Sonnet 141: In faith, I do not love thee with

POEM TEXT

In faith, I do not love thee with mine eyes,
For they in thee a thousand errors note;
But 'tis my heart that loves what they despise,
Who, in despite of view, is pleased to dote;
Nor are mine ears with thy tongue's tune delighted,
Nor tender feeling, to base touches prone,
Nor taste, nor smell, desire to be invited
To any sensual feast with thee alone:
But my five wits nor my five senses can
Dissuade one foolish heart from serving thee,
Who leaves unswayed the likeness of a man,
Thy proud heart's slave and vassal wretch to be.
Only my plague thus far I count my gain,
That she that makes me sin awards me pain.

SUMMARY

To be honest, I don't love you with my eyes, because they can see a thousand flaws in you. It's my heart that loves what my eyes hate and that enjoys doting on you despite your looks. My ears aren't thrilled with your voice, either. Nor is my sense of touch pleased by your crude caresses. My senses of taste and smell wouldn't want to be invited to an erotic feast with just you. Still, neither my intellectual faculties nor my senses can stop my silly heart from yielding to you—leaving the rest of me a helpless, hollow shell as it becomes the lowly servant of *your* aloof heart. The only thing I've gained from this romance is my lovesickness (and/or an STI). At least the woman who convinces me to sin with her gives me the necessary punishment at the same time.

THEMES

THE IRRATIONALITY OF LOVE

The speaker of Shakespeare's "Sonnet 141" loves a woman despite (supposedly) not being attracted to her. He finds her somewhat repellent, in fact, but still can't stop his "foolish heart" from "serving" her. As a result of this deep inner conflict, he expresses a passive-aggressive mix of love, loathing, and desire. He's well aware of this woman's supposed flaws, yet he can't help "sin[ning]" with her anyway. The speaker's love is irrational, yet stronger than all his other emotions (and, perhaps, his better judgment).

For better or worse—here almost entirely for worse—the speaker is ruled by his heart. He's not attracted to his love interest's looks and even claims to find her ugly (his eyes outright "despise" this woman). The speaker declares that this woman doesn't appeal to his senses of hearing, touch, taste, or smell, either. He even implies that he finds her morally and intellectually unattractive: his "five wits" are as displeased with her as his "five senses." (The "five wits" are the intellectual faculties, as understood in Shakespeare's time: common sense, imagination, fantasy, estimation, and memory.)

There's no part of the speaker that rationally, logically likes this woman, and it's tormenting him that he's drawn to her anyway. The implication seems to be that he loves this woman on some emotional level that he can't comprehend. And when the "heart" is invested, no matter how "foolish[ly]," nothing else can "Dissuade" a lover from persisting.

Though the speaker says doesn't want to be exclusive with his love interest (he doesn't want to be "invited / To any sensual feast with [her] alone), he feels utterly subjected to her. He calls himself her lowly servant, or her "proud heart's slave and vassal wretch." ("Wretch" here can mean "powerless person," "miserable person," or both.) In giving only his "heart" to her, the speaker feels as if the rest of him is now hollow and fake (the "likeness of a man" rather than a real man). Since the heart is said to govern, or sway, the body, he now feels "unswayed"—disoriented and unstable.

In short, the speaker is an emotional mess! He's "pleased to dote on" his beloved, yet disgusted with himself for doing so. If the poem places the "heart" at the center of love, it also shows the misery, confusion, and self-loathing lovers suffer when *only* their hearts are aligned.

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-14

PLEASURE, PAIN, AND SUBMISSION

The speaker of "Sonnet 141" takes a kind of pleasure in loving a woman he superficially "despise[s]." He also takes a kind of pride in enduring the "pain" she causes him. He says cruel things about her (and himself), but it's clear she has the upper hand in their power dynamic. He can't stop "serving" her and may not even want to. In fact, he celebrates the "plague" he's "gain[ed]" from loving her, along with the "pain" she "awards" him (and it's not clear that he's simply being sarcastic; these phrases imply that she's given him a sexually

transmitted illness in addition to emotional agony!). He appears to enjoy his submissive, lovesick state, as well as whatever physical suffering he derives from her. Broadly, the poem illustrates how intense, complex romances can make pain feel like pleasure—and vice versa.

