Sonnet 55: Not marble nor the gilded

POEM TEXT

Not marble nor the gilded monuments
Of princes shall outlive this powerful rhyme,
But you shall shine more bright in these contents
Than unswept stone besmeared with sluttish time.
When wasteful war shall statues overturn,
And broils root out the work of masonry,
Nor Mars his sword nor war's quick fire shall burn
The living record of your memory.
'Gainst death and all-oblivious enmity
Shall you pace forth; your praise shall still find room
Even in the eyes of all posterity
That wear this world out to the ending doom.
So, till the Judgement that yourself arise,
You live in this, and dwell in lovers' eyes.

SUMMARY

Neither expensive stone statues nor gold-covered monuments to the ruling class will live as long as this mighty poem. Through this sonnet, you will shine more brightly than any statue ruined by messy, careless time.

When wars come along and topple statues, and conflicts undo the skilled work of masons, not even Mars (the god of war) himself or war's speedy fires shall destroy this living memory of you.

Defeating the forces of death and indiscriminate hostility, you will march ever onwards. Praise of you will always have a place among *all* future generations, until the forces of history bring this world to the end times.

Until the end of time at Judgment Day, when you will be resurrected, you live through this poem, and in the eyes of the lovers who read it.

THEMES

POETRY AND IMMORTALITY

One of Shakespeare's best-known sonnets, "Sonnet 55" promises the speaker's lover everlasting life through verse. The speaker argues that poetry alone has the power to grant immortality. Kingdoms will fall and statues will crumble away, the speaker says, but this poem will keep the lover's memory (and the speaker's love itself) alive.

The speaker argues that even the most imposing statues, palaces, and monuments will eventually fall, despite their seeming solidity. Rulers often commission stone monuments to symbolize their strength and lasting power. But these "gilded" (decorated with gold) statues, made of the finest marble, offer no protection against time's ravenous appetite. If natural decay doesn't get these monuments, wars will "overturn" them, or mere squabbles ("broils") will "root out" the fine handiwork of masons (craftspeople who work with stone). The word "root" even hints that nature itself might reclaim these objects. Time eats away at the physical world, puncturing the grandeur of rulers who think they can immortalize themselves in stone or gold.

That's where poetry comes in. A good poet can immortalize someone—in this case, the poet's lover—in a way that sculpture can't. The poem refers to itself as a "powerful rhyme" that will "shine more bright[ly]" over the course of time than any stone. Even Mars, the great God of war, won't be able to "burn" the "memory" of the speaker's lover with his destructive fire. That's because the lover is immortalized and memorialized within the poem itself. In other words, as long as the poem lives on—which it clearly has!—so too does its addressee.

But nothing lives *forever*-forever: only until the Christian "Judgement" brings the speaker's beloved back from the dead for an eternal life in heaven. This is when Jesus will return to the earth, ushering in God's final judgment of all humans that have ever lived. The speaker naturally believes that the beloved will meet God's approval.

The speaker also insists that poetry is more powerful than statuary because, while statues offer a motionless, stony "record" of people's lives, poetry makes this record "living." Unlike statuary, poetry can be easily and perfectly reproduced: it travels from person to person, on paper or in memory. The speaker's lover's memory will also survive because new generations of lovers will read the poem. Poetry doesn't depend on physical material in the same way that statues do—and, as the poem has already insisted, the physical world is always prone to decay. Poetry alone, then, opens a door to immortality.

But with all this in mind, the reader might observe that what has really survived here is "Sonnet 55" itself, rather than the "memory" of its addressee. Nobody knows for sure who Shakespeare's beloved "Fair Youth" was (though theories abound!). So, while the poem has proved the enduring power of poetry itself, it's worth asking whether it has *truly* achieved the immortality it claims—or whether it was seeking immortality for itself rather than its beloved all along.

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-14

LINE-BY-LINE ANALYSIS

LINES 1-2

Not marble nor the gilded monuments
Of princes shall outlive this powerful rhyme,

The sonnet begins with a clear statement of its argument: no statue or gold-decorated monument will last as long as this poem. Time will crumble any stone tribute, but poetry can survive forever. And so far, the poem has proved itself right!

The first line is deliberately ornate, subtly mocking the tendency of "princes"—or any person in a position of wealth and power—to try and immortalize themselves. This dense pattern of sound suggests artistry and skillful construction. Hardly a syllable stands alone:

Not marble nor the gilded monuments

Alliteration between "not/nor" and "marble/monuments" (with internal /m/ and /n/ consonance in the latter word, too), consonance on /l/, /d/, and /r/ sounds, and assonant /o/ and /e/ vowels—all in the space of one line! This conspicuous sound patterning mimics the arrogance of these egotistical rulers by being showy and attention-seeking. Like a statue "gilded" with gold, the line itself is flecked with flashy ornamentation.

