Sonnet 130: My mistress' eyes are nothing like

POEM TEXT

My mistress' eyes are nothing like the sun;
Coral is far more red than her lips' red;
If snow be white, why then her breasts are dun;
If hairs be wires, black wires grow on her head.
I have seen roses damasked, red and white,
But no such roses see I in her cheeks;
And in some perfumes is there more delight
Than in the breath that from my mistress reeks.
I love to hear her speak, yet well I know
That music hath a far more pleasing sound;
I grant I never saw a goddess go;
My mistress, when she walks, treads on the ground.
And yet, by heaven, I think my love as rare
As any she belied with false compare.

SUMMARY

The speaker describes the eyes of the woman he loves, noting that they are not like the sun. He then compares the color of her lips to that of coral, a reddish-pink, concluding that her lips are much less red. Next he compares her breasts to the whiteness of snow. His lover's skin, in contrast, is a dull gray. He suggests that his lover's hair is like black wires. Then he notes that he has seen roses that blend together pink and white hues like a lush embroidered fabric, but that his lover's cheeks lack such colors: they are not rosy pink. He then notes that some perfumes smell better than the breath his wife exhales. He loves to listen to her talk, but he understands that music sounds better. Though the speaker admits that he has never seen a goddess move, he is still sure that his lover moves like an ordinary person, simply walking on the ground. But, the speaker swears, the woman he loves is as unique, as special, and as beautiful, as any woman whose beauty has been inflated through false comparisons by other poets.

THEMES

BEAUTY AND LOVE

In "Sonnet 130," the speaker unfavorably compares his lover's body to a series of beautiful things (implying that she is less beautiful than the sun, snow, roses, a goddess, etc.). Ultimately, the speaker concludes that, even if his mistress cannot be credibly compared to the typical imagery of love poems, his love is still real and valuable, and his mistress is still beautiful. In this way, Shakespeare suggests that love and beauty should not be understood through abstract comparisons, but rather should be valued for being real and flawed.

The poem begins with the speaker comparing parts of his lover's body to beautiful objects, finding, in each case, that her body is less beautiful than the thing to which it's being compared. For example, he writes that her eyes aren't as bright as the sun, and her breath isn't at all like perfume—in fact, it "reeks." These comparisons at first seem to paint a portrait of a woman who is not very appealing. She is lackluster in comparison to the beauty of roses, snow, or music, which implies that the speaker might be able to find more beauty and pleasure in the everyday things that surround him than in the woman he loves. The comparisons, in other words, seem to degrade her value.

However, since the comparisons are rarely overtly negative, it's possible that they are not meant to debase the speaker's mistress. For example, the first line notes that the speaker's mistress' eyes are "nothing like the sun," but it does not say what they *are* like. This leaves open the possibility that her eyes are *better* than the sun, or are at least beautiful in a different way. Similarly, the speaker notes that "if snow be white" then his mistress' "breasts are dun," which seems more like a statement of reality (even the whitest skin is actually tan, or dun) than a criticism. The only truly insulting thing that the speaker says is that her breath "reeks" and, because of this, he finds "more delight" in "some perfumes." But even this is a reasonably mild statement; he's not even saying that *all* perfumes are more delightful than her reeking breath, so clearly he doesn't mind it all that much.

The poem's final two lines cement the interpretation that the comparisons are not meant to be degrading to the speaker's mistress or to the love that they share. When the speaker claims that he finds "his love" as beautiful as any other woman "belied with false compare," he's making the point that *no one's* eyes are as beautiful as the sun and *everyone's* breath smells kind of bad, and that, therefore, such comparisons are not actually a useful way to think about beauty or love.

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-14

LOVE, PERSONALITY, AND THE SUPERFICIAL

In Lines 9 and 10, of Sonnet 130, the speaker notes that even though music has a "far more pleasing sound" than his mistress's voice, that he nonetheless "love[s] to hear her speak." This comment about his mistress's voice is the only explicitly positive comment about the speaker's mistress before the poem's final two lines, and it is possible to argue that it points to another broader point about love within the poem: that one should love personality more than looks. After all, if the speaker loves to hear his mistress speak not because the sound of her voice is as beautiful as music (it's not), then it is reasonable to assume that part of the reason that he loves to hear her speak is because of the content of what she says. In other words, the speaker cares about what she is *saying*, not about the more superficial question of whether her voice is musical enough.

And yet, overall, even as the poem rejects superficiality and asks the reader to think of love and beauty as inherently imperfect but still rare and valuable, the poem can only be said to be partially successful in this critique. After all, the majority of the poem is still comprised of superficial comparisons, and even if they're included for the humorous and satirical effect of mocking traditional love poetry and its impossible comparisons, readers of Sonnet 130 *still* don't learn anything about the speaker's mistress that isn't superficial.

