Sonnet 30: When to the sessions of sweet

POEM TEXT

When to the sessions of sweet silent thought
I summon up remembrance of things past,
I sigh the lack of many a thing I sought,
And with old woes new wail my dear time's waste:
Then can I drown an eye, unus'd to flow,
For precious friends hid in death's dateless night,
And weep afresh love's long since cancell'd woe,
And moan th' expense of many a vanish'd sight;
Then can I grieve at grievances foregone,
And heavily from woe to woe tell o'er
The sad account of fore-bemoaned moan,
Which I new pay as if not paid before.
But if the while I think on thee, dear friend,
All losses are restor'd, and sorrows end.

SUMMARY

When I'm silently reflecting on things that have happened in the past, I feel disappointed that I failed to get the things I wanted. Old sorrows feel new again, and I complain about how I wasted my precious time. Then I can weep heavily, even though I rarely cry, for dear friends who have died; I can weep again for lost loves I'd once gotten over; I can complain about things that have been destroyed. Then I get angry about old insults, and I complain about one bad thing after another: a sad tale of things I've already complained about, which feel as painful now as they did before. But, if I stop and think about you, dear friend, everything I've lost returns to me and all my sorrows end.

THEMES

THE PAIN OF MEMORY

In "Sonnet 30," the speaker rehashes all the injuries and disappointments of life: dead friends, lost pleasures, squandered opportunities. For the speaker, neither memory nor time itself diminishes the pain of these losses: just to think about them brings them back in their full power and difficulty. Indeed, the speaker suggests that memory itself is a powerful source of pain.

The speaker of "Sonnet 30" has a lot of regrets and disappointments. And as soon as the speaker starts to reminisce about "things past," these regrets and disappointments come flocking in, overwhelming the speaker. The speaker broods over "the lack of many a thing I sought"—in other words, about missed opportunities. The speaker also weeps over old friends, long dead: "Then can I drown an eye, unused to flow, / For precious friends hid in death's dateless night." The speaker grieves lost loves too: "love's long since cancelled woe." The first 12 lines of the poem thus constitute a long, exhaustive list of all the things the speaker grieves and regrets.

Strikingly, these disappointments and sorrows don't seem to have faded with time. Time usually takes the sting out of grief and disappointment, but that's not the case for this speaker. The speaker no sooner thinks of some "fore-bemoaned moan" than the speaker has to "new pay as if not paid before." In other words, the speaker endures the pain all over again—and it feels just as fresh and sharp as before; it is as though no time has passed at all.

The first 12 lines of the poem are thus dark and full of despair. The speaker occupies a world in which no one ever really heals, where hurt and pain last forever without subsiding or becoming bearable. And reflecting on the past—remembering it—only brings that pain back with all its power and difficulty.

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-14

THE POWER OF LOVE

The speaker of "Sonnet 30" spends most of the poem in despair: obsessively meditating on past disappointments, regrets, and sorrows. The speaker can't find any relief: even the passage of time doesn't heal these wounds. As we discuss in this guide's theme entry on "The Pain of Memory," remembering these griefs is like enduring their pain all over again. But in the final two lines of the poem, the speaker finally announces that there is something that makes up for all these losses and disappointments: love.

After the speaker's intense despair in the first 12 lines, the couplet that closes the poem provides a sudden and unexpected relief. The speaker reveals that there *is* a way to compensate for disappointment and sorrow. All the speaker has to do is think about "thee," a "dear friend"—and "all losses are restored, and sorrows end." In other words, the speaker feels powerfully about the "dear friend"—so powerfully that simply thinking about this "dear friend" is enough to dispel the obsessive negative thoughts that pursue the speaker.

"Sonnet 30" on its own doesn't tell the reader who the "dear

friend" is or what kind of relationship the "dear friend" has with the speaker. It could be read simply as a poem in praise of the transformative power of friendship—which alone, it seems, can heal the wounds that life inflicts. But in the broader context of Shakespeare's 154 sonnets, it's clear who this "dear friend" is: he's the beautiful young man whom Shakespeare's speaker obsessively courts and praises in sonnets 1-126.

In other words, the speaker of this poem—if the reader takes the poem in the broader context of the sequence—isn't just saying that friendship makes things better. Rather the speaker is insisting that love—passionate, erotic love between two people—supplies all the pleasure, hope, and solace necessary to survive life's disappointments and sorrows.

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-14

LINE-BY-LINE ANALYSIS

LINES 1-4

When to the sessions of sweet silent thought
I summon up remembrance of things past,
I sigh the lack of many a thing I sought,
And with old woes new wail my dear time's waste:

The first four lines of "Sonnet 30" establish one of the poem's themes and its form. The poem begins with the speaker reminiscing, thinking about "things past." The speaker describes this act of reminiscing with an evocative and suggestive metaphor. The speaker describes thought itself—"sweet silent thought"—as "sessions." In Renaissance England, where the poem was written, the word "sessions" had a specific technical meaning: it refers to court sessions, the period of the year when magistrates and judges heard legal cases. The metaphor thus suggests that the speaker experiences "sweet silent thought" as a kind of tribunal: a place of trial and questioning. The metaphor might even suggest that the speaker starts the poem feeling guilty.