The enjambment at the end of the first line means the sentence's main verb, "outlive," doesn't arrive until the second line. The *delay* of the verb first draws the reader's attention to statues and sculptures—the things that it claims poetry (or this poem) will easily outlast. By placing the main elements of the first two lines in this particular order, the poem is doubly dismissive of "marble" and "gilded monuments," mentioning them first so that "powerful rhyme" (poetry) can muscle them out of grammatical place. In short, the poem builds them up and instantly knocks them down.

The second line also uses alliteration and consonance, with the loudest sound being the /p/ of "princes" and "powerful rhyme." That strong /p/ lends drama to the contrast between royalty/power on the one hand and poetry on the other. ("Rhyme" is a synecdoche for poetry: most English poetry in Shakespeare's era was rhymed.) The way the second /p/ falls on "powerful rhyme" seems to *steal* the power from "princes" and grant it to the poem itself, highlighting where the ***real*** power lies.

It's worth noting that line 2 sees the first use of "live" of the poem (in "outlive"). There are three or four of these in the sonnet depending on whether one counts the buried "live" in "oblivious" (line 9). The mention of the word here starts to build a contrast between the living memory of the speaker's beloved (the young man to whom most of Shakespeare's sonnets are addressed) and the dead or soon-to-be-dead artifacts of long-gone "princes" (or other powerful people).

LINES 3-4

But you shall shine more bright in these contents
Than unswept stone besmeared with sluttish time.

While at first glance lines 3 and 4 seem to reiterate the same message as lines 1 and 2, they contain a subtle but important shift in the poem's argument. It's not just that the poem ("this powerful rhyme") will "outlive" statues and monuments to arrogant rulers and wealthy elites. The speaker believes that as long as the poem survives, so too does the "you" it's addressed to. The rhymes in the first four lines set up this contrast between "monuments" and "time" on the one hand and the poem itself ("rhyme" and "these contents") on the other.

The poem metaphorically expresses the idea that the addressee will "live" through the speaker's tribute in the phrase "shine more bright" in line 3. While gold and jewels on monuments will fade over time, the addressee will not. The use of the second-person pronoun "you" means that, while the poem has one eye on the future of human history, its other eye is firmly on the beloved, right there in the speaker's present.

The clear, bright alliteration of "shall shine" in line 3 suggests the addressee's own metaphorical brightness, the way his beauty endures while the world around him fades and falls apart. The long /i/ assonance between "shine" and "bright" draws even more attention to the beloved's brilliant beauty.

Line 4 is so densely packed with consonance that it practically collapses under its own weight:

Than unswept stone besmeared with sluttish time.

Try saying this out loud—it's a mouthful! This overload of /s/ and /t/ sounds make it seem as if the speaker is spitting his words. He's describing neglected statues that "sluttish time" reclaims, and his sounds evoke his contempt for these futile monuments. Material tributes to princes, he suggests, always eventually fade into irrelevance, to the extent that no-one even cleans them anymore. By contrast, a poem can keep its addressee's memory as fresh and alive forever.

"Sluttish time" can be read in two ways. In the Elizabethan era, "sluttish" could just mean unclean. But the word also carried the meaning more familiar to contemporary readers: "sexually promiscuous." Either way, the poem here personifies time as an indiscriminate force of decay. The first idea works with the way that an environment changes over time, becoming dusty, moldy, and so on. This ties in with the use of "unswept." But time could also be sluttish because of how, according to the poem, it has this kind of effect on practically *everything*. Time is in a ruinous relationship with all the statues on earth—but it can't destroy

this poem.

LINES 5-8

When wasteful war shall statues overturn,
And broils root out the work of masonry,
Nor Mars his sword nor war's quick fire shall burn
The living record of your memory.

In its second quatrain, the poem develops its central idea—that poetry outlives statues and monuments—by explaining how time reclaims the material world. Put simply, no stone tribute—or, indeed, any physical monument—can last for very long, because soon enough humanity's appetite for destruction will bring it down. Here, the poem depicts humankind as violent and bloodthirsty, and suggests that poetry is more durable than sculpture in the face of war.

Lines 5 and 6 both claim that fighting and warring will inevitably destroy any ruler's statue—no matter how physically imposing or expensively decorated it might be. The triple alliteration—"When wasteful war"—of at the start of line 5 suggests this violent recklessness, as though the poem has /w/ sounds to throw away.

These two lines examine the same idea in subtly different ways. In line 5, "overturn" relates to the idea of toppling a ruler or powerful person, removing them from their position. It also evokes the image of a statue being pulled down from its plinth, a toppling of the symbol of power. In line 6, meanwhile, the words "root out" suggest a more gradual, natural kind of destruction—the way that vines and roots might grow around, disfigure, and eventually bring down any monument if given enough time.

