Sonnet 138: When my love swears that she is

POEM TEXT

When my love swears that she is made of truth,
I do believe her, though I know she lies,
That she might think me some untutored youth,
Unlearnèd in the world's false subtleties.
Thus vainly thinking that she thinks me young,
Although she knows my days are past the best,
Simply I credit her false-speaking tongue:
On both sides thus is simple truth suppressed.
But wherefore says she not she is unjust?
And wherefore say not I that I am old?
Oh, love's best habit is in seeming trust,
And age in love loves not to have years told.
Therefore I lie with her and she with me,
And in our faults by lies we flattered be.

SUMMARY

When the woman I love swears that she is honest, I believe her, even though I know she's lying to me. I do this so that she will think that I am a naïve young person, unexperienced in the ways of the world. In this way, I pretend that she thinks I'm young—even though she knows I'm getting on in years. And I pretend to believe her lies. In this way, neither side is truthful. But why doesn't she admit that she lies? And why don't I admit that I'm old? Because the best thing about love is pretending to trust one another—and because old people don't like to have their age revealed to their lovers. Therefore I lie to her and she lies to me; as a result, despite our faults, these lies make us feel better.

THEMES

TRUTH, LIES, AND LOVE

"Sonnet 138" plunges its reader into a complicated and fraught relationship. The poem's speaker and the woman he loves both lie to each other constantly about matters large and small: for instance, the speaker's age and his mistress's unfaithfulness. As a result, the speaker feels deeply insecure and unsettled—unable to trust the person he loves and, indeed, unable to place his trust in love itself. For the speaker of the poem, love is thus not a source of comfort and joy. Instead, he argues, with considerable cynicism and bitterness, the only comfort that his relationship affords is the uncertain and perilous pleasure of mutual deception.

Both the speaker and the woman he loves are habitually untruthful to each other. The poem opens with one such lie. Although the speaker's "love swears that she is made of truth," the speaker "know[s] she lies." In other words, the speaker's mistress has been unfaithful to him (wildly so, as Shakespeare notes in "Sonnet 135"!). And the speaker knows it: he doesn't have any illusions about his mistress's faithfulness. However, he insists—paradoxically—"I do believe her, though I know she lies." Basically, he doesn't *actually* believe his mistress—but he *acts* like he does.

He does so for a key reason: it makes him seem naïve—and thus younger than he actually he is. He wants to seem like "some untutored youth." This is hardly a convincing ploy: the mistress knows full well that the speaker's "days are past the best"—that he is, in other words, getting old. So, both the mistress and the speaker are lying to each other—and indeed, one lie leads to another: the mistress lies about whether she's cheated on the speaker, that leads him to lie about his age, and so on. As the speaker notes, summarizing the situation, "On both sides thus is simple truth suppressed."

The speaker and his mistress are trapped in a vicious cycle of lies and they can't escape from it. In a series of rhetorical questions, the speaker briefly entertains the possibility that they might give up all these lies and simply be honest with each other. But he quickly dismisses the possibility. He offers two reasons. One of these reasons comes, simply, from vanity: he doesn't want the truth about his age to get out. (Indeed, it seems like he doesn't want to admit it even it to himself!) The second reason is more subtle, and more devastating. The "best habit" of love, he argues, is "seeming trust." In other words, the best thing about love is when lovers *seem* to trust each other.

This is a dark and potentially heartbreaking argument: the speaker doesn't imagine that it's actually possible for him to trust his mistress. And instead of seeking comfort in love, he seeks comfort in deception. The best that he hopes for is that he and his mistress might "seem" to trust each other. However, as the speaker recognizes, this is an unsustainable position. Each time the lovers lie to each other, they reinforce their faults: "in our faults by lies we flattered be." The relationship between them thus teeters on the brink of disaster—disaster that they accelerate by continually lying to each other.

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-14

LINE-BY-LINE ANALYSIS

LINES 1-4

When my love swears that she is made of truth,
I do believe her, though I know she lies,
That she might think me some untutored youth,
Unlearnèd in the world's false subtleties.

The first four lines of "Sonnet 138" establish the poem's theme and its form. The poem begins with a strange paradox. Whenever the speaker's mistress swears that she is "made of truth" (that is, metaphorically, whenever she swears that she is honest and faithful to him) the speaker believes her. Then, after a caesura, he announces an unexpected qualification: "though I know she lies."

The speaker believes his mistress is faithful—and, at the same time, knows that she is lying to him. The caesura in line 2 thus seems like a wall within the speaker, which separates two contradictory beliefs. That contradiction is heightened by the alliteration that links together "love" and "lies." The alliteration binds together the two words and suggests that, for this speaker, love is inextricable from lying.

This is a strange and puzzling opening to the poem. The reader might wonder how the speaker can possibly believe two things which are so obviously in contradiction with each other. But lines 3-4 begin to suggest an answer. The speaker is simply *acting* like he believes his mistress. And he does so because he hopes that she will think that he is an "untutored youth"—in other words, a naïve and inexperienced youngster.