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Lines 9-10

LINE-BY-LINE ANALYSIS

LINE 1

My mistress' eyes are nothing like the sun;

The first line of "Sonnet 130" establishes the poem's broad themes as well as its stylistic pattern. The line is a single, declarative sentence. The line is almost a simile: it compares one thing to another, using the word "like." But it negates the comparison. Instead of saying that the speaker's mistress' eyes *are* like the sun, the speaker insists that they *aren't* like the sun. This notion, that the speaker's mistress' body is *not* like some traditional beautiful object, is fundamental to the poem's consideration of beauty, love and desire.

In this case, the beautiful object is the sun. The speaker invokes the sun because of its physical characteristics: it is bright, brilliant, sparkling. While the line doesn't tell the reader anything about the mistress's eyes, we know that they lack these characteristics: by implication, they might be dark or cloudy. Perhaps her eyes have a dark color; perhaps they are ugly; perhaps they lack the sparkle of a quick wit. But the speaker may also be saying that his mistress's eyes aren't like the sun because *no one*'s eyes are like the sun — and that comparing anyone's eyes to the sun is ridiculous. Because the poem only says what his mistress's eyes are *not*, the speaker invites readers to make guesses about what her eyes are actually *like*—and whether this refusal to actually compare her eyes to the sun is an insult or a compliment. That ambiguity and obscurity is key to the poem as it develops.

The meter of the line is also worth noting. As its title suggests, "Sonnet 130" is a special kind of poem called a "sonnet." A sonnet is a tightly organized poem with a specific rhythmic pattern of stressed and unstressed syllables in each of its lines. In Shakespeare's sonnets, each line has ten syllables, with alternating unstressed and stressed syllables (this kind of meter is called iambic pentameter):

My mistress' eyes are nothing like the sun

The line is metrically regular, meaning there are no unexpected shifts in the meter — it's straight iambic pentameter. This regularity suggests a smooth, polished speaker: in control—and maybe showing off a little. It suggests that the rest of the poem will be similarly rigorous and controlled, and that any variations from the metrical pattern of the poem are intentional and significant.

LINES 2-4

Coral is far more red than her lips' red;
If snow be white, why then her breasts are dun;
If hairs be wires, black wires grow on her head.

The second line of the poem closely reproduces the grammatical and poetic structures of the previous line. As in the first line, the speaker compares part of the mistress's body — her lips — to something beautiful: coral. (Shakespeare is referring here to a bright red species of coral native to the Mediterranean). Once again, the woman's body fails to live up to the beauty of the object she's compared to. The coral is much more red than her lips. Once again, however, the reader doesn't learn much about her lips on their own terms: we only know what they're *not*.

Over the next two lines, a pattern emerges. Each line of the poem takes a separate part of the mistress' body and compares it to something exceptionally beautiful. The poem is concerned with her body, then, but not as a whole. The speaker breaks her body into separate parts. This might not seem like a very nice way to talk about someone: why doesn't the speaker praise her personality or her intelligence instead of talking about her body? As one moves deeper into the poem, though, it becomes clear that the speaker is actually asking the same question—and implicitly criticizing poets who insist on talking about their lovers' bodies, instead of focusing on deeper parts of who they are.

Before getting there, though, the speaker spends a good deal of

time describing this woman's body. Again and again, he notes how his mistress fails to equal some ideal object. In lines 3 and 4, the rhetorical structure shifts. Instead of simple, declarative sentences, he employs counter-factuals: if *x*, then *y*. In line three, he compares his mistress' breasts to snow. Where snow is white, her breasts are *dun*—an old-fashioned word for a grayish-brown color. Here Shakespeare invokes the beauty standards of his age. In Shakespeare's day, people didn't think it was sexy to have a tan—instead, they prized very pale white skin, probably because only the rich could afford to stay inside out of the sun all day (nowadays when tans are prized, only the rich can afford to go play outside all day while other people work in offices or factories). The line is thus an important clue to the speaker's purpose in the poem. His mistress not only fails to equal beautiful objects like the sun or coral, but she also fails to live up to the beauty standards of her time. This arguably raises important questions for the poem: are those beauty standards fair? Should one accept them?

The fourth line of the poem does something similar. The speaker starts the line by offering an apparently strange premise: "If hairs be wires..." He refers here to a poetic cliché (at least a cliché in his day): that a woman's hair is like a mass of golden wires. Once again, the mistress fails to live up to this standard of beauty: her hairs may be wires, but they're black, not golden.

Each of the first four lines of the poem are end-stopped. In other words, each line is a complete grammatical unit unto itself; one can read it and understand it without reading the line before or after it. The result is a sense of closure and completeness: the poem is tightly organized. In addition, each of these lines rhymes with another line: line 1 rhymes with line 3 and line 1 with line 4. As a result, the four line unit has a similar sense of completeness. It feels woven together as a self-sufficient unit.

LINES 5-8

I have seen roses damasked, red and white,
But no such roses see I in her cheeks;
And in some perfumes is there more delight
Than in the breath that from my mistress reeks.

