Sonnet 94: "They that have power to hurt"

POEM TEXT

They that have power to hurt and will do none,
That do not do the thing they most do show,
Who, moving others, are themselves as stone,
Unmoved, cold, and to temptation slow:
They rightly do inherit heaven's graces
And husband nature's riches from expense;
They are the lords and owners of their faces,
Others but stewards of their excellence.
The summer's flower is to the summer sweet
Though to itself it only live and die,
But if that flower with base infection meet,
The basest weed outbraves his dignity:
For sweetest things turn sourest by their deeds;
Lilies that fester smell far worse than weeds.

SUMMARY

People who have the power to hurt others but don't—who don't do the things that they seem most likely to do, who are able to affect other people but themselves remain stiff as a rock, who are stoic, cold, and difficult to tempt—these people are the ones who receive the God's approval and generosity. These kinds of people hold onto their gifts and do not let go of or share what they have been given. These people are totally in control of their expressions. Everyone else can simply appreciate and marvel at this type of person's excellence. In a similar way, the summertime itself can appreciate the sweetness and beauty of a summer flower. That flower, by contrast, doesn't notice or value its own beauty in the same way. A flower's only concerns are of being alive or of being dead. But if that flower is struck by a foul infection, even the common weed is braver and more dignified. After all, sweet things (both seemingly perfect people and beautiful flowers) turn all the more corrupt as a result of their own actions. Rotting lilies smell much worse than weeds.

THEMES

THE VALUE OF RESTRAINT

"Sonnet 94" begins with sweeping, bold statements praising people who display a lot of restraint. Those who are able to remain "unmoved, cold" and resist temptation, the speaker argues, are favored by God and superior to others. That said, the poem's ultimate stance on restraint is up for debate: it's possible that the speaker is actually being ironic in presenting emotional detachment and extreme self-control as good things. In other words, the speaker might be *mocking* these people rather than applauding them.

In any case, the speaker starts the poem by saying that people who can control their emotions and desires have a few things in common. For one, these types of people *have* power but don't *use* it. Though they can cause "hurt" they "will do none."

The speaker, rather elliptically, also says that these restrained people, "do not do the thing they most do show"—they don't do whatever it is they seem most likely to do. The restrained person may be very physically attractive but choose to remain chaste, for example; although they may arouse sexual interest in others, they themselves remain unaffected. They're also immobile as "stone"; they keep their feelings private and don't easily give in to temptation. Another part of restraint, then, is the ability to maintain a difference between one's inner self and outer appearance or expression.

Such people, the speaker continues, are essentially better than everyone else and "rightly" receive the grace of heaven. In other words, their restraint means that they are favored by a divine power. What's more, the speaker says, though the restrained person receives "nature's riches," they do not spend them: they hold on to their perfection and do not seek to share it with others. Using language related to hierarchy (words like "lords" and "owners") the speaker notes that everyone else who cannot muster restraint must be a lowly "steward" to those excellent, ideal people. Though most people cannot be perfect, they can appreciate and wonder at seeming perfection.

Yet all this celebration of restraint is undercut by the speaker's potentially mocking tone. Readers might wonder, how can the ideal person be as cold as stone? Doesn't not spending riches make you stingy? To some readers, the speaker has painted an image of a selfish, unfeeling hoarder—the kind of person who knows just how powerful they are, and "lords" their self-possession over other people.

What's more, as the poem continues, it suggests that even these perfect specimens are subject to corruption. In fact, the speaker insists, corruption is ultimately even *more* terrible when it comes from such seeming models of virtue! It's up to readers, then, to decide whether the speaker is being truly sincere in praising emotional restraint—or if the poem is actually critiquing people who act like they're above everyone else.

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-8

CORRUPTION AND HYPOCRISY

While the first part of this poem seems to praise the values of restraint, the second part suggests that such cool, calm, and collected people aren't always what they seem. After seeming to celebrate the virtues of the restrained person, the speaker switches gears to talk about how a sweet and beautiful flower can get infected and start to fester. The implication is that the people from the poem's opening are like that flower: susceptible to corruption and foul deeds. What's more, the speaker says, this corruption is worse when it comes from those who outwardly act like models of virtue.

Readers can take the flower to represent those seemingly perfect people from the first lines of the poem. The flower, like the type of person described, appears beautiful and does not seem to be affected by its own beauty as others are. And yet, if this flower gets infected, it will fester and stink. Likewise, the poem implies, these seemingly perfect, self-possessed people are susceptible to corruption: they too can "fester" and rot.

