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The Epic of Gilgamesh Tablet I

Gilgamesh

King of Uruk, the strongest of men, and the personification of all human virtues. A brave warrior, fair judge, and ambitious builder, Gilgamesh surrounds the city of Uruk with magnificent walls and erects its glorious ziggurats, or temple towers. Two-thirds god and one-third mortal, Gilgamesh is undone by grief when his beloved companion Enkidu dies, and by despair at the prospect of his own extinction. He travels to the ends of the Earth in search of answers to the mysteries of life and death.

Enkidu

Companion and friend of Gilgamesh. Hairy-bodied and brawny, Enkidu was raised by animals. Even after he joins the civilized world, he retains many of his undomesticated characteristics. Enkidu looks much like Gilgamesh and is almost his physical equal. He aspires to be Gilgamesh's rival but instead becomes his soul mate. The gods punish Gilgamesh and Enkidu by giving Enkidu a slow, painful, inglorious death for killing the demon Humbaba and the Bull of Heaven.

Shamhat

The temple prostitute who tames Enkidu by seducing him away from his natural state. Though Shamhat's power comes from her sexuality, it is associated with civilization rather than nature. She represents the sensuous refinements of culture—the sophisticated pleasures of lovemaking, food, alcohol, music, clothing, architecture, agriculture, herding, and ritual.

Utnapishtim

A king and priest of Shurrupak, whose name translates as "He Who Saw Life." By the god Ea's connivance, Utnapishtim survived the great deluge that almost destroyed all life on Earth by building a great boat that carried him, his family, and one of every living creature to safety. The gods granted eternal life to him and his wife.

Utnapishtim's Wife

An unnamed woman who plays an important role in the story. Utnapishtim's wife softens her husband toward Gilgamesh, persuading him to disclose the secret of the magic plant called How-the-Old-Man-Once-Again-Becomes-a-Young-Man.

Urshanabi

The guardian of the mysterious "stone things." Urshanabi pilots a small ferryboat across the Waters of Death to the Far Away place where Utnapishtim lives. He loses this privilege when he accepts Gilgamesh as a passenger, so he returns with him to Uruk.

The Hunter
Also called the Stalker. The hunter discovers Enkidu at a watering place in the wilderness and plots to tame him.

Anu
The father of the gods and the god of the firmament.

Aruru
A goddess of creation who fashioned Enkidu from clay and her spittle.

Ea
The god of fresh water, crafts, and wisdom, a patron of humankind. Ea lives in Apsu, the primal waters below the Earth.

Humbaba
The fearsome demon who guards the Cedar Forest forbidden to mortals. Humbaba's seven garments produce an aura that paralyzes with fear anyone who would withstand him. He is the personification of awesome natural power and menace. His mouth is fire, he roars like a flood, and he breathes death, much like an erupting volcano. In his very last moments he acquires personality and pathos, when he pleads cunningly for his life.

Summary: Tablet 1

A prelude introduces us to the hero. Gilgamesh's mother was the Lady Wildcow Ninsun, a minor goddess noted for her wisdom, and Lugulbanda was his father. Gilgamesh built the great city of Uruk and surrounded it with magnificent, intricately constructed outer and inner walls. He erected beautiful temples for Anu, the god of the heavens, and for Anu's daughter Ishtar, the goddess of war and love. He laid out orchards and ponds and irrigated fields. A dauntless explorer, Gilgamesh opened passes through the mountains and dug wells in the wilderness. He traveled to the ends of the Earth and beyond, where he met Utnapishtim, the sole survivor of the great flood that almost ended the world. When he returned from his travels he wrote everything down on a tablet of lapis lazuli and locked it in a copper chest.

As the story begins, Gilgamesh is terrifying and all-powerful. He sacrifices warriors whenever he feels like fighting, rapes his nobles' wives, takes whatever he wants from his people, and tramples anyone who gets in his way. The old men of Uruk complain, saying that a king is supposed to protect his subjects like a shepherd, not harass them like a wild ox. The gods listen. They tell Aruru, the goddess of creation, that since she made Gilgamesh, she must now make someone strong enough to stand up to him.

Aruru takes some clay, moistens it with her spit, and forms another man, named Enkidu. Shunning the cultivated lands and the cities, he lives in the wilderness with the animals. His most prominent physical feature is his hairiness. One day a hunter sees him at a watering hole. Terrified, the hunter rushes back to his house to tell his father he has seen a giant man, the most powerful in the land. The hunter says the man has unset his traps and filled in his pits, and that now he cannot be a hunter.