The speaker stays invested in his relationship despite its painful and shameful elements. For example, he claims he's "pleased to dote" on his lover "in despite of view." That is, he enjoys serving her and showing her affection even though he's not attracted to her looks. He also claims that his "Only [...] gain" from the relationship has been "[his] plague," which may refer to an STI, lovesickness, or both. He grimly suggests that the "pain" she "awards" him for "sin[ning]" with her is a kind of benefit, because it will reduce his punishment in hell. (He's paying for his sins now, so he won't have to pay as much later.)

But there are also hints that he stays in the relationship *because* of its painful and shameful elements. In other words, he takes a perverse kind of pleasure and pride in suffering and shame—or else he's lying about what he likes and dislikes. The speaker may be *protesting too much* (to use a Shakespearean phrase!) when he criticizes his beloved. He may actually find her beautiful and intelligent, despite insisting otherwise. If so, all his negative comments about her looks and character—as well as his own "foolish" love—are basically defensive.

Alternatively, he may derive a masochistic thrill from the shame he feels when he's with her, plus the physical/emotional "pain" she makes him suffer. In other words, his remarks about "gain[ing]" sickness and pain might not be entirely sarcastic. He clearly enjoys feeling like her "vassal," or servant, on some level, because neither his "wits" (intellect) nor "senses" (superficial judgment) can convince him to abandon this power dynamic.

It's hard to read the sonnet as a straightforward love poem, or its speaker as entirely happy with his romance. But the speaker's alleged feelings of pain, disgust, and powerlessness aren't entirely straightforward, either. Sonnet 141 is part of a longer sequence of sonnets in which Shakespeare (or his speaker) works through a messy, love-hate relationship with a woman critics have called the "Dark Lady." These poems consistently explore shame and pride, pleasure and pain, as flip sides of one another. It's complicated!

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Lines 3-4
- Lines 9-14

LINE-BY-LINE ANALYSIS

LINES 1-4

In faith, I do not love thee with mine eyes,
For they in thee a thousand errors note;
But 'tis my heart that loves what they despise,
Who, in despite of view, is pleased to dote;

The poem's first four lines—the opening quatrain of the sonnet—set up a rich dramatic conflict. The speaker, addressing his lover (with the old-fashioned pronoun "thee"), declares that he loves her with his "heart" rather than his "eyes." This might sound like a sweet, if slightly left-handed, compliment—but the speaker makes it sting as much as possible.

It's not just that he's looking beyond the superficial; it's that his eyes "despise" her. They notice "a thousand errors" whenever they look at her. He makes it sound as if he truly finds her ugly! Because "errors" can connote sin or moral error, and "sin" comes up in the poem's final line, some critics have argued that the speaker perceives and despises his lover's *moral* flaws. Either way, it's a harsh judgment, and it reflects a major conflict within the speaker. He's "pleased to dote" on her—enjoys showing her affection—but he does so "despite of view," or in spite of what his eyes tell him. He loves her, but he hates himself for loving her. Not only is he aware of the irony, but he's also eager to point it out, as if he's trying to flatter and wound her at the same time.

The first words of the poem are "In faith," meaning "To be honest," but it's not clear that this speaker is telling the full truth! As the poem goes on, there are hints that he finds his lover more attractive than he claims. He may be the poetry equivalent of an unreliable narrator in fiction. In his plays, Shakespeare was a master of exploring ambiguous motives and ambivalent feelings. The speaker of his sonnets—whether or not it's literally supposed to be *him*—is as murky in his desires and goals as any of the characters in the plays.

LINES 5-8

Nor are mine ears with thy tongue's tune delighted,
Nor tender feeling, to base touches prone,
Nor taste, nor smell, desire to be invited
To any sensual feast with thee alone:

In lines 5-8, the speaker continues to emphasize his lover's flaws. Previously, he slighted her looks. Now, with the help of repetition (specifically, anaphora), he lists all the *other* senses she doesn't especially appeal to:

Nor are mine ears with thy tongue's tune delighted,
Nor tender feeling, to base touches prone,
Nor taste, nor smell, desire to be invited
To any sensual feast with thee alone:

The speaker claims that his lover doesn't appeal to his senses of:

- Hearing. His "ears" are not "delighted" by her "tongue's tune" (a metaphor for her voice). Maybe her voice is normal, or maybe it grates on him a

little—it's not clear.