Specifically how this corruption occurs is unclear. All that the speaker tells the reader is that "deeds" are what turn sweet things sour. This suggests that *behavior*, and not *appearance*, is what actually defines people. When the outwardly beautiful and restrained person abuses their power or acts in a nasty way, they corrupt their outer perfection.

In fact, the speaker argues that a seemingly perfect person doing bad deeds is even worse than someone who never seemed perfect to begin with! Because it was never very pretty or sweet, even a simple weed is more dignified than the infected flower. Likewise, a regular person is better than a corrupted, supposedly ideal person.

While it's possible to read the speaker as being sincerely sad about this corruption, the speaker also could be taking some pleasure in seeing such a fall from grace. On that note, though this sonnet can be read as a standalone poem, its meaning changes when readers take into account that it belongs to Shakespeare's Fair Youth Sequence.

These sonnets are read as being addressed to a rich and beautiful young man with whom the poems' male speaker has an intimate (and likely romantic) relationship. At one point in the sequence, the speaker feels continuously rebuffed and met with coldness on the young man's part. In other words, his love for the youth (either platonic or sexual) is unreciprocated.

The seemingly perfect and restrained type described in this poem can be read as a portrait of that fair youth. The speaker's stance on restraint is thus conflicting: the speaker is both attracted to the young man's seeming perfection and frustrated by his distance and lack of interest. If the speaker is being rejected by the fair youth, maybe he feels satisfied by the fair youth being brought down a few pegs.

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Lines 9-14

LINE-BY-LINE ANALYSIS

LINES 1-2

They that have power to hurt and will do none,
That do not do the thing they most do show,

In the poem's first two lines, the speaker begins to describe a certain kind of person: one who is capable of hurting others but chooses not to do so. The speaker doesn't the specific kind of "hurt," but is likely talking about emotional, possibly romantic, injury.

The next line then sets up a paradox of sorts: this is the type of person who doesn't don't do that very thing they seem most likely to do. The diacope here turns line 2 in particular into a tongue twister of sorts; in the short space of a single line, the speaker says the word "do" three times (four if you include line 1):

> That do not do the thing they most do show,

In lines describing restraint, it's also interesting that the speaker keeps using the word "do," which conveys action—the very opposite of restraint!

These lines are written in iambic pentameter, meaning that each line has five iambs—poetic units consisting of an unstressed syllable followed by a stressed syllable (da-DUM, da-DUM). The meter in these first two lines is mostly regular, though it's possible to read that opening "They" as a stressed beat (and note that "power" scans as a single syllable, "pow'r"):

> They that have power [...]

Reading the line this way adds extra emphasis to the kind of person the speaker is describing. The second line is then perfectly iambic:

> That do not do the thing they most do show

Notably, these first two lines contain very short words: the words here are all monosyllabic (consisting of one syllable). The short words, combined with close adherence to iambic pentameter, lend these lines a sense of rigidity and control. The self-restraint practiced by the type of person being described is echoed in the regular, restrained sound of the lines themselves.

LINES 3-4

Who, moving others, are themselves as stone,
Unmoved, cold, and to temptation slow:

Lines 3-4 continue to describe the type of person introduced in the first two lines of the poem. This person may not "hurt" others, but they do "move them." In other words, they arouse certain feelings (emotional and, implicitly, sexual) in other people even as they "themselves" remain still "as stone."

This simile illustrates the extent of such people's self-restraint: stones are hard and heavy, difficult to physically move. The mention of stone might also make readers think of statues. It's thus not entirely clear whether the speaker actually admires this self-restrained person: a statue might be beautiful and alluring, but it's also lifeless; stones can't listen or feel.

Line 4 then builds on the idea of this restrained person being particularly, and perhaps not admirably, stoic. While being able to resist "temptation" can be considered a virtue, one wouldn't usually take being called "cold" as a compliment. Also note that the speaker doesn't say this person is never tempted—just that it takes them longer to give in than others!

Temptation, here, might describe any kind of indulgent behavior. But given the poem's context as part of the "Fair Youth" sequence (written from the perspective of a lover), these lines take on a sexual meaning. In calling this person "slow to temptation," the speaker might be calling out the fact that this individual is refusing to engage intimately with the speaker. Thus while, on one level the poem's language describes a general type of person, on another level it pointedly addresses one person in particular: the beautiful and cold fair youth.