In lines 5 and 6, the speaker breaks the pattern he established in the first four lines of the poem. Where those lines are end-stopped, line five is enjambed, ending only with a weak comma that doesn't cause much of a pause. The sentence spills over into line 6; one has to continue reading past the line break to understand what the speaker's trying to say. This establishes a pattern for the rest of the poem. Henceforth, each sentence is two lines long: the first line introduces an idea or problem and the second complicates and completes the first line.

In line 5, the speaker begins by issuing a relatively banal account of his own experience: he has seen roses. These roses, he notes, are both pink and white, the two colors blended together in a pattern he calls "damasked." In this context, the word "damask" might mean two separate things. It might mean the colors are dappled—that the surface of the roses is marked by patches of red and pink that blend into each other. In this case, the speaker compares his mistress to a natural object, as in lines 1, 2, and 3. Or it might refer to a style of embroidery, known for its intricate patterns. In that case, the speaker compares his mistress to a man-made object, as in line 4. This alternation between man-made and natural objects (which continues throughout the poem) suggests that the speaker is asking questions about beauty itself. Should it be thought of as something natural? Or is it something man-made—and thus something that people can change?

In the next two lines of the poem, the speaker compares his mistress' breath to perfume. It's an important shift in the poem's focus. The poem has so far focused on the beauty of the surfaces of her body: her eyes, lips, breasts, etc. Here the speaker turns to something that comes from inside the mistress' body and that isn't visible. His consideration expands to include other senses. Unsurprisingly, her breath falls short: compared to perfume it "reeks." While the word "reeks" in Shakespeare's time was more neutral than it is today, and refers not necessarily to something that stinks but instead to the general fact of exhaling or of a smell being given off, the comparison nonetheless isn't generally complimentary to his mistress. Also note that the speaker is careful to qualify his judgment: it only reeks in comparison to *some* perfumes. This might mean that her breath actually smells better than some perfumes, or it might be a moment of false gentleness, in which the speaker tries to soften the blow of his otherwise harsh judgments.

Like the previous four lines, this one is rhymed in a criss-cross pattern: line 5 rhymes with line 7 and line 6 with line 8. Interestingly, here the rhyme crosses the sentences. Each line in this quatrain finds its rhyme outside its own sentence. The rhyme acts to bind together these separate thoughts, suggesting an underlying continuity between them. And by this point that continuity is clear: that the speaker's mistress can't be compared to these various beautiful things.

LINES 9-12

I love to hear her speak, yet well I know
That music hath a far more pleasing sound;
I grant I never saw a goddess go;
My mistress, when she walks, treads on the ground.

In lines 9 and 10, the speaker continues to focus on the mistress' internal and intangible characteristics—in this case her voice. Here, his comments become more complimentary and less insulting than in the preceding lines. Indeed, he begins by paying an explicit compliment: he loves listening to her talk. But, he adds, he knows that music sounds much better. Here the speaker resists the elaborate, excessive compliments his

peers like to pay to their mistresses: he tries to find a way to express his love and admiration in more honest and direct language.

In the next pair of lines, he once again engages—and refuses—the traditional compliments that poets pay to the women they love. Beginning with Virgil's *Aeneid* (I.326-405), it's been traditional for poets to claim that their ladies walk like goddesses. The speaker begins by making fun of this tradition: maybe other poets have seen goddesses walking around, he says, but he certainly hasn't. In making this comment, he is pointing out that other poets, of course, *also* haven't ever seen goddesses walking around. The speaker then notes that when his mistress "goes" (i.e. when she walks), she does so in a humble, ordinary way: with her feet on the ground. The lines are more ambiguous than lines 9 and 10. Once again, the speaker refuses the conventions of love poetry, but here he doesn't find a way to compliment his mistress as he does so. The question then, becomes, is the speaker withholding the compliment as a way of searching for a better, more honest way of writing about love and beauty—or is it simply insulting?

As in the previous two four line units, lines 9-12 are strongly iambic and rhymed in a criss-cross pattern. This formal regularity builds a sense of continuity in the poem. Each of the four line units advances a similar argument. Moreover, the poem lacks a narrative. One could reorder the lines without substantially changing the poem's meaning. This shows that the poem is primarily rhetorical and argumentative: it's trying to prove a point rather than tell a story. This in turn raises questions about its intended audience. If the poem reads almost like a legal brief on the mistress's beauty, is the poem in fact intended for her—or is it presented to a broader community of readers, designed to test and challenge their notions of beauty?

LINES 13-14

And yet, by heaven, I think my love as rare
As any she belied with false compare.