In lines 7 and 8, the poem intensifies the atmosphere of violence and destruction by alluding to Mars, the Roman god of war. Even a divine being as powerful as Mars can't destroy the "living record of [the addressee's] memory." In other words, no violence, godly or otherwise, can destroy this poem. It follows, according the poet's logic, that the addressee can *also* survive violence, with their beauty preserved in immortal words.

The poem depicts war metaphorically as an all-consuming "quick fire" that burns everything—except, of course, for poetry. Notice how the two "nor[s]" in line 7 recall the "not"/"nor" combination in line 1, doubling down on the idea that poetry—or good poetry, at least—is in its own special category of immortality.

Finally, the enjambment after "burn" takes away the power of war's fire, the empty space at the end of the line working like a firebreak. This pause sets line 8 apart from the forces of destruction described in the preceding lines, meaning that "the living record of your memory" exists powerfully all by itself. In other words, the phrase itself survives everything that Mars and war can throw at it.

But it's worth questioning if this *is* a living record of the addressee's memory, as the poem gives very little away about who that person actually is. Perhaps it's more the *desire* behind the poetic tribute that survives, rather than the memory of the lover itself.

LINES 9-12

'Gainst death and all-oblivious enmity
Shall you pace forth; your praise shall still find room
Even in the eyes of all posterity
That wear this world out to the ending doom.

Line 9 subtly shifts the poem toward new ideas. Here, the speaker switches from a focus on the destructiveness of time and war to the persistence of the beloved through poetry.

This passage starts with the strong spondee of "'Gainst death," which disrupts the iambic pentameter to portray the beloved as especially powerful. Metaphorically speaking, the memory of the addressee will "pace forth" through time, immune to the destructive efforts of "death" and hostility ("all-oblivious enmity").

The enjambment between lines 9 and 10 evokes enduring power by extending the sentence over the line break to land strongly on the word "forth," the caesura making the word ring out loud and clear. The memory of the addressee marches "forth" through and against time, whereas statues crumble to dust.

The poem claims that its own beauty, which only exists as a tribute to the beauty of the addressee, will last until the end of time. The poem calls itself "praise" for the addressee, but, in truth, the subject here mostly seems to be the immortality of poetry itself. Boldly, the speaker suggests that this poem will survive for as long as there are people around to read it (which is undeniably true so far!).

The "eyes of all posterity" refers to all the people who will witness the world, right up until its "ending doom." In this latter phrase, the poem expresses one of the dominant religious ideas of the time: that humanity is on an inevitable path of decline heading straight for its own destruction in the Last Judgment. This is when Jesus will return to the earth and God will judge humankind. This might be inevitable, but it's not coming soon: the enjambment between these four lines evokes a long stretch of time. It's the poem's equivalent of the long (and eventful) span of human history.

LINES 13-14

So, till the Judgement that yourself arise,
You live in this, and dwell in lovers' eyes.

This poem, like most Shakespearean sonnets, ends with a rhyming couplet that offers a conclusion, a summary, or a volta—a new twist. Here, the speaker states plainly that the "you" of the poem *lives* in the poem itself, and will live there until God resurrects the dead on Judgment Day. This makes the

poem into a kind of time capsule, protecting the beloved's memory from all the war, violence, and decay humanity and time might throw at it.

The shift from classical allusion to Roman gods into a more Christian outlook reinforces the idea that all other forms of power—like the entire Roman Empire—will not stand the test of time.

There are two important sonic effects at work in the last line. Firstly, the assonance:

> You live in this, and dwell in lovers' eyes.

These /i/ sounds gently link the poem ("this") to the way it will keep the memory of the addressee alive ("live in"). This emphasis on continuing life, even in the form of poetry and memory, is underlined by the repetition of the word "live" (the third use of the word in this short poem).

The poem's final phrase, which comes just after the caesura in line 14, claims that this memory of the addressee will live "in lovers' eyes," because it is they who will read about him. In other words, the sonnet becomes a kind of ambassador of love that will travel through the ages, meeting anyone who looks to poetry to learn about love (and youthful beauty). The elegant, liquid /l/ consonance in "live," "dwell," and "lovers" evokes both the enduring beauty of the beloved and the enduring beauty of love itself. The latter will be expressed by generation after generation of lovers, who will reach for the sonnets to find words that match their feelings—and, in doing so, keep the beloved alive.

SYMBOLS

STONE MONUMENTS

The glorious, gilded, soon-to-be-destroyed stone statuary of the poem's first eight lines symbolizes the fragility of the whole physical world. Stone is a heavy-duty material, and sculptors build monuments with it precisely because it can be expected to last. But in the end, this poem claims, even the firmest stone is just matter, and will meet the fate that all matter meets: decay and destruction. Poetry, in contrast, behaves more like a spirit, able to flit from person to person, to be copied and recopied, and to survive down the centuries.