The hunter's father tells him he should go to Uruk and ask Gilgamesh to lend him a temple prostitute, whose greater power will suffice to conquer Enkidu. The hunter follows his father's advice and soon travels back to the wilderness with the prostitute. They wait by the watering hole for three days.

When Enkidu finally appears, the hunter tells the prostitute to lie down on a blanket and show Enkidu her breasts. Enkidu comes to her and they copulate for six days and seven nights. When Enkidu's lust is finally sated, he returns to the animals, but they no longer regard him as their kin. They run away from him.

Enkidu tries to pursue the animals, but he has become weaker and can no longer gallop as he did before. His mind has awakened. Troubled and confused, he goes back to the prostitute, who consoles him by telling him about the pleasures and wonders he will find in the city of Uruk. She tells him about music, food, festivals, and the strong, terrible king, Gilgamesh. As soon as Enkidu hears about Gilgamesh, he realizes how lonely he is. He longs to meet him and challenge him to a contest of strength.

The prostitute tells Enkidu that Gilgamesh is stronger than he is and that he could not hope to prevail over him, but also that Gilgamesh longs for a friend. In fact, Gilgamesh has already had two dreams about Enkidu. In the first dream, a meteor lands in a field outside Uruk. Gilgamesh is drawn to the rock as if it were a woman. After lifting it with great effort, he carries it to his mother, Ninsun. In the second dream, Gilgamesh finds an axe lying in the street. Throngs of people surround it, overcome with admiration. Gilgamesh too loves the axe, as much as if it were his wife. He carries it to his mother and lays it at her feet. Ninsun tells him that both the rock and the axe represent the man he will soon contend with—the man who will become his most trusted companion and counselor, the friend who has the power to save him.

Analysis: Tablet 1

The narrator introduces Gilgamesh in the past tense—the high walls of the city he built are already ancient. At the same time he suggests that the story is in Gilgamesh's own words, and that the legendary king himself wrote it down. Gilgamesh's story commemorates historical people and deeds, and at the same time, Gilgamesh's passage through heroism, grief, and wisdom is a perpetual, universal process. The story of Gilgamesh is both timeless and immediate.

Gilgamesh's mother Ninsun plays a fairly significant role in the early parts of the story, we learn very little about his father. The Sin-Leqi-Unninni version of Gilgamesh says his father is Ninsun's husband, Lugulbanda, but it's not clear if Lugulbanda is actually Gilgamesh's biological father. Some versions of the poem declare that Gilgamesh's father is a priest, while others call him a "fool." Like Gilgamesh, Lugulbanda was a genuine historical figure. He precedes Gilgamesh on Uruk's king list by two, and he would have more likely been his grandfather, considering the lengths of the recorded reigns. Like Gilgamesh, people worshipped him as a god after his death.

Though Gilgamesh is legendary, the poet hastens to inform us that he was not always exemplary. An equal was required to counter and control his awesome power. Gilgamesh was more god than mortal, and the narrator suggests that his equal, Enkidu, is a singular force of nature. He is hairy, he grazes with the animals, and he lacks the power of speech. Enkidu anticipates the hairy Esau of the Bible and possibly Ishmael, "the wild ass" of a man. He enables the animals to escape human dominance, which threatens the balance of the world. When Enkidu must depart from his life in nature and come into civilization, his redemption is through a woman. He confronts the strong power of a woman's sexuality, which tames him. Ishtar is Uruk's resident god, and the prostitutes in her service epitomize the values of that highly sophisticated urban culture.

Enkidu's story repeats the story of humankind, the passage from mere animal existence to self-awareness and culture. His fall from nature foreshadows another biblical motif: Adam and Eve's fall from innocence in Eden when they become aware of their sexuality. Female sexuality is the force that makes domesticity and civilized life possible, and Ishtar, the goddess of love, fertility, and war, plays a huge role in Gilgamesh and Enkidu's stories. As the epic continues, however, sexual love does not necessarily figure in to the ultimate human relationship. In Gilgamesh, the love that exists between evenly matched comrades is even more important. Equilibrium, balance, and moderation are essential virtues. Gilgamesh is part god and part mortal, and these different aspects are in constant contention. The very qualities that make him so awesome—his strength and beauty—also make him monstrous, until they achieve balance. Enkidu's wildness, likewise, must come into harmony with his humanity. He requires an equally developed spirit to control his powerful body. Enkidu's domestication is a prerequisite for Gilgamesh's moral education.