Indeed, as becomes clear in lines 3-4, the speaker's memories are not pleasant. Instead of returning to happy times, the speaker focuses on "old woes": disappointments and failures from the past. For the speaker, just thinking about these things is enough to bring them back with all their painful power. And so the speaker "new wail[s]" them. In other words, the speaker grieves the "lack of many a thing I sought" and "my dear time's waste" again. Just remembering these failures and wasted opportunities is enough to send the speaker into a spiral of regret and self-recrimination.

The tone of these opening lines is thus dark and brooding: they are full of guilt, grief, and disappointment. But the poem itself is exceptionally elegant and refined. That creates some tension for the reader. For example, line 4 contains a strong alliterative /w/ sound in "**w**oes," "**w**ail," and "**w**aste." The /w/ sound underlines the way old and new overlap, the way the speaker tries—and fails—to get over the past. The assonant /o/ sound in the line, in "**o**ld w**oe**s," also emphasizes the speaker's grief: it sounds like someone moaning. But these sounds work in a highly literary, even artificial way. Though the poem describes despair and disillusionment, it remains powerfully controlled and organized.

This control is reflected in the poem's form. "Sonnet 30" is a Shakespearean sonnet. It follows a strict rhyme scheme—the first twelve lines form three rhyming quatrains and follow an ABAB pattern. The poem also follows an equally strict meter, iambic pentameter. The speaker's pensive meditative mood is further underlined throughout by the speaker's use of end-stop: almost all of the poem's lines are end-stopped, as though the speaker were hesitating, procrastinating. One of the only exceptions comes in the poem's first line, which is enjambed. That enjambment gives the opening of the poem a sense of energy and sprightliness that quickly fades as the speaker wades deeper and deeper into despair.

LINES 5-8

Then can I drown an eye, unus'd to flow,
For precious friends hid in death's dateless night,
And weep afresh love's long since cancell'd woe,
And moan th' expense of many a vanish'd sight;

In lines 5-8, the speaker continues to rehearse a series of regrets, disappointments, and griefs. In lines 5-6, the speaker describes weeping—metaphorically, to "drown an eye"—for dead friends. This is unusual for the speaker: the speaker's eye is "unus'd to flow." In other words, the speaker doesn't often cry. That might be surprising, since by this point the speaker seems to be wallowing in grief. The speaker marks off this phrase, "unus'd to flow," with a caesura—one of only three in the poem. As a result, it feels like a break from the poem's world, a crack in the otherwise dark space the speaker occupies.

The speaker uses another metaphor to describe death: the speaker's friends are "hid in death's dateless night." Night here is a symbol for the afterlife, the place where the souls of the dead go after they die. The metaphor emphasizes the permanence of death: the speaker cannot find these friends, cannot reconnect with or recover them, because of the way they're "hid" in a dark, forbidding, and timeless space.

In lines 7-8, the speaker turns to another set of disappointments and sorrows. The speaker "weep[s] afresh" for "love's long since cancell'd woe." In other words, the speaker is weeping over lost loves. Then, in line 8, the speaker "moan[s]" about "vanish'd sights"—in other words, lost buildings and monuments.

These lines thus continue the dark mood established in the first four lines. The speaker remains deep in despair. The poem's

heavy, insistent end-stops underline this dark mood. All of these lines are end-stopped: as a result, the poem feels pensive, slow, meditative—as though the speaker is dwelling on each injury and grief, unwilling to move forward. And the mournful assonant /o/ sound from the poem's first four lines reappears here, in "woe" and "moan" in lines 7 and 8. The poem continues to sound sad, full of grief.

At the same time, the poem also continues to sound refined and elegant. These lines are rhymed CDCD and written in strong, fluid iambic pentameter. Even as the speaker wallows in despair, the poet effortlessly fulfills the complicated demands of the Shakespearean sonnet. Indeed, the poem even finds room for elegant plays of alliteration and consonance, as in line 6:

> For precious friends hid in death's dateless night,

The pattern of /n/, /d/, and /t/ sounds is sophisticated and refined. Even as these sharp sounds underline the pain that runs through the line, they also remind the reader of the speaker's control and poetic confidence—and point toward a hidden reserve of hope and possibility in the speaker's otherwise dark world.

LINES 9-12

> *Then can I grieve at grievances foregone,*
> *And heavily from woe to woe tell o'er*
> *The sad account of fore-bemoaned moan,*
> *Which I new pay as if not paid before.*

In lines 9-12, the speaker continues to wallow in grief and disappointment. In line 9, the speaker "grieves at grievances foregone." In other words, the speaker wrestles with old "grievances"—resentments or disappointments. In line 10, the speaker "heavily" goes over "woe" after "woe." The reader gets the sense that the speaker can't stop—even if the speaker wanted to. The complaints and moans pour out of the speaker compulsively.

And the speaker doesn't get any satisfaction or relief from rehearsing these old grievances. Instead, the speaker compares old "woe[s]" to an "account"—a debt or financial obligation. Each time the speaker calls to mind these "fore-bemoaned moan[s]," the speaker has to "new pay" them. This is a complicated financial metaphor, but its general message is clear. The speaker can't get over these regrets. Time doesn't lessen the wounds: instead, just remembering them is enough to bring them back with all their painful power.

Three of these lines employ polyptoton: the speaker repeats variations on the same word: "grieve" and "grievances" in line 9, "fore-bemoaned" and "moan" in line 11, and "pay" and "paid" in line 12. These repetitions have a strong and important effect: they emphasize the speaker's difficulty distinguishing past and present, underlining how past injuries and disappointments cause the speaker pain in the present.

