Daily Bard

STUDY GUIDE

Shakespeare's Sonnets: study guide

The Sonnets are 154 short arguments about love, time, desire and the power of verse. This guide explains how the sequence is arranged, how the form works, and how to write precisely about the poems most often set.



WRITTEN
Probably c. 1590s to early 1600s; printed together in 1609

GENRE
Lyric poetry: a sonnet sequence

SETTING
No fixed place; a speaker addresses a young man (1-126) and a mistress (127-152)

FORM
English sonnet: 14 lines of iambic pentameter, three quatrains and a couplet, rhymed abab cdcd efef gg

LENGTH
154 sonnets, printed with the narrative poem A Lover's Complaint

STUDIED FOR
GCSE, A-level, AP Literature, IB, undergraduate surveys

Context

The sonnet before Shakespeare

The sonnet came to England from Italy, where Petrarch's poems to the unattainable Laura had set the pattern for love poetry: a devoted male speaker, a beautiful, distant lady, and praise built from stock comparisons (eyes like suns, lips like coral, skin like snow). Thomas Wyatt and the Earl of Surrey brought the form into English in the reign of Henry VIII, and Surrey developed the rhyme scheme we now call the English or Shakespearean sonnet. After Philip Sidney's Astrophil and Stella appeared in print in the 1590s, sonnet sequences became a fashion.

Shakespeare writes late in that fashion and against it. His first 126 poems address a beautiful young man, not a lady. His mistress is dark, not golden, and Sonnet 130 takes the Petrarchan catalogue apart item by item. Knowing the convention is what lets you see the surprise.

Time, mortality and print

Elizabethans lived with early death, and Renaissance poets inherited from classical writers such as Horace and Ovid the boast that verse outlasts monuments. Shakespeare returns to that boast repeatedly, most famously in Sonnets 18 and 55, but he also doubts it: the same poems that promise immortality describe Time with a scythe.

Patronage and privacy

Poets depended on noble patrons, and the language of the sonnets to the young man mixes love with the deference a writer owed a social superior. By 1598 Shakespeare's sonnets were known to be circulating in manuscript among his friends, and versions of two of them were printed in 1599. They were poems for a small readership before they were a book.

CONTEXT IN ONE LINE

The Sonnets take the Petrarchan tradition of idealised love and test it against time, desire and honesty. Use that sentence, then prove it from a specific poem.

Sonnets reward slow, repeated reading. Daily Bard shows one Shakespeare passage a day, verified against the Folger text, with a plain-English reading on the back of the leaf, which suits poems this compact. It accompanies study; it does not replace reading the poems whole.

The sequence: an overview

The 1609 Quarto

The poems were printed in 1609 by the publisher Thomas Thorpe, with a dedication to an unidentified "Mr. W.H." We do not know whether Shakespeare approved the publication or chose the order. That uncertainty matters: any "story" in the sequence is an inference from the arrangement, not a fact about Shakespeare's life.

The shape of the sequence

Sonnets 1-126 are traditionally called the Fair Youth sonnets. The first seventeen urge a young man to marry and have children; the rest explore the speaker's love for him, including absence, betrayal, a rival poet (roughly 78-86) and the fear of age. Sonnets 127-152 concern a dark-haired mistress, the so-called Dark Lady, and are far more bitter about desire. Sonnets 153-154 are two versions of a myth about Cupid. The labels "Fair Youth" and "Dark Lady" are later critics' terms, and many individual poems do not specify the sex of the person addressed.

The form

A Shakespearean sonnet has three quatrains (four-line units) and a closing couplet. The quatrains usually develop an idea in three steps or through three images. The *volta*, or turn, is the point where the argument changes direction. Shakespeare often turns at line 9, as the Italian form does, and then again in the couplet, which may clinch, reverse or undercut what came before.

The most-taught sonnets

Sonnet 18. The speaker considers comparing the beloved to a summer's day, finds summer too rough and too brief, and promises a summer that will last as long as the poem is read. See the essay on "Shall I compare thee".

Sonnet 20. The young man has a woman's beauty without, the speaker claims, a woman's inconstancy. He is *"the master mistress of my passion"*: a poem central to discussions of gender and desire.

Sonnet 29. One long sentence. Envious and self-despising, the speaker happens to think of the beloved, and his mood rises like a lark at dawn.

Sonnet 60. Minutes move like waves towards the shore; Time gives and then destroys. Only verse may stand against him.

