking about questions of love and honesty that could apply equally to men and women. The theme of "Literature and Writing" is sort of flying under the radar in this poem, but we think it's important.

William Shakespeare has become the most famous and influential author in English literature. Only active as a writer for a quarter century, he wrote thirty-eight plays, one hundred fifty-four sonnets and two epic poems that reinvented and defined the English language to such a degree that his works are required study all over the world.

There are many mysteries in the life of William Shakespeare and perhaps none is more intriguing than the one he initiated himself when he published, in 1609, a collection of his sonnets. When we start to consider the enduring enigmas and controversies that circle and shroud the sonnets, it is a good idea to establish the few unarguable facts first. The sonnets - the greatest lyric sequence of love poems ever written - were published seven years before Shakespeare's death in 1616, and some years after the last poems were written. There are 154 sonnets in total: 126 of them are addressed to a "Fair Youth", a young man of aristocratic breeding; 26 of them concern a "Dark Lady", conspicuously not aristocratic. The last two are bawdy allusions to the notorious mercury baths, the favoured contemporary form of treatment for the pox.

When we say the words "love poem," we always think that a love poem has to be sappy. If we are told that the love poem we had in mind was over 400 years old that might make it even worse. Old love poems bring to mind flowery language and the kind of unrealistic glom that we could never bring our self to say with a straight face.

But, if we think sappy love poems are ridiculous, we are not alone - that's pretty much how Shakespeare felt too, and he spends these fourteen lines ripping that kind of poem apart. Shakespeare's Sonnet 130 is a parody of the kind of insincere, sickly sweet love poems that authors have been writing for centuries.

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. In magazines women pretty much tend to look the same. They all fit into a very narrow definition of what is beautiful. Essentially, the speaker in this poem is pointing out that love poetry does the same thing. It makes women into goddesses, not real human beings. He insists that his idea of beautiful femininity doesn't depend on fitting an abstract, unrealistic fantasy and to criticize the unrealistic expectations that men have for female beauty.

We get little glimpses of "The Dark Lady" in this poem. Shakespeare talks about her hair, the color of her skin, etc. Mostly, though, this poem is a gentle parody of traditional love poetry. Shakespeare uses this sonnet to poke fun at the kinds of exaggerated comparisons some poets of his day made when talking about their lovers. He makes fun of clichéd images

that were worn out even then, like "eyes like the sun," and "skin as white as snow." These kinds of over-the-top compliments appear everywhere in poems by writers like Petrarch, who wrote famous Italian sonnets in the 14th century. Although no one is sure whether the woman, Shakespeare is talking about really existed, readers can see how well he uses this sonnet to skewer lame poetic clichés.

The whole point of this poem is to gently mock the clichéd love poems written by other authors. The speaker isn't actually making fun of his own lover so much as he is pointing out how ridiculous poetic comparisons can become. 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 by giving us details about the flaws of her body, her smell, even the sound of her voice. Then, at the end, he changes his tune and tells us about his real and complete love for her.

My mistress' eyes are nothing like the sun ;(line-1)

- 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.

If snow be white, why then her breasts are dun; (line -3)

- This woman's skin isn't white, or even cream coloured. Instead, the speaker calls it "dun," a sort of greyish-brown color.
- 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.

In "Romeo Juliet" "Shakespeare beautifully exaggerated the beauty of Juliet as

"being like the sun, brighter than a torch, a jewel sparkling in the night, and a bright angel among dark clouds".

Though Shakespeare exaggerated the beauty of Juliet by his hero Romeo in the play "Romeo Juliet", when it comes on his part to describe his mistress in the sonnet 130, he disliked false exaggeration.

If hairs be wires, black wires grow on her head. (line - 4)

- 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.

In Petrarch's sonnet 227, he describes the hair of his lady love as,

"Breeze, blowing that blonde curling hair, stirring it, and being softly stirred in turn, scattering that sweet gold about, then gathering it, in a lovely knot of curls again..."

Petrarch loved Laura, but she refused him for the very proper reason that she was already married to another man. He channelled his feelings into love poems that were exclamatory rather than persuasive.

There is psychological realism in the description of Laura, her presence causes him unspeakable joy, even though Petrarch's quest for love leads to hopelessness and irreconcilable anguish.

"And in some perfumes is there more delight Than in the breath that from my mistress reeks". (lines -7&8)

- The speaker tells us that some perfumes smell better (give more "delight") than this woman's lover's breath.
- Apparently her breath stinks, which is the valiant description by the poet.

"I love to hear her speak, yet well I know That music hath a far more pleasing sound;...(lines- 9&10)

- 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.
- 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.

**...I think my love as rare
As any she belied with false compare (lines - 13 &14)**

Now, 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.

- As he gently mocks traditional love poems, the speaker manages to maintain a light tone. This playfulness makes it easier for him to turn the subject back to true love and finish the poem on a sweet and cheerful note.

Although it is meant to be a parody of romantic poetry, Sonnet 130 misses the fun of those other poems. By ignoring the playful nature of those exaggerated comparisons, our speaker ends up being the one who accepts his mistress as what she is.

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 what is important to Shakespeare in this sonnet, and he deliberately uses typical love poetry metaphors against themselves.

The references to metaphorical 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.

This whole poem, while seeming like a criticism of this woman, is actually a parody of other poets. Does the end justify the earlier lines? Is this what real love looks like? Is the common notion of the readers after reading of this poem? But "TRUE LOVE IS APART FROM PHYSICAL FLAWS"

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Author's Note:



silicon era.

Author's area of interest is research in Shakespeare's depiction of women empowerment. Shakespeare's vision and optimistic approach on women empowerment is still a dream for women and deprived of justification even in the contemporary