The assonant /oo/ sound in "untutored" and "youth" suggests the connection the speaker is trying to make: the "untutored" are, it seems, young by definition. So if the speaker is "untutored"—if he doesn't understand the "world's false subtleties," its tricks and dishonesties—then he *must* be young. Both the speaker and his mistress and therefore being dishonest and deceptive. She is trying to deceive him about her infidelities, while he is trying to deceive her about his age.

"Sonnet 138" is a Shakespearean sonnet, a demanding kind of formal verse. Though Shakespeare did not invent the form that bears his name, he did master it—and, eventually, popularize it. Sonnet 138 displays that mastery. It is written in strong, fluid, and highly regular iambic pentameter. And it closely follows the sonnet's ABAB rhyme scheme, using strong, straightforward rhymes. Notably, all of the poem's lines are end-stopped, which gives it a slow, heavy feeling. The speaker is so troubled by his complex, demanding relationship that he seems to struggle to keep the poem itself going.

LINES 5-8

Thus vainly thinking that she thinks me young,
Although she knows my days are past the best,
Simply I credit her false-speaking tongue:
On both sides thus is simple truth suppressed.

In lines 5-8, the speaker continues to describe his fraught and complicated relationship with his mistress. In lines 1-4, the speaker noted that when his mistress lies to him about her faithfulness, he pretends to believe her—in the hope that doing so will make him seem naïve, and therefore young. It's a desperate and strange gambit. And, the speaker confesses in lines 5-6, it doesn't even begin to convince his mistress. She knows full well that his "days are past the best." That he is, in other words, old. (Note the way the consonance between "past" and "best" makes it seem like the speaker is spitting out these words, in frustration and derision.)

But the mistress lets the speaker have his little fantasy. And he too allows her to believe that he is convinced by her lies: "Simply I credit her false speaking tongue." This is a financial metaphor: the speaker compares his trust and credence to a loan that he offers his mistress. So both of them are dishonest with each other, and both of them refuse to confront the other. As the speaker notes in line 8, "On both sides thus is simple truth suppressed."

This complex and unpleasant situation is reflected in the poem's form. Note, for instance, the use of alliteration and polyptoton in line 5, with its /th/ sounds and its repetition of the word "think":

> Thus vainly thinking that she thinks me young,

The /th/ sounds wrap around in each other in a dense tangle. As a result, the line sounds difficult and harsh—just like the relationship it describes. And the repetition of the word "think" emphasizes the strangeness of the situation, the way the speaker is trying to get inside his mistress's head, while, at the same time, he is deeply wrapped up in his own anxieties.

As the poem works through this tangled relationship, its form remains smooth and confident. These lines continue to effortlessly fulfill the formal demands of the Shakespearean sonnet. They are written in strong iambic pentameter, and they rhyme CDCD, using effective and straightforward end rhymes. And like the first 4 lines, they are all end-stopped—which continues to give the poem a heavy pace, as heavy as the speaker's heart as he works through the difficult and unhealthy dynamics of his relationship.

LINES 9-12

But wherefore says she not she is unjust?
And wherefore say not I that I am old?
Oh, love's best habit is in seeming trust,
And age in love loves not to have years told.

In lines 9-12, the speaker considers a series of objections—in the form of rhetorical questions—about his strange and unhealthy relationship with his mistress. He asks himself why she doesn't simply confess to being unfaithful; after all, he

clearly knows all about it. And he also asks himself why *he* doesn't simply come clean and admit how old he is; it's clear his little games aren't fooling her.

The speaker poses these rhetorical questions, but his heart isn't really in it. He assumes that his reader will wonder why the two lovers don't simply come clean with each other. But he already knows that it would be impossible for them to do so. And, sure enough, in lines 11-12, he lays out his reasons why they can't stop lying to each other. He offers two reasons. First, he argues that the best thing about love—its "best habit"—is "seeming trust." In other words, love is at its best when lovers *pretend* that they trust each other. (The speaker apparently doesn't believe that real trust is possible—"*seeming* trust" is the best that it gets.)

Second, he notes that old people in love don't like to have their ages revealed; it's embarrassing. The use of polyptoton and antanaclasis in these lines—forms of the word "love" repeat three times in lines 11-12—is so insistent that, for the reader, the word starts to lose its meaning. Indeed, these lines subtly but insistently pose questions about what love is, what it truly offers to people.

These lines complete the first section of a Shakespearean sonnet. Like the rest of the poem so far, they are written in iambic pentameter and rhyme in a criss-cross pattern, EFEF. As a result of this consistent criss-cross rhyme scheme, the first twelve lines of the poem can be further broken down into three rhyming quatrains. And like the rest of the poem, these lines are all end-stopped. Indeed, the end-stops feel particularly insistent and heavy here: as the speaker sinks further and further into despair about his relationship, the lines become slower and slower, more and more ponderous.

