Astrophil and Stella Sonnet 1: Loving in truth,

POEM TEXT

1 Loving in truth, and fain in verse my love to show,
2 That she, dear she, might take some pleasure of my pain,—
3 Pleasure might cause her read, reading might make her know,
4 Knowledge might pity win, and pity grace obtain,—
5 I sought fit words to paint the blackest face of woe;
6 Studying inventions fine her wits to entertain,
7 Oft turning others' leaves, to see if thence would flow
8 Some fresh and fruitful showers upon my sunburn'd brain.
9 But words came halting forth, wanting invention's stay;
10 Invention, Nature's child, fled step-dame Study's blows;
11 And others' feet still seem'd but strangers in my way.
12 Thus great with child to speak and helpless in my throes,
13 Biting my truant pen, beating myself for spite,
14 "Fool," said my Muse to me, "look in thy heart, and write."

SUMMARY

Truly in love, and eager to show my feelings in poetry, so that my beloved (oh, that dear "she"!) might find some enjoyment in my sufferings (for you see, her enjoyment of my skill might make her read my poetry, and reading my poetry might make her understand my feelings for her, and if she understood my feelings she might pity me, and if she pitied me she might grant me her love)—I tried to find the right words to show just how sad pining for her makes me. I tried to come up with lovely new turns of phrase to please her mind, often looking through other people's poetry to see if their words might release a few rainstorms of inspiration onto my poor sunburned brain. But my words would only stumble out, uninspired; my imagination, born from Nature, ran away from the cruel beatings of its stepmother Effort. Everyone else's verses felt like strangers blocking my path. It was while I was in this state—pregnant with words I was desperate to speak, helpless in my labor pains, gnawing on my unresponsive pen, cruelly beating myself up over my uselessness—it was then that my Muse said to me: "You fool, look into your heart, and write."

THEMES

CREATIVITY AND IMAGINATION

"Loving in truth" is the first poem in Sir Philip Sidney's book-length sequence *Astrophil and Stella*, and it lays out a sort of mission statement for the full collection: to win a lady's heart through lovely verse. The poem's speaker, the lovesick Astrophil, is desperate to catch his beloved Stella's eye, and he's pretty sure poetry is the way to do it. After all, verse that gives a lady "pleasure" might eventually persuade her to give its author "grace"—that is, to return his affections. The trouble is, actually sitting down to *write* these poems gives Astrophil a terrible case of writer's block. Through its portrait of a striving poet, this sonnet makes the case that good poetry is born not of "Study" (laborious intellectual effort), but of "Nature." That is, it must grow organically from the poet's "heart," not be artificially constructed through the poet's straining "wits."

Determined to win Stella over through the power of his verse, Astrophil racks his brains to figure out exactly what words will do the trick. He "stud[ies] inventions fine her wits to entertain"—that is, he works hard to try to find the cleverest, most innovative language he can, so that his verse will dazzle her. He spends hours "turning others' leaves" (the pages of other people's books) in quest for inspiration. None of it does any good. Astrophil's efforts leave him with nothing but a "sunburn'd brain" and a "truant pen" (that is, a pen that's gone AWOL, refusing to do its job). Trying to be the cleverest and looking for inspiration in other people's poetry simply does not work; a heady intellectual approach only paralyzes him.

That's because "invention"—a word that here means a sort of cross between "imagination," "ingenuity," and "innate creative power"—isn't the product of "Study," but "Nature." In other words, artistic brilliance doesn't come through effort or scholarship or any other act of will; it's part of the poet's character, something inborn. "Study" can only be a "cruel step-dame" (a wicked stepmother) to a gift that is rightly "Nature's child."

When Astrophil is at his wits' end, his "Muse"—a spirit of poetic inspiration—finally gets fed up with him and steps in with some simple advice: "'Fool,' said my Muse to me, 'look in your heart, and write.'" This intervention drives home the poem's perspective on artistic creativity. The poet who wishes to move their reader can't labor their way to success. Poetic brilliance can only emerge from a poet's singular and sincere "heart," not their well-trained and well-read "brain." Verse must be allowed to grow naturally, not bullied into obedience.