Sonnet 73. The ageing speaker presents himself as late autumn, twilight and a dying fire, and concludes that the listener's love is stronger for knowing it must lose him.

Sonnet 116. A definition of love as constancy: it does not change when circumstances change, and it outlasts beauty. See the essay on Sonnet 116.

Sonnet 129. A furious anatomy of lust: craved before, despised after, and never avoided.

Sonnet 130. The mistress fails every conventional comparison, and the speaker loves her as much as any woman praised with lies.

Voices and figures

The speaker

The "I" of the Sonnets is a poet, older than the young man and conscious of lower status. He is not simply Shakespeare: treat him as a constructed voice. He is devoted, jealous, self-accusing and sharply intelligent about his own self-deception. He admits, in Sonnet 138, *"I do believe her though I know she lies"*.

The Fair Youth

The young man is beautiful, well born and never heard directly. In the early sonnets he is scolded for self-love, *"contracted to thine own bright eyes"*; later he is idealised, then suspected of coldness and infidelity. He functions as the object against which the speaker measures time, since his is the beauty that will be lost.

The Dark Lady

The mistress is dark in colouring and, in the speaker's account, in conduct. She reverses the Petrarchan lady: available, not distant; desired, not worshipped. We see her only through a resentful lover, who can call her *"as black as hell, as dark as night"*. Read that as evidence about him as much as about her.

The Rival Poet

A more fashionable writer competes for the young man's favour. The speaker admires *"the proud full sail of his great verse"* and fears being silenced by it. These poems turn love poetry into an argument about style: plain truth against ornate praise.

Time

Time is the sequence's antagonist, personified with a scythe, a sickle and a pen that draws wrinkles. In Sonnet 19 he is *"Devouring Time"*. The speaker's weapons against him change: first children, then verse, then love itself.

Themes

Time and decay

The Sonnets insist that everything beautiful is already being lost. Images of seasons, tides, sunset and harvest recur. The theme develops from public warning in the early poems (have a child before you fade) to private reckoning in Sonnet 73, where the speaker himself is the thing decaying.

The power and limits of verse

Poetry is offered as a defence against time: *"So long lives this"*. But the claim is a wager, not a certainty. Sonnet 65 calls preservation in *"black ink"* a *"miracle"*, and the beloved who is to be immortalised is never named or described in detail. What survives is the poem.

Ideal love and constancy

Sonnet 116 defines love as that which does not alter. Set beside the poems of jealousy and betrayal around it, the definition reads less as calm description than as an ideal asserted under pressure. A strong essay asks whether the sequence believes it.

Desire, deception and self-knowledge

The later sonnets separate lust from love and find the speaker unable to act on what he knows. Sonnet 129 ends with the admission that nobody avoids *"the heaven that leads men to this hell"*. The lovers of Sonnet 138 flatter each other with lies. Honesty about dishonesty is the sequence's most modern quality.

Beauty and truth in praise

Shakespeare repeatedly asks whether praise can be truthful. Sonnet 130 rejects *"false compare"*, and the Rival Poet sonnets defend plain style. The argument is partly about love and partly about writing: comparison that exaggerates insults the person it claims to honour.

> **COMMON MISTAKE**
>
> Do not write "Shakespeare tells his lover that …". Write "the speaker". We cannot identify the people, and biography is not analysis. Examiners reward what the words do.

Key quotations

All ten are on the **printable Sonnets quotation sheet**.

> Shall I compare thee to a summer's day?
> Thou art more lovely and more temperate.
>
> SONNET 18

Plain English: Shall I liken you to a summer's day? You are lovelier and milder.

The poem opens with a question about its own method and answers it at once: the comparison will fail because the beloved exceeds it. *"Temperate"* means mild and even, in weather and in character. The end-stopped lines sound assured. Use this to show Shakespeare examining the convention of comparison even as he uses it.

> So long as men can breathe or eyes can see,
> So long lives this, and this gives life to thee.
>
> SONNET 18

Plain English: As long as people live and read, this poem will live, and will keep you alive.

The couplet clinches the turn made at line 9. Anaphora (*"So long … So long"*) and the repeated *"this"* make the poem point at itself. The monosyllables give the claim the weight of a proof. Notice the condition: immortality depends on readers. Link to the theme of verse against time, and to Sonnet 55.

> Like to the lark at break of day arising
> From sullen earth, sings hymns at heaven's gate;
>
> SONNET 29

Plain English: My mood, like a lark rising at dawn from the gloomy ground, sings at the gate of heaven.