Where this symbol appears in the poem:

- **Lines 1-2:** "marble nor the gilded monuments / Of princes"
- **Line 4:** "unswept stone besmeared with sluttish time"
- **Lines 5-6:** "When wasteful war shall statues overturn, / And broils root out the work of masonry"

POETIC DEVICES

ALLITERATION

There's a lot of alliteration of "Sonnet 55," bringing the poem's images to life or echoing its ideas through sound.

The first line is packed full of sound patterning, with two separate alliterative sounds at work:

> Not marble nor the gilded monuments

Here, the /n/ and /m/ are both quite soft sounds, perhaps hinting that the "monuments" being described are not as tough and durable was they might at first appear. But the specific sound isn't as important as the way that the obvious alliteration reflects the showy decoration the line describes. These attention-grabbing sounds support the speaker's criticism of "princes" who seek immortality through statues and monuments.

Those sounds contrast with the plosive /p/ in the following line:

> Of princes shall outlive this powerful rhyme,

These dueling /p/ sounds contrast two different types of power in a heavyweight battle between princes and poetry. The shared sound makes this contrast more obvious, while stressing that "powerful" poetry wins every time.

The sibilant /s/ alliteration in line 4, meanwhile, sounds slippery and oily, working with the /s/ consonance of "besmeared" to make the image of "stone" tributes ruined by "sluttish time" especially vivid.

Line 10's "pace" and "praise," both of which refer to the movements and the glories of the addressee, recall the strong /p/ of "powerful" and subtly reinforce the idea that the addressee will live on after death through this poem.

In the last line, alliteration in "live" and "lovers'" links the two words together, emphasizing that as long as there are lovers in the world, this poem will be read, and the memory of the speaker's lover will survive. /L/ is what's known as a liquid consonant, and its long delicious sound is often associated with luxury and elegance. The way that /l/ moves the tongue around the mouth also perhaps gestures towards kissing—a popular lovers' activity!

Where Alliteration appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "Not," "marble," "nor," "monuments"
- **Line 2:** "princes," "powerful"

- **Line 3:** “shall shine”
- **Line 4:** “stone,” “sluttish”
- **Line 5:** “When wasteful war”
- **Line 7:** “Nor,” “nor”
- **Line 10:** “pace,” “praise”
- **Line 12:** “wear,” “world”
- **Line 14:** “live,” “lovers’”

ALLUSION

The poem draws its allusions from two main areas: classical literature/mythology and Christian belief.

The whole sonnet can be read as a response—and, therefore, a type of allusion—to two key figures in ancient Roman poetry, Ovid and Horace. Like Shakespeare, both poets made claims about the enduring power of poetry. In "Ode 3.30," Horace asserts that his poetry is a monument that will outlast entire empires, while Ovid, at the end of *The Metamorphoses*, argues that his poetic achievements have guaranteed him a kind of immortality. Echoing both, Shakespeare's poem makes an important change, declaring that it is the addressee of the poem—the speaker's lover, not the speaker himself—who is immortalized. (Whether that's totally true here is debatable!)

The poem also name checks Mars, the Roman god of war (line 7). This is part of the poem's argument that, in time, humanity's destructive nature will bring about the ruin of any "gilded monument," no matter how strong it might seem. The Romans saw Mars as a hateful, violent guy, a proto-Incredible Hulk—but, for all his strength and violence, Mars *won't* be able to destroy this "living record" of the speaker's lover. The poem is too strong, its human subject too beautiful, to be slain by Mars's sword.

The other allusion comes at the end of the poem, and switches the focus from classical to Christian mythology. Here, the speaker references the Last Judgment. This is the time when Jesus will come back to the earth and usher in the end times, when God will decide who, out of all the people that ever lived, can ascend to the heavenly kingdom—and who will be damned to hell. The poem doesn't have to last forever, then—just until the end of the world (!). At that point, God will surely bring the poem's addressee back to life.

Where Allusion appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** “monuments”
- **Lines 5-8:** “When wasteful war shall statues overturn, / And broils root out the work of masonry, / Nor Mars his sword nor war’s quick fire shall burn / The living record of your memory.”
- **Line 12:** “the ending doom.”
- **Line 13:** “till the Judgement that yourself arise,”

ASSONANCE

"Sonnet 55" often uses assonance to create sound effects that make an image or idea more vivid. (See the Alliteration entry for an in-depth look at how sonic devices like these work.)

One particularly important moment of assonance comes in line 2, where the poem uses a long /o/ vowel:

> Of princes shall outlive this powerful rhyme,

Here, the assonance makes the word "powerful" even stronger, the /o/ taking longer to form than the short /i/ in "princes" and "outlive this". This sets up a kind of battle between princes (and/or their statues) on the one side, and poetry on the other—making it clear that it's the latter who will outlast the former. Line 3 achieves a similar effect with "shine" and "bright," another long vowel sound reinforcing the argument that the addressee's "memory" will "outlive" that of any ruler.