LINES 13-14

> *Therefore I lie with her and she with me,*
> *And in our faults by lies we flattered be.*

In lines 13-14, the speaker summarizes the complicated and fraught relationship between himself and his mistress. "I lie with her," he notes, "and she with me." This is a pun. On one level, the speaker is simply saying that he and she both lie to each other. But, he's also playing on a now-obsolete meaning of the phrase "to lie with" someone. In Shakespeare's time, this meant having sex with them. So the speaker and his mistress are both lying *to* each other and *with* each other; indeed, for the speaker, sex and dishonesty are practically inseparable from each other.

This is not a healthy situation or a good relationship, as the speaker makes clear in line 14. Instead of bringing out the best in each other—as one might hope from a passionate, loving relationship—they augment and amplify each other's faults. As the speaker puts it in line 14, "And in our faults by lies we flattered be." Their lies serve as a kind of flattery, which excuses their "faults"—old age, in the speaker's case; infidelity, in the case of his mistress. (The alliteration between "faults" and "flattered" emphasizes the way that one reinforces the other.) Their relationship thus seems doomed: they are trapped in a vicious cycle of lies and dishonesty, with no clear way out.

The final two lines of a Shakespearean sonnet are different from the first twelve in an important way. Although these lines are still written in iambic pentameter, their rhyme scheme has shifted. Instead of rhyming in a criss-cross pattern (like the ABAB rhymes of lines 1-4), they form a rhyming couplet. The formal break between lines 12 and 13 has a name: it's called the *volta*, or turn. It often serves as a place for the speaker to reconsider things—to offer a new idea or a new argument.

But the speaker of "Sonnet 138" has backed himself into a corner: he sees no clear way out of this vicious cycle of dishonesty. And so the volta of "Sonnet 138" doesn't change or advance the poem's argument; instead, it simply summarizes the poem, reiterating the unhealthy dynamics it describes. It is no surprise, then, that the poem closes with two strongly end-stopped lines: the speaker continues to plod heavily forward, unable to find a spark of hope in this dark and difficult relationship.

SYMBOLS

TONGUE

In line 7, the speaker accuses his mistress of having a "false-speaking tongue." The tongue serves as a complex symbol here. It has a set of meanings that would've been obvious to Shakespeare and his early readers, but which have dissolved in the intervening centuries. Most simply, the tongue is a stand-in for language: the words the mistress speaks. Since it is "false-speaking" it further symbolizes the way that the speaker's mistress seems to lie continually, compulsively. Her tongue seems almost incapable of speaking truthfully. The symbol thus calls into question the very possibility that the speaker's mistress might be honest and straightforward with him.

These symbolic meanings are complemented by a deeper, and culturally specific, set of associations. In early modern England, women who spoke openly and freely were often considered to be sexually promiscuous. This highly misogynistic trope served to police women's speech: women were pressured to be silent in public for fear of calling their reputation into question. This is a trope that Shakespeare often invokes—and it's present in "Sonnet 138."

In some of his earlier sonnets—like "Sonnet 135"—Shakespeare has accused his mistress of being sexually promiscuous. When Shakespeare accuses his mistress of having a "false-speaking tongue," then, the symbol implies that her tongue is not the only

false thing about her. For the speaker, the mistress's habit of lying suggests a deeper pattern of deceit, unfaithfulness, and promiscuity.

Where this symbol appears in the poem:

- **Line 7:** "tongue"

POETIC DEVICES

END-STOPPED LINE

Each line of "Sonnet 138" is end-stopped. That gives the poem a heavy, plodding feeling: the long pause at the end of the poem slows down the poem's rhythm, decreasing its velocity. As a result, the reader has a sense that the speaker is struggling, exhausted from the demands that his relationship places on him. The reader can feel this dynamic in lines 9-12:

> But wherefore says she not she is unjust?
> And wherefore say not I that I am old?
> Oh, love's best habit is in seeming trust,
> And age in love loves not to have years told.

All of these are strong end-stops. The speaker rests heavily at the end of each line.

The speaker seems weighed down by the complicated, impossible questions he's asking himself. He cannot see a way out or a way forward. The poem's use of end-stop thus helps to communicate the difficulty of the speaker's situation—and the deep sadness he feels as he contemplates his relationship. Unable to see a way out of this complicated and unpleasant situation, he plods forward slowly and unhappily toward the poem's conclusion.

That said, the drag that these end-stops place on the poem are somewhat compensated for by other devices. For instance, the use of polyptoton of "say" and "says" in lines 9-10 gives the rhythm a little boost. In this part of the poem, the speaker seems pulled in two directions at once—at once depressed and yet also irritated with himself. Polyptoton is also discussed further in its own section of this guide.

Where End-Stopped Line appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "truth,"
- **Line 2:** "lies,"
- **Line 3:** "youth,"
- **Line 4:** "subtleties."
- **Line 5:** "young,"
- **Line 6:** "best,"
- **Line 7:** "tongue:"
- **Line 8:** "suppressed."
- **Line 9:** "unjust?"
- **Line 10:** "old?"
- **Line 11:** "trust,"
- **Line 12:** "told."
- **Line 13:** "me,"
- **Line 14:** "be."