In the final two lines of the poem, the formal pattern of the poem changes abruptly. Where the previous twelve lines have been rhymed in a criss-cross pattern in units of four lines, the final two lines rhyme with each other in what is called a rhyming couplet. The couplet is also indented. The difference in the spatial and formal arrangement of the couplet gives the reader a helpful signal: something big is changing here. The poem is shifting, turning. (In fact this moment is called the *volta*: an Italian word that means, literally, "a turn"). Traditionally, the turn marks a moment where the argument of a sonnet reverses: where the speaker begins to argue refute what he or she has said or implied before. (Though, in non-Shakespearean sonnets it often comes much earlier, around line 9—which gives the poet much more space to unfold a new set of ideas).

Sonnet 130 is no exception. In lines 13 and 14, the speaker drops the playful, insulting tone of the preceding lines and offers a direct and apparently sincere compliment to his mistress. Swearing on the heavens themselves, he claims that she is as "rare"—as special and unique—as any woman. He also now makes explicit what was only implicit before: that his refusal to compare his mistress to beautiful objects before were *not* meant as insults, but rather were meant to criticize all such comparisons that litter the work of so many other love poems. The key phrase occurs when the speaker says that his mistress is as beautiful as any woman "belied with false compare." "Belied" refers to lying, slandering, or passing malicious rumors. So the speaker is here stating that other poets who might say, for example, "my mistress is more beautiful than the sun" are simply lying. And, in doing so, they obscure their own mistress's actual beauty. The poem thus argues for a different kind of love poetry: a love poetry that focuses on the reality of the women it addresses, and that dismisses artificial beauty standards in favor of simplicity, honesty, and directness.

However, it's worthwhile to note that the poem only inconsistently practices that alternate kind of love poetry. The speaker does, at times, deliver sweet compliments to his mistress, but just as often he insults her. He also says very little about who she is or what she looks like. Instead, the reader only learns what she *isn't*. In this sense, the poem remains bound to the poems and poets it criticizes—repeating their habits and metaphors, even as it criticizes them. (A modern reader might further note that the poem almost exclusively focuses on beauty as being a physical thing; even as the poem criticizes idealized standards of beauty for women, it insists only on more accurate and honest ways of describing physical beauty, and not a shift to a different vision of beauty that includes who the beloved really is as a person.)

The final two lines are, at the least, an attempt by the speaker to set the record straight. Each reader will need to decide for themselves how convincing those are. Do they effectively make up for the insults and backhanded compliments that fill the first twelve lines of the poem? Or are they tacked on, a hurried attempt to make up for having said too much? This ambiguity exists even in the meter of these lines. Where the previous twelve lines have been strongly and evenly iambic, line 13 has a hiccup—the first real hiccup in the poem:

And yet, by heaven, I think my love as rare

In the second foot of the line ("by heaven"), Shakespeare substitutes a metrical foot called an *anapest* (unstressed unstressed stressed) for the iamb one expects (unstressed stressed). This is an unusual and unexpected place to find an anapest. It reads like a pause, a moment of hesitation or uncertainty. That such a hesitation should appear as the speaker swears on oath—on heaven—can be interpreted, perhaps, as a sign that the speaker isn't quite convinced of the oath himself, that there is some lingering insecurity or

insincerity in this otherwise smooth, even glib poem. Alternatively, one can interpret that hiccup in the meter during an oath of love as a sign of actual emotion — of the speaker choking up when expressing his very real love for his mistress. It isn't necessary that one interpretation be right and the other wrong. Both exist within the poem for the reader to wrestle with and think about.

SYMBOLS

THE SUN

The sun is the source of light and warmth on Earth; it sparkles with brilliance and cheer. As such, the sun is often used as a symbol for something of extraordinary value—especially in poems and plays that deal with love. (In Shakespeare's play *Romeo and Juliet*, for example, Romeo, watching Juliet emerge onto her balcony, proclaims, "It is the east and Juliet is the sun.") For a speaker to compare his mistress to the sun is to suggest that she is the source of light and life. The speaker of *this* sonnet, however, explicitly refuses to compare his mistress to the sun, which could be taken as an insult or as the basis for a more honest and pragmatic real world love in which romantic love is *not* the sole source of light and life.

Further, because the word "sun" sounds like "son" (and in Renaissance English, the two were often spelled the same way), the sun is often associated with Christianity—in particular, with the figure of Jesus. In this way, the sun often carries with it associations with resurrection. The sun is not only the source of life, but it also often stands for God himself, the ultimate source of value in a Christian universe. Thus, to deny the speaker's mistress this association is to suggest that she is ungodly or distant from god—a suggestion that echoes the final line of the sonnet Shakespeare wrote just before this one — Sonnet 129 — in which the speaker compares his mistress to "hell."