Sappho 31

Sappho 31 is an ancient Greek lyrical poem written by a Greek female poet, Sappho of Lesbos. Not only is it one of the most significant pieces of her work to survive, but it is also one of her most famous.Most translators and literary scholars see the poem as an ode to the anxiety of attraction and a confession of love from a woman to another woman. In addition to that, Fragment 31 is notable in terms of how it has influenced modern, lyrical poetry concepts.

The poem: Fragment 31
The poem was written in the Aeolic dialect, a dialect spoken in Sappho's home island of Lesbos.

"That man seems to me to be equal to the gods

Who is sitting opposite you

And hears you nearby

Speaking sweetly

And laughing delightfully, which indeed

Makes my heart flutter in my breast;

For when I look at you even for a short time,

It is no longer possible for me to speak

But it is as if my tongue is broken

And immediately a subtle fire has run over my skin,

I cannot see anything with my eyes,

And my ears are buzzing

A cold sweat comes over me, trembling

Seizes me all over, I am paler

Than grass, and I seem nearly

To have died.

But everything must be dared/endured, since (even a poor man)…"

The poem has been debated much by scholars, most of which centralizes the feeling of a woman to another woman (we will see much more in the poem's defragment below).Some scholars suggested that the poem is a wedding song, indicated by mentioning a man and woman standing or near one another. However, some dismissed the impression of it being a wedding song as there is no significant indication that Sappho was writing about a marriage. Others suggested that men's and women's relationship is like a sibling relationship between a brother and a sister. From the observation, the two characters have a similar social status.

Defragment of Sappho's Fragment 31
Sappho

Line 1 – 4:
In the first stanza (line 1 – 4) of the poem, Sappho introduces us to her three characters: a man, a woman, and the speaker. The speaker is clearly impressed with the man; we can see that in the first verse where the speaker proclaims the man "…to be equal to the gods…".

However, it must be noted that the man is only mentioned once by the speaker. This is an indication that the man, while impressive, is actually of no interest to the speaker.

The god-like description ascribed to the man by the speaker is simply a tool used by the speaker to intensify their actual admiration for the real object of the poem; the person sitting opposite him and talking to him. This person is addressed as "you" by the speaker throughout the duration of the poem.

Who is this second person opposite the man? We can infer by the rest of the poem and the speaker's description of this character that the person whom the man is sitting across from and speaking to is a woman.

Within the first stanza, Sappho also lays out the setting between all of the characters; the man, the woman and the speaker. Although there is no specific mention of the location, readers can imagine the space the characters are in and how the action of the poem is taking place.

Through the speaker's description of the man and woman from afar, Sappho indicates that the speaker is watching the woman from a distance. This distance constitutes that central tension within the poem.

The speaker indicates that the man is listening closely to the woman, who tells the reader that this proximity between those two characters is physical and romantic intimacy, metaphorically.

This brings the readers to the second stanza (line 5 – 8), which shows the speaker's intense emotion towards the woman and the emotional agony of having the distance between them.

Line 5 – 8:

In this stanza, "you" (the woman) is further described, and ultimately the relationship between the two characters, the speaker and the woman, is revealed.

First, Sappho uses sonic imagery, for example, "sweet speaking" and "lovely laughing." These descriptions of the woman indicate the sound the readers should hear throughout the poem as they read it but are also used to reveal the speaker's fond feelings about the woman.

Within this stanza, we can also see the speaker is opening up about themselves and their feelings towards the women. This is where the readers can identify the gender of the speaker through the verse "…makes my heart flutter in my breast…". This verse acts as a climactic moment where the reader suddenly becomes aware of the speaker's feelings. This moment is the result of the tension built up due to the speaker's distance from the woman and the continued admiration in previous verses.

Throughout this stanza, the focus has shifted away from the woman's objective reality speaking to the man and instead towards the speaker's subjective experience of love. She understands her feelings toward the woman, and the phrase "…even for a short time…" indicates to the reader that this is not the first time that she has seen the woman. The reader seems to have experienced this kind of speechlessness, caused simply by the sight of her beloved, before.

Line 9 – 12:
In these lines, the focus centers more on the speaker's experience of love. Here Sappho emphasizes the increasingly intense experience of the speaker as they watch their beloved. The descriptions of the speaker's passion intensify as the poem nears its conclusion.

We can see how the speaker's passion is intensifying through these phrases:

"…tongue is broken…"
"…a subtle fire has run over my skin…"
"…cannot see anything with my eyes…"
"…ears are buzzing…"
Sappho uses the senses to describe how the speaker is getting increasingly overwhelmed by her feelings of love, so much so that her body is systematically failing, starting from her sense of touch to sight and, lastly, to her hearing.