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-14

THE POWER OF POETRY

In Sidney's "Loving in truth," poetry isn't just pleasant or decorative, a nice way to idle away a few minutes. Rather, it's a force that can move hearts and change lives, particularly in matters of love.

The poem's speaker—the titular Astrophil, a lovelorn young man—wants to win the heart of his beloved Stella, and he hopes that writing her a book of sonnets might help him to do so. He has a clear map for how this is going to work, step by step. If his verse gives her "pleasure," then she'll read it. If she reads it, it will "make her know" his feelings. If she knows his feelings, she might "pity" him. If she pities him, she might offer him "grace" (that is, return his affections).

There's a whole artistic philosophy in that reasoning! Poetry, in Astrophil's view, works first by delighting people with its beauty and wit, then by revealing some new understanding to them, then by *moving* them with that new knowledge. And when people are moved, they see the world differently—and act differently.

Perhaps that's especially true when it comes to romance. As Astrophil's "Muse" (a spirit of creative inspiration) tells him, he must "look in [his] heart" in order to write well—for the heart is where both love and good poetry reside. Poetry, then, might be the best way to win Stella's love not just because it works on *her* feelings, but because it's the most powerful, sincere way for Astrophil to express *his* feelings.

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-4
- Line 14

LINE-BY-LINE ANALYSIS

LINES 1-4

> *Loving in truth, and fain in verse my love to show,*
> *That she, dear she, might take some pleasure of my pain,—*
> *Pleasure might cause her read, reading might make her know,*
> *Knowledge might pity win, and pity grace obtain,—*

"Loving in truth" is the first poem in Sir Philip Sidney's long sequence *Astrophil and Stella*, and it sets the tone for the 107 (!) poems that will follow it. In this sonnet, Astrophil (a young man whose name means "star-lover" in Greek) lays out his grand plan to win the heart of his beloved Stella (whose name means—you guessed it—"star" in Latin). His big idea? Poetry. Poetry ought to do it.

Through his verse, Astrophil hopes, Stella will "take some pleasure of [his] pain"—in other words, she'll enjoy reading beautiful descriptions of just how lovelorn he feels. For, if she likes the way he writes:

> Pleasure might cause her read, reading might make her know,
> Knowledge might pity win, and pity grace obtain,—

In other words, if she likes his style, she'll read his work—and if she reads his work, she'll know how he feels—and if she knows how he feels, she might take pity on him—and if she pities him, she might start to have feelings for him, and grant him the "grace" of her love.

Even the echoing parallelism of these lines ("Pleasure might," "Reading might," "Knowledge might") suggests an oddly logical chain reaction, a process through which art can alter the world around it. Astrophil is spelling out exactly how poetry might have grand effects, carrying its reader from on-the-page pleasure toward real-world love.

But before that can happen, the poems have to get written. This poem will trace Astrophil's struggle to find just the right words to make Stella love him—and it will truly *be* a struggle.

Even the poem's innovative form suggests that Astrophil is scrambling for ideas. While this poem is a sonnet—a 14-line poem with a set meter and rhyme scheme—it's an odd, experimental one:

- Rather than a sonnet's typical iambic pentameter (lines of five iambs, metrical feet with a da-DUM rhythm, as in "I **grant** | I **nev-** | er **saw** | a **god-** | dess **go**"), this poem uses alexandrines (lines of iambic *hexameter*, six iambs, as in "That **she,** | dear **she,** | might **take** | some **plea-** | sure **of** | my **pain**").
- And rather than using an English sonnet's typical ABAB CDCD EFEF GG rhyme scheme, this sonnet rhymes ABAB ABAB CDCD EE.

Both of those choices help to capture Astrophil's frantic energy as he prepares to write what must feel like the most consequential poems of his life. The hexameter lines seem to overflow, suggesting nervous babble. And the insistent ABAB ABAB rhyme sequence that starts the poem subtly evokes the obsessive energy that Astrophil will bring to his quest.