CAESURA

"Sonnet 138" contains only two caesuras, one in line 2 and the other in line 11. It is worth being somewhat cautious when interpreting these caesuras. The punctuation printed here is not universally adopted by Shakespeare's editors; in the 1609 Quarto, generally considered the authoritative text of Shakespeare's *Sonnets*, neither of these lines have caesuras. Instead, the 1609 Quarto prints a comma in the middle of line 13; its text reads:

> Therefore I live with her, and she with me,

However, the punctuation of the 1609 Quarto probably doesn't come from Shakespeare himself. In Renaissance printing houses, punctuation was mostly up to the people who set the type—and they followed their own, often idiosyncratic, inclinations.

So there's no guarantee that any of these caesuras reflect Shakespeare's intentions for the poem. And a caesura like the one that separates "Oh" from "love's best habit" in line 11 doesn't carry much weight. But the caesura in line 2 does do important work for the poem:

> I do believe her, though I know she lies,

The caesura splits the line in two, dividing it into contradictory halves. It thus reflects the divisions within the speaker: one part of him "believe[s]" his mistress, while the other half doesn't. There's a kind of wall inside him, cutting off the part of him that "know[s] she lies" from the part that "believe[s] her." The caesura represents that internal division: the break in the line captures the break within the speaker.

Where Caesura appears in the poem:

- **Line 2:** ", "
- **Line 11:** ", "

ALLITERATION

Alliteration appears throughout "Sonnet 138." The speaker uses it to emphasize the strange—and strained—dynamics of his relationship with his mistress. For instance, in lines 1-2, the speaker uses an alliterative /l/ sound:

> When my love swears that she is made of truth
> I do believe her, though I know she lies,

Alliteration often links words together, suggesting that there is some underlying connection between them. So the alliteration between "love" and "lies" is surprising—particularly at the beginning of the poem, before the reader fully understands the complicated dynamics of the speaker's relationship. Under normal circumstances, "love" and "lies" are not—should not—be linked together. But the alliteration suggests that, for the speaker, loving and lying are inseparable from each other.

A similar alliteration appears in the poem's final lines:

> And in our faults by lies we flattered be.

Once again, alliteration links together two words that don't usually belong together. After all, one should not be flattered by one's faults: that would involve celebrating one's failings and shortcomings. But that's precisely what the speaker and his mistress do. In this sense, the alliteration underlines the perversity of the speaker's relationship. Instead of bringing out the best in each other, he and his mistress end up reinforcing each other's faults. Alliteration thus helps the speaker bring out the complicated and unsettling dynamics of his relationship with his mistress.

Where Alliteration appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "love"
- **Line 2:** "lies"
- **Line 3:** "That," "might," "think," "me," "untutored"
- **Line 4:** "Unlearnèd"
- **Line 5:** "Thus," "thinking," "that," "thinks"
- **Line 7:** "Simply," "speaking," "tongue"
- **Line 8:** "sides," "simple," "truth," "suppressed"
- **Line 9:** "she," "she"
- **Line 10:** "I," "I"
- **Line 11:** "seeming," "trust"
- **Line 12:** "love," "loves," "told"
- **Line 13:** "lie"
- **Line 14:** "faults," "lies," "flattered"

ASSONANCE

"Sonnet 138" is not a heavily assonant poem. Most of its assonant sounds appear in its rhymes—and, as a result, are better discussed as part of the poem's rhyme scheme. However, there are a few striking and useful instances of assonance that crop up in the poem. These instances tend to reinforce the speaker's argument, underlining the way he describes the complex and fraught dynamics of his relationship with his mistress.

For example, note the assonant /oo/ sound in line 3:

> That she might think me some untutored youth,

The assonance creates a strong link between the two words. As a result, it starts to feel like young people ("youth") are "untutored"—that is, naïve and experienced—by definition. And that's exactly what the speaker wants. If young people are naïve—and if he's naïve—then he must be young. The speaker tries to sell this self-deception by reinforcing it with assonance.

This is a good example of how assonance works more generally in the poem: even though it is not widespread or particularly loud, it does subtly reinforce the speaker's arguments, helping him sell his lies. It underlines the tangled dynamics of his relationship with his mistress.

One other noteworthy form of assonance reaches its peak in the poem's ending couplet:

> Therefore I lie with her and she with me,
> And in our faults by lies we flattered be.

Here, /i/ and /e/ assonance, coupled with internal rhyme, draw attention to the poem's pronouns. The connection between "I" and "lie" once again reinforces the speaker's self-deception. Meanwhile, the tangle of "she," "me," "we," and "be" captures how this self-deception is rooted in the speaker's relationship with his mistress. Sometimes, that relationship feels like a cohesive "we," and other times it feels like "she" and "me," as if the speaker and his mistress are separated by their own lies.