Finally, note how there is a list-like, building hypotactic quality to the first few lines of the poem: the lines are windy, interwoven, each clause building on the last. The syntax (sentence structure) is quite convoluted as well, and the lines are filled with caesuras (all those commas and pauses). The slow, meandering pace of the lines reflects the self-restraint and control being described.

LINES 5-6

They rightly do inherit heaven's graces
And husband nature's riches from expense;

So far, the speaker described someone who: doesn't hurt others even though they could if they wanted to, doesn't behave in the way that it looks like they will based on their appearance, is unemotional, and resists temptation.

Now, the speaker talks about the benefits this kind of person receives from being so restrained: "heavens graces." In other words, they receive God's favor; one might say that this kind of person lives a charmed life. The word “rightly” indicates that the speaker believes that this person is deserving of such "graces."

Next, the speaker goes on to describe how this type of person holds onto such rewards: they "husband," or save and conserve, their riches. On the one hand, this seems like a good thing: such people don't go about frivolously spending their gifts. And yet, "husbanding" riches sounds a lot like hoarding them. This seemingly ideal person isn't actually sharing their wealth, but keeping it all to themselves.

Again, then, there's a hint that the speaker's praise is ironic: the speaker isn't actually calling this self-reserved person a model of virtue, but pointing out how they're actually pretty cold, unfeeling, and selfish. This person may think it's only right that they "inherit heaven's graces," but maybe the speaker isn't so sure.

There is a “straight” or literal reading of these lines, and also a more sexually and romantically inflected reading:

- Though the definition of “husband” as “to conserve” is definitely at play here, the word also describes a male spouse. The language of partnership and relationships might indicate that the speaker is thinking about his relationship with the fair youth.
- When the speaker tells readers about this person's refusal to “expend” nature’s riches, the speaker could mean that the youth is just generally self-controlled or stingy. Yet the word “expense” also carries a sexual connotation—one that is later picked up in "Sonnet 129," when the word refers to consummating a sexual act (“The expense of spirit in a waste of shame / Is lust in action”).
- Thus, while the poem's language is vague and nonspecific, it might point to the speaker being annoyed that the fair youth won't give in to him romantically and/or sexually.

LINES 7-8

They are the lords and owners of their faces,
Others but stewards of their excellence.

The speaker goes on to say that these self-controlled people don't just temper their emotions: they also are in total control of their "faces"—their outward expressions. They keep their feelings close to the chest, it seems, not letting people in on what they're really thinking.

On the one hand, this might be a positive thing. And yet, not being able to tell what someone is really thinking is also disturbing because it leaves the door open for deception and hypocrisy.

Calling such people the "lords" and "owners" also brings notions of power and hierarchy into the poem. While the self-controlled person is like a “lord” or an “owner,” everyone else is a mere “steward,” or servant—the kind of person who might supervise or look after another’s household.

Once again, the tone of these lines depends on whether

readers take them to be sincere or not. Perhaps the speaker is earnestly praising such excellent people. By writing about their virtues, in fact, the speaker acts as one of these "stewards" of excellence within this very poem.

And yet, it's also possible that the speaker is being ironic: that this praise is said bitterly and sarcastically. The speaker might in fact resent his task as a chronicler of such an unfeeling, holier-than-thou person.

LINES 9-10

The summer's flower is to the summer sweet
Though to itself it only live and die,

In line 9, the speaker switches gears. Whereas the first eight lines of the sonnet (its octet) talked about a specific kind of self-restrained person, now the speaker starts talking about a flower. This moment is called the sonnet's *volta*, or turn. Not all Shakespearean sonnets have a volta in line 9, but this one certainly does!

Readers might, understandably, wonder why the poem's focus shifts so abruptly, but things make more sense when considering that the speaker is using this flower to *represent* the kind of person discussed earlier in the poem.

The flower, outwardly, is entrancing. Even the summer itself seems to revel in the flower's loveliness, the personification of line 9 presenting summer like an adoring fan. Just as a person might be a "steward" of the powerful,self-restrained type, the sun is a steward of the flower, appreciating and tending to the flower's sweetness.

The sibilance and gentle /w/ sounds of these lines evoke the delicate loveliness of the flower: "summer's flower is to summer sweet." This repetition of the word "summer," meanwhile, suggests that there's a kind of natural connection or affinity between the flower and the summer.