The poem's sound also emphasizes the speaker's pain: the same assonant /o/ sound that appeared throughout the first 8 lines appears here too—in "woe" and "moan." Moreover, the enjambment in line 10 emphasizes the way that moans, complaints, and grievances pour out of the speaker—overwhelming the poem's otherwise careful and insistent pattern of end-stopped lines.

These lines complete the main body of the Shakespearean sonnet. The first twelve lines rhyme ABABCDCDEFEF, and they are all written in iambic pentameter. The form of the poem is stable, predictable—and so is its content. From the start of the poem through the end of line 12, the speaker has insisted, almost monotonously, on the intense pain of memory. However, both the poem's form and its content shift between lines 12 and 13. That shift is a traditional aspect of the Shakespearean sonnet; it is called the *volta*, or turn. Sonnets traditionally have a volta, and in a Shakespearean sonnet it always comes after line 12. It offers the speaker a chance to reconsider things—to offer new ideas and arguments. The volta is, in other words, an opportunity to transform the poem.

LINES 13-14

> *But if the while I think on thee, dear friend,*
> *All losses are restor'd, and sorrows end.*

The speaker spends the first 12 lines of "Sonnet 30" rehearsing setbacks, regrets, and disappointment. Indeed, it seems like there's no way to get over these sorrows: time doesn't heal them, and remembering them brings them back in all their power and pain. But things shift suddenly and decisively in lines 13-14: the speaker announces that there *is* a way to get over the past, with all its sorrows and disappointments. All the speaker has to do is "think on thee, dear friend" and everything gets better: "All losses are restor'd, and sorrows end."

This is a surprising end. The dark clouds that have followed the speaker throughout the poem suddenly clear up. And the speaker suddenly introduces a new character to the poem. Apparently, the speaker has been talking to someone the whole time—an instance of apostrophe. This person—the "dear friend"—appears throughout the first 126 of Shakespeare's *Sonnets*. He is a beautiful and aristocratic young man—with whom the speaker of Shakespeare's poems is passionately in love.

So the poem is suddenly revealed as a love poem. Instead of being simply about the intense pain of memory, it's about the power of love to repair the injuries of the past. Love, the speaker argues, acts as a powerful consolation: it can change the way the speaker thinks, rescuing the speaker from the intense sorrow that otherwise consumes the poem—a power emphasized by the alliteration between "think" and "thee," which links the "dear friend" to the speaker's thoughts.

The tone of these lines is thus very different from the rest of the poem. For instance, these lines are end-stopped—like most of the rest of the poem—but their end-stops feel different. Instead of conveying despair and heaviness, they feel strong and confident. And these lines contain two caesuras—though the poem is otherwise almost entirely free of caesura. Just as the "dear friend" punctures the speaker's gloom, so too the caesuras break up these lines, making them feel less meditative and pensive.

The final two lines are written in iambic pentameter, like the rest of the poem. But their rhyme scheme shifts: they form a rhyming couplet. This formal shift underlines the change in the speaker's mood and the sudden transformation of the poem. Looking back, it feels like the poem has been subtly building up to this moment all along. The speaker dwells on the pain of memory to make the dear friend's love feel all the more powerful and transformative. The poem is ultimately not simply a meditation on the pain of memory, but on the power of love to repair the losses and damages that the speaker has endured.

SYMBOLS

NIGHT

Night is a symbol of the afterlife, the place where the dead go. For the speaker, death is dark, timeless space: it is "dateless." There is no hope or light in it. Once someone sinks into death, they are lost forever—they cannot be restored to life. This symbol of the afterlife thus links to the overall sense of despair, of hopelessness, the speaker feels in the first 12 lines of the poem.

This treatment of the afterlife is remarkably atheistic for a poem written in a culture where regular attendance at church was mandatory. The speaker emphatically does not imagine these "precious friends" in Heaven, enjoying eternal life. Indeed, the symbol may be said to exclude the Christian hope of resurrection from the poem. Only love itself—erotic love—can restore the loss the speaker feels so intensely.

Where this symbol appears in the poem:

- **Line 6:** "night"

POETIC DEVICES

END-STOPPED LINE

Most of the lines in "Sonnet 30" are end-stopped. (Indeed, the poem has only two enjambments, in lines 1 and 10.) This gives the poem a slow pace and a meditative feeling. Pausing at the end of most lines, the speaker feels exhausted, overwhelmed by despair and regret, unable to keep going.

That feeling is especially strong in lines 5-8:

> Then can I drown an eye, unus'd to flow,
> For precious friends hid in death's dateless night,
> And weep afresh love's long since cancell'd woe,
> And moan th' expense of many a vanish'd sight;

Here the speaker describes a series of sorrows—the death of "precious friends," lost loves, etc. Each line introduces a new grief or disappointment. And each line is end-stopped. The end-stops slow these lines down: each line is pensive and heavy. As a result, it almost feels like the speaker is hesitating at the end of each line—delaying the next line, avoiding discussing the next form of grief or sorrow.

End-stop generally works this way in the poem: slowing it down, emphasizing the speaker's sorrow and regret. In the final couplet of the poem, however it plays a different function. Both of the final two lines are end-stopped:

> But if the while I think on thee, dear friend,
> All losses are restor'd, and sorrows end.

Here the end-stops—particularly in the final line of the poem—communicate certainty, confidence, and finality. The speaker has no doubts about the power of love, its capacity to restore losses and end sorrows. Although these lines are end-stopped, the end-stops function differently than they do in the rest of the poem: no longer expressing sorrow and regret, they embody the speaker's confidence in the power of love.