Where this symbol appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "sun"

WHITENESS

In line 3, the speaker compares his mistress to white snow—and finds her skin, rather, to be "dun," which is a kind of tan or gray-gold. The whiteness of the snow is itself symbolically rich. As a color, white often suggests innocence and purity (though, to be clear, in Shakespeare's day it was not yet associated with weddings and bridal gowns). It was also, in Shakespeare's time, a sign of beauty and wealth—since only wealthy people could afford to be indoors, out of the sun, instead of working in the fields. As Shakespeare notes that his mistress' skin is *not* white, then, he suggests two related implications. First, she is not pure—as the other sonnets in the so-called "Dark Lady" sequence (sonnets 127-154) suggest, she is sexually experienced in a way the speaker often finds threatening. Second, she is not aristocratic or wealthy, but is rather a common, ordinary woman.

At the same time, one can also read the poem such that the speaker is not simply using the symbol of whiteness against which to negatively compare his mistress. In this alternate reading, it's possible to see the speaker as actually questioning whiteness as a meaningful symbol against which to compare any human. After all, of course the mistress isn't pure — everyone has impure thoughts, and has performed impure actions. And of course the speaker's mistress's skin isn't white as snow — no one's skin is, not even a noble who never goes outside. In some ways, then, the poem invokes its symbols in order to show how the purity and simplicity of the symbols make them ineffective as tools to describe or measure humans or human love.

Where this symbol appears in the poem:

- **Line 3:** "If snow be white, why then her breasts are dun"

POETIC DEVICES

SIMILE

"Sonnet 130" opens with a simile—or, at least, something like a simile. The speaker uses the word "like" to compare two unlike things: his mistress' eyes and the sun. But he says that her eyes are *nothing* like the sun, blocking the connection between the two things at the same moment he suggests it. This sets up a pattern that applies to both metaphor and simile throughout the poem. The speaker is not interested in finding clever ways of saying what his mistress looks like. Rather, he insists, repeatedly, that certain metaphors and similes do *not* capture his mistress' appearance. The poem, then, can be read as a rejection of simile. The speaker loves his mistress for herself, for being "rare," and the entire poem stands against all forms of "false compare" — essentially the speaker is insisting that similes are lies that do a disservice when used to describe people.

Where Simile appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "My mistress' eyes are nothing like the sun"

METAPHOR

Like the negated simile that opens the poem, "Sonnet 130" includes multiple negated metaphors. For example, in the lines

"I have seen roses damasked, red and white, / But no such roses see I in her cheeks," the speaker suggests that someone's cheeks might be like roses, but he blocks the metaphor in the case of his mistress: her cheeks do *not* resemble roses. These moments suggest that the speaker is not interested in describing his mistress' body through the use of metaphor. Quite the contrary: the speaker wants to show how a traditional set of metaphors for talking about women's bodies are false. The speaker is not criticizing his beloved. He is criticizing the metaphors commonly used to describe women, and perhaps it could be argued that the speaker is criticizing the use of any metaphor to describe anyone.

Where Metaphor appears in the poem:

- **Line 4:** "black wires grow on her head"
- **Line 6:** "But no such roses see I in her cheeks"

PARALLELISM

As the speaker argues that his mistress fails to live up to traditional beauty standards, he often uses a special kind of parallelism, called antithesis. In antithesis, parallel structures are repeated in order to identify the differences between them. For example, in the lines "I have seen roses damasked, red and white, / But no such roses see I in her cheeks," the second line carefully repeats the key elements of the first line: the roses reappear, as does the speaker and his observations. But the repetition of this element serves to emphasize the *difference* between them. In the first line, the speaker uses the past tense to describe roses he's previously seen. In the second, he uses the present tense to describe what he sees now. In the first line, he sees the delicate, dappled flesh of a rose; in the second, he sees something different. The antithesis allows him to insist on the difference between his mistress and the rose, without saying what she's *actually* like.

Where Parallelism appears in the poem:

- **Line 4:** "wires, black wires"
- **Lines 5-6:** "roses damasked, red and white, / But no such roses"

END-STOPPED LINE

The first four lines of "Sonnet 130" are end-stopped. Each line is a complete thought unto itself, creating a sense of measured, carefully considered thought.

After the first four lines, the sonnet switches into more frequent enjambment, and each thought takes up two lines. This gives the last ten lines of the poem a sense of acceleration. Where the first four lines are considered and slow, the enjambed lines accelerate the pace of the poem, as though the speaker's thoughts have started spilling out of himself.

Where End-Stopped Line appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** ";"
- **Line 2:** ";"
- **Line 3:** ";"
- **Line 4:** "."
- **Line 6:** ";"
- **Line 8:** "."
- **Line 10:** ";"
- **Line 11:** ";"
- **Line 12:** "."
- **Line 14:** "."

ENJAMBMENT

After the first four lines, which are all end-stopped, the poem alternates enjambed and end-stopped lines. Over the final 10 lines of the poem, the thoughts expressed are carefully organized: each thought occupies two lines, starting at the beginning of one line and running to the end of the next. For example, in the lines "And in some perfumes there is more delight / Than in the breath that from my mistress reeks," the speaker begins his comparison between perfume and his mistress' breath at the start of line 7 and carries it to the end of line 8. Indeed, only at the very end of line eight, in its last word, do we learn what her breath smells like—and it smells bad. The enjambment at the end of line 7 allows the speaker to delay this conclusion as long as possible, giving it real force and weight when it finally closes the sentence, twenty syllables and two lines after its start.