And at the end of the poem, the identical /ih/ sounds of "You live in this" sound insistent, as though the poem is tapping the table to emphasize its argument. The shortness of the sound, and the way that the vowel is tucked inside its surrounding consonants, suggests a kind of protective bubble in which the memory of the poem's addressee is tucked in tight until Judgment Day.

Where Assonance appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** “Not,” “marble,” “nor,” “the,” “gilded,” “monuments”
- **Line 2:** “princes,” “outlive,” “this,” “powerfu”
- **Line 3:** “shine,” “bright”
- **Line 7:** “Nor,” “sword,” “ nor ,” “war’s”
- **Line 10:** “pace,” “praise”
- **Line 14:** “live in this”

CAESURA

The caesurae in lines 10, 13, and 14 create brief, tender pauses, slowing the poem down as it reaches its intimate ending. (But note that this version of the poem has been updated to reflect modern spelling and grammar. In Shakespeare's time, English wasn't yet standardized; even Shakespeare's name is recorded with many different spellings, including "Shaxpere"! This poem's spelling and grammar look pretty different in the first published version, where only lines 10 and 14 use caesurae. See the "Resources" section to take a look at the original.)

Line 10 *needs* a caesura, because otherwise two clauses would clash together nonsensically. The pause after "forth" creates dramatic emphasis, painting a contrast between "death and all-oblivious enmity" (hostility) and the everlasting memory of the poem's addressee, which now walks "forth" through time in the form of this sonnet. The pause, then, carves out a little space, mirroring the way that the poem carves out a niche in time for the speaker's lover.

The other caesura worth noting is in line 14 (which also appears in the original text):

> You live in this, and dwell in lovers' eyes.

This also creates the briefest of pauses, a short but tender silence which suggests intimacy and affection between the speaker and the poem's addressee.

Where Caesura appears in the poem:

- **Line 10:** "forth; your"
- **Line 13:** "So, till"
- **Line 14:** "this, and"

CONSONANCE

Consonance, like assonance and alliteration, helps to bring the poem's images to life. There's a more in-depth reading of how sound devices like these work in the Alliteration section of this guide.

A noteworthy example of consonance appears in line 4, which is intentionally loaded with /t/ and /s/ sounds, almost to breaking point:

> Than unswept stone besmeared with sluttish time.

Try saying this out loud—it's quite a mouthful! The tongue-twisting collision of sounds here fits with the image of "time" turning once-grand monuments into wrecks. The sibilance of the /s/ sound almost sounds like a broom moving across a floor, fitting in with the imagery of sweeping and smearing.

Where Consonance appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "Not marble nor," "gilded monuments"
- **Line 2:** "princes," "shall outlive," "powerful"
- **Line 3:** " shall shine," " bright," "contents"
- **Line 4:** "Than unswept stone besmeared," "sluttish time"
- **Line 5:** "When wasteful war," "statues overturn"
- **Line 6:** "root out"
- **Line 7:** "Nor Mars his," "nor war's"
- **Line 10:** " pace," "praise"
- **Line 12:** "That wear this world"
- **Line 14:** "live," "dwell," "lovers'"

ENJAMBMENT

Many lines in "Sonnet 55" are enjambed, some more obviously than others. These enjambments often create sentences that stretch over multiple lines, delaying a sentence's main verb for dramatic effect. This isn't a coincidence, but a product of the sonnet form itself. The speaker's skillful mastery of grammar and syntax across limited line lengths suggests that this poem is totally under his control—and that it's a powerful piece of art which can outlast anything made of stone.

The enjambment between lines 1 and 2 allows the poem to first focus on sculptures and monuments—things that *won't* stand the test of time—before "powerful rhyme" muscles them out of grammatical place as the thing that will "outlive" them. This enjambment reflects the poem's themes: because of the way these lines are constructed, "rhyme" literally gets the last word here, surviving all these grand statues.

Then, in lines 9 to 12, consistent enjambment suggests a long passage of time. The speaker claims that this poem will survive nothing less than the entire future of humanity (which even the most pessimistic predictions suggest will be a long time!). Reading this long, enjambed sentence actually takes longer, anticipating the poem's survival through "all posterity."

Where Enjambment appears in the poem:

- **Lines 1-2:** "monuments / Of"
- **Lines 3-4:** "contents / Than"
- **Lines 7-8:** "burn / The"
- **Lines 9-10:** "enmity / Shall"
- **Lines 10-11:** "room / Even"
- **Lines 11-12:** "posterity / That"

METAPHOR

The poem uses metaphor throughout to visually dramatize a contest between stone tributes (like statues) and poetry itself—claiming, of course, that the latter will survive longer.