Line 13, however, could also be considered an instance of enjambment, since the meaning of the phrase ("if the while I think on thee") isn't completed until the next line. However, the incompleteness doesn't convey uncertainty. Rather, it suggests excitement. Again, this contributes to the overall confidence in love that the final couplet talks about.

Where End-Stopped Line appears in the poem:

- **Line 2:** "past,"
- **Line 3:** "sought,"
- **Line 4:** "waste:"
- **Line 5:** "flow,"
- **Line 6:** "night,"
- **Line 7:** "woe,"
- **Line 8:** "sight;"
- **Line 9:** "foregone,"
- **Line 11:** "moan,"
- **Line 12:** "before."
- **Line 13:** "friend,"
- **Line 14:** "end."

ENJAMBMENT

"Sonnet 30" contains only two enjambments. Because there are so few enjambments in the poem, the device does not play a set role in the poem. Instead, it's better to examine each enjambment in turn.

The first appears in line 1:

> When to the sessions of sweet silent thought
> I summon up remembrance of things past,

This enjambment falls in an interesting place in the poem. The speaker hasn't really gotten into the poem's major theme—its discussion of the pain of memory. Instead, the speaker is setting things up, describing the act of reminiscing about "things past"—not yet talking about the powerful effect of such reminiscences.

So, the opening of the poem feels lively and quick, its velocity increased by the enjambment. And that sets up a powerful contrast with the rest of the poem, which is almost entirely end-stopped. After this initial enjambment—which sets up a sprightly rhythm for the poem—the switch to end-stop feels like a descent, as though the speaker is losing energy and enthusiasm.

The next enjambment appears in line 10:

> And heavily from woe to woe tell o'er
> The sad account of fore-bemoaned moan,

Here the speaker is describing the effect of reminiscing about "things past." The speaker can't stop complaining: the speaker goes "from woe to woe" in a torrent of grievance and resentment. The enjambment captures this flood of speech: the speaker's complaints spill across the line, uncontained, uncontainable. It mimics the way the speaker can't stop complaining about "fore-bemoaned moan."

It should also be noted that line 13 can be considered an instance of enjambment as well. Here, the phrase begun in line 13 ("if the while I think on thee") isn't completed until line 14, capturing the speaker's excitement in thinking about the "dear friend."

So, when the poem does use enjambment, it does so for local, specific rhythms—emphasizing particular moments of passion or intensity, rather than answering to a larger pattern or plan.

Where Enjambment appears in the poem:

- **Lines 1-2:** "thought / I"
- **Lines 10-11:** "o'er / The"

CAESURA

"Sonnet 30" contains remarkably few caesuras. Indeed, there are only three in the whole poem: one in line 5, one in line 13, and one in line 14. Though the poem's caesuras are notable, the lack of caesura in the poem is equally notable—and important to its effect. Almost all the poem's lines are unbroken by caesura, and almost all of them are end-stopped. In the absence of caesura—and with the almost constant presence of end-stop—the poem's lines feel solid and heavy. And the speaker who articulates them feels pensive, weighed down by grief. The lack of caesura contributes to this sense of heaviness.

Indeed, in the twelve lines the speaker dedicates to discussing grief and regret, there's only one caesura, in line 5:

> Then can I drown an eye, unus'd to flow,

The caesura captures a surprising admission from the speaker. Although the speaker is consumed by disappointment and despair, that's not the way things normally are. Indeed, the speaker doesn't usually spend time weeping; the speaker's eye is "unus'd to flow." The caesura thus highlights a fact about the speaker that momentarily breaks the spell of grief and disappointment—hinting that the speaker is usually much happier.

Similarly, in lines 13-14, two caesuras introduce radical alternatives to the speaker's grief:

> But if the while I think on thee, dear friend,
> All losses are restor'd, and sorrows end.

The first caesura introduces the speaker's "dear friend." The second marks one of the dear friend's powers, the power to "end" sorrow. The caesuras capture how just the thought of the dear friend is enough to break through the speaker's gloom and despair.

Where Caesura appears in the poem:

- **Line 5:** ", "
- **Line 13:** ", "
- **Line 14:** ", "

ALLITERATION

"Sonnet 30" is a strongly alliterative poem. Most of its lines contain at least some alliteration—and that alliteration tends to be strong and noticeable. The poem's frequent use of alliteration helps it feel elegant and refined: even though it describes dark, obsessive thoughts, it is a poem of unusual beauty.

One can feel the tension between the poem's elegant beauty and its dark content in line 4:

> And with old woes new wail my dear time's waste:

An alliterative /w/ sound runs through the line, linking together all the bad things it describes, "old woes," "wail[ing]" and "my dear time's waste." The /w/ sound emphasizes the way old and new are mingled together in the speaker's mind, the way the speaker tries—and fails—to get over past injuries. These are sad, hard things to contemplate and describe. But the /w/ sound links them together in an elegant and powerful way.

The reader might wonder why a poem about obsession and despair is so elegant, so carefully composed. The answer comes in the poem's final two lines, where the speaker reveals that there *is* one way to get over past injuries and disappointments—to "think on thee, dear friend." In other words, the speaker's love for the "dear friend" allows the speaker to move past grief. The alliteration between "think" and "thee" emphasizes the powerful connection between the "dear friend" and the speaker's thoughts—the way simply thinking about the "dear friend" is enough to reshape the speaker's thoughts.