Line 10, meanwhile, juxtaposes the flower's appearance with its inner reality: though the flower is beautiful on the outside, its beauty doesn't mean much to the flower itself. The flower itself is concerned with something more basic: life and death. It may be pretty, but deep down it's pragmatic.

LINES 11-12

But if that flower with base infection meet,
The basest weed outbraves his dignity:

The poem seems to take yet another turn here: that pretty flower introduced in lines 9-10, the speaker now says, is susceptible to "base infection."

The word "base" is a pun: it can mean common or lowly (as in, this "infection" is gross and ignoble), and it can refer to the lowest part of something (implying that the flower gets rotten at the root). If that flower gets sick, the speaker says, it becomes gross and undignified. And because the flower was once so beautiful, the loss of this beauty is all the more tragic; it has fallen from such a great height, from the graces of "heaven" itself.

Notice in these lines how the speaker repeats the word "base"/"basest." This polyptoton emphasizes that the lovely flower can easily be brought down not simply to the level of the lowliest weed, but even lower! The flower may seem particularly "sweet," but really it's just like any other living thing: capable of being debased or brought low by the dirty, real, and common course of life. The weed, by contrast, is *already* base. It is not particularly special and never had any delusions of grandeur.

These lines also continue to use human language to describe nonhuman living things. Bravery, dignity, and social hierarchy are all qualities more clearly associated with the human world than the plant. All this personification should remind readers that the speaker is using these plants as stand-ins for different types of people.

Finally, notice in particular the use of pronouns here: the flower is given a gender—"his dignity." This grammatical choice further suggests that the flower is a stand-in not just for a type of person but for the fair youth himself.

LINES 13-14

For sweetest things turn sourest by their deeds;
Lilies that fester smell far worse than weeds.

Shakespeare typically ends his sonnets with a rhyming couplet that wraps up/restates everything that has come before, and that's exactly what happens here. These final two lines form a rhyming pair that offers a concluding point.

While the speaker started the poem by seeming to praise the self-restrained person, at the end of the poem, the reader is left with a festering, rotting flower that smells "far worse than weeds." Perhaps that ideal person from the beginning of the poem isn't so ideal after all, if they have the potential to "fester" so badly.

The fall away from an ideal is also reflected in the poem's meter, which, in the last line, becomes more irregular:

For sweet- | est things | turn sour- | est by | their deeds;
Lilies | that fe- | ster smell | far worse | than weeds.

Line 14 begins with a trochee (stressed-unstressed) rather than the expected iamb. It's also possible to read the fourth foot here as a spondee (stressed-stressed), which actually results in three stressed beats in a row: "smell far worse." This draws attention to the stench of those rotting flowers. More broadly, the steady, even, and controlled meter developed at the beginning of the sonnet falls apart. There goes both the ideal person and the ideal sonnet!

The end of the poem can be read in many different ways. The

speaker could be expressing sadness at the flower and, implicitly, the fair youth's fall from grace. The speaker could be issuing a warning about a yet-to-occur fall from grace. The speaker could be making some kind of bitter statement about the fair youth, relishing in the youth's "festering." Or maybe the speaker is trying to convince himself that he never wanted the fair youth anyway!

SYMBOLS

THE FLOWER

The most significant symbol in "Sonnet 94" is the flower introduced in line 9, which represents the self-restrained person described at the beginning of the poem. Like such a person, the flower looks beautiful on the outside. A personified summer finds the flower "sweet" and tends to it, offering it nourishing warmth and light; it essentially fawns over the flower, just as lesser people act as "stewards of" the self-restrained person's excellence.

The flower itself, however, doesn't seem to care about the summer's affection: all that concerns it is life and death. This reflects the way that the person described at the beginning of the poem is "unmoved" by others. Both the flower and self-restrained person are lovely but aloof, inspiring others but themselves uninspired.

And flowers, the speaker also makes clear, aren't always as perfect as they seem: they can become sick, infected at the root, and start to rot and "fester"—just as the high and mighty person from the beginning of "Sonnet 94" is capable of corruption, hypocrisy, and general unpleasantness.

Where this symbol appears in the poem:

- **Line 9:** "flower"
- **Line 11:** "flower"
- **Line 14:** "Lilies"

WEEDS

The weed mentioned at the end of the poem represents a regular, imperfect, and not particularly self-restrained type of person. The weed basically symbolizes all that the flower does not.

