

William Shakespeare

Shakespeare's Sonnets

the original poems and a plain modern English translation, side by side

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Sonnet 18

One of the sonnets addressed to the beautiful young man. The speaker sets out to compare him to a summer's day, finds that summer falls short, and promises that the poem itself will keep his beauty alive forever.

Original

Shall I compare thee to a summer's day?
Thou art more lovely and more temperate:
Rough winds do shake the darling buds of May,
And summer's lease hath all too short a date:
Sometime too hot the eye of heaven shines,
And often is his gold complexion dimm'd,
And every fair from fair sometime declines,
By chance, or nature's changing course
untrimm'd:
But thy eternal summer shall not fade,
Nor lose possession of that fair thou ow'st,
Nor shall death brag thou wander'st in his
shade,
When in eternal lines to time thou grow'st,
So long as men can breathe, or eyes can see,
So long lives this, and this gives life to thee.

Translation

Should I compare you to a summer's day?
You are more lovely and more gentle.
Rough winds shake the delicate buds of May,
and summer's lease runs out far too quickly.
Sometimes the eye of heaven — the sun —
shines too hot, and often its golden face is
dimmed by clouds; and everything beautiful
eventually falls away from beauty, stripped by
accident or by nature's changing course.
But your eternal summer will never fade, or lose
its hold on the beauty you own; and Death will
never get to brag that you wander in his shadow,
because in these eternal lines you grow into
time itself.
As long as people can breathe and eyes can see,
this poem will live — and this poem gives life to
you.

Sonnet 29

The speaker is at rock bottom — unlucky, disgraced, and envious of nearly everyone he can think of. Addressed to the beloved friend, the sonnet turns on a single thought of him, which lifts the speaker from self-loathing to joy.

Original

When in disgrace with fortune and men's eyes
I all alone beweepe my outcast state,
And trouble deaf heaven with my bootless cries,
And look upon myself, and curse my fate,
Wishing me like to one more rich in hope,
Featur'd like him, like him with friends
possess'd,
Desiring this man's art, and that man's scope,
With what I most enjoy contented least;
Yet in these thoughts my self almost despising,
Haply I think on thee, and then my state,
Like to the lark at break of day arising
From sullen earth, sings hymns at heaven's
gate;
For thy sweet love remember'd such wealth
brings
That then I scorn to change my state with kings.

Translation

When I'm out of favor with luck and with
everyone around me, I sit all alone and cry over
being an outcast, bother deaf heaven with
useless cries, look at myself, and curse my fate.
I wish I were like someone with better
prospects; I wish I had this man's looks and that
man's friends; I envy one person's talent and
another's opportunities — and the things I
usually enjoy most satisfy me least.
Yet in the middle of these thoughts, when I
almost hate myself, I happen to think of you —
and then my spirit, like a lark rising at daybreak
from the gloomy earth, sings hymns at heaven's
gate.
Remembering your sweet love brings me such
wealth that I would refuse to trade places with
kings.

Sonnet 30

Addressed to the dear friend, this is a sonnet about memory: alone with his thoughts, the speaker relives every old grief, lost friend, and failed hope as if the pain were new. One thought of the friend cancels the whole account.

Original

Translation

When to the sessions of sweet silent thought
I summon up remembrance of things past,
I sigh the lack of many a thing I sought,
And with old woes new wail my dear time's
waste:
Then can I drown an eye, unused to flow,
For precious friends hid in death's dateless
night,
And weep afresh love's long since cancell'd woe,
And moan the expense of many a vanish'd sight:

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

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

When, in the quiet courtroom of sweet silent
thought, I summon up memories of the past, I
sigh over the many things I wanted and never
got, and old sorrows make me mourn all over
again the waste of my precious years.
Then my eyes, though they are not used to
crying, can drown in tears for dear friends
hidden in death's endless night; I weep again
over heartbreak that was settled long ago, and
grieve the cost of many things now vanished
from my sight.

Then I can mourn over sorrows already finished,
and heavily count up, grief by grief, the sad
account of miseries I have mourned before —
and I pay that bill all over again, as if I had never
paid it.

But if, while all this is happening, I think of you,
dear friend, every loss is made good and the
sorrows end.

Sonnet 55

Addressed to the young man, this sonnet makes the sequence's boldest immortality claim: no marble monument or royal tomb will last as long as this poem, which will carry his memory all the way to Judgment Day.