- Touch. His "tender feeling," which is "prone" (drawn) to "base touches" (erotic caresses, i.e., sex), wouldn't want "to be invited / To any sensual feast with [her] alone." "Sensual feast" is another metaphor—a slightly crude one—which imagines sex as a banquet with different available options. The speaker sounds, here, as if he'd prefer to keep his options open. He enjoys her touch to some extent, but it doesn't prompt a "desire" to be exclusive with her.
    - Line 6 might also be read as saying that this woman's "touches" are what's "base" (in contrast to the speaker's own "gentle feeling"). That is, the speaker isn't aroused by her crude caresses.
- Taste and smell. Same as with touch. This woman may not *disgust* these senses, but she doesn't drive them wild, either. (For example, her scent doesn't make him so giddy that he feels the need to be with her and her "alone.")

All of this is pretty insulting, especially after the speaker has belittled her appearance. It's no surprise that some critics have accused this poem (and its author) of misogyny—after all, the speaker is disparaging a woman's body for no good reason.

At the same time, Shakespeare's sonnets, like his plays, are psychologically complex, so it's helpful to consider that this speaker may be fooling *himself* as well as his lover. As much as he claims to find her unimpressive or unpleasant, the pleasing music of these lines—with their gentle /t/ alliteration ("tongue's tune"/"tender"/"to"/"touches"/"taste"/"to"/"To")—tells a different story. It sounds like love poetry! Even in denying her sex appeal, the speaker uses a suspicious number of sexy and appealing words: "delighted," "tender," "desire," "sensual," etc.

In fact, he's almost certainly *protesting too much*—a phrase Shakespeare invented—when he insists that she doesn't delight *any* of his senses. These lines sound defensive, as if he's afraid of falling head over heels for her, or is in some way ashamed of his attraction. By the end of the poem, he acknowledges that he's smitten, so this whole quatrain may imply the opposite of what it claims. (He may very well want to be in a relationship "with [her] alone.")

LINES 9-12

But my five wits nor my five senses can
Dissuade one foolish heart from serving thee,
Who leaves unswayed the likeness of a man,
Thy proud heart's slave and vassal wretch to be.

Lines 9-12 form the third quatrain of the sonnet. As is often the case in sonnets, line 9 marks an important transition or "turn."

The speaker signals this transition with the word "But," then starts to qualify everything he's said previously. He's aware of his lover's shortcomings, *but* he can't help loving her anyway.

And he makes it clear that he's really *trying* not to love her! His "five wits" and his "five senses" have tried to talk his "foolish heart" out of "serving" her, but they've failed to "Dissuade" him. (Thinkers of Shakespeare's time believed that the mind had five "wits" or faculties—common sense, imagination, fantasy, estimation, and memory—to match the body's five senses.)

In fact, the speaker's got it bad for her. He imagines his heart leaving his body to become the "slave and vassal wretch" (totally submissive servant) of his lover's "proud heart." Here, "proud" may mean that his lover is aloof, confident, haughty, or all of the above. Her pride marks a contrast with his complete self-abasement. The speaker even imagines that his heart, once given to her, leaves him a hollow shell—a mere shadow or "likeness of a man," walking around "unswayed" by the organ that's supposed to govern him. (In Elizabethan times, the heart was thought to be literally the center of emotion. Having forfeited his heart, the speaker feels out of control.)

As in previous lines, the speaker consistently personifies parts of the body and aspects of the mind. His "five wits," "five senses," and "heart"—not to mention his lover's heart—all seem to have minds of their own. (Whereas his wits and senses are reasonable, his heart is "foolish," but very stubborn.) This device helps dramatize his deep inner conflict—it's as if different parts of him are at war with each other—along with the simmering tension between him and his lover.

LINES 13-14

Only my plague thus far I count my gain,
That she that makes me sin awards me pain.

Lines 13-14 conclude the poem with a rhyming couplet. This is the standard way of ending the English sonnet—now commonly known as the Shakespearean sonnet.

The couplet of a Shakespearean sonnet often has a surprising and/or snappy effect, like a final twist or zinger. You can hear something of that quality in this poem. Having contrasted his "wits" and "senses" with his "heart"—a familiar kind of contrast, even if the poem takes it to extremes—the speaker suddenly tacks on a comment about his "plague." This isn't a *total* change of subject, since he's still discussing his body and his troubled romance. But it's still a little jarring!

To recap: the speaker has told his lover that his wits and senses are unimpressed with her, yet his heart is "foolish[ly]" and "wretch[edly]" enthralled with her. He feels conflicted and out of sorts, like a hollow "likeness of a man." Now, with bitter irony, he adds that there's one upside to all of this. He "count[s]" it as a win, or "gain," that he's gotten a "plague" from her because the same woman who's led him to "sin" has also "award[ed]" him some fitting punishment.