In each case of enjambment in the poem, it is used for similar effect: to keep the reader moving swiftly from the first half of an idea into the second half, so that the reader rushes headlong into the "twist" in which the speaker inventively denies the comparison set up in the first of the two lines.

Note: It's possible to argue that line 5 isn't actually enjambed, since it does end with a comma, but the pause is weak enough that one could also argue that the line is enjambed.

Where Enjambment appears in the poem:

- **Lines 5-6:** "white, / But"
- **Lines 7-8:** "delight / Than"
- **Lines 9-10:** "know / That"
- **Lines 13-14:** "rare / As"

VOCABULARY

Mistress (Line 1) - In modern times, the word "mistress" is usually used to describe woman in an illicit relationship. More specifically, if a man is cheating on his wife, the woman he's cheating on her with might be called his "mistress."

Shakespeare, however, uses the word in an earlier, more general sense: here it simply refers to a woman of power or authority, with whom the speaker has an intimate relationship.

Coral (Line 2) - These days, the word coral has two senses: it describes an organism that lives in the ocean *and* a reddish-pink color. In Shakespeare's time, though, the word hadn't yet acquired its second sense: the speaker is comparing his mistress here to a specific species of red coral native to the Mediterranean.

Dun (Line 3) - The word "dun" isn't used much anymore (except to describe horses), but during Shakespeare's day it described a dull, grayish tan color. It is often used in opposition to brilliant or bright colors, and it conveys a sense of something drab or uninspired.

Wires (Line 4) - The word "wires" may appear strange: why would one compare someone's hair to wire? But Shakespeare is playing here on a long-running trope of Renaissance poetry. For example, Bartholomew Griffin writes in 1596, "My lady's hair is threads of beaten gold"; similarly, Thomas Watson writes in 1582, "Her yellow locks exceed the beaten gold." These poets compare their ladies' blond hair to beaten gold. Shakespeare reduces the elegant, finely worked metals that Watson and Griffin invoke to wire—something plain, everyday, and even comic. But he also notes that his mistress' wires are black—far from the golden standard that other writers use.

Damasked (Line 5) - The word "damask" usually refers to an embroidered fabric, often used for table linen. Shakespeare may be comparing the delicate interplay between pink and red in the flesh of a rose to this intricate fabric. Alternatively, he may be using the word in a metaphorical sense, in which the word refers to any variegated surface.

Reeks (Line 8) - In modern times, "reeks" refers to something that smells bad. In Elizabethan times, when Shakespeare wrote "Sonnet 130," the word had a more neutral meaning, and simply refers to something "exhaled" or "given off" without the resulting smell having to be bad. So while it is possible to read lines 7-8 as the speaker saying that perfume smells better than his mistress's stinking breath, it is more accurate to read it as saying that perfume smells better than the breath his mistress exhales.

Goddess (Line 11) - Here Shakespeare refers to a durable tradition in western poetry, which dates from Virgil's *Aeneid*. In the first book of the *Aeneid*, the poet notes, about a woman, "in her gait she was revealed as a true goddess." In other words, she walks like a goddess. Virgil's text was widely imitated in the Renaissance, particularly in poems about beauty, desire, and love. Shakespeare reverses that tradition, noting that his mistress walks like a human being.

Belied (Line 14) - The word "belied" implies a wrong-doing. To belie is to slander, to lie about, or to spread false and malicious rumors about someone's character—or, in this case, their appearance.

Compare (Line 14) - Here, Shakespeare—famous for inventing new words and expanding the meanings of old ones—uses the verb "compare" in place of the noun, "comparison." His reasons are likely metrical: he wants to preserve the iambic pentameter of the poem. The word as used here simply means that the metaphors and similes (the comparisons) that other poets have used to describe their ladies are fake, false, and malicious.

FORM, METER, & RHYME

FORM

"Sonnet 130" is a Shakespearean sonnet, a form that was popularized (but not actually invented) by Shakespeare. A Shakespearean sonnet has fourteen lines. Its meter is iambic pentameter and it follows a regular rhyme scheme. For the first twelve lines, the poem rhymes in four line units, organized in a criss-cross pattern such that the first and third lines rhyme, as do the second and fourth lines. The poem then ends with a two-line, rhyming couplet.

In a Shakespearean sonnet, the couplet is also called the *volta* or *turn*. Traditionally, it's a place where the sonnet changes perspective and argues with itself. In other sonnet forms (for example, the Petrarchan sonnet), the *turn* comes a few lines earlier in the poem, which gives the poet space to fully explore a new perspective or new idea. Because the turn in Shakespearean sonnets come so late in the poem, it can often feels tacked on: instead of resolving the issues the poem raises, it attempts to use a strong declaration to cover them up, sweep them under the rug.