The poem is thus an elegant tribute to the power of love in general—and to the speaker's love for the dear friend in particular. The first twelve lines serve to set up this tribute. They are so elegant, so rich with alliteration, because their true purpose is not to dwell on despair and grief, but to set up a refined compliment to someone the speaker truly loves.

Where Alliteration appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "sessions," "sweet," "silent," "thought"
- **Line 2:** "summon," "things"
- **Line 3:** "sigh," "thing," "sought"
- **Line 4:** "with," "woes," "wail," "dear," "waste"
- **Line 5:** "drown," "flow"
- **Line 6:** "For," "friends," "death's," "dateless"
- **Line 7:** "weep," "love's," "long," "woe"
- **Line 8:** "moan," "many"
- **Line 9:** "grieve," "grievances"
- **Line 10:** "woe," "woe"
- **Line 12:** "new," "pay," "not," "paid"
- **Line 13:** "think," "thee"

ASSONANCE

"Sonnet 30" is chock full of alliteration and consonance, but its use of assonance is more subtle, most noticeably cropping up in its rhymes. That's not to say, however, that there aren't several important instances of assonance in the poem.

Particularly notable is a sound that the poem indulges in repeatedly: /o/. The poem's assonant /o/ sound first appears in line 4:

> And with old woes new wail my dear time's waste:

The sound then cascades through the poem, in the rhyme between "flow" and "woe" in lines 5 and 7; in the word "moan" in line 8; and then in variations on those words that pop up in the following lines, "woe to woe" in line 10 and "fore-bemoaned moan" in line 11 (where the poem's use assonance overlaps with its use of polyptoton).

There's a good reason why this sound keeps coming up in the poem. It sounds mournful, like someone moaning in pain. The assonant /o/ sound that runs through these lines helps them do more than just describe the speaker's pain: they embody it, becoming, in their own right, cries of agony.

Other instances of assonance work in smaller ways. Often, assonance helps to create a sense of cohesion in phrases, such as in line 6: "For precious friends hid in death's dateless night." The short /e/ and /i/ sounds help this line feel unified. Similar moments occur in phrases like "When to the sessions" in line 1 and "while I think on thee, dear friend" in line 13. These uses of assonance, both great and small, contribute to the poem's overall feeling of artistry.

Where Assonance appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "When," "sessions," "silent," "thought"
- **Line 2:** "I," "summon," "up," "past"
- **Line 3:** "I," "sigh," "lack," "I," "sought"
- **Line 4:** "old," "woes," "wail," "waste"
- **Line 5:** "I," "eye," "flow"
- **Line 6:** "precious," "friends," "hid," "in," "death's," "dateless," "night"
- **Line 7:** "cancell'd," "woe"
- **Line 8:** "moan," " vanish'd," "sight"
- **Line 9:** "grieve," "grievances," "foregone"
- **Line 10:** "heavily," "woe," "woe," "tell," "o'er"
- **Line 11:** "fore," "bemoaned," "moan"
- **Line 12:** "pay," "paid," "before"
- **Line 13:** "while," "I," "think," "thee," "dear," "friend"
- **Line 14:** "losses," "sorrows," "end"

CONSONANCE

"Sonnet 30" is a sonically rich poem. It uses a lot of alliteration and consonance. And all those sounds help make the poem feel elegant—a refined, beautifully constructed compliment to the "dear friend" that the speaker loves. Indeed, the poem is a tribute to the power of love itself to compensate for disappointment and grief.

The reader can see this elegant sonic play in action in line 6:

> For precious friends hid in death's dateless night,

The line contains a series of alliterative and consonant sounds—/n/, /d/, and /t/. These sounds overlap. For instance, the /n/ sound is the first to appear, but between its first and second appearance in the line, there are three /d/ sounds. These

sounds are sharp and piercing; they emphasize the pain and trauma that the speaker experiences reflecting on dead friends.

But the sounds are also controlled and well-patterned. As a result, the reader hears more than pain in this line—the reader also hears the speaker's control and poetic power shaping these experiences. In this sense, the poem's consonance subtly hints that the reader shouldn't take the speaker's despair and disappointment *so* seriously. It may be sincere, but it is also being used to set up the poem's final two lines—with their tribute to the power of the "dear friend."

Where Consonance appears in the poem:

- Line 1
- Line 2
- Line 3
- Line 4
- Line 5
- Line 6
- Line 7
- Line 8
- Line 9
- Line 10
- Line 11
- Line 12
- Line 13
- Line 14

METAPHOR

"Sonnet 30" is a highly metaphorical poem. The speaker uses metaphor throughout the first twelve lines to describe the powerful effect of memory. Indeed, the speaker opens with the poem with a suggestive metaphor for memory itself:

> When to the sessions of sweet silent thought
> I summon up remembrance of things past,

Here, the speaker compares thinking to "sessions." In Renaissance England, "sessions" were the periods of the year when court was in session, when judges sat to hear trials. In other words, the speaker imagines thinking as a legal proceeding. Memory is not something pleasant, something the speaker engages in gladly. Instead, it is a tribunal—and the speaker is on trial. This suggests, from the very start of the poem, that the speaker feels guilty; that the speaker's memories lead to pain and self-recrimination, not joy or nostalgia.