What's going on here? First, "my plague" might refer to a sexually transmitted disease that the speaker has caught from his lover. A metaphorical reading is also possible: he could be

talking about lovesickness, the emotional strain of the relationship, etc. (Or maybe he means all of the above!)

In any case, he seems to feel that he deserves it. He's been "sin[ning]" with his lover—presumably, sleeping with her outside of marriage, during an age when that was considered sinful—so he's due for some divine punishment. Though he dubiously blames her for "mak[ing]" him sin (leading him into temptation, etc.), he also carries a sense of shame. He suggests that it's better to pay for his sin now than in the afterlife. In that sense, the lover who's made him sick "awards [him] pain" rather than just *inflicting* pain.

Of course, all of this could be pure sarcasm. The speaker may be angry at his situation and ironically calling it a "gain" rather than a misfortune. He may be effectively saying: "So far, this relationship has done nothing but mess me up inside, but hey, at least I've gotten an STD out of it!"

On the other hand, there may be some emotional truth to his statement. For the speaker, the "pain" of this romance seems inseparable from the pleasure. (Remember, "Sonnet 141" is part of a sequence of conflicted, even tormented, sonnets Shakespeare wrote about the same woman.) The speaker sounds defensively critical of his lover, but he also seems to relish calling himself her "proud heart's slave and vassal wretch." He likes mocking her one minute and throwing himself at her feet the next. There may be something masochistic about his love.

POETIC DEVICES

REPETITION

The poem repeats several words/phrases for the purposes of emphasis and contrast. For example, the word "heart" occurs in lines 3 and 10, and in line 12 as "heart's." Not only does the repetition stress that this is a love poem—albeit a slightly twisted one—but it also draws out the contrast between the speaker's "foolish" heart and his lover's "proud" one. This is a poem not only about the love but about the *tension* between hearts, as well as the tension within the speaker's own heart.

Repetition also draws out the contrast in line 9:

> But my five wits nor my five senses can
> Dissuade one foolish heart from serving thee,

In the Europe of Shakespeare's day, some thinkers believed that the five bodily senses (sight, hearing, touch, taste, smell) had their equivalent in the mind. These five mental faculties, or "wits," were said to be common wit (i.e., common sense), imagination, fantasy, estimation (i.e., calculation), and memory. Here, the repetition-with-variation—"my five wits nor my five senses"—stresses that *neither* the speaker's physical perceptions *nor* his mental processes can help him in his lovesick state.

Finally, the word "Nor" itself occurs several times, not only in line 9 but in the anaphora of lines 5-7:

> Nor are mine ears with thy tongue's tune delighted,
> Nor tender feeling, to base touches prone,
> Nor taste, nor smell, desire to be invited [...]

In a sonnet written centuries after Shakespeare, Elizabeth Barrett Browning famously "count[ed] the ways" in which she loved her partner. Here, it's as if the speaker is counting the ways in which he *doesn't* love his partner! The succession of "Nor"s emphasizes that he doesn't love her through any of his senses—not hearing, nor touch, nor taste, etc. Of course, all of this sets up the claim that he *does* love her with his heart.

Where Repetition appears in the poem:

- **Line 3:** "heart"
- **Line 5:** "Nor"
- **Line 6:** "Nor"
- **Line 7:** "Nor"
- **Line 9:** "my five," "nor," "my five"
- **Line 10:** "heart"
- **Line 12:** "heart's"

METAPHOR

The speaker uses several metaphors to contrast his "heart" with the rest of his body and to illustrate the complexities of his romantic situation.

First, he describes his lover's voice as "thy tongue's tune." This *sounds* like a flattering image, but ironically, he claims not to like the tune very much. He insists that his "ears" are not "delighted" with the music of her voice. He then adds that his senses of "taste" and "smell" wouldn't want her to be the only offering at a "sensual feast." That is, he doesn't want to love her exclusively, and she's not the sweetest, most fragrant partner he's ever been with. Pretty harsh words for a supposed love poem! (The poet/critic Don Paterson has sarcastically summed up these metaphors: "[Y]our tongue doesn't please my ear; nor do my nose and mouth care to be invited to any *sensual feast* in which you, m'dear, are the only entrée on the card.")