LINES 5-8

> *I sought fit words to paint the blackest face of woe;*
> *Studying inventions fine her wits to entertain,*
> *Oft turning others' leaves, to see if thence would flow*
> *Some fresh and fruitful showers upon my sunburn'd brain.*

His poetic plot in place, Astrophil begins trying to write the

verses that will make Stella pity him (and, with any luck, love him back). What he needs, he decides, is "fit words to paint the blackest face of woe." That metaphor might suggest one or both of the following:

1. He's trying to paint a word-picture of his woeful face (i.e., his misery).
2. He's trying to use his poetry to paint his feelings onto his real, live face, revealing to Stella the lovelorn gaze that she apparently hasn't noticed yet.

But as Astrophil observed earlier, the goal isn't merely to show Stella how he feels, but to "entertain" her "wits"—to delight and amuse her so she'll keep reading. Ideally, he needs to write poetry that will appeal to her mind *and* her heart.

This artistic challenge presents a difficulty: Astrophil now seems to have stage fright. He doesn't sit down at his desk and get cracking, but stalls, picking up the work of other poets, "turning others' leaves" (that is, paging through other people's books) in the hopes that they might offer him some inspiration.

Here, his metaphors suggest that he's really not feeling equal to his task:

> Oft turning others' leaves, to see if thence would flow
> Some fresh and fruitful showers upon my sunburn'd brain.

That "sunburn'd brain" calls up two images. There's a vision here of a brain as tormentedly hot and itchy as a pale neck after a day at the beach, a brain squirming in restless, rashy discomfort under the burden of its artistic task. But there's also an image of the brain as dried-out farmland in desperate need of some "fresh and fruitful showers" of inspiration if it's going to, well, bear fruit!

But even the dithering rhyme scheme here (which repeats the ABAB of the first four lines) suggests that Astrophil is fruitlessly stalling. Other people's work can't help him now, even if it's given him the kind of pleasure he hopes to give Stella.

LINES 9-11

But words came halting forth, wanting invention's stay;
Invention, Nature's child, fled step-dame Study's blows;
And others' feet still seem'd but strangers in my way.

Astrophil's hopes that *reading* poetry might inspire him to *write* poetry come to nothing. His words, he says, come "halting forth," limping and stumbling as if they'd been kicked in the shins. They can't go far on their own, Astrophil laments: they "want[]" (or lack) "invention's stay," the support of his powers of invention.

That word "invention" is a rich and important one. "Invention," to a writer of Sidney's era, didn't just mean "the ability to make things up." Rather, it connoted some combination of "imagination," "wit," and "innate creative brilliance." What Astrophil is looking for here isn't just a good idea, but the enlivening and very personal poetic power without which a writer can never get far.

Astrophil explores that idea further through a lively personification:

> Invention, Nature's child, fled step-dame Study's blows;

If Astrophil's power of invention is "Nature's child," it's something born with Astrophil, something as personal and unique to him as his own eyeballs. It's also a natural phenomenon—not an effort, not an exercise of will, but something that (as the Romantic poet John Keats remarked centuries later) needs to come as naturally as the leaves to a tree.

That means that "Study"—a word that here suggests "laborious effort" as well as "thinking" or "scholarly examination"—can only be Invention's cruel "step-dame," its wicked stepmother rather than its rightful parent. This moment ends up feeling like something out of a fairy tale: the innocent, Cinderella-like Invention, rightful heir to Astrophil's poetic kingdom, flees from the "blows" (or beatings) of its stepmother Study. (Readers can almost *hear* those cruel blows in the harsh /st/ alliteration of "step-dame Study.") Something's gone all wrong in the balance of Astrophil's inner creative world.

Astrophil's invention must also evade the work of other poets. As he reads through books of verse, he remarks, "others' feet still seem'd but strangers in my way." There's a witty little pun in this personification: other poets' "feet" are here their *metrical* feet, the iambs and trochees and dactyls and anapests from which their rhythms are made. Those feet only trip Astrophil up! Far from granting him the "fresh and fruitful showers" of inspiration he longs for, other people's poems become a hostile crowd clogging up his own road to artistry.