The speaker refers to the weed as "base," meaning that it is common, inferior to the beautiful flower. And yet, the speaker insists, the weed does have one advantage over the flower: it doesn't have many expectations placed on it. There are no demands that the weed must be beautiful. And because it was never very dignified anyway, any kind of corruption it might experience is not all that tragic. It's already "base," so it can't fall that far.

Through the symbol of the weed, it's possible to read the poem as asserting that grandeur is overrated. Perhaps the speaker is suggesting that there is something respectable about being just a normal, humble person.

Read in the context of Shakespeare's other sonnets, one might take the flower to represent the fair youth and the weed to represent the speaker of these poems himself. As someone of a lower social status, the speaker neither places upon himself or has placed upon him expectations of greatness or perfection.

Where this symbol appears in the poem:

- **Line 12:** "weed"
- **Line 14:** "weeds"

POETIC DEVICES

METAPHOR

There are quite a few metaphors in the poem. Most obvious, perhaps, is the implied comparison between flowers/weeds and self-restrained people/everyone else. Readers can understand that the flowers of the poem's second half are meant to symbolize the self-restrained people of the first.

But there are more discrete metaphors as well. In line 7, for example, the speaker says, "They are the lords and owners of their faces." Just as a lord might control a piece of land and all who live on it, or like an owner controls their property, the self-restrained person controls their own face.

In line 8, there is another metaphor: "Others but stewards of their excellence." Here, the speaker deems normal people "stewards"—people whose job is to tend to those "lords" from the prior line. Metaphors like this establish the contrast between the self-restrained (and self-important) people that the speaker seems to praise and everyone else.

Where Metaphor appears in the poem:

- **Lines 7-8:** "They are the lords and owners of their faces, / Others but stewards of their excellence."

SIMILE

Line 3 contains the poem's one simile. Here, the speaker compares those high and mighty people who exhibit extreme self-restraint to "stone." While others might be "moved" by such people, they "themselves" are still and steady as a rock.

While the speaker seems, on one level, to be praising such calm and collected individuals, it's also possible to read this as a critique. Stones are immobile and unchanging, which might suggest that these people are stoic but also stubborn to a fault. Stones also aren't alive; they can't see, feel, hear, or, of course, love. It's as though the self-restrained people the speaker is

talking about are marble statues: pretty to look at, regal and sophisticated, but also cold and missing out on all the messiness that can make like interesting.

Where Simile appears in the poem:

- **Line 3:** "themselves as stone"

PERSONIFICATION

The speaker uses personification in the poem's second half, ascribing human qualities to the summer, flowers, and weeds.

In line 9, for example, the speaker says:

> The summer's flower is to the summer sweet

In other words, the summer finds the flower "sweet"; it's as though the summer is a fan of the flower. And in the next lines, the flower itself gets personified: the speaker treats the flower as a male figure with "dignity" (albeit "dignity" that gets easily beat by that of the personified "weed").

By personifying the natural world like this, the speaker makes it clear that all this plant talk is meant to apply to the first half of the poem. That is, the speaker isn't suddenly talking about flowers and weeds just because he feels like it, but because they can offer a lesson about, or an analogy for, the situation described in the first part of the poem.

Where Personification appears in the poem:

- **Lines 9-12:** "The summer's flower is to the summer sweet / Though to itself it only live and die, / But if that flower with base infection meet, / The basest weed outbraves his dignity:"

IRONY

"Sonnet 94" is often considered to be one of Shakespeare's more difficult sonnets, and that's in large part because of its pervasive use of irony. While it's possible to read the sonnet "straight"—to take the speaker at his word, as earnestly praising the fair youth and the self-restrained type of person in general—much of the language of the poem suggests that this praise isn't sincere. That is, it's just as likely that the speaker is actually mocking or critiquing these supposedly ideal people.

A bit of context is important here: at this point in the "Fair Youth" sonnet sequence, the speaker has been rebuffed by the young man he so desires. This poem, then, might be an expression of his frustration at the youth's apparent coldness toward the speaker.

If readers take the poem to be ironic in its praise, it might make more sense: after all, calling someone "cold" and as unfeeling "as stone" is a strange way to pay a compliment! And when the speaker says that the restrained person is "husbanding nature's riches," the speaker might actually be implying that this person's behavior is selfish rather than admirable.

Read ironically, when the speaker says that such restrained people deserve the charmed lives they lead—that they "rightly [...] inherit heaven's graces"—he might mean the very opposite: that they *don't* actually merit special treatment. And when the speaker calls them "lords and owners of their faces," he might actually be mocking the way in which these people think they're better than everyone else.