The first metaphor is probably the most familiar to modern readers. The notion of a person shining brightly (line 3) is now what is sometimes called a dead metaphor—a metaphor that is so common that it's almost invisible. The interesting part of this metaphor, though, is how the speaker claims that it's *through the poem* itself that the speaker's beloved will shine. The poem, in this metaphor, is a kind of indestructible jewel, reflecting the addressee' own shine—his beauty and vivacity—long after his body is gone.

The "sluttish time" metaphor (line 4) is also personification, and covered in that section of the guide. That said, "sluttish" means messy and neglectful—metaphorically describing how, according to the poem, time will eventually destroy all statues and monuments.

Line 6 presents a possible metaphor through verbal association. To "root" something "out" means to find and remove it, and that's the main meaning here: conflicts ("broils") will, over time, bring down even the strongest statue. But the phrase itself relates to the roots of a tree. Subtly, then, the phrase hints at the way that mother nature, as well as war, might reclaim some statues and palaces for herself.

Lines 7 to 10 are densely metaphorical. War is a "quick fire" because of its ability to destroy anything and everything in no

time at all. The poem then describes itself as "the living record of [the addressee's] memory," portraying its proven ability to survive through the ages as a kind of life-force which contrasts with the death-force of war and violence. This memory will "pace forth" (which could also be read as personification) through time, standing tall and upright, still alive.

The metaphors in lines 10 and 14 come as a pair, and also relate to the poem's (and the beloved's) survival. This is a spatial metaphor, suggesting that the poem will "find room" (find a safe and secure home) until the end of humanity. This room will be "in lovers eyes" (where the poem will "dwell"). This neatly relates to the act of reading (imagined here as done by lovers), which is one and the same as keeping the poem's addressee alive. And it's worth noting that sonnets are sometimes metaphorically described as little rooms, small but hardy bits of linguistic architecture.

Where Metaphor appears in the poem:

- **Line 3:** "shine more bright"
- **Line 4:** "besmeared with sluttish time"
- **Line 6:** "root out"
- **Lines 7-8:** "Nor Mars his sword nor war's quick fire shall burn / The living record of your memory"
- **Lines 9-10:** "'Gainst death and all-oblivious enmity / Shall you pace forth"
- **Line 10:** "your praise shall still find room"
- **Line 14:** "dwell"

PERSONIFICATION

In line 4, the poem personifies time as "sluttish." While the word could simply mean wasteful, the connotation of sexual promiscuity is also on the table here. Either way, it's all down to the effect of time on the physical world: indiscriminate decay and destruction. If a statue, for example, isn't maintained (if it's left "unswept"), then eventually time will "besmear" it (dirty it and make it ugly). The possible personification here highlights the way that time does this to anything and everything. It is thus a kind of promiscuous force of destruction. The ruins of past great civilizations, with their crumbled statues, show just how powerful "sluttish time" is.

The poem also subtly personifies art—though nowhere near as directly as it personifies time. But the observant reader might notice that the word "live"—or variants of it—appears three times (and is hidden in line 9's "all-oblivious"). Metaphorically speaking, the poem implies, both "gilded monuments" (glorious statues) and poetry are living creatures, with their own lifespans. The poem argues that poetry "outlive[s]" statuary, and will even live until the end of the world (when God will judge humankind). Through this poem's life, the speaker's beloved—or some version of him—lives on, too.

Where Personification appears in the poem:

- **Line 2:** "outlive"
- **Line 4:** "sluttish time"
- **Line 8:** "living"
- **Line 14:** "live"

VOCABULARY

Marble (Line 1) - An expensive stone material often used for sculpture.

Gilded (Line 1) - Decorated with gold.

Rhyme (Line 2) - Poem.

Contents (Line 3) - Stressed on the second syllable: con-**tents**.

Unswept (Line 4) - Unmaintained (monuments and statues need significant upkeep!).

Besmeared (Line 4) - Covered with grime.

Sluttish (Line 4) - This word originally meant "messy" or "disorderly," but also has connotations of promiscuity.

Broils (Line 6) - Conflicts, fights.

Masonry (Line 6) - Stonework.

Mars (Line 7) - The Roman god of war.

'Gainst (Line 9) - Abbreviation of "against."

All-oblivious (Line 9) - Indiscriminately wiping out (or "obliviating").

Enmity (Line 9) - Hostility.

Posterity (Line 11) - The future generations of humankind and, generally, the future.

Ending Doom (Line 12) - The end of the world—specifically, the Christian Last Judgment (see note for "Judgement").

Judgement (Line 13) - The end of the world as predicted by Christian theology (though there is no single agreed-upon story). This is when Jesus will return to earth, the dead will come back to life, and God will choose who, out of all the people that ever lived, will live in heaven.

Arise (Line 13) - Get up. This refers to the addressee's resurrection at the end of the world (see note on "Judgement").

Dwell (Line 14) - Live.