Original

Not marble, nor the gilded monuments
Of princes, shall outlive this powerful rhyme;
But you shall shine more bright in these
contents
Than unswept stone, besmear'd with sluttish
time.

Translation

Neither marble nor the gold-plated monuments
of princes will outlive this powerful poetry.
You will shine more brightly in these lines than
in some neglected gravestone smeared with the
grime of slovenly time.

When wasteful war shall statues overturn,
And broils root out the work of masonry,
Nor Mars his sword, nor war's quick fire shall
burn
The living record of your memory.
'Gainst death, and all-oblivious enmity
Shall you pace forth; your praise shall still find
room
Even in the eyes of all posterity
That wear this world out to the ending doom.
So, till the judgement that yourself arise,
You live in this, and dwell in lovers' eyes.

When wasteful war overturns statues and riots
rip up the stonemason's work, neither the
sword of Mars, god of war, nor war's fast-
spreading fire will burn away this living record of
your memory.
Against death, and against hostility that wipes
out everything, you will keep striding forward;
praise of you will always find a place in the eyes
of every future generation, down to the ones
who wear this world out to Judgment Day.
So, until that final judgment when you yourself
rise from the dead, you live in this poem — and
dwell in lovers' eyes.

Sonnet 60

A meditation on time, addressed to the young man: minutes crash forward like waves, and Time destroys everything it gives — youth, beauty, life itself. Only the poet's verse, praising the young man, will withstand it.

Original

Like as the waves make towards the pebbled
shore,
So do our minutes hasten to their end;
Each changing place with that which goes
before,
In sequent toil all forwards do contend.
Nativity, once in the main of light,
Crawls to maturity, wherewith being crown'd,
Crooked eclipses 'gainst his glory fight,
And Time that gave doth now his gift confound.

Translation

Just as waves push toward the pebbled shore,
our minutes hurry toward their end, each one
trading places with the one ahead of it, all of
them straining forward in relentless sequence.

Birth, once launched into the wide sea of light,
crawls toward maturity — and no sooner is it
crowned with that glory than crooked eclipses
fight against it, and Time, who gave the gift, now
destroys it.

Time doth transfix the flourish set on youth
And delves the parallels in beauty's brow,
Feeds on the rarities of nature's truth,
And nothing stands but for his scythe to mow:

And yet to times in hope, my verse shall stand.
Praising thy worth, despite his cruel hand.

Time punctures the bloom he set on youth, digs
parallel trenches across beauty's forehead,
devours nature's rarest and most genuine
treasures — nothing stands except as material
for his scythe to mow down.

And yet, in ages still to come, my poetry will
stand, praising your worth despite his cruel
hand.

Sonnet 73

The aging speaker tells the young man to look at him and see autumn, twilight, and a dying fire — three pictures of approaching death. Knowing the speaker will soon be gone should make the young man's love stronger.

Original

That time of year thou mayst in me behold
When yellow leaves, or none, or few, do hang
Upon those boughs which shake against the
cold,
Bare ruin'd choirs, where late the sweet birds
sang.
In me thou see'st the twilight of such day
As after sunset fadeth in the west;
Which by and by black night doth take away,
Death's second self, that seals up all in rest.
In me thou see'st the glowing of such fire,
That on the ashes of his youth doth lie,
As the death-bed, whereon it must expire,
Consum'd with that which it was nourish'd by.

Translation

You can see in me that time of year when yellow
leaves — or none, or only a few — hang on
branches that shiver in the cold: bare, ruined
choir-stalls where sweet birds sang just a little
while ago.
You see in me the twilight of a day fading in the
west after sunset, gradually carried off by black
night — night, death's double, which seals
everything up in rest.
You see in me the glow of a fire lying on the
ashes of its own youth, as if on a deathbed
where it must go out, consumed by the very fuel
that once fed it.

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

You see all of this, and it makes your love
stronger: it makes you love well what you must
give up before long.

Sonnet 116

Often read at weddings, this sonnet is the speaker's definition of true love: constant, unshakable, and immune to time. It is less a story than a declaration — and the final couplet stakes the poet's entire credibility on it.

Original

Let me not to the marriage of true minds
Admit impediments.
Love is not love
Which alters when it alteration finds,
Or bends with the remover to remove:
O, no! it is an ever-fixed mark,
That looks on tempests and is never shaken;
It is the star to every wandering bark,
Whose worth's unknown, although his height
be taken.
Love's not Time's fool, though rosy lips and
cheeks
Within his bending sickle's compass come;
Love alters not with his brief hours and weeks,
But bears it out even to the edge of doom.

