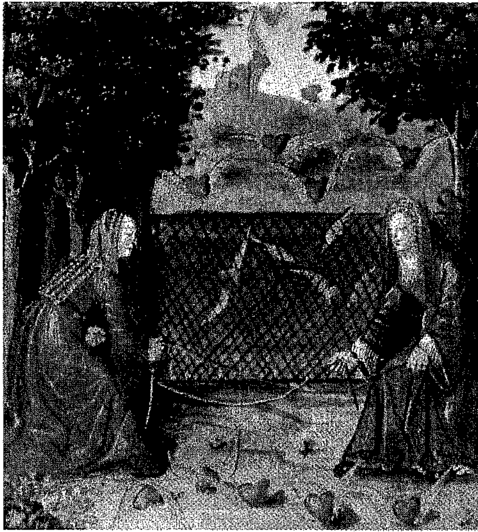
Sonnets



Emblems and Devices of Love (detail) by Pierre Sala. Manuscript.

The British Library.

Had Shakespeare written no plays at all, he would still have an immense reputation as a poet, not so much for his long narrative poems on classical subjects, *Venus and Adonis* (1593) and *The Rape of Lucrece* (1594), as for his *Sonnets* (1609). There are altogether 154 sonnets, their speaker is male, and their chief subject is love.

On these three points everybody might agree, but beyond these three points, there is no agreement, only question:

Is the speaker of the sonnets a dramatic character invented by Shakespeare, like Romeo, Mercutio, or the Nurse, or is he the dramatist himself? The speaker does call himself Will a few times, and he does make puns on his name, but what evidence exists to prove that all the sonnets are spoken by this Will? If the sonnets are about the real man Shakespeare, then who are the real people behind the other characters mentioned in them: the beloved young man who may be the subject of many of the first 126 sonnets, or the beautiful and exciting dark-complexioned woman who may be the subject of some of the later sonnets? Who is the rival poet referred to in several sonnets? Are there only these four characters (speaker, fair young man, dark lady, other poet), or are there more?

Is the order of the sonnets in which they were published—probably without Shakespeare's consent—the correct one? Shouldn't they be rearranged to tell a more satisfactory story?

And who is the "Mr. W. H." mentioned in the 1609 publication as the "only begetter" of the sonnets? Is he the same person as the young man (or one of the young men), or is he someone else? And so on.

These and dozens of other questions about the sonnets have been asked and answered over and over again—but never to everybody's satisfaction. Instead of convincing answers to the questions, all we have are hundreds of conflicting theories.

Fortunately, these problems need not trouble us here, since we are not concerned with the whole sequence but only with individual sonnets. And about these sonnets there is indeed general agreement: They are among the supreme utterances in English. They say profound things about important human experiences, and they say them with great art.

The Sonnets' Form

Among their other admirable features, the sonnets show how well Shakespeare handled the difficult sonnet form, a fixed form into which all the words of the poem, and the ideas expressed by those words, must be fitted. Each sonnet has its formal organization established by the rules of the sonnet, which Shakespeare did not invent but inherited from Wyatt, Surrey, Sidney, and others. Each sonnet also has its logical organization—the appropriate placement of ideas within the sonnet form. How these two organizations are made to cooperate may be illustrated by a close analysis of the structure of Shakespeare's Sonnet 18:

Logical organization			Formal organization
	Shall I compare thee to a summer's day?	*a*	
	Thou art more lovely and more temperate.	*b*	First quatrain
	Rough winds do shake the darling buds of May,	*a*	
A question and tentative answers	And summer's lease° hath all too short a date.°	*b*	
	Sometime too hot the eye of heaven shines,	*c*	
	And often is his gold complexion dimmed;	*d*	Second quatrain
	And every fair° from fair sometimes declines,	*c*	
	By chance, or nature's changing course, un-trimmed.°	*d*	
The turn	But thy eternal summer shall not fade.	*e*	
	Nor lose possession of that fair thou ow'st,°	*f*	
A final answer	Nor shall Death brag thou wander'st in his shade	*e*	Third quatrain
	When in eternal lines to time thou grow'st.	*f*	
	So long as men can breathe or eyes can see,	*g*	Couplet
	So long lives this, and this gives life to thee.	*g*	

The sonnet's formal organization calls for fourteen **iambic pentameter lines** divided into three **quatrains** and a **couplet,** as indicated in the diagram. These are the fixed requirements of all sonnets of the kind known as English, or Shakespearean; Italian (or Petrarchan) sonnets are slightly different. The logical organization will vary, of course, from sonnet to sonnet. Here in Sonnet 18 it consists of a **question** followed by negative **answers:** The beloved "thee" addressed by the speaker does have some resemblances to a summer's day, but they are superficial. The summer's day has many shortcomings, and the first two quatrains concentrate on these rather than on the loved one.