FORM, METER, & RHYME

FORM

"Sonnet 55" is a Shakespearean or English sonnet (as opposed to a Petrarchan or Italian sonnet), which means it's built from three quatrains and a rhyming couplet. Writers often use the sonnet form for love poetry, and "Sonnet 55" is only one of

many, many love sonnets that Shakespeare wrote.

Here, over the first three quatrains, the speaker first makes a bold claim—that this poem, and through it the speaker's beloved, will "outlive" statues and monuments.

Then, at the beginning of the couplet comes a volta, or turn—that is, a shift in tone or theme. The final couplet in English sonnets often summarizes what's come before, though Shakespeare regularly breaks this rule. Here, that closing couplet definitely makes a bigger point, reaching out beyond the speaker's world to Judgment Day itself—and, before then, to the eyes of all those lovers who will read this sonnet in the future.

METER

"Sonnet 55" uses iambic pentameter—a meter made up of five iambs, a.k.a. poetic feet with a da-DUM stress pattern. This is to be expected, as nearly all of Shakespeare's sonnets use this meter! Readers might already be familiar with this rhythm from Shakespeare's plays, which are also mostly written in iambic pentameter. Here's how it sounds in lines 3-4:

> But you | shall shine | more bright | in these | contents
> Than un- | swept stone | besmeared | with slutt- | ish time.

Notice how the strong, pulsing iambic rhythm makes the word "contents" sound like "con-TENTS" rather than "CON-tents"? Iambic pentameter's steady, pulsing power often sweeps words up this way—mirroring the very tick of time these lines describe! That onward momentum suggests the way that "sluttish time" marches on relentlessly, making a mockery of "gilded monuments."

RHYME SCHEME

"Sonnet 55" has a typical rhyme scheme for a Shakespearean sonnet, running like this:

> ABAB CDCD EFEF GG

These patterns group the poem into three quatrains and a couplet. The intricate, interlocking rhymes make the poet's thought feel structured and elegant—an important part of the overall effect in a poem whose artistry is meant to live forever!

The rhyme here also calls attention to opposites and contrasts. The poem pitches itself as a metaphorical fight, with "monuments" (sculptures and statues) on one side, and poetry ("this powerful rhyme") on the other. This fight plays out in the rhyming pairs: "monuments" vs. "these contents," "rhyme" vs. "time," "masonry" (stonework) vs. "memory" (as preserved by the poem), "enmity" (animosity) vs. the poem's safe spot in "all posterity," "room" (sonnets are sometimes described as "little rooms") vs. "the ending doom" (humankind's inevitable destruction). The poem's argument repeats in miniature through the rhyme scheme.

The closing couplet emphasizes the aliveness of the addressee's memory through the "living record" of the poem. "Arise" relates to resurrection, and it's the "eyes" of lovers that will read the sonnet until "Judgement" comes around.

SPEAKER

Like most of Shakespeare's sonnets, this one doesn't give the reader much specific information about the speaker. In fact, scholars have long debated the identity of the speaker in these sonnets—though the consensus leans toward seeing them as at least partly autobiographical.

While the question will never truly be settled, this poem works just fine with an autobiographical interpretation. For, like Shakespeare, the speaker is a poet—and one who greatly admires the poem's subject, generally taken to be the "Fair Youth" (or beautiful young man) that most of this sonnet sequence addresses.

The speaker believes deeply in the value of poetry, claiming that his poem will "outlive" any tribute carved in stone. In fact, he has more faith in poetry than he does in humanity: he anticipates centuries of war, right up until the end of the world. But he has full confidence in his own ability to immortalize the addressee through poetry—to create a "living record of [his beloved's] memory" that will remain as long as there are lovers to read the poem, in spite of all the chaos of history.

But this speaker might also be a little sly. While this poem supposedly preserves the speaker's beloved, it sure doesn't tell readers much about that beloved! What survives here is the feeling, skill, and artistry of the poet himself.

SETTING

The poem isn't set anywhere specific, and doesn't date itself to any particular time. But it still gives readers hints of the world around it with its "marble" statues and "gilded monuments." This is a world with a powerful elite of "princes" who commission elaborate stonework in a vain attempt to immortalize themselves. The speaker pitches this world of pompous power against the true power of poetry.

This comparison uses the other main element of the poem's setting: time. Here, time is an all-powerful force that destroys anything physical and material. Given enough time, the poem suggests, all statues come crumbling to the ground (helped along the way by war). Poetry, on the other hand, doesn't need much to survive. According to the speaker, as long as there are lovers to read this poem, it will live on. That's why the poem ends on such an intimate note, situating the poem itself—and therefore the memory of the addressee—inside "lover's eyes."