The sonnet in general is perhaps the most important and prestigious form of short poetry in the Renaissance, with major writers like Petrarch, Ronsard, Sidney, and Spencer using the form. The traditional subject matter of the sonnet is unrequited heterosexual love: a male poet writes about an exalted and unattainable woman whom he adores with a fervor that borders on worship. Unlike poems that narrate personal experiences, the sonnet is generally suited for argumentation: sonnet writers tend to have a point, they want to convince you of something. This is true even when they're writing about something deeply personal, like love. Thus when Shakespeare decides to write about his mistress and her physical appearance, he does so in the form of an argument—with prior poets, with his audience—about what beauty is and how it should be written about.

METER

Like most traditional sonnets in English, "Sonnet 130" is written in iambic pentameter. The meter is prized in English because it captures the rhythms of ordinary speech: when it's well executed, it sometimes feels as though the meter disappears

and one is listening to confident, elegant, but ordinary speech. This is true throughout much of "Sonnet 130," which is almost perfectly iambic.

The poem does occasionally indulge in metrical substitutions, in which an iamb is replaced by some other metrical foot. In some poems such substitutions are meant to unbalance the rhythm of the poem. But in Sonnet 130 the substitutions are smooth and unobtrusive. For example, line 2 starts with a trochee before switching back into iambs:

> Coral is far more red than her lips red;

It is common to find trochaic substitutions in the first foot of an iambic line, since poets often find it useful to start a line with a stressed syllable. So even though "coral" breaks the meter, it doesn't disturb the feeling that the line—and the poem as a whole—is strongly iambic.

More surprising is the anapest that forms "by heaven" in line thirteen:

> And yet, by heaven, I think my love as rare

It's such a strange moment, rhythmically, that many editors print the word "heaven" as "heav'n" to delete the extra syllable. But the word is "heaven" in the earliest printing of the poem, and we should take it seriously. At the moment when the poem is most sincere, the speaker's rhythm trips, his smooth meter suddenly roughed up. One might read this as an indication of insincerity — that the speaker trips in the act of swearing. Or one could read it, conversely, as offering a moment of *real* sincerity, in which this speaker who has with total control managed to mock beauty standards while also making fun of his mistress all in perfect iambic pentameter, now in swearing his love gets choked up with actual emotion.

RHYME SCHEME

"Sonnet 130" precisely follows the standard rhyme scheme for a Shakespearean sonnet:

> ABABCDCDEFEFGG

The first twelve lines of the poem can be broken into smaller subunits of four lines, and each of those subunits has a kind of "criss-cross" rhyme structure in which the first line rhymes with the third line, and the second with the fourth. Then, in the final two lines of the poem, the rhyme scheme changes (though the meter stays the same). The last two lines are rhyming couplet: they rhyme with each other, rather than following the criss-cross pattern of the rest of the poem.

Shakespeare's rhymes are unusually emphatic. The poem does not have any slant rhyme, for example. All of its rhymes are full rhymes, and most of the rhymes fall on strong single-syllable words. (The only exceptions are "delight" in line 7 and "compare" in line 14). Sonnet 130 lacks internal rhyme as well: when rhyme occurs, it does so at the end of lines, where one would expect them. All of this contributes to the sense that the poem is very well-organized. The tight organization of rhyme gives the poem a feeling of confidence and self-assurance. The speaker of this poem knows what he's doing and does it calmly, fluently, effectively.

SPEAKER

The speaker of "Sonnet 130" is an anonymous lover. The reader doesn't learn much about the speaker from the poem, apart from the fact that he (or even perhaps she) is in love with a woman and that either: 1) the woman he loves falls short of traditional beauty standards, and so, as a result, he wants to criticize those standards; 2) or that the speaker sees all traditional beauty standards as impossible to attain for any woman, and criticizes them on those grounds.

The writer of this poem is highly literate: he knows what other poets have written and he wants to object to those poets. A number of questions emerge from these observations: what class does the speaker belong to? How and why did he come to distrust traditional beauty standards? How long have he and his mistress been an item? What's the history of their relationship? Is the poem part of a running joke between them—or does it come out of the blue? The poem steadfastly refuses to answer these questions, directing one's attention instead to its argument.

There is a long tradition of reading Shakespeare's sonnets as autobiographical, and treating the speaker as being the same as Shakespeare himself. (Shakespeare's earliest readers do not seem to have understood the poems in that way, however; the first person to treat this poem and the others in the series is Edmund Malone, in 1780, almost 200 years after it was written). Readers who do read Shakespeare's sonnets as being autobiographical treat the poems as a kind of memoir, which tells the story of several of Shakespeare's intense erotic relationships, including a relationship with a "dark lady" (covered by sonnets 127-154, and thus including "Sonnet 130"). There is little evidence in the poems themselves, however, to support this autobiographical reading.