Where Irony appears in the poem:

- **Line 4:** "Unmoved, cold, and to temptation slow:"
- **Line 5:** "They rightly do inherit heaven's graces"
- **Line 6:** "And husband nature's riches from expense;"
- **Line 7:** "They are the lords and owners of their faces,"
- **Line 8:** "Others but stewards of their excellence"

CAESURA

The poem's most striking caesurae appear in line 4, where the speaker's stiff syntax (that is, word order) creates two distinct pauses in a single line:

> Who, moving others, are themselves as stone,

There's a pause after the word "Who" and then again after the word "moving." These caesurae slow the line down, in effect enacting what's being described: the way that the kind of person the speaker is talking about doesn't "move." Self-restrained people are stiff "as stone," and the pauses built into line 3 reflect that stiffness. The caesura here also creates a clear separation in the line between two kinds of people: those who are moved, and those who are not.

The subtler caesurae in line 4 have a similar effect, slowing down a line that, appropriately, talks about the way that these people are "unmoved" and "slow" to "temptation."

Where Caesura appears in the poem:

- **Line 3:** "Who, moving others, are"
- **Line 4:** "Unmoved, cold, and"

ASSONANCE

The poem uses assonance here and there to make its language more intense. For example, note how the /oo/ sound repeats throughout lines 2-3 (in part thanks to the tongue-twisting diacope of the word "do"):

> That do not do the thing they most do show,
> Who, moving others, are themselves as stone,

This flurry of repeated vowel sounds adds music and intensity

to the speaker's (supposed) praise. In the very next lines, meanwhile, the long, round /o/ sounds of "stone," "cold," and "slow" work alongside caesurae to slow the poem down. This is appropriate for a moment when the speaker is talking about how these self-restrained people are "slow" to be tempted and are still "as stone."

At other points, blips of repeated sound add emphasis to specific images and ideas, as with the flitting /eh/ sounds in "inherit heaven's" in line 5 or the long /ay/ of "basest" and "outbraves" in line 12. Finally, that short /eh/ sound pops up again in the poem's last line in "fester smell," calling readers' attention to this image of rotting flowers.

Where Assonance appears in the poem:

- **Line 3:** "Who, moving," "stone"
- **Line 4:** "cold," "slow"
- **Line 5:** "inherit heaven's"
- **Line 12:** "basest," "outbraves"
- **Line 14:** "fester smell"

SIBILANCE

In "Sonnet 94," sibilance evokes the speaker's praise and sometimes his distaste.

In lines 8-9, for example, gentle /s/ sounds might suggest the delicate loveliness of that sweet summer flower (note that the sibilance here appears at the start of words and thus is also an example of alliteration):

> The summer's flower is to the summer sweet

And yet, as the poem goes on, this sweetness turns sour and sibilance takes a sinister turn. The sudden rush of hissing /s/ sounds in the final two lines make it seem as though the speaker is spitting out his words in disgust:

> For sweetest things turn sourest by their deeds;
> Lilies that fester smell far worse than weeds.

The fact that these /s/ sounds shift from evoking beauty to disgust reflects the speaker's point: that even seeming perfection can be corrupted.

Where Sibilance appears in the poem:

- **Line 9:** "summer's," "summer sweet"
- **Line 13:** "sweetest," "sourest"
- **Line 14:** "fester ," "smel," "l," " worse"

JUXTAPOSITION

"Sonnet 94" is filled with juxtaposition as the speaker contrasts the seemingly ideal, self-restrained person with more emotional common folk.

Some of the juxtaposition here is between appearances and behavior: the people the speaker praises have "power to hurt" but don't hurt, and in fact don't "do the thing they most do show"—that is, the thing they look most likely to do. The juxtaposition here also makes the poem's final couplet more striking: the speaker ultimately argues that people are defined by what they do rather than how they appear—that "deeds" can make even the "sweetest things turn sourest." The self-restrained person's outer appearance thus matters less than how they act—and how they act, the poem implies, isn't always so "sweet."

Other moments of juxtaposition are between the effect that these restrained people have on others and how they behave themselves. They move other people yet are "themselves as stone" and resist temptation, for instance. These people are also "lords" and "owners," whereas others are simply "stewards"—essentially servants.

All this juxtaposition emphasizes just how separate these restrained people seem from the rest of society. They're "flowers" while other people are mere "weeds." And yet, the speaker concludes, even flowers can rot. Despite seeming so different from, so far above, everyone else, even these ideal-seeming people can be brought down to earth.