These lines insist that Astrophil needs to find his *own* springs of "invention," not to make a half-baked copy of someone else's work. Unfortunately for him, "Invention" can't be willed, forced, or studied into existence. Astrophil has a whopping case of writer's block and no good ideas about how to cure himself.

LINES 12-14

Thus great with child to speak and helpless in my throes,
Biting my truant pen, beating myself for spite,
"Fool," said my Muse to me, "look in thy heart, and write."

As the poem rolls toward its ending, Astrophil's creative panic rises to a new pitch. He feels as if he's "great with child to speak and helpless in [his] throes": in other words, as if he's pregnant

with verse and stuck in an endless, agonizing labor. Unlike the earlier image of the "sunburn'd brain," this metaphor suggests that his mind isn't exactly empty or barren. He's got a *lot* to say—if only he could get it out!

The metaphor is also distinctly hyperbolic, comparing Astrophil's creative trouble to what is proverbially some of the worst pain a human being can experience. (Sidney wasn't alone in making this comparison: lots of Renaissance-era writers imagined wit and poetry as things a mind could be pregnant with.) That hint of self-mockery becomes even clearer in Astrophil's final, frantic image of himself:

> Biting my truant pen, beating myself for spite,

The parallelism of "Biting" and "beating" (not to mention the alliterative slant rhyme between those two forceful words) captures the inner violence of Astrophil's writer's block. The intensity of this line might also begin to make the reader think: *Astrophil, buddy, you need to calm down*.

That, it transpires, is exactly what his "Muse" is thinking, too. This spirit of creative inspiration—a figure allied with Astrophil's powers of "Invention"—finally gets fed up with his fruitless self-flagellation, and she brings both his sufferings and the poem to an end with one pithy line: "'Fool,' my Muse said to me, 'look in thy heart, and write.'"

The Muse's comical, succinct prescription for the struggling writer introduces a new idea of how invention might best be summoned. "Study" won't do it; striving won't do it. The writer who wants to compose moving verse must rely on the "heart," not the "wits." Sincere emotion, the Muse's closing wisdom suggests, is the only source from which truly worthy (and effective) love poetry might emerge. That, and sitting down at the darn desk already.

These words thus become a kind of manifesto—for the long sequence of love poems that follows, yes, but also for Sidney's view of poetry more generally. In this view, the most moving, world-changing poets aren't necessarily the wittiest or the best-informed or the hardest-working, and they're certainly not the ones who take themselves the most seriously. Their power emerges from "Nature," unhindered "Invention," and the promptings of the earnest "heart."

POETIC DEVICES

REPETITION

Repetitions help to capture Astrophil's urgent energy as he struggles to write his love poetry. For example, the parallelism in lines 3-4 suggests that he feels he's got a straightforward, logical plan for winning his lady's love through verse:

> **Pleasure might cause** her read, **reading might make** her know,
> **Knowledge might pity win**, and **pity grace obtain**,—

These mirrored phrasings reveal Astrophil's faith in the power of poetry. The orderly language here suggests a clear step-by-step process: taking pleasure in verse *naturally* leads to falling in love through it (or at least, it very well "might").

But these quick repetitions also sound urgent and driven, an effect that feels even more pronounced when Astrophil later describes himself:

> **Biting** my truant pen, **beating** myself for spite,

The intense parallelism there underscores the almost comical torment of Astrophil's writer's block. (The internal slant rhyme on "**b**it**ing**" and "**b**eat**ing**" helps, too, making the line even more emphatic.)

In line 2, meanwhile, diacope helps Astrophil put a swoon into words: for it's "**she**, dear **she**" that he wishes to win. The repetition here suggests that this "she" is the only "she" in the world for him. He doesn't feel he even needs to say the lady's name to make it clear who he's talking about.

Finally, one subtle but significant word weaves through the poem. "Invention"—a word that connotes some combination of "imagination," "creative power," and "innate artistic gifts"—appears three times in slightly different form (lines 6, 9, and 10). That's because "invention" is one of the most important ideas in play here. Astrophil must ultimately draw upon his powers of invention, not his "Study" and intellectual effort, and the repetition of the word helps to knock that point home.