Then comes the **turn,** a shift or change in the focus of the speaker's remarks. Here the speaker turns from examining the faulty summer's day and concentrates on the beloved. By the time he reaches the end of the third quatrain, the speaker has entirely abandoned the comparison of the opening question. Like most literary terms, the word *turn* is a metaphor; the speaker, figuratively speaking, is "turning" from one thing to another. In an Italian sonnet, the turn usually occurs after the eighth line, between the octave (lines 1–8) and the sestet (lines 9–14). In an English sonnet, the turn sometimes occurs late, after the end of the third quatrain. It could be argued that Sonnet 18 has such a second turn, since the final couplet summarizes and explains what has gone before. It says, perhaps with some exaggeration, that by being addressed in this poem, the beloved person has become immortal.

4. **lease:** allotted time. **date:** period. 7. **fair:** beauty. 8. **untrimmed:** deprived of

This sonnet ridicules the fashionable excesses being committed by some of Shakespeare's fellow poets, the exaggerated metaphors they were using to describe the women they loved: Your eyes are suns that set me on fire, your cheeks are roses, your lips are coral, your breasts are snowballs, you are a goddess—that sort of thing. Such metaphors, or *conceits,* as they were called, are ultimately traceable to Petrarch, but by 1600 they had become, through repetition, tiresome or laughable.

Sonnet 130

My mistress' eyes are nothing like the sun;
Coral is far more red than her lips' red;
A 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
10 That music hath a far more pleasing sound.
B I grant I never saw a goddess go:
My mistress, when she walks, treads on the ground.
C And yet, by heaven, I think my love as rare
As any she belied° with false compare.°

3. **dun:** brown.

5. **damasked:** variegated.

8. **reeks:** is exhaled.

14. **belied:** misrepresented. **compare:** comparison.

Responding to the Poem

Analyzing the Poem

Identifying Details

1. Shakespeare uses the classic objects of comparison in describing his mistress. What are they?

Interpreting Meanings

2. Describe what the speaker's mistress might look like.
3. Some of the ways the speaker chooses to praise his mistress are humorous. Which descriptions did you find comical? How is the sonnet as a whole humorous?
4. Why is the **couplet** absolutely necessary to keep the sonnet from being misunderstood?

Writing About the Poems

A Creative Response

1. **Writing a Parody.** Sonnet 130 is a witty parody of love poems popular in Shakespeare's day. You might write your own parody of love songs popular today. Before you write, make a list of the characteristics of the songs; you might consider **imagery, repetition, story line, tone, melody.**

A Critical Response

2. **Comparing Poems.** Read the following poem carefully and write an essay in which you (a) discuss its speaker and (b) compare the speaker in this poem with the

PETRARCHAN SONNETS

Wyatt's and Surrey's **sonnets** are adaptations or translations of sonnets originally written in Italian by Francesco Petraca, known in English as Francis Petrarch (1304–1374). Petrarch addressed many love poems to a woman identified only as Laura, a proud woman of ideal virtue and beauty who, in the poems, remains totally indifferent to the poet. The poet-lover, an abject, humble figure, alternately burns with desire for the lady and freezes from her disdain of him. Here is how Wyatt describes this stressful condition:

> I fear and hope, I burn and freeze like ice;
> I fly above the world, yet can I not arise.

Although the love they express is hopeless, sonnets written in the Petrarchan manner are interesting for two reasons. First, they contain many ingenious and remarkable comparisons, which in time became known as **Petrarchan conceits.** Love is a baited hook, for instance, and being in love is like plowing water or sowing seed in sand. And love itself is warfare—or a hunt, as we have seen in Wyatt's poem.

Petrarchan, or Italian, sonnets are also interesting for their strict structure to which the poet must conform. The ideas in the poem must be expressed in fourteen lines, no more and no less. In a good sonnet the poem never seems to be squeezed or stretched to fit the form. Moreover, each line of the sonnet has to consist of ten syllables: five unaccented ones alternating with five accented. This kind of meter is called **iambic pentameter;** it differs from blank verse only in being rhymed. Finally, the sonnet must be organized into two unequal parts: an **octave,** consisting of the first eight lines, and a **sestet,** consisting of the final six. In most Italian sonnets the octave describes a situation and the sestet describes a change in the situation. This change is called the **turn.** The turn signals a logical or emotional shift, or a new beginning. Sometimes the octave presents a problem and the sestet a solution, or the octave and the sestet present the same problem from two different points of view. Sometimes the problem of the octave is intensified in the sestet, and no solution is given. The possibilities are endless.

In "Whoso List to Hunt," find the line with the turn. Does the turn show a logical or an emotional shift?

from Canzoniere

Francesco Petrarch

Laura

translated by Morris Bishop

She used to let her golden hair fly free
For the wind to toy and tangle and molest;
Her eyes were brighter than the radiant west.
(Seldom they shine so now.) I used to see
5 Pity look out of those deep eyes on me.
("It was false pity," you would now protest.)
I had love's tinder[1] heaped within my breast;
What wonder that the flame burned furiously?
She did not walk in any mortal way,
10 But with angelic progress; when she spoke,
Unearthly voices sang in unison.
She seemed divine among the dreary folk
Of earth. You say she is not so today?
Well, though the bow's unbent,[2] the wound bleeds on.

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1. **tinder** (tin′ dər) *n.*: Dry, easily flammable material used for starting a fire.

2. **though the bow's unbent:** Though she is older and do not have her original beauty; the bow referred to is Cupid's.