Where Assonance appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "truth"
- **Line 2:** "I," "though," "I," "know," "lies"
- **Line 3:** "she," "think," "me," "untutored," "youth"
- **Line 4:** "subtleties"
- **Line 5:** "thinking," "she," "thinks," "me," "young"
- **Line 6:** "Although," "knows," "best"
- **Line 7:** "tongue"
- **Line 8:** "thus," "suppressed"
- **Line 9:** "she," "she," "unjust"
- **Line 10:** "I," "I," "old"
- **Line 11:** "love's," "trust"
- **Line 12:** "love," "loves," "told"
- **Line 13:** "I," "lie," "she," "me"
- **Line 14:** "we," "be"

CONSONANCE

In contrast to the poem's restrained and limited use of assonance, "Sonnet 138" employs consonance throughout. Indeed, the poem practically bristles with consonance (and alliterative consonant sounds). This helps set the poem's tone. The poem describes a complicated, difficult relationship—and, with its churning, sharp consonant sounds it also *sounds* complicated and difficult.

The reader can hear this in line 5, with its tangled pattern of /th/ sounds:

> Thus vainly thinking that she thinks me young,

The /th/ sounds wrap around each other, forming a tough knot of sounds at the heart of the line. The line's sound thus reflects the difficulty of the speaker's relationship, the way that speaker and mistress can neither free themselves from each other nor can they give each other up.

Elsewhere, the speaker uses consonance to convey his sense of frustration. Listen, for instance, to the consonant /st/ sound in the next line:

> Although she knows my days are past the best,

The /st/ sound appears in the final four syllables of the line, repeating in close succession in the words "past" and best." It gives the line a sense of impatience, even disgust: it sounds like the speaker is angrily spitting out these words. Consonance thus works throughout the poem to convey the bitter feelings that animate the speaker and run underneath his relationship.

Where Consonance appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "love"
- **Line 2:** "believe," "lies"
- **Line 3:** "That," "might," "think," "me," "some," "untutored," "youth"
- **Line 4:** "Unlearnèd," "world's," "false," "subtleties"
- **Line 5:** "Thus," "thinking," "that," "thinks"
- **Line 6:** "Although," "knows," "past," "best"
- **Line 7:** "Simply," "credit," "false," "speaking," "tongue"
- **Line 8:** "both," "sides," "thus," "simple," "truth," "suppressed"
- **Line 9:** "she," "she"
- **Line 11:** "best," "habit," "seeming," "trust"
- **Line 12:** "love," "loves," "have," "told"
- **Line 13:** "lie"
- **Line 14:** "faults," "lies," "flattered"

METAPHOR

"Sonnet 138" is not a highly metaphorical poem. Mostly, the speaker uses straightforward language to describe the complicated relationship he finds himself in with his mistress. But the poem does use metaphor every now and then—usually in quiet ways. The poem's metaphors don't call a lot of attention to themselves, but they do help flesh out the speaker's portrait of his relationship.

In line 1, the speaker uses a metaphor to characterize his mistress's claims that she is honest and faithful:

> When my love swears that she is made of truth

Here "made of truth" is a metaphor for being faithful in a relationship: the speaker's mistress is saying that she hasn't cheated on him. The metaphor suggests the vehemence of her insistence. She isn't just saying that she is truthful or faithful. Rather, she is insisting that such truth and honesty are part of her very substance: she is "made of truth."

The speaker uses another metaphor in line 7:

> Simply I credit her false-speaking tongue

The speaker is saying that he believes his mistress. But he uses a subtle financial metaphor to do so: he "credit[s] her." In other words, he gives her credit—as in a loan. He is loaning her his trust, even though she hasn't earned it.

Neither of these metaphors are central to the poem, but they nonetheless subtly support and sharpen its account of the speaker's complicated relationship.

Where Metaphor appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "she is made of truth"
- **Line 7:** "Simply I credit her false-speaking tongue"

POLYPTOTON

Polyptoton appears frequently in "Sonnet 138," particularly in its final six lines—all of which contain an instance of the device. The speaker repeats key words and bends their meaning to highlight the tangled, complicated dynamics of his relationship with his mistress.

For instance, note the repetition of the word "think" (in two different forms) in line 5:

> Thus vainly thinking that she thinks me young

The speaker is pretending to believe the lies his mistress tells him so that she will think he's naïve—and therefore younger than he actually is. At the center of their relationship, then, is mutual deception, with the speaker trying to guess what his mistress thinks of him—and trying to guide her opinion. The repetition of the word "thinks" in line 5 underlines this strange, fraught dynamic: the way that the speaker is playing a game with his mistress, trying to get inside her mind.

Polyptoton plays a similar role in lines 11-12, where the speaker repeats the word "love," in various versions:

> Oh, love's best habit is in seeming trust,
> And age in love loves not to have years told.

The repetition of the word "love" calls attention to the different ways the speaker uses it: to describe love as an entity, to refer to the state of being in love, and to speak about preferring or desiring. As a result of these repetitions, the reader starts to

call into question what the word "love" itself means—what love is. That's fitting for a poem which, in itself, also calls into question what love is. Note that this is also an example of the closely related device antanaclasis, given that the meaning of the word love changes, from a noun to a verb:

> And age in love loves not to have years told.

The final two lines of the poem can also be interpreted as both polyptoton and antanaclasis, because the first "lie" is a pun:

> Therefore I lie with her and she with me,
> And in our faults by lies we flattered be.