The speaker turns to metaphor several more times in the heart of the poem. The speaker compares weeping to "drown[ing] an eye"—another dark image, suggesting the depth of the speaker's despair. And in line 6, the speaker compares death to being "hid in [...] dateless night," to being shrouded in pitch-black eternity. In other words, the speaker feels that lost friends are inaccessible, permanently lost. These metaphors reinforce the speaker's sense of deep disillusionment and despair.

As the poem progresses, the speaker keeps listing more and more disappointments and sorrows. The speaker seems obsessive, unable to stop fixating on these losses. The speaker acknowledges this in a complex metaphor that runs through lines 10-12:

> And heavily from woe to woe tell o'er
> The sad account of fore-bemoaned moan,
> Which I new pay as if not paid before.

The speaker compares these disappointments and sorrows to an "account"—in other words, a bill or a debt, something the speaker has to pay. But the speaker has to pay this "account" again: the speaker must "new pay as if not paid before."

The speaker thus compares grief and sorrow to a financial transaction—a particularly cruel one, in which the speaker must pay the same debt over and over again, without any reduction in the penalty or obligation. This is a complex and odd metaphor, but its message is relatively clear: the speaker's sorrow doesn't lessen over time; instead, each time the speaker remembers a grief or disappointment, it feels as sharp and painful as ever.

Where Metaphor appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "the sessions of sweet silent thought"
- **Line 5:** "can I drown an eye"
- **Line 6:** "hid in death's dateless night,"
- **Lines 10-12:** "And heavily from woe to woe tell o'er / The sad account of fore-bemoaned moan, / Which I new pay as if not paid before."

APOSTROPHE

The first twelve lines of "Sonnet 30" are introspective, even isolated. The speaker is meditating deeply on past griefs and disappointments. As the speaker does so, the outside world seems to fall away. The speaker is lost in the past. If there are other people in the poem, "precious friends," old lovers, they are all in the past, irretrievably lost. The speaker seems cut off from such meaningful human contact in the present.

So it comes as a considerable surprise, even a shock, when the speaker suddenly directly addresses someone—a "dear friend"—in the poem's final two lines. (This "dear friend" is the beautiful young man whom Shakespeare's speaker obsessively courts in the first 126 of his *Sonnets*.) This use of apostrophe fundamentally reshapes the way the reader understands the poem. It turns out that the speaker is not alone or isolated, meditating on grief and disappointment. Instead, the speaker has been addressing a lover all along.

The long list of the speaker's sorrows and griefs thus serves a point. The speaker lists all these things in order to make the poem's closing couplet—with its elegant tribute to the power of love to dispel grief and compensate for disappointment—all the more powerful. Because the speaker has spent all this time describing the depths of despair, the dear friend's power to dispel that despair becomes more remarkable and impressive. The poem's use of apostrophe—the way it's withheld until the very last moment—thus underlines the power of love.

Where Apostrophe appears in the poem:

- **Lines 13-14:** "But if the while I think on thee, dear friend, / All losses are restor'd, and sorrows end."

POLYPTOTON

"Sonnet 30" is, in part, about the intense pain of memory. For the poem's speaker, remembering a sorrow or disappointment is as painful as enduring that sorrow or disappointment for the first time. The speaker uses polyptoton repeatedly in lines 9-12 to emphasize this point. The repetition of forms of the same word allows the speaker to underline the way that grief and sorrow recur without diminishing in power:

> Then can I grieve at grievances foregone,
> And heavily from woe to woe tell o'er
> The sad account of fore-bemoaned moan,
> Which I new pay as if not paid before.

Three of these lines contain an instance of polyptoton (while line 10 contains a similar use of diacope).

Here, polyptoton stages a contrast between the past and the present—between, for example, the speaker's current grief and "grievances foregone," or between the speaker's new and old payments for a "sad account," or debt. But this contrast between past and present breaks down: the use of polyptoton suggests that there actually isn't much difference between them for the speaker. The same griefs and payments mark both past and present; the same sorrows recur with the same, undiminished power. Polyptoton thus underscores the speaker's fundamental thesis about memory: it does not diminish. For the speaker, time doesn't heal any wounds.

Where Polyptoton appears in the poem:

- **Line 9:** "Then can I grieve at grievances foregone"
- **Line 10:** "And heavily from woe to woe tell o'er"
- **Line 11:** "The sad account of fore-bemoaned moan"
- **Line 12:** "Which I new pay as if not paid before"

VOCABULARY

Sessions (Line 1) - Court proceedings. In early modern England, judges would sit to hear cases for limited, regularly scheduled, periods called "sessions."

Remembrance (Line 2) - Memories.

Lack (Line 3) - The failure to obtain something the speaker desired.

Old Woes (Line 4) - Old sorrows.

New Wail (Line 4) - To mourn once again the speaker's "old woes" or old sorrows.

Drown An Eye (Line 5) - To weep heavily, as if the eye is drowning in tears.

Unus'd (Line 5) - Not used to, not accustomed to.

Dateless (Line 6) - Timeless. Because death is eternal, the dead do not experience time.

Afresh (Line 7) - Once again.

Th'expense (Line 8) - The loss of, the destruction of.

Foregone (Line 9) - Something in the past, something that's already happened.

O'er (Line 10) - Over. The word has been shortened for the sake of the meter; it should be pronounced as one syllable (as "or").

Fore-bemoaned (Line 11) - Something the speaker has already moaned about.

Thee (Line 13) - You. An informal—and now obsolete—way of addressing someone.