SETTING

The setting for "Sonnet 130" is not stated directly, though it responds directly to both the poetic traditions and feminine ideals of 15th and 16th century Europe, reusing their language and tropes. It was likely written in London in the 1590s and thus reflects the language used at that time—and the standards of beauty that English culture observed then. Because it does not have a more specific setting, however, it asks readers to

consider the standards of beauty and love that affect people at any moment in history.

CONTEXT

LITERARY CONTEXT

"Sonnet 130" emerged from a tradition in Renaissance poetry called the *blazon*. In a *blazon*, a male poet praises a woman's beauty by comparing each part of her body to a different beautiful object. For example, in Sir Philip Sidney's *Astrophil and Stella* #9, Stella's forehead is compared to alabaster, her hair to gold, and her teeth to pearls. Sidney detaches each part of her body and compares it to an ideal object; Stella is not simply a beautiful woman, Sidney suggests, she is made out of the most beautiful objects in the world. The *blazon* was popular during the 1400s and 1500s in Italian, French, and English poetry, with examples by poets like Clement Marot, Edmund Spencer, and Thomas Campion.

The *blazon's* popularity, though, caught the attention of snarks and smart-alecks, who realized that actually it would be terrifying—*not* beautiful—to meet a woman who had pearls for teeth and roses growing in her cheek. By the mid-1500s, people like Charles Berger were poking fun at the tradition: his etching in the period shows a horrifying woman, a kind of Frankenstein, stitched together from a grotesque mix of different objects. A counter tradition that mocked the *blazon* thus emerged, the *contre-blazon*. Shakespeare's poem belongs to and emerges from this tradition.

"Sonnet 130" poem was most likely written during the 1590s, during a craze for sonnets that followed the publication of Sidney's *Astrophil and Stella* in 1590. The poem thus emerges at a moment when it would be topical and funny to poke holes in the traditions of the sonnet and its rhetorical excesses. But the poem has remained relevant since then—in part because of the popularity and prestige of sonnets. Readers continue to take a breath of relief when they encounter Shakespeare's poem; they enjoy the way it punctures a tradition full of hot air. And "Sonnet 130" has served as an inspiration for future poets as well. For example, in 2001 the contemporary poet Harryette Mullen rewrote the poem word-for-word in her poem "Dim Lady." "Dim Lady" takes "Sonnet 130" and rewrites it in contemporary language. "My mistress' eyes are nothing like the sun" becomes, in Mullen's treatment, "My honeybunch's peepers are nothing like neon."

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Literary scholars have been unable to agree on a precise date of composition for Shakespeare's *Sonnets*, but most agree that they were written in the 1590s and circulated to readers in manuscript. (They were not published until 1609). This would put the poems in the last years of Queen Elizabeth's reign, during the golden age of English literature. English society had recently become Protestant and had survived a series of bloody civil wars in the 14th and 15th century. Elizabeth's reign marked a period of internal stability—though the isolated island nation of England faced serious challenges abroad, from, for example, the Catholic Spanish Empire. Nonetheless, internal stability in England allowed for the flourishing of literature and culture, including the creation of Shakespeare's greatest works. The domestic concerns of Shakespeare's *Sonnets* reflect this peace and security: they tackle matters of the heart, rather than matters of state.

MORE RESOURCES

EXTERNAL RESOURCES

- Harryette Mullen's "Dim Lady" — Read the full text of Harryette Mullen's "Dim Lady," a rewriting of Shakespeare's Sonnet 130. (https://sites.northwestern.edu/jac808/2014/01/29/harryette-mullens-dim-lady/)
- "Sonnet 130" Glossary — A glossary and commentary on Sonnet 130 from Buckingham University. (https://www.buckingham.ac.uk/english/schools/poetry-bank/sonnet130)
- 1609 Quarto Printing of Shakespeare's Sonnet 130 — An image of Shakespeare's Sonnet 130 as it appeared in its first printing, in 1609. (https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sonnet_130#/media/File:Sonnet_130_1609.jpg)
- Reading of "Sonnet 130" — Ian Midlane reads "Sonnet 130" for the BBC, introduced by some smooth jazz. (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Z5aWWPATT74)
- Blazon Lady — See an image of Charles Berger's blazon lady and read Thomas Campion's contemporaneous blazon. (http://www.units.miamioh.edu/visualrhetoric/blason.html)
- Sidney's Astrophil and Stella #9 — Read the full text of Sidney's earlier blazon, Astrophil and Stella #9. (https://blogs.hanover.edu/astrophil/2012/11/16/astrophil-and-stella-sonnet-9/)

LITCHARTS ON OTHER WILLIAM SHAKESPEARE POEMS

- Sonnet 116: Let me not to the marriage of true minds
- 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 30: When to the sessions of sweet silent thought
- Sonnet 73: That time of year thou mayst in me behold

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