If this be error and upon me prov'd,
I never writ, nor no man ever lov'd.

Translation

Let me never admit that there are obstacles to
the marriage of two faithful minds.
Love isn't love if it changes when it finds the
other person changed, or if it pulls away when
the other pulls away.
Oh no — love is a permanent seamount that faces
down storms and is never shaken.
It is the star that guides every wandering ship:
its height can be measured, but its true value is
beyond calculating.
Love is not Time's fool, even though rosy lips
and cheeks fall within the sweep of Time's
curved sickle.
Love does not alter with Time's brief hours and
weeks — it holds out all the way to the edge of
doomsday.
If that is an error, and it can be proved against
me, then I never wrote a word, and no one ever
loved.

Sonnet 130

The speaker describes his mistress — the 'Dark Lady' of the later sonnets — by refusing every clichéd compliment poets usually make about eyes, lips, and cheeks. It is a parody of exaggerated love poetry that ends as a genuine compliment.

Original

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 damask'd, 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.

Translation

My mistress's eyes are nothing like the sun.
Coral is far redder than her lips.
If snow is white, then her breasts are a dull
grayish-brown; if hairs are wires, then black
wires grow on her head.

I have seen damask roses, red and white, but I
see no such roses in her cheeks — and some
perfumes give more delight than the breath my
mistress breathes out.

I love to hear her speak, and yet I know perfectly
well that music has a far more pleasing sound.
I admit I never saw a goddess walk — my
mistress, when she walks, steps on the ground.

And yet, by heaven, I think my beloved is as
extraordinary as any woman who has been
misrepresented by false comparisons.

Sonnet 27

The speaker, exhausted and far from the young man he loves, lies down to sleep — but his mind begins a nighttime 'pilgrimage' to the beloved instead. Work wears out his body by day; longing keeps his mind awake by night.

Original

Weary with toil, I haste me to my bed,
The dear repose for limbs with travel tir'd;

Translation

Worn out by hard work, I hurry to my bed — the
precious rest for limbs exhausted from travel.

But then begins a journey in my head
To work my mind, when body's work's expired:

For then my thoughts, from far where I abide,
Intend a zealous pilgrimage to thee,
And keep my drooping eyelids open wide,
Looking on darkness which the blind do see:

Save that my soul's imaginary sight
Presents thy shadow to my sightless view,
Which, like a jewel hung in ghastly night,
Makes black night beauteous, and her old face
new.

Lo! thus, by day my limbs, by night my mind,
For thee, and for myself, no quiet find.

But then a journey starts inside my head,
putting my mind to work just as my body's work
has ended.

That is when my thoughts, setting out from this
faraway place where I am staying, begin a
devoted pilgrimage to you, and they hold my
drooping eyelids wide open, staring into the
same darkness the blind see.

Except that my soul's imaginary eyesight brings
your image before my sightless eyes, and that
image, like a jewel hung against the hideous
night, makes black night beautiful and gives its
old face a new look.

So there it is: by day my limbs and by night my
mind can find no rest — because of you, and
because of me.

Sonnet 71

Facing his own death, the speaker tells the young man not to mourn him — in fact, to forget him entirely — so that grief won't hurt him and the sneering world won't get the chance to mock him for it.

Original

No longer mourn for me when I am dead
Than you shall hear the surly sullen bell
Give warning to the world that I am fled
From this vile world with vilest worms to dwell:
Nay, if you read this line, remember not
The hand that writ it, for I love you so,
That I in your sweet thoughts would be forgot,
If thinking on me then should make you woe.

Translation

When I am dead, don't mourn for me any longer
than you can hear the grim, sullen bell warning
the world that I have fled this vile world to live
with viler worms.
In fact, if you read this line, don't even
remember the hand that wrote it — because I
love you so much that I would rather be
forgotten in your sweet thoughts than have a
thought of me cause you pain.

O if, I say, you look upon this verse,
When I perhaps compounded am with clay,
Do not so much as my poor name rehearse;
But let your love even with my life decay;
Lest the wise world should look into your moan,
And mock you with me after I am gone.

Or if — I repeat — you look at this poem when I
have perhaps been mixed back into the clay,
then don't so much as say my poor name out
loud; let your love decay right along with my life.
Otherwise the know-it-all world might examine
your grieving and use me to mock you after I am
gone.

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