Still, the speaker claims that he loves this mysterious lady. Metaphorically, his heart "serv[es]" *her* "proud heart[]" like a "slave and vassal wretch," or a lowly servant completely under her power. (This figure of speech could also be described as a personification.) Under the medieval system known as feudalism, "vassals" were indebted to powerful landlords and monarchs, so this term has become synonymous with subordination. As the speaker's "wits" and "senses" remain aloof from his mistress, his heart yields to hers—which seems to remain aloof from him. Even the "plague" he's caught from

her may be partly metaphorical: a form of lovesickness.

Where Metaphor appears in the poem:

- **Line 5:** "thy tongue's tune"
- **Lines 7-8:** "Nor taste, nor smell, desire to be invited / To any sensual feast with thee alone:"
- **Line 10:** "Dissuade one foolish heart from serving thee,"
- **Line 12:** "Thy proud heart's slave and vassal wretch to be."
- **Line 13:** "Only my plague thus far I count my gain,"

ALLITERATION

The sonnet is full of alliteration, which both adds to its musicality (something Shakespeare's language is famous for!) and reinforces its meaning.

Look at the succession of /d/ words in lines 3-4, for example:

> But 'tis my heart that loves what they despise,
> Who, in despite of view, is pleased to dote;

First comes a strongly negative word ("despise"), then a moderately negative or neutral one ("despite"), then a strongly positive one ("dote"). For maximum contrast, "despise" and "dote" fall at the ends of consecutive lines. This contrast, heightened by alliteration, sums up the speaker's deep emotional conflict. He's in a classic love-hate relationship.

In lines 5-8, the /t/ alliteration seems almost ironic, as its delicate music undermines the speaker's claims:

> Nor are mine ears with thy tongue's tune delighted,
> Nor tender feeling, to base touches prone,
> Nor taste, nor smell, desire to be invited
> To any sensual feast with thee alone:

The speaker insists that he's not bowled over by his lover's voice (her "tongue's tune"), her touch, her scent, etc. His language is harsh, but as poetry, it doesn't *sound* harsh. All the /t/ words create a gentle, pleasant "tune"—a hint that he doesn't find his lover quite as unimpressive as he claims.

Alliteration can also suggest a thematic relationship between the phrases it links. In lines 9-10, for example, it accentuates the contrast the speaker is drawing: between his "five wits" and "five senses" on the one hand and his "foolish heart" on the other.

Where Alliteration appears in the poem:

- **Line 2:** "they," "thee"
- **Line 3:** "despise"
- **Line 4:** "despite," "dote"
- **Line 5:** "tongue's tune"
- **Line 6:** "tender," "touches"
- **Line 7:** "taste," "to"
- **Line 8:** "To"
- **Line 9:** "five," "five"
- **Line 10:** "foolish"
- **Line 11:** "leaves," "likeness"

PERSONIFICATION

The poem personifies the speaker's "senses," "wits" (mental faculties), "eyes," "ears," and "heart"—and his beloved's "heart[]" as well.

By treating these body parts and mental faculties as miniature characters in their own right, the poem dramatizes how deeply the speaker is in conflict with himself. (Remember, besides being a poet, Shakespeare was the most famous playwright ever—he knew all about characters, conflict, and drama!) The two sides of this conflict are the speaker's heart vs. the rest of him. The woman he loves doesn't appeal (or so he claims) to his "senses" or "wits"—but his "heart" belongs to her completely. In other words, he doesn't feel physically or mentally attracted to her, but emotionally, he's hooked. It's an unusual distinction to make, but remember, the speaker might be unreliable—he could be lying to his lover ("thee") or to himself.

The speaker also portrays his lover's heart as "proud"—meaning that she herself is proud (as in aloof or haughty). This personification could also be described as a synecdoche, a figure of speech in which part of someone/something stands in for the whole. Meanwhile, the speaker's heart feels like the "slave and vassal wretch" of hers: in other words, he feels completely under her power.

Where Personification appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-12

IRONY

"Sonnet 141" is a love poem laced with strong, and fairly bitter, irony. The speaker himself calls attention to the irony of his situation, noting that his "heart" someone whom his eyes "despise." To drive the point home, he adds that he's "pleased to dote" on his mistress "in despite of view"—that is, in spite of her looks. Laying it on even thicker, he claims that *none* of his five senses are especially drawn to her. This is a very simple situational irony, in that we usually fall for people whom our eyes and/or other senses find attractive.