After eight lines of envy, the simile lifts the poem. Enjambment carries the sense over the line ending so that the syntax rises with the bird. Earlier, heaven was *"deaf"* to his cries; now he sings hymns at its gate. The contrast of *"sullen earth"* and *"heaven"* measures how far thought of the beloved has raised him.

> Like as the waves make towards the pebbled shore,
> So do our minutes hasten to their end,
>
> SONNET 60

Plain English: Just as waves move towards the stony shore, so our minutes hurry to their end.

An extended simile makes time visible as tide: each wave, like each minute, replaces the one before. *"Hasten"* gives the minutes a will of their own, and *"our"* includes the reader. The quatrain's steady forward movement enacts what it describes. Compare the single dying year, day and fire of Sonnet 73.

> Upon those boughs which shake against the cold,
> Bare ruined choirs where late the sweet birds sang.
>
> SONNET 73

Plain English: On the branches shivering in the cold: bare, ruined choir stalls where birds sang not long ago.

The metaphor turns leafless branches into a ruined church, which may recall the monasteries dissolved earlier in the century. The crowded stresses of *"Bare ruined choirs"* slow the line, and *"late"* insists that the loss is recent. Age is shown as architecture emptied of music: a striking image for a poet to choose for himself.

> This thou perceiv'st, which makes thy love more strong,
> To love that well which thou must leave ere long.
>
> SONNET 73

Plain English: You see all this, and it makes you love more strongly what you must soon lose.

The couplet turns from the speaker's decline to the listener's response. It is a statement that works as a plea: he tells the beloved what to feel. *"Leave"* is ambiguous, meaning lose or abandon. Compare Sonnet 116, where love is strong because it ignores time; here it is strong because it notices time.

> Love is not love
> Which alters when it alteration finds
> Or bends with the remover to remove.
>
> **SONNET 116**

Plain English: Love that changes when things change, or leaves when the other person leaves, is not really love.

Shakespeare defines by negation. The repetitions with variation (*"alters … alteration"*, *"remover … remove"*) mimic the wavering that true love refuses. The phrase before it, *"Admit impediments"*, echoes the marriage service. Ask why a definition needs so many negatives: the poem may be arguing against someone, or against the speaker's own doubt.

> Love's not Time's fool, though rosy lips and cheeks
> Within his bending sickle's compass come;
>
> **SONNET 116**

Plain English: Love is not Time's plaything, even though youthful beauty falls within reach of his curved sickle.

Time is personified as a reaper and Love as one who refuses to be his *"fool"*, a jester or dupe. The concession *"though"* is honest: beauty will be cut down. The hard alliteration of *"compass come"* closes the line like a blade. Shakespeare separates love from the physical beauty that Petrarchan poetry praised.

> Th' expense of spirit in a waste of shame
> Is lust in action;
>
> **SONNET 129**

Plain English: Acting on lust is a spending of vital energy in a shameful waste.

The sonnet opens with its verdict. *"Expense"* and *"waste"* are financial terms, making desire a ruinous transaction, and *"spirit"* carries a bodily as well as a moral sense. The sentence runs on over the line break, and the poem that follows piles up adjectives without pause. The form enacts the compulsion it condemns. Contrast the composure of Sonnet 116.

> And yet, by heaven, I think my love as rare
> As any she belied with false compare.
>
> SONNET 130

Plain English: And yet I swear my beloved is as precious as any woman misrepresented by false comparisons.

The volta arrives only in the couplet: *"And yet"* reverses twelve lines of apparent insult. *"Belied"* means lied about, so the target is revealed as dishonest poetry, not the mistress. *"Rare"* means precious as well as uncommon. The mild oath *"by heaven"* sounds like speech, not ceremony. The essential quotation for anti-Petrarchan satire.



A sonnet a day is a realistic habit. **The Daily Bard app** *gives you one Folger-verified passage each day on iPhone and iPad, with a plain-English reading on the back of the leaf.*

Language, form and structure

Metre. The sonnets are in iambic pentameter: ten syllables, five stresses, in a rising rhythm, as in *"My mistress' eyes are nothing like the sun"*. Look for places where the pattern is disturbed, because variation is where emphasis falls. An extra unstressed final syllable is a feminine ending; every line of Sonnet 20 has one.