Where Repetition appears in the poem:

- **Line 2:** "she, dear she"
- **Lines 3-4:** "Pleasure might cause her read, reading might make her know, / Knowledge might pity win, and pity grace obtain,—"
- **Line 6:** "inventions"
- **Line 9:** "invention's"
- **Line 10:** "Invention"
- **Line 13:** "Biting my truant pen, beating myself for spite,"

PERSONIFICATION

Through personification, the poem presents writer's block not as some abstract psychological problem, but as a battle between living forces. When Astrophil reflects on his thwarted powers of "invention" (imagination and creativity), he does so in these alarming, and very human, terms:

> But words came halting forth, wanting invention's stay;

> Invention, Nature's child, fled step-dame Study's blows;

Both his "words" and "Invention" are personified here. The words stumble along, "halting" (limping or hesitating) as if they'd been kicked hard in the shins. And poor "Invention" has a wicked stepmother, "Study," who mercilessly beats it. In other words, striving, studying, and copying other people's work doesn't help Astrophil's creative powers at all. "Nature" is invention's true mother. This personification suggests there's something innate, personal, and effortless about the kind of artistry Astrophil seeks.

By personifying these warring forces, the poem shows (with a hint of hyperbolic comedy) how dramatic and painful writer's block feels to Astrophil. He hasn't just gotten stuck because he's thinking too hard: his very powers of creativity are a *child being flogged!*

There's a similar mood in the line where Astrophil declares that "others' feet still seem'd but strangers in my way." Here, he personifies other people's poetry through that witty pun on "feet" (which suggests both literal feet and metrical feet, like iambs or dactyls). All the poems he's studied in the hopes of improving his own verse, in other words, feel like a big jostling crowd that won't part and let him through. The pun on "feet" even suggests that he's getting tripped up.

By the end of the poem, his very "pen" has become a "truant." In other words, the tool of his trade has gone AWOL, like a kid skipping class. (That "pen" isn't just a literal pen, either; it's also a metonym for Astrophil's creative power itself.) It takes the intervention of the exasperated Muse to pull pen and Astrophil alike out of their shared funk.

Where Personification appears in the poem:

- **Lines 9-11:** "But words came halting forth, wanting invention's stay; / Invention, Nature's child, fled step-dame Study's blows; / And others' feet still seem'd but strangers in my way."

METAPHOR

The poem's vivid, funny metaphors help convey Astrophil's struggles.

For instance, Astrophil's aim in writing his collection of poetry is to "paint the blackest face of woe": in other words, to represent his lovesickness as touchingly as he can, in hopes that Stella will take pity on him. This metaphor conjures up two images at once. Astrophil is personifying his sorrow here, imagining "woe" embodied on the page, wearing the darkest, most tragic expression possible. But readers might also see him painting his *own* face with his poetry—trying to convey the blackness (misery) of his mood to Stella, since she apparently hasn't yet noticed that he's mooning over her.

Trying to paint that "blackest face" is really taking it out of Astrophil. Wriggling in the grip of writer's block, desperate for creative energy, he turns to the work of other poets, hoping that some "fresh and fruitful showers" of inspiration might emerge from his reading and quench his "sunburn'd brain." These images suggest that grappling with a creative block can feel as uncomfortable as a hot, red, peeling rash—and that inspiration, when it comes, is as soothing and enlivening as a rainstorm after a drought. If those showers are "fruitful," they'll bring forth metaphorical crops from the dry earth, so this image also suggests that Astrophil feels creatively dried up at the moment: his "sunburn'd brain" is a scorched field as much as a red, tender piece of flesh.

As it happens, though, it's not so much that Astrophil doesn't have anything "fruitful" to say. It's that he has *too much* to say, and can't get it out. He makes that point through the image of himself "great with child to speak and helpless in [his] throes"—in other words, heavily pregnant, suffering through a painful labor, but unable to make that final push and deliver his word-child. The pregnancy metaphor gets at the severity of his pain and panic—perhaps with a hint of self-mocking hyperbole. But this desperate line marks the climax of his struggles. He's forced to come right back down to earth when his "Muse" intrudes and says, in essence, *Get over yourself, sit down, and write what's in your heart*.