The closing couplet introduces another irony, which hovers somewhere between situational and verbal. The speaker claims that his only "gain" from this romance has been "my plague," noting that he's already paying for his "sin" through the "pain" his mistress "awards" him. Presumably, he's implying that he won't have to do as much penance in the afterlife, since he's

suffering so much already. This remark could just be bitter sarcasm—especially if his "plague" is a sexually transmitted illness, rather than a metaphorical malady like lovesickness. But it could also hold a grain of truth, one that reinforces the irony of his situation. In other words, he might really take a certain pleasure in the "pain" of lovesickness. (Don't we all, on some level?) Moreover, he seems ashamed of his own "foolish" attraction, so he may ironically savor the punishment he's suffering—because he feels he deserves it.

Beneath all these smaller ironies runs the larger irony inherent in the poem's concept. It's a love poem that explains what the speaker *doesn't* like about his beloved! In this way, it has some features of the poetic genre called the *contreblason*—a satirical response to the *blason*, in which the poet celebrates their lover's wonderful qualities. (The most famous contreblason in English is Shakespeare's own Sonnet 130.)

Where Irony appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-10
- Lines 13-14

VOCABULARY

In faith (Line 1) - In truth; to be honest.

Thee (Line 1, Line 2, Line 8, Line 10) - Old-fashioned variant of the second-person pronoun "you."

Mine (Line 1, Line 5) - Old-fashioned variant of "my" (used before words beginning with vowels).

'Tis (Line 3) - A contraction of "it is."

In despite of (Line 4) - Old-fashioned variant of "despite" or "in spite of."

View (Line 4) - What the eyes see (here meaning the lover's appearance).

Dote (Line 4) - Dote on; show affection to.

Thy (Line 5, Line 12) - Old-fashioned variant of the second-person pronoun "your."

Tongue's tune (Line 5) - Voice.

Base (Line 6) - Wicked, crass, related to the lower instincts, etc. (Here implying that the "touches" are erotic.)

Prone (Line 6) - Inclined, drawn.

Desire (Line 7) - Here used as a verb meaning "want."

Sensual feast (Line 8) - A metaphor comparing sex to a delicious meal or "feast" for the senses.

Five wits (Line 9) - A concept from Shakespeare's era, which posited that the mind had five wits (intellectual faculties) to match the body's five senses. These five wits were:

- "common wit" (common sense or instinctive judgment)
- imagination
- fantasy
- estimation (calculation)
- memory

Dissuade (Line 10) - Deter; talk someone out of doing something. (The opposite of *persuade*.)

Unswayed (Line 11) - Ungoverned or uncontrolled. (A person's heart was said to govern or "sway" their actions, so having metaphorically giving his heart away to his beloved, the speaker no longer feels in control of himself.)

Likeness (Line 11) - Imitation; semblance. The idea is that, having given away his heart, the speaker is now just a hollow imitation of a man.

Slave (Line 12) - Servant. Used metaphorically to suggest that the speaker is totally under the woman's sway.

Vassal wretch (Line 12) - Lowly servant or subordinate. A "vassal" was the subject of a landlord or monarch under the feudal system. "Wretch" here can mean both "poor or lowly person" and "miserable person."

Plague (Line 13) - Could imply one or all of several things:

- Lovesickness.
- General misery or suffering.
- A sexually transmitted illness.

Regardless, the speaker is implying that his beloved has given him this plague; it's what he's "gain[ed]" from being in the relationship.

She (Line 14) - In this context, "she" could be a third-person feminine pronoun or a regular noun synonymous with "woman." It's a small but subtle difference! (In other words, the line could be read either as "The fact that she who makes me sin awards me pain" or as "That woman, who makes me sin, awards me pain.")

FORM, METER, & RHYME

FORM

"Sonnet 141" is a typical Shakespearean sonnet: a poem of 14 lines, written in iambic pentameter (five-beat lines following a da-DUM, da-DUM rhythm). The 14 lines can be grouped into three quatrains (which rhyme on alternating lines) and a final rhyming couplet. This form is also known as the English or Elizabethan sonnet. Shakespeare didn't invent it, but he used it so consistently throughout his famous sonnets that it's become indelibly associated with him.

As is conventional in the sonnet, there's a *volta*—a significant "turn" or transition—in the ninth line. Here, that turn is signaled by the word "But," which introduces the speaker's claim that he's hopelessly in love with his mistress despite her faults.