The speaker doesn't quite claim true immortality for the poem, claiming merely (!) that it will last until the Christian Judgment Day. On this day, God will resurrect the speaker's lover and welcome them into the heavenly kingdom. The poem itself thus becomes a kind of setting: it's like a time capsule in which the beloved's memory is kept safe until the poem is no longer needed.

CONTEXT

LITERARY CONTEXT

"Sonnet 55" is one of Shakespeare's better-known sonnets—though it's not quite on the same level of fame as "Sonnet 18" or "Sonnet 130." The poem first appeared in the 1609 Quarto edition of Shakespeare's poetry, which contained 154 sonnets. The bulk of these (1-126) are known as the "Fair Youth" sequence and are addressed to a young, aristocratic male lover. Though some critics (particularly those from the prudish Victorian era) view the relationship between the speaker and the youth as a mere intense friendship, these sonnets are often deeply romantic and erotic—though there's not much of that on display here.

This poem shares a lot of common ground with many other sonnets in the sequence. In fact, a number of them make a similar argument in favor of the power of poetry: that poems, good ones at least, can survive the ravages of time. Along these lines, readers might want to check out sonnets 18, 19, 81, 107, and 123 (to name only a few). Sonnet 18 famously features a concluding couplet similar to this one:

> So long as men can breathe or eyes can see,
> So long lives this, and this gives life to thee.

The sonnet form is arguably poetry's most enduring, and is still popular today. While it may have originated as a form of short song ("sonnet" translates as "little song"), the 14th-century Italian poet, Petrarch, is seen as its greatest early innovator. Petrarch established the now unbreakable link between the sonnet and love, and also began the long tradition of poetic skill being read as evidence of powerful romantic feeling.

The sonnet was then popularized in the English language by writers like Sir Thomas Wyatt (who translated/interpreted a number of Petrarch's sonnets) and Sir Philip Sidney (whose sequence, *Astrophel and Stella*, was a major influence on Shakespeare's own). So-called Shakespearean (or English) sonnets differ from Petrarchan sonnets through their rhyme scheme and structure, with the latter focusing more on a shift—or "volta"—between the eight and ninth lines. Shakespearean sonnets end with a couplet that often summarizes or concludes what came before—though sometimes it also introduces a last-minute surprise.

This poem's roots stretch back even further than the sonnet form. It is indebted to the works of ancient Roman poets like Ovid and Horace, who both claimed their verse would win them a kind of immortality. While Shakespeare claims this sonnet wins immortality for his beloved, no one today knows who that beloved was—but we sure recognize Shakespeare as an immortal name. His work reshaped the English language to the extent that no writer in English can claim not to be influenced by him.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Shakespeare's sonnets were composed in the 1590s and early 1600s, and first published in 1609. This means the sonnets were mostly written in the Elizabethan period, but published in the Jacobean, when King James succeeded Queen Elizabeth.

The Elizabethan era is known as an age of adventure and discovery, with British ships exploring the globe and the age of colonialism just on the horizon. It was a culturally rich time, too: Shakespeare was one of London's many celebrated poets and playwrights, making a name for himself through exciting linguistic innovation and psychologically complicated characters.

This sonnet draws on the creative excitement of the period, but also looks to the past and the future. Through allusion to the classical era (like that reference to Mars, Roman god of war), the poem hints at the way empires can rise and fall. With this in mind, the poem anticipates a Christian end time—the "Judgement" of line 13, when, according to the Christian faith, Christ will return and the dead will resurrect.

MORE RESOURCES

EXTERNAL RESOURCES

- The Identity of the Fair Youth — Read about the debated identity of the sonnet's mysterious addressee. (https://www.bl.uk/shakespeare/articles/shakespeare-sexuality-and-the-sonnets)
- The Sonnet Out Loud — Hear the poem read by the celebrated British actor Patrick Stewart. (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=t_Wzd99yYik)
- The First Edition of the Sonnets — See the sonnet in its original context: the 1609 Quarto edition. (https://www.bl.uk/collection-items/first-edition-of-shakespeares-sonnets-1609)
- The Sonnet as a "Little Room" — Listen to a fascinating lecture by the late, great scholar Russ McDonald, which interprets the sonnets in their historical context. (https://backdoorbroadcasting.net/2011/10/russ-mcdonald-shakespeares-sonnets-in-context/)
- Shakespeare's Sonnets — Find all the sonnets, plus some

analysis, in one useful place! (http://www.shakespeares-sonnets.com)

LITCHARTS ON OTHER WILLIAM SHAKESPEARE POEMS

- Sonnet 116: Let me not to the marriage of true minds
- Sonnet 130: My mistress' eyes are nothing like the sun
- Sonnet 138: When my love swears that she is made of truth
- 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 29: When, in disgrace with fortune and men's eyes
- Sonnet 30: When to the sessions of sweet silent thought
- Sonnet 71: No longer mourn for me when I am dead
- Sonnet 73: That time of year thou mayst in me behold

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