If readers take that first "lie" to mean the telling of untruths, then this is polypoton; it's equally possible, given the pun here, to take "lie" to meaning having sex, in which case this becomes an example of antanaclasis. What's more important than terminology is the way the use of these kinds of repetition amplifies the problems and questions with which the poem wrestles.

Where Polyptoton appears in the poem:

- **Line 5:** "thinking," "thinks"
- **Line 7:** "Simply"
- **Line 8:** "simple"
- **Line 9:** "says"
- **Line 10:** "say"
- **Line 11:** "love's"
- **Line 12:** "love," "loves"
- **Line 13:** "lie"
- **Line 14:** "lies"

PUN

"Sonnet 138" contains a classic Shakespearean pun. It appears almost at the end of the poem, in line 13:

> Therefore I lie with her and she with me,

A modern reader might miss this pun altogether. It relies on a now obsolete meaning of the word "lie." In Renaissance English, to "lie with" someone meant to have sex with them. At the same time, it also could mean something more recognizable to modern ears. "To lie with" was also to purposefully tell someone something untruthful.

Both of these meanings are present in the line. The speaker is saying that he and his mistress are having sex with each other—and, at the same time, they're also lying to each other. Indeed, the pun suggests that, for the speaker, the two activities can't really be distinguished from each other. For this couple, lying and sex are inextricably wrapped up with each other. The speaker ends the poem with no clear sense of how he and his mistress might fix their relationship. The pun underlines that sense of stuckness, of impossibility. By linking lying and sex so closely, the pun suggests that the speaker still can't see a way to disentangle sex and dishonesty.

Where Pun appears in the poem:

- **Line 13:** "Therefore I lie with her and she with me"
- **Line 14:** " And in our faults by lies we flattered be."

RHETORICAL QUESTION

"Sonnet 138" contains two rhetorical questions. They appear at a key moment in the poem, in lines 9-10:

> But wherefore says she not she is unjust?
> And wherefore say not I that I am old?

The speaker has spent the first eight lines of the poem explaining the complex dynamics of his relationship with his mistress: she lies to him; he pretends that he believes her so that she'll think he's younger than he actually is. It is an unpleasant and unsustainable position to be in.

In lines 9-10, the speaker seems to simply get fed-up with the whole thing. He demands to know why his mistress doesn't just level with him and admit her infidelities. And he asks himself the same question: wondering why he doesn't simply admit the truth about his age. The rhetorical questions suggest that this would be the simplest, most natural course for these two lovers to take.

And yet, these rhetorical questions also feel a bit insincere: although the speaker sympathizes with his reader's sense of frustration, he isn't *really* considering these options. Instead, he's simply posing the questions he knows the reader might have. He poses these questions, in other words, in order to brush them aside.

Where Rhetorical Question appears in the poem:

- **Lines 9-10:** "But wherefore says she not she is unjust? / And wherefore say not I that I am old?"

PARADOX

"Sonnet 138" opens with a strange and surprising statement—a paradox. In the poem's first two lines, the speaker announces:

> When my love swears that she is made of truth,
> I do believe her, though I know she lies

The speaker believes two contradictory things at once. On the one hand, he believes that his mistress is honest with him—and faithful to him. On the other hand, he "know[s] she lies." It's hard to understand how the speaker can believe both of these

things at once—and yet he manages to do so.

In other words, the poem opens with a paradox, and the speaker spends much of the rest of the poem explaining how—and why—he manages to sustain these paradoxical, conflicting beliefs. It takes a while for him to explain himself. He wants his mistress to think that he is "some untutored youth"—and therefore young. In other words, the speaker is trying to use his mistress's lies as a way of making himself seem younger than he really is. The two of them are thus trapped in a dense tangle of lie and counter-lie. The paradox sets the agenda for the poem: it provides a problem that the poem then gradually unravels.

Where Paradox appears in the poem:

- **Lines 1-2:** "When my love swears that she is made of truth, / I do believe her, though I know she lies"

VOCABULARY

Made of Truth (Line 1) - Honest, truthful, faithful.

Untutored (Line 3) - Naïve, inexperienced—literally, "untaught."

Unlearnèd (Line 4) - Inexperienced, unaware of.

Subtleties (Line 4) - Tricks and deceits.

Past the Best (Line 6) - Old; no longer young.

Simply (Line 7) - Naïve, without guile. The speaker is comparing himself to a simpleton.

Credit (Line 7) - Give credit to. In other words, the speaker believes his mistress. Note that the Latin root of this word means "believe" or "trust."

Wherefore (Line 9) - *Wherefore* means "why."

Unjust (Line 9) - Untruthful, dishonest.

Seeming Trust (Line 11) - Pretending to believe each other.

Age (Line 12) - Old age. Here it refers to old people.

Flattered (Line 14) - Soothed, comforted. Instead of challenging each other's bad habits and mutual deception, the lovers reinforce each other's bad habits.