Where Juxtaposition appears in the poem:

- **Lines 1-4:** "They that have power to hurt and will do none, / That do not do the thing they most do show, / Who, moving others, are themselves as stone, / Unmoved, cold, and to temptation slow:"

VOCABULARY

Heaven's graces (Line 5) - In Christian faiths, grace is the gift of God's goodness. Christian theology holds that grace is something given freely to all believers. Notably, the poem seems to claim that certain people receive more grace than others. In this sense, the poem uses the term loosely.

Husband (Line 6) - To cultivate, to conserve, or hold onto.

Expense (Line 6) - In the context of the poem, "expense" means spending or using up resources. The word "expense" can also carry a sexual connotation, as it does in "Sonnet 129," where the word refers to consummating a sexual act ("The expense of spirit in a waste of shame/ Is lust in action").

Stewards (Line 8) - People who control the property and affairs of a household; more generally, servants, or subordinates who work in service of some kind of superior.

Base (Line 11, Line 12) - Common or lowly. "Base" can also refer to the bottomost layer or level of something.

Outbraves (Line 12) - Withstands.

FORM, METER, & RHYME

FORM

"Sonnet 94" is a Shakespearean sonnet. That means it has 14 lines broken up into three quatrains (four-line stanzas) and ends with a rhyming couplet.

The final couplet of a Shakespearean sonnet typically serves as a quick summation of the poem or offers a condensed statement of the poem's argument. This is certainly the case with the last lines of "Sonnet 94," which read as a kind of pithy aphorism. Notice how the couplet finally brings together the two seemingly disparate concerns of the poem—flowers and types of people.

While Shakespearean sonnets typically consist of three quatrains and a couplet, Italian or Petrarchan sonnets consist of an octave and a sestet: an eight-line stanza followed by a six-line stanza, with a shift in thought/argument (called a turn, or "volta") in between (at line 9).

Though "Sonnet 94" is a relatively typical Shakespearean sonnet in many ways, it also contains a clear turn in line 9: there's a distinct thematic shift between the first eight lines of the poem and the final six. It's only in line 9 that the symbol of the flower appears, and it takes until the last two lines of the poem for the connection between this flower and the people described in the poem's first half to become clear.

METER

"Sonnet 94" is written in iambic pentameter. This means that each line has five iambs, poetic feet with a da-DUM rhythm.

Line 4 is a perfect example of this meter in action:

> Unmo- | ved, cold, | and to | tempta- | tion slow:

Notice how a regular meter is particularly suitable for the content of this line. Like the person being described, the meter is steady, "unmoved." The poem's meter here is itself restrained.

The meter throughout the poem is pretty regular for the most part. At some moments, words must be shortened to fit the meter (as with "power" in line 1 and "flower" each time it appears; both words should be read as having one syllable, "pow'r," "flow'r"). These slight alterations don't affect the meaning of the poem.

That said, there are some clear variations in the meter that do have a noticeable impact. The most dramatic deviation occurs in the last line of the poem:

> Lilies | that fe- | ster smell | far worse | than weeds.

This line begins with a trochee, a different kind of metrical unit consisting of a stressed syllable followed by an unstressed syllable. Because this deviation of the expected meter occurs at the beginning of the line, it's all the more pronounced. Then, there's a type of foot called a spondee (stressed-stressed) with "far worse," resulting in an emphatic three stressed beats in a row: "smell | far worse."

This is no accident. Shakespeare waits until the very end of the poem to shift the meter in order to draw the reader's attention to the last line and to emphasize the corruption of the supposedly ideal person introduced in the first half of the poem. The meter falls apart, evoking the way that seeming perfection can "fester."

RHYME SCHEME

"Sonnet 94" follows the typical rhyme scheme of a Shakespearean sonnet:

> ABAB CDCD EFEF GG

In other words, each quatrain uses an interlocking rhyme pattern: the first and third lines rhyme with each other, as do the second and fourth; the last two lines of the poem then form a rhyming couplet. The quick one-two punch of that couplet makes the ending sound pithy and almost like an aphorism, a quick doling out of wisdom as the speaker wraps up the poem's argument.

SPEAKER

"Sonnet 94" belongs to Shakespeare's "Fair Youth" sequence, a group of 126 poems conventionally read as having a male poet as their speaker and being addressed to a handsome young lover (or, perhaps, very close friend).