Where Metaphor appears in the poem:

- **Line 5:** "I sought fit words to paint the blackest face of woe"
- **Line 8:** "Some fresh and fruitful showers upon my sunburn'd brain"
- **Line 12:** "great with child to speak and helpless in my throes"

ALLUSION

In the closing lines of "Loving in truth," Astrophil is at the end of his rope: tangled in an awful case of writer's block, "biting [his] truant pen," and beating himself up for being so useless. He's rescued at last by the wry intervention of his "Muse," who tells him, simply: "'Fool [...] look in thy heart, and write.'" This is an allusion to the ancient Greek tradition that the arts and sciences are presided over by nine goddesses, each with her own specialty: Calliope is in charge of epic poetry; Urania, astronomy; Terpsichore, dance, and so on. Readers might imagine that the Muse looking out for poor Astrophil here is Erato, the spirit of love poetry and lyric poetry.

The term "Muse" can also refer more generally to an artist's personal genius, the quality that inspires them and makes their art *theirs*. Accordingly, the appearance of the Muse here connects to the poem's bigger ideas about the way creative inspiration works. Allusions to the Muses often suggest that

artists don't make art through sheer force of will or intellect, but through a mystical communion with something beyond themselves.

Artists can't be all activity and striving, in other words; they must also be receptive and patient as they wait for inspiration and intuition to work on them. By mentioning the Muse, the poem underscores the idea that good poetry can't be forced or "stud[ied]" into existence.

Where Allusion appears in the poem:

- **Line 14:** ""Fool," said my Muse to me, "look in thy heart, and write.""

VOCABULARY

Fain (Line 1) - Eager, keen.

Cause her read (Line 3) - That is, cause her to read (here, the speaker's poetry).

Obtain (Line 4) - Earn, gain.

Fit (Line 5) - Fitting, suitable.

Inventions fine (Line 6) - Elegant, innovative language.

Invention (Line 6, Line 9, Line 10) - Imagination, creativity.

Oft (Line 7) - Often.

Turning others' leaves (Line 7) - In other words, turning the pages of other people's books of poetry.

Thence (Line 7) - From there.

Halting (Line 9) - Hesitatingly, uncertainly.

Step-dame (Line 10) - Stepmother. (Here, "step-dame Study" is a personification of strenuous intellectual effort.)

Great with child (Line 12) - Pregnant (in this case, metaphorically—with poems!).

Throes (Line 12) - Fits of pain.

Truant (Line 13) - Evasive of duty; absent without leave. (You're "truant" if you cut class, for instance.)

Thy (Line 14) - An old-fashioned way of saying "your."

FORM, METER, & RHYME

FORM

"Loving in truth" is the opening poem of *Astrophil and Stella*, a long sequence of love verses tracing the rise and fall of a forbidden passion. Most of the 108 poems in this collection are sonnets, and this one is no exception. But its shape might look a little unfamiliar to modern-day readers. The best-known sonnets in the English-speaking world are:

- 14-line poems
- Written in iambic pentameter—lines of five iambs, metrical feet with a da-DUM rhythm, as in "They al- | so serve | who on- | ly stand | and wait"
- Written in one of a couple of set rhyme schemes: the English style, which runs ABAB CDCD EFEF GG, or the Italian style, which starts ABBA ABBA, then ends in one of several mixtures of C, D, and E rhymes (often CDE CDE).

This sonnet uses those familiar 14 lines. But it makes some changes, too:

- Its lines are alexandrines—lines of six iambs, as in "I sought | fit words | to paint | the black- | est face | of woe."
- And its rhyme scheme is a variation on the English pattern, running ABAB ABAB CDCD EE.

This innovative opening poem sets the tone for what will follow: a sequence that often stretches the sonnet form into new shapes, whether through changes to meter, rhyme, or both.

In this instance, Sidney's choices help to capture Astrophil's obsessive dithering over his verse and his love. The relentless ABAB ABAB rhyme sequence and the stretched-out hexameter lines suggest the nervous scribble-scrabbling of a poet whose work *just isn't coming together*.