FORM, METER, & RHYME

FORM

"Sonnet 138" is a Shakespearean sonnet. Shakespearean sonnets have a complicated, demanding set of formal requirements. They are 14 lines long, written in a single stanza. Further, they are written in iambic pentameter and have a set rhyme scheme. Although Shakespeare didn't actually invent the Shakespearean sonnet, he did popularize the form—so much so that it now bears his name. A Shakespearean sonnet can be divided into two discrete sections. The first twelve lines form the first section (it can be further broken down into three rhyming quatrains). The final two lines, a rhyming couplet, constitute the second section.

The shift between these two sections is called the *volta*. It falls between lines 12 and 13. *Volta* is an Italian word; it means "turn." The shift from the sonnet's first section to its second constitutes a kind of turn. The speaker of Shakespeare's sonnets usually uses this as a point to reflect back on the poem. Sometimes the speaker introduces new ideas or arguments; sometimes, as in "Sonnet 138" the speaker offers a kind of summary or recap for the poem.

In a Shakespearean sonnet, the volta comes very late. By contrast, in a Petrarchan sonnet—an earlier type of sonnet—it falls between lines 8 and 9. That gives the speaker more time to reconsider things, to introduce new ideas. The speaker of Shakespeare's sonnets has much less space to do so—and so the final two lines often feel like throwaways. But it's worth paying careful attention to them nonetheless: they often crystalize or distill the poem's message, drawing out its contradictions or complications.

METER

"Sonnet 138" is written in iambic pentameter. Iambic pentameter has a da DUM rhythm. In other words, it alternates unstressed and stressed syllables, with five feet in each line. The reader can hear this rhythm in line 2:

I do | believe | her, though | I know | she lies,

This is the meter Shakespeare usually uses in his sonnets—and most sonnet writers in English have followed his example. Although iambic pentameter was a relatively young tradition during Shakespeare's life, in the four centuries since he wrote his sonnet it has hardened into a rule, an expectation. It has become one of the defining formal characteristics of the Shakespearean sonnet. Shakespeare is an acknowledged master of the form, using it naturally and fluidly. It does not seem to hamper or constrain him: rather it forms a kind of foundation for the poem.

Indeed, the poem is highly metrically regular, with only a few variations. The most striking of these falls in line 12:

And age | in love | loves not | to have | years told.

The repetition of the word love introduces a trochaic substitution in the middle of the line. That trochee (DUH duh) falls in an unusual and disruptive place, causing a slight hiccup, a moment of syncopation. The speaker seems to get tripped up in this moment. The demands of "age in love," i.e. being old and in love, introduces a moment of hesitation and uncertainty.

So, although Shakespeare is very adept at following the meter,

he's not afraid to switch it up in order to achieve certain expressive effects.

RHYME SCHEME

The Shakespearean sonnet has a distinctive and demanding rhyme scheme. It rhymes:

ABABCDCDEFEFGG

The rhymes break the poem up into smaller units. Its first twelve lines form three rhyming quatrains; its last two lines form a rhyming couplet. There's thus a formal shift between lines 1-12 and lines 13-14: the rhyme scheme changes unexpectedly, right as the poem ends. This shift is called the *volta*, or turn.

"Sonnet 138" uses strong and straightforward rhymes. Its rhyme words tend to be a single syllable each, with a few exceptions here and there. The poem stays away from weaker forms of rhyme, like slant rhyme. The speaker of the poem thus feels powerfully in control of the poem—even as he wrestles with complex feelings. And Shakespeare characteristically respects the smaller units of his poems: it's rare, for instance, to find an enjambment between two rhyming quatrains in his sonnets.

It should also be noted that there are some instances of internal rhyme in the poem. In the final couplet, the speaker says,

> Therefore I lie with her and she with me,
> And in our faults by lies we flattered be.

Here, the poem creates tangled rhymes between "I" and "lie" and between "she," "me," "we," and "be." This tangle emphasizes the messiness and deception of the speaker's relationship. The neatness of the end rhymes is muddled by internal rhymes, just as the speaker and his mistress muddle their relationship.

SPEAKER

The speaker of "Sonnet 138" is involved in a complicated and difficult love affair. The speaker focuses on the dynamics of this love affair: the way that he lies to his mistress about his age; the way she lies to him about whether she cheats on him or not; and the way that both know the other is lying. This is, in other words, hardly an idyllic, idealized love affair. Instead, it is consuming and compromising, characterized by deceit and paranoia, rather than mutual understanding or mutual respect.

In the context of Shakespeare's full sonnet sequence, the speaker of this poem is traditionally interpreted as a man. The tone and contents of Shakespeare's sonnets are often bound up in what the relationships between men and women (and men and men) were like at the time these poems were written. So, in this guide, we have followed this convention. However, it should be noted that, taken out of context, there is nothing in the poem itself that suggests the speaker has to be a man.

It is worth noting that many readers and scholars have treated the *Sonnets* as an autobiographical document—as though the 154 poems were a kind of diary, in which Shakespeare himself describes his desires, anxieties, and activities. Though this reading is plausible, there is no firm evidence to link Shakespeare directly to the speaker (or speakers) that appear in his sonnets—and so any autobiographical reading must precede with skepticism and caution.