FORM, METER, & RHYME

FORM

"Sonnet 30" is a Shakespearean sonnet. That means it follows a set form. The poem has 14 lines in a single stanza, it's written in iambic pentameter, and it has a distinctive rhyme scheme. Although Shakespeare didn't invent the Shakespearean sonnet, he did popularize it. (And he wrote more than 150 of them in his lifetime, making him the acknowledged master of the form.) The Shakespearean sonnet is divided into two sections: the first 12 lines—which can be broken down further into quatrains—and the final 2 lines, which form a rhyming couplet.

The shift between lines 12 and 13 is called the *volta*. That's an Italian word, which means "turn." It marks a point where things shift: the speaker pauses to reconsider the poem's argument, to propose a new idea. The volta falls very late in a Shakespearean sonnet. The speaker only has two lines to reconsider things, to propose new ideas—and so the voltas of Shakespearean sonnets often feel forced and unconvincing. On the other hand,

sometimes this abrupt artificiality can contribute to the poem's overall effect. By contrast, in the Petrarchan sonnet—an older form—the volta falls between lines 8 and 9, giving the speaker much longer to develop a counter-argument, to change his or her mind.

In "Sonnet 30," the speaker spends most of the poem describing setbacks, sorrows, and regrets. And while the speaker does proclaim in lines 13-14 that love "restor[es]" "all losses," a reader might feel like the power of the speaker's sorrows outweighs this hasty and conventional ending.

METER

"Sonnet 30" is written in iambic pentameter, the standard meter for a Shakespearean sonnet. Iambic pentameter has a duh DUM rhythm, with five poetic feet in each line. The reader can hear this rhythm in line 5:

> Then can | I drown | an eye, | unus'd | to flow,

Pioneered by earlier English poets like Geoffrey Chaucer and Sir Thomas Wyatt, iambic pentameter became popular and widely used during the 1580s and 1590s—when Shakespeare was first cutting his teeth as a poet and playwright. Iambic pentameter is a prestigious and important meter; using it in a sonnet, Shakespeare suggests that he takes his topic seriously—that he considers the speaker's struggles to be dignified and weighty.

Shakespeare is one of the acknowledged masters of iambic pentameter. The reader can see that mastery in the way he works metrical variations into the poem. These variations keep the rhythm of the poem lively, without upsetting its overall flow—or attracting too much attention to themselves. For example, line 3 contains an anapest midway through the line:

> I sigh | the lack | of man- | y a thing | I sought,

The anapest gives the line a slight hiccup, a slight syncopation—but it doesn't distract the reader or call too much attention to itself. Shakespeare is able to maintain a strong rhythm throughout the poem while also incorporating the variations necessary to keep the poem lively and engaging.

RHYME SCHEME

"Sonnet 30" is a Shakespearean sonnet. All Shakespearean sonnets have the same rhyme scheme:

> ABABCDCDEFEFGG

In other words, even though the poem is one continuous stanza, it can be broken up into smaller units. The first twelve lines divide into three rhyming quatrains. The final two lines of the poem are a rhyming couplet. The poem thus shifts, formally, between lines 12 and 13.

In his sonnets, Shakespeare habitually exploits that formal shift. The final two lines of the poem become a place for the speaker of the poem to reflect on the previous twelve lines—sometimes reinforcing their arguments and sometimes, as in "Sonnet 30" using them as a place to introduce new ideas. This is called the *volta*, or the turn. The introduction of the rhyming couplet (GG) as opposed to the alternating rhymes of the rest of the sonnet (e.g. ABAB) captures that shift.

The rhymes in "Sonnet 30" are strong and straightforward. Although the rhyme between "past" and "waste" in lines 2 and 4 and the rhyme between "foregone" and "moan" in lines 9 and 11 sound like slant rhymes to modern ears, they wouldn't have to Shakespeare: English pronunciation has changed since he wrote the poem. For Shakespeare's early readers, these would've been perfect rhymes. The formal polish of the poem, with its strong iambic pentameter and its clear, strong rhymes thus stands in tension with the speaker's powerful sense of disappointment, even despair.

SPEAKER

The speaker of "Sonnet 30" is full of regrets, disappointments, and sorrows. Over the course of the poem's first twelve lines, the speaker outlines those griefs in detail, moving from frustrated ambition to grief over the deaths of "precious friends." The speaker seems obsessed with these setbacks and regrets. They don't get easier over time: whenever the speaker remembers them, they are just as painful.

However, the speaker also has a "dear friend"—someone whom the speaker cares about deeply. And the speaker feels so strongly about this "dear friend" that just thinking about them is enough to wash away sorrow, loss, and regret. In the broader context of Shakespeare's *Sonnets*—a sequence of 154 poems—this "dear friend" is a beautiful young man with for whom the speaker has a deep, homoerotic passion, and with whom the speaker has a complicated, difficult love affair. At the heart of "Sonnet 30," then, is an eloquent testament to the power of love—which, the speaker argues, can repair any injury or disappointment.

It is worth noting that many readers treat Shakespeare's *Sonnets* as an autobiographical document. In other words, they assume that the speaker of the *Sonnets*—including "Sonnet 30"—is Shakespeare himself. There are some hints in the historical record that line up with the arguments and characters that appear in the *Sonnets*. But there is no evidence in the poems themselves that they are autobiographical, or even written directly in Shakespeare's voice.