The more traditional elements of this sonnet's form serve the poem's thematic purposes, too. As in a more typical English sonnet, the closing rhymed couplet provides a kind of punchline—in this case, the fed-up Muse's terse instruction that Astrophil should sit down, look in his heart, and write what he finds there, already.

And of course, the sonnet is one of the classic forms for love poetry. In writing *Astrophil and Stella*, Sidney was likely responding to Petrarch, one of the great poets of the early Italian Renaissance. Petrarch's biggest claim to fame was a sequence of poems in praise of a woman called Laura—a woman he knew he could never be with, but was content to praise from afar. Astrophil is luckier and unluckier than Petrarch: he eventually wins Stella's heart, but he's also forced to give her up again.

METER

This poem is written in lines of iambic hexameter, also known as alexandrines. Alexandrines use six iambs per line, as in line 8:

> Some fresh | and fruit- | ful showers | upon | my sun- | burn'd brain.

(Note that "showers" there should be pronounced with one syllable, in the English style: "shours," not "SHOW-ers.")

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Sonnets are more typically written in iambic pentameter (lines of *five* iambs, as in "That time | of year | thou mayst | in me | behold"), so these longer lines feel distinctive. Their overflowing length captures Astrophil's frantic energy on his quest to find *just the right words*.

Variations in the meter likewise suggest the emotion in his voice. Take lines 3-4, for instance:

> Pleasure | might cause | her read, | reading | might make | her know,
> Knowledge | might pit- | y win, | and pit- | y grace | obtain,—

"Pleasure," "reading," and "Knowledge" are all trochees (the opposite foot to an iamb, with a DUM-da rhythm). These stress-first feet make Astrophil sound urgent and eager as he pictures how poetry might win his lady over, step by step.

RHYME SCHEME

This poem's rhyme scheme is a variation on the traditional pattern of an English sonnet. Typically, the rhyme scheme for this form runs ABAB CDCD EFEF GG. Sidney's variation, however, goes like this:

> ABAB ABAB CDCD EE

Sidney thus starts *Astrophil and Stella* off on an experimental note. He goes on to play with sonnet rhyme all through his long sequence. In this opening poem, the insistent double ABAB sequence seems to reflect Astrophil's romantic desperation. His rhymes sound as obsessive and anxious as his quest for the words that will win Stella's heart.

One conventional aspect of this sonnet, though, is the way it uses its closing couplet. The punchy, paired rhymes in a sonnet's last two lines often deliver an emphatic conclusion. Here, they give the speaker's wry, exasperated "Muse" the final word.

SPEAKER

The speaker of this sonnet is the lovelorn Astrophil himself. His predicament is baked into his very name. "Astrophil," in Greek, means "star-lover"—and his beloved is "Stella," the Latin for "star." These celestial names might even hint that the couple were destined to be in this kind of relationship, with Astrophil pursuing and Stella glittering just out of reach. After all, the stars are an ancient symbol of fate.

Poor Astrophil is desperate to win Stella's love—so desperate that he's about to write a book of 108 sonnets about it. But here in the first poem of that long sequence, he finds himself paralyzed by writer's block. The right words, he's sure, will win Stella's heart, but what are the right words? He gropes around looking for inspiration in the works of other poets, he sweats and flails—but nothing works until his no-nonsense "Muse," a spirit of poetic inspiration, steps in and tells him to stop procrastinating, "look in [his] heart, and write."

Through the voice of Astrophil, Sidney pokes fun at the folly and obsessions of both poets and lovers—and thus at himself. (Many critics have noted that Astrophil's predicament resembles Sidney's relationship with one Lady Penelope Rich, who was married to someone else.) Sidney also suggests that good writing isn't so much a matter of developing a high-flown style or finding *exactly the right words*. It's about exuberant "Invention" (imagination) and sincerity: the clear expression of the "heart" rather than the laborious efforts of the "sunburn'd brain."