SETTING

"Sonnet 138" was written in England during the 1590s—and most likely in London, where Shakespeare lived and worked. However, the poem doesn't make any explicit (or implicit) references to this setting or to its broader historical context. There's a good reason for this. The speaker of the poem is entirely wrapped up in the tense, tumultuous relationship he shares with his mistress: the lies flying back and forth from both sides. He doesn't have any space in his mind for anything else; he can't turn outward to face the broader world. The setting of the poem, then, is not a specific place or time. Rather, its true setting is a relationship—with all its complicated tangles of emotion, of truth and untruth.

CONTEXT

LITERARY CONTEXT

Shakespeare's *Sonnets* are now some of the most famous poems in the English language—a crowning poetic achievement in a career rich with crowning achievements. But, given their current glory and prestige, their origins are surprisingly humble. The sonnet itself started off in the Middle Ages as a low-brow Italian form: it was used for drinking songs and sung in medieval Italian taverns. But then poets like Petrarch and Dante—who hoped to write great poetry in their own language, not Latin—adopted the form and used it to write love poetry. Their poems address distant, inaccessible women—praising them in elaborate, highly idealized language. These poems served as a model for poets across Europe.

In the centuries after Petrarch's death, the sonnet spread across the continent. But it reached England relatively late. Although medieval and late-medieval English poets like Chaucer and Skelton read Petrarch, they didn't attempt to produce sonnets of their own. Only in the 1540s did English poets try the sonnet for themselves. And only in the 1580s and 1590s did the sonnet become widely popular.

When it finally did become popular, however, English poets hurried to make up for lost time. The 1590s in particular were

marked by an explosion of sonnet-writing: there was a kind of sonnet craze. Shakespeare's *Sonnets* were likely written during this period. We don't know for sure when they were written, or why, but by the late 1590s they were circulating in manuscripts and unauthorized publications. "Sonnet 138," for instance, was published in 1599 as part of a pirated book of Shakespearean poems, *The Passionate Pilgrim*.

From "Sonnet 127" until the end of the sequence of Shakespeare's *Sonnets*, the focus of the speaker's desire is a "dark lady." These poems are full of desire and disgust: the speaker seems perplexed by his desire for a woman whom he repeatedly describes as unattractive, even repulsive, often relying on misogynistic tropes. His relationship with her is tumultuous and difficult. "Sonnet 138" thus fits into this broader pattern of ambivalence: it testifies to a powerful desire, even as it also makes the relationship between the speaker and his mistress seem unhappy.

Although Shakespeare's sonnets were written at the height of the sonnet's popularity, they weren't published in their entirety until 1609. And they weren't particularly popular in the years that followed. The 1609 Quarto edition of Shakespeare's sonnets, for instance, was not republished in its original order until 1780. The popularity and prestige of Shakespeare's sonnets is thus a relatively recent phenomenon. For more than a hundred and fifty years after they were published, these crowning poems were largely forgotten—a footnote to his accomplishments.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Shakespeare wrote his sonnets during a moment of peace and prosperity in English society. Queen Elizabeth was at the height of her power. Although the Catholic Church had stirred up a range of plots against her—from attempted assassinations to wars—she had persevered. Indeed, she had recently defeated an enormous Catholic fleet—the Spanish Armada—preserving England's liberty from foreign threats.

In Elizabeth's court, poetry played a surprisingly important role. Courtiers wrote elaborate love poems to their virgin Queen as a way of currying favor. Poets like Spenser made their living writing poems on behalf of the Queen. The result was an extraordinary flourishing of poetic power and talent: the 1580s and 1590s are often considered a golden age of English literature.

Although Shakespeare was a commoner, distanced from the exalted business of court, he clearly benefited from the patronage and encouragement that Elizabeth provided to the literary arts. His work draws on the example of poets like Spenser (and his close friend Sir Philip Sidney) who did rely on Elizabeth for favor and promotion, who used poetry as a way of advancing in the highly stratified society of Elizabethan England. Shakespeare took this material, this tempest of literary energy, and refined it and transformed it—producing a series of poems that reflect their historical moment, but also advance far beyond it.

MORE RESOURCES

EXTERNAL RESOURCES

- Sonnet 138 Read Aloud — Jamie Muffet recites "Sonnet 138." (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VYFymOqLjXc)
- Shakespeare's Life — A detailed biography of Shakespeare from the Folger Shakespeare Library. (https://www.folger.edu/shakespeares-life)
- Love Poetry in Renaissance England — Emily Mayne provides an introduction to the history of love poetry in England during the Renaissance. (https://www.bl.uk/shakespeare/articles/love-poetry-in-renaissance-england)
- Shakespeare's Sonnets — An overview of Shakespeare's Sonnets from the British Library (https://www.bl.uk/works/shakespeares-sonnets)
- Shakespeare, Sexuality and the Sonnets — Aviva Dautch explores the Sonnets' complex relationship with sexuality at the British Library. (https://www.bl.uk/shakespeare/articles/shakespeare-sexuality-and-the-sonnets)

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 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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