After the three longer quatrains, the couplet of a

Shakespearean sonnet has a pithy, punchline-like effect. Sometimes it also contains a thematic "turn" of its own. Here, the couplet builds on the bitter passion and self-loathing of the previous lines, but it introduces a slight twist: the speaker claims that all he's gotten from this relationship is a "plague." This word might refer to an STI, though it could also suggest some other physical or emotional malady, such as lovesickness. Regardless, the speaker claims he's happy to have caught it because it provides some necessary (welcome?) punishment for "sin[ning]" with his mistress.

METER

Like nearly all Shakespearean sonnets, "Sonnet 141" uses iambic pentameter. This means that its lines typically contain 10 syllables arranged in an unstressed-stressed rhythm: da-DUM, da-DUM, da-DUM, da-DUM, da-DUM. (Some also have an unstressed eleventh syllable at the end, as in lines 5 and 7.)

Readers can hear this rhythm clearly in lines 1-2:

> In faith, | I do | not love | thee with | mine eyes,
> For they | in thee | a thou- | sand err- | ors note;

The rhythm contains some variations, however, as in most metrical poems. For instance, line 13 begins with a trochaic (stressed-unstressed) rather than an iambic (unstressed-stressed) foot:

> Only | my plague | thus far | I count | my gain,

This variation heightens the emphasis on "Only"—appropriately enough, since the speaker wants to stress that a "plague" is the *only* thing he's gotten from this romance.

RHYME SCHEME

The poem uses the standard rhyme scheme of the English, or Shakespearean, sonnet:

ABABCDCDEFEFGG

This scheme can be subdivided into three quatrains (which rhyme on alternating lines) and a final rhymed couplet. The couplet has a punchy, often humorous effect after the shorter quatrains. The rhymes are all exact (none are imperfect), adding to the polished wit of the poem as a whole.

Notice how well the final rhyme, "gain"/"pain," encapsulates the speaker's situation! He claims that all he's gotten out of this romance is sickness and suffering—but he seems to *enjoy* these things on some level, so there's a sense in which his "pain" really is his "gain."

SPEAKER

The speaker of "Sonnet 141" is the same as the speaker of all 154 of Shakespeare's *Sonnets*. These poems tell a coherent but complicated story involving a love triangle. Most of the sonnets are addressed to a character whom critics traditionally call the "Fair Youth": a handsome young man with whom the speaker is passionately in love. However, sonnets 127-152 address a proud, mysterious, and unfaithful woman, whom critics traditionally call the "Dark Lady." The speaker's love for the Lady is more brooding, tormented, and passive-aggressive than his love for the Youth. "Sonnet 141" takes this passive aggression to an extreme, depicting a true love-hate relationship (see lines 1-4 and lines 9-12). In these later poems, the Youth and the Lady also become romantically involved, igniting the speaker's jealousy.

Is the speaker Shakespeare himself? Readers have argued this question for centuries! Little is known about Shakespeare's personal life, so it's impossible to say how autobiographical the *Sonnets* are. Regardless, their speaker is as psychologically complicated as any of the famous characters in Shakespeare's plays.

SETTING

Like most of Shakespeare's sonnets, this one has no clear physical, temporal, or geographical setting. Many readers have assumed the speaker is William Shakespeare himself, and that the time period is therefore Elizabethan England (with all its complex romantic conventions). However, there's some critical disagreement as to whether the speaker is Shakespeare or an invented persona, like one of the characters in his plays. In any case, the sonnets' lack of specifics regarding names, dates, settings, etc. contributes to their timeless quality—they've fascinated readers worldwide for centuries!

CONTEXT

LITERARY CONTEXT

"Sonnet 141" appears toward the end of William Shakespeare's sequence of 154 sonnets, which was published in 1609 by bookseller and publisher Thomas Thorpe. The first 126 of these sonnets express the speaker's passion for a beautiful young aristocratic gentleman, whom critics have dubbed the Fair Youth. (The first 17 actually urge the Fair Youth to marry and have kids, but they're full of barely restrained passion nonetheless.) Sonnets 127-152 chronicle the speaker's tormented love for a mysterious, unfaithful woman, whom critics call the Dark Lady. (Sonnets 153 and 154 close out the sequence with a pair of poems about Cupid.) This is one of the

Dark Lady sonnets.

In some ways, "Sonnet 141" resembles Shakespeare's now more famous "Sonnet 130" ("My mistress' eyes are nothing like the sun"), whose speaker also catalogs the Lady's faults and insists he loves her despite them. Both sonnets emerge from a tradition in Renaissance poetry called the *blazon*.