SETTING

While there's no clear setting in this poem, readers might well imagine that it takes place in Sir Philip Sidney's own 16th-century English world. Writing a book of courtly poetry to win a lady's heart is a very Renaissance idea indeed. During Sidney's era, there was a craze for sonnet sequences along these lines, with a male lover pining for an inaccessible female beloved.

Sidney models these poems on the work of the earlier Italian Renaissance writer Petrarch (1304-1374), who wrote a similar sequence about a woman named Laura, another idealized beloved. The speaker's focus on "Invention" as a source of poetry likewise reveals an Italian Renaissance influence. Meaning something akin to both "imagination" and "ingenuity," "Invention" here is a lot like the Italian *ingegno*, a term that could be used to describe imagination, wit, and a person's distinctive, innate creative gifts. Such gifts, the speaker suggests, aren't at the beck and call of "Study" (laborious effort). They have to flow naturally!

CONTEXT

LITERARY CONTEXT

Sir Philip Sidney (1554-1586) was an English Renaissance poet and courtier. His short life was very Elizabethan indeed, full of panache and strange incident. He served Queen Elizabeth I (as her cupbearer, no less); his mother, disfigured by smallpox, refused to go out in public without a mask on; he relished jousting and won many glamorous tournaments; he died of a thigh wound sustained on a Netherlandish battlefield. If one were trying to invent a model English Renaissance courtier, those are the sorts of biographical details one would pick.

Sidney's poetic works, too, are deeply rooted in the styles and fashions of his era. *Astrophil and Stella* (1591), the longer collection in which this poem appears, was part of an Elizabethan vogue for sonnets. Inspired by the work of earlier

Italian sonneteers—especially [Petrarch]—English poets made the form their own. As a contemporary of the [most famous English sonneteer], William Shakespeare, Sidney lived during the great flowering of the form's possibilities.

This particular poem also offers a glimpse of some of the era's wider conversations about artistry. With its picture of "Invention" (imagination, wit, and talent) stifled by cruel "Study," this sonnet suggests that poets are, or should be, creatures of "Nature"—as spontaneous and emotive as lovers.

Besides *Astrophil and Stella*, Sidney's enduring claim to fame is his 1593 book *Arcadia*, a pastoral romance (that is, a fanciful story set in an imagined countryside) that inspired many later imitators.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Astrophil and Stella may draw on an incident in Sidney's own life. In 1576, Sidney was offered the hand of a young woman named Penelope Devereaux, the daughter of the Earl of Essex. That proposal came about in a rather strange way: through Penelope's father's will. As a friend of Sidney's, the dying Essex suggested that his daughter might make a great match for a young man he'd grown very fond of while serving with him in the court of Queen Elizabeth I.

At the time, Sidney didn't take this offer seriously: Penelope was still a young girl, and Sidney a man in his twenties. Sidney likely saw the Earl's offer more as an affectionate gesture than an earnest proposal. But there's evidence to suggest that he regretted his choice after Penelope grew up and married a man named Robert Rich. The story of *Astrophil and Stella* includes many passages in which Astrophil laments not wedding Stella when he had a chance—and the parallel seems too neat to be ignored.

MORE RESOURCES

EXTERNAL RESOURCES

- The Poem Aloud — Listen to a reading of the poem. (https://youtu.be/fwEb2key8U8?si=MLMjBiiI-8Xk4v0G)
- A Brief Biography — Learn more about Sidney's life and work via the Poetry Foundation. (https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poets/philip-sidney)
- The Poem and its World — Read an article describing how Astrophil and Stella fit into Sidney's Renaissance world—and discussing Sidney's continuing poetic influence. (https://www.theguardian.com/books/booksblog/2008/feb/08/thedazzlingworldofsirphil)
- A First Edition — See images of the 1591 edition of Astrophil and Stella—the first printing in which the whole sequence was collected. (https://www.bl.uk/collection-items/philip-sidneys-astrophil-and-stella-1591)
- Portraits of Sidney — See some portraits of Sidney (in which he looks every inch the dashing Renaissance lover). (https://www.npg.org.uk/collections/search/person/mp04113/sir-philip-sidney)

HOW TO CITE

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