Quatrains, volta and couplet. Ask what each quatrain adds. In Sonnet 73 the three images shrink from a year to a day to a fire's last hour, so the structure itself narrows towards death. Then find the turn. Sonnets 18 and 29 turn at line 9 (*"But thy eternal summer"*; *"Yet in these thoughts"*). Sonnet 130 saves it for line 13. The couplet can resolve, as in Sonnet 18, or stake everything on a dare, as in Sonnet 116.

Syntax. Note how sentences fit the form. Sonnet 29 is a single sentence whose main verb is delayed while misery accumulates. Enjambment (sense running over the line ending) and caesura (a pause within the line) control pace.

Imagery and wordplay. Recurrent fields include the seasons, law and finance (*"summer's lease"*), navigation and reaping. Shakespeare puns constantly: *"lines"* in Sonnet 18 are lines of verse and perhaps of descent; *"lie"* in Sonnet 138 means both deceive and sleep with. Personification makes Time and Death into opponents who can be defied. The **guide to Shakespeare's language** and the **close reading toolkit** give a method and vocabulary for all of this.

Critical perspectives

Biographical readings. Since the Romantic period many readers, Wordsworth among them, have treated the Sonnets as a key to Shakespeare's own heart, and much effort has gone into identifying the young man and the mistress. Use this cautiously. No identification is proven, and sonnet sequences were a literary game with

conventions. You can argue that the poems create the effect of confession without being one.

Formalist readings. Critics such as Helen Vendler read each sonnet as a made object, attending to its patterns of words, sounds and structure and not to its supposed story. This is the approach examiners most directly reward. Its limit is that it can detach poems from the sequence and from history.

Gender and sexuality. Modern criticism takes seriously that most of the poems express a man's love for a man. Readers differ on whether that love is erotic, idealised friendship, or deliberately unclassifiable; Sonnet 20 is the key text. Avoid forcing modern categories on the poems, but do not explain the desire away.

Feminist and race-conscious readings. The mistress is silent and described by a hostile lover, and her darkness is tied to moral blame. Critics ask what the language of "fair" and "black" takes for granted. You might answer that Sonnet 130 mocks conventional standards of beauty, then test that against the harsher later poems.

Essay questions

GCSE style

- How does Shakespeare present love in Sonnet 116?
- Compare how the speaker presents the effects of time in Sonnet 18 and Sonnet 73.
- How does Shakespeare use the sonnet form to surprise the reader in Sonnet 130?

A-level and IB style

- "The Sonnets promise immortality but are haunted by loss." Discuss with reference to at least three sonnets.
- Examine the view that Sonnet 116 describes an ideal which the rest of the sequence cannot sustain.
- How does Shakespeare use and challenge the conventions of Petrarchan love poetry?

AP Literature style

- Read Sonnet 73 carefully. Analyse how Shakespeare uses imagery and structure to convey the speaker's complex attitude towards ageing.
- Analyse how the volta in a sonnet of your choice develops the poem's meaning.
- Analyse how the speaker of Sonnet 29 moves from despair to consolation, attending to syntax and figurative language.

Undergraduate

- How useful are the labels "Fair Youth" and "Dark Lady" for reading the 1609 sequence?
- Discuss the relationship between praise and truth in the Sonnets.

- "The couplet is the Shakespearean sonnet's greatest risk." Discuss.

Planning a top-band answer

Choose two or three sonnets and know them line by line. Build each paragraph on a formal feature (a quatrain, the volta, the couplet), and say how the form shapes the meaning. Compare within paragraphs, not in separate halves. The **essay planner** has a comparison frame, and the **assessment map** shows in general terms what is rewarded.

Revision checklist

- I can describe the Shakespearean sonnet form and define quatrain, couplet and volta.
- I can explain how the 1609 sequence is arranged and why the labels are uncertain.
- I can explain Petrarchan convention and show how Sonnet 130 answers it.
- I can locate the volta in Sonnets 18, 29, 73, 116 and 130.
- I can compare how two sonnets present time.
- I can write about "the speaker" without relying on biography.
- I can analyse metre, imagery and wordplay in six short quotations.
- I can apply and challenge two critical approaches.

The best way to learn a sonnet is by heart, one quatrain at a time: the structure becomes obvious once you can say it. Start with couplets from the **quotation sheet**, since they compress each argument. Read a little daily; **get Daily Bard for iPhone and iPad** if a page each morning would help. Teachers will find three complete lessons, including a comparison of Sonnets 73 and 116, in the **Sonnets lesson plans**.



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