- In a *blazon*, a male poet praises a woman's beauty by comparing each part of her body to a different beautiful object. For example, Sir Philip Sidney's *Astrophil and Stella* #9 compares Stella's forehead to alabaster, her hair to gold, and her teeth to pearls. The *blazon* was popular during the 1400s and 1500s in Italian, French, and English poetry, with poets such as Clement Marot, Edmund Spencer, and Thomas Campion participating.
- But the *blazon's* popularity soon caught the attention of snarks and smart-alecks, who realized that actually it would be terrifying—not beautiful—to meet a woman who had pearls for teeth and roses growing in her cheek. The *blazon* thus bred a mocking counter-tradition, called the *contreblazon*. Shakespeare's "Sonnet 130" belongs to this tradition, and "Sonnet 141," though a less straightforward example, follows suit by denigrating its subject's appearance, voice, and so on.

"Sonnet 141" was most likely written during the 1590s, during a craze for sonnets that followed the publication of Sidney's *Astrophil and Stella* (1590). The poem thus emerges at a moment when it would be topical and funny to poke holes in the traditions of the sonnet and its rhetorical excesses.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Literary scholars have been unable to agree on a precise date of composition for Shakespeare's *Sonnets*, but most agree that they were written in the 1590s and circulated to readers in manuscript. (They weren't published until 1609, when bookseller Thomas Thorpe sold a quarto called *Shake-speares Sonnets*; Shakespeare may or may not have authorized the publication.) This timing would put the poems in the last years of Queen Elizabeth's reign, during the golden age of English literature.

At this time, English society had recently become Protestant and had survived a series of bloody civil wars in the 14th and 15th centuries. Elizabeth's reign marked a period of internal stability in England (though the isolated island nation faced serious challenges abroad, from, for example, the Catholic Spanish Empire). This internal stability allowed for the flourishing of literature and culture, including the creation of Shakespeare's greatest works. Shakespeare's private, domestic *Sonnets* indirectly reflect his era's peace and security: they tackle matters of the heart, not matters of state.

MORE RESOURCES

EXTERNAL RESOURCES

- The Sonnet Aloud — Listen to actor Patrick Stewart recite the poem (with some help from his dog). (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DjORkkUvPzI)
- The Life of William Shakespeare — Watch an A&E documentary about the world's most famous playwright and poet. (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ITc13WnBWX4)
- The Bard's Life and Work — Read a brief biography of Shakespeare at the Poetry Foundation. (https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poets/william-shakespeare)
- Introduction to the Sonnets — An introduction to Shakespeare's sequence of 154 sonnets, courtesy of the Folger Shakespeare Library. (https://shakespeare.folger.edu/shakespeares-works/shakespeares-sonnets/about-shakespeares-sonnets/)
- The Sonnets at the British Library — View the British Library's first edition of Shakespeare's Sonnets and read a brief introduction to the volume. (https://www.bl.uk/collection-items/first-edition-of-shakespeares-sonnets-1609)

LITCHARTS ON OTHER WILLIAM SHAKESPEARE POEMS

- Sonnet 116: Let me not to the marriage of true minds
- Sonnet 129: Th' expense of spirit in a waste of shame
- Sonnet 12: When I do count the clock that tells the time
- Sonnet 130: My mistress' eyes are nothing like the sun
- Sonnet 138: When my love swears that she is made of truth
- Sonnet 147: My love is as a fever, longing still
- Sonnet 18: Shall I compare thee to a summer's day?
- Sonnet 19: Devouring Time, blunt thou the lion's paws
- Sonnet 20: A woman's face with nature's own hand painted
- Sonnet 27: "Weary with toil, I haste me to my bed"
- Sonnet 29: When, in disgrace with fortune and men's eyes
- Sonnet 30: When to the sessions of sweet silent thought
- Sonnet 33: Full many a glorious morning have I seen
- Sonnet 45: The other two, slight air and purging fire
- Sonnet 55: Not marble nor the gilded monuments
- Sonnet 60: Like as the waves make towards the pebbl'd shore
- Sonnet 65 ("Since brass, nor stone, nor earth, nor boundless sea")
- Sonnet 71: No longer mourn for me when I am dead
- Sonnet 73: That time of year thou mayst in me behold
- Sonnet 94: "They that have power to hurt"

HOW TO CITE

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