Scholars debate how autobiographical these poems are and whether readers should assume that Shakespeare himself is the speaker. It's worth noting that there's no actual indication within this sonnet itself of the speaker's gender, occupation, age, etc. As such, the poem can be read as a general statement about corruption and self-restraint.

What readers can assume, however, is that the poem's speaker is not one of those self-possessed people being praised at the poem's opening. On the contrary, the speaker seems to clearly be one of the "stewards" of such people's "excellence."

How the speaker feels about this situation is up for debate. It's possible that the speaker is sincere in his praise and genuinely thinks that self-restrained people are deserving of all their good fortune. At the same time, it's also possible that the poem is meant to be ironic—that the speaker is actually mocking such people for being callous and cocky.

The poem's context adds nuance here. At this point in the sonnet sequence, the speaker has been rebuffed by the fair

youth—a beautiful, rich, and upper-class young man. It's possible that the speaker is resentful of the youth's refusal to engage romantically, and has written this poem to subtly critique him.

SETTING

Most of Shakespeare's sonnets—"Sonnet 94" included—don't have a particular setting. While their language belongs to Elizabethan London, where and when the poems were written, there are very few setting markers in the poems themselves.

This lack of a defined time or place adds to the poem's ability to make general statements about relationships, human behavior, and love. The speaker's observations can apply to the specific context of his relationship with a certain person, but the observations are also true generally, regardless of context.

CONTEXT

LITERARY CONTEXT

"Sonnet 94" was published in a 1609 quarto alongside 153 Shakespearean sonnets and a longer poem entitled "A Lover's Complaint." This poem was likely written during the 1590s, however, a few years prior to publication.

Shakespeare's sonnets can be broken into two sequences: the first 126 comprise the "Fair Youth" sequence, addressed to a young, handsome man; sonnets 127-154 comprise the "Dark Lady" sequence, addressed to a dark-haired woman. The "Fair Youth" sonnets chart the speaker's relationship with and devotion to this mysterious youth, who is aristocratic, beautiful, sought-after, and self-centered. "Sonnet 94" appears at a point in the sequence when the speaker has begun to feel betrayed by and frustrated with the youth.

The sonnet form originated in Italy and was often used to write about courtly love (that is, about aristocratic romance). Sonnets began to enter English literature in the 1530s and 1540s; while Shakespeare was not the first to use the form in English, he did help popularize it.

Shakespeare's sonnets often draw on the courtly love tradition, whose thematic hallmarks include restraint and unrequited love. Yet even as Shakespeare's sonnets engage many of these themes, they also at times subvert the form's conventions. Much courtly love poetry centers on unattainable, ideal women, for example; neither of the love interests in Shakespeare's sonnets fit this type. The fair youth isn't a woman, for one thing, and the dark lady isn't conventionally attractive.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

William Shakespeare was born in England in 1564. The majority of his writing career took place during the monarchy of Queen Elizabeth I. The period of her reign, 1559-1603, is often referred to as a golden age during which England experienced relative peace and the arts flourished.

Scholars debate the identity of the "fair youth" addressed in the sequence of which "Sonnet 94" is a part, as well as whether the poems are meant to be read as autobiographical. Supporting the idea that Shakespeare himself is the poems' speaker is the fact that they were likely meant to be circulated privately and were initially published without Shakespeare's permission. While close, affectionate male relationships were accepted in the Elizabethan era, homosexuality generally was not. That said, some scholars debate whether the relationship between the sonnets' speaker and the fair youth was truly romantic in nature or simply an intense friendship.

MORE RESOURCES

EXTERNAL RESOURCES

- What Is a Sonnet? — Learn more about the poetic form that Shakespeare helped popularize. (https://poets.org/glossary/sonnet)
- First Printing of the Sonnets (1609) — Check out scans of the first printing of the sonnets via the British Library. (https://www.bl.uk/collection-items/first-edition-of-shakespeares-sonnets-1609#)
- "Sonnet 94" Read Aloud — Listen to actor Sir Patrick Stewart read "Sonnet 94" out loud. (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=i0VbLb80ypg)
- More on Shakespeare's Life — Learn more about the man behind the sonnets. (https://www.bl.uk/shakespeare/articles/shakespeares-life)
- The Mysterious Identity of the "Fair Youth: — This article attempts to unravel the mystery of the fair youth. (https://www.shakespeare.org.uk/explore-shakespeare/blogs/mysterious-identity-fair-youth/)

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 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

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