Additionally, much of the narrative, or story, that critics see in the *Sonnets* depends on the order in which they were first printed, in 1609. But there's no evidence that Shakespeare was actually involved in the publication of his own poems; many critics suspect the 1609 edition of being a piracy. So the reader

should be cautious when attempting to read "Sonnet 30"—or any of Shakespeare's other sonnets—as evidence about Shakespeare's own life.

SETTING

In the opening lines of "Sonnet 30," the speaker describes "summon[ing] up" to the "sessions of sweet silent thought [...] remembrance of things past." In other words, the speaker is remembering things, bringing memories forward as though they were on trial at a "session," a court proceeding. The setting for the poem is thus the speaker's own mind and memories.

The speaker spends most of the poem sifting through these memories, going over all of life's disappointments and griefs. The speaker obsesses over these setbacks. Indeed, they are so powerful that the speaker can't let them go—and can't look beyond them. The speaker feels trapped in memory, unable to see the world outside. The poem never situates the speaker in a place or a broader setting. Even when the speaker remembers the "dear friend"—the love that restores "all losses"—the speaker still doesn't turn outward, doesn't rejoin the world through, for example, descriptive imagery. The poem's setting is thus the claustrophobic, circumscribed world of the speaker's mind.

CONTEXT

LITERARY CONTEXT

The sonnet originally developed as a form of popular song. During the early Middle Ages, it was sung in Italian taverns. It's hard to imagine it—now that the word "sonnet" is almost synonymous with elegant, refined love poetry—but the sonnet started its life as a drinking song. However, Italian poets like Petrarch and Dante made the sonnet their own. They wanted to write poems in their own language—not Latin—and so they turned to the sonnet as an appropriate Italian form.

These poets also gave the sonnet its distinctive content and themes. They used the sonnet to write achingly beautiful and passionate love poems for beautiful, inaccessible women. Most of the poets who followed them adopted this gender dynamic. Shakespeare's sonnets are among the only that articulate homoerotic passion, instead of a traditionally heterosexual desire.

From Italy, the sonnet spread across Europe, becoming, for several centuries, one of the most popular poetic forms. The sonnet reached England relatively late in its history. By the time English poets began writing sonnets, in the 1530s and 1540s, Petrarch and Dante's experiments were several centuries old. But English poets thoroughly embraced the form. Following the publication of Sir Philip Sidney's *Astrophil and Stella* in 1590, there was a sonnet craze. For about ten years, English poets—including Edmund Spenser, Thomas Watson, and Shakespeare himself—churned out sonnet sequences.

Although Shakespeare's *Sonnets* were not published until 1609, well after the craze had burned out, they were written at the height of the form's popularity. Perhaps due to their late publication, Shakespeare's *Sonnets* were not widely read until they were republished in 1780. Today, Shakespeare's *Sonnets* are considered to be his crowning poetic achievement—and sometimes people even read them as a powerful record of his own sexual and emotional life. But they were largely neglected, even forgotten, in his own time.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Shakespeare wrote "Sonnet 30" sometime in the 1590s. (Scholars aren't exactly sure when.) The 1590s were a time of relative peace and prosperity in England. Queen Elizabeth, the country's ruler, was at the height of her power; she had recently defeated the Spanish Armada, a huge Spanish fleet. The kingdom was secure from foreign threats, and its internal affairs were firmly under control.

This gave poets the freedom to focus on matters of the heart—and some of the most famous love poems in the English language, by poets like Edmund Spenser, John Donne, and Shakespeare himself, belong to this period. That peace and prosperity wouldn't last long. After Queen Elizabeth's death in 1603, the country began a long slide into religious factionalism that ended in a bloody civil war in the 1640s and '50s.

Some scholars have speculated that the sonnets were written in response to a more immediate set of circumstances. In the early 1590s, the theaters were closed during an outbreak of the plague. It's possible that Shakespeare began writing these sonnets on commission from the family of a wealthy aristocrat, the young and spoiled Earl of Southampton—who had refused a wedding orchestrated by his guardian.

Indeed, the early sonnets do urge a beautiful, young aristocratic man to marry and have children. In this account, Shakespeare would've begun the sonnets as a way to make up for lost income while the theaters were closed. If that's true, though, it's clear that things got out of hand pretty quickly: it doesn't take long for Shakespeare to give up urging the beautiful young man to get married. Indeed, he seems to have fallen in love with him himself.

MORE RESOURCES

EXTERNAL RESOURCES

- The 1609 Edition of Shakespeare's Sonnets — A complete facsimile of the first printing of Shakespeare's Sonnets, the 1609 Quarto. (https://www.bl.uk/collection-items/first-edition-of-shakespeares-sonnets-1609)

- Shakespeare's Sonnets — A brief essay on Shakespeare's Sonnets by Don Patterson in the Guardian Newspaper. (https://www.theguardian.com/books/2010/oct/16/shakespeare-sonnets-don-paterson)
- A Biography of Shakespeare — The Folger Shakespeare Library provides a detailed overview of Shakespeare's life, with links to more resources. (https://www.folger.edu/shakespeares-life)
- Did Shakespeare Want to Suppress His Sonnets? — At NPR, Lynn Neary considers the complicated publication history of Shakespeare's Sonnets. (https://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=104317503)
- "Sonnet 30" Read Aloud — Patrick Stewart recites Shakespeare's "Sonnet 30." (https://vimeo.com/44721462)

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 29: When, in disgrace with fortune and men's eyes
- Sonnet 73: That time of year thou mayst in me behold

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