This stanza lists a series of physical experiences of the speaker, and it is written in a disjointed manner, whereby readers can see how each part of the speaker's body is breaking apart. This stanza is the most dramatic part of the poem and is the ultimate escalation after the build-up of unfulfilled passion from the earlier two stanzas.

The phrase "…my tongue is broken…" is used to describe the speaker's start of physical deterioration. Sappho uses the tongue as a subject to bring the readers to the rest of the stanza. The deterioration moves from the tongue to the skin, eyes, and finally the ears. As stated by the speaker, each part is failing to function.

The intense physical feelings of the speaker's loss of senses in this stanza functions as a way for us to see the speaker's isolation from the world. She is completely detached from the reality of what is happening around her in the outside world. She is experiencing a form of dissociation or detachment from her own body and self as if she were dying.

This is to show to us, the readers, the loneliness and isolation the speaker is experiencing has resulted from her unexpressed love. Moreover, it brings us back to the distance that the speaker experienced within the first stanza. This distance is now being reflected in her relationship with everything in the world, including herself.

Line 13 – 17:
In these final lines, we are brought back to the speaker as she returns to her body after experiencing an intense moment of dissociation from her beloved (the woman), the world, as well as herself.

Sweating from stress and shaking, the speaker describes herself metaphorically as "paler than grass" and "seem nearly to have died." She experienced such extreme and intense emotions that she now feels almost dead.

The last line of this stanza, according to scholars, is thought to be the beginning of a new and final stanza, which has unfortunately been lost. That means that Sappho did not intend the poem to stop on this line. Rather, she intended to write a stanza where the speaker will reconcile herself to the situation at hand.

Sadly, the last three lines of the poem are lost to time. Although the poem is left on a cliffhanger, scholars noted that the speaker seems to turn away from her ecstatic despair and instead may turn to express herself outwardly and commit to risk embarking upon the world.

Themes

There are three main themes within this poem, and they are jealousy, ecstasy, and disassociation.

Jealousy – often referred to as Sappho's poem of jealousy by scholars, Fragment 31 begins with a typical love triangle between the man, the woman, and the speaker. As the speaker watches her beloved from a distance, she starts to describe the man sitting opposite her beloved. Here the poem could have focused on the speaker's jealousy of the man to whom her beloved is speaking. However, throughout the poem, the speaker didn't seem to have any interest in the man. Instead, the speaker intimately watches her beloved and turns her attention towards her own experience of self context.

Ecstasy – The theme of ecstasy is vividly expressed through the phrase "…makes my heart flutter in my breast…" in which Sappho used metaphor to describe the physical sensation of a lovestruck heart.

Dissociation – This is the feeling of being removed from the senses of one's body, that is, one's essence, soul, and/or mind. This is exactly what the speaker experienced as she mentions the breaking down of parts of her body that starts with the tongue and continues with her skin, eyes, and ears. It leads to the dissociative experience that, considering the poem's context as a love poem, suggests that transcendence is actually an erotic engagement with oneself.

Conclusions

As one of her most frequently adapted and translated poems and a favorite subject for scholarly commentary, it is commonly agreed upon that Fragment 31 is one of Sappho's most famous works.

The poem has had a huge influence on other poets, whereby they adapted it into their own works. For example, Catullus, a Roman poet, adapted it into his 51st poem, where he incorporated his muse Lesbia into the role of Sappho's beloved.Other adaptations that can be found would be in the works of one of the ancient authors named Theocritus, in which he incorporated it into his second Idyll. The same goes with Apollonius of Rhodes, where he adapted the poem into his description of the first meeting between Jason and Medea in the Argonautica.

As described by Sappho, the physical response of desire, which is the center of attention in the poem, is particularly celebrated by scholars and fans of her works. The poem has been quoted in other works, such as in Longinus' treatise On The Sublime, in which it was quoted for its intensity of emotion. Plato, the Greek philosopher, also mentioned the physical symptoms of desire portrayed in the poem in Socrates's speeches on love.

Poems Addressed to Lesbia by Catullus

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"Vivamus, mea Lesbia, atque amemus" ("Let us live, my Lesbia, and let us love") is a passionate love poem by the Roman lyric poet Catullus, often referred to as "Catullus 5" or "Carmina V" for its position in the generally accepted catalogue of Catullus' works. It dates from around 65 BCE and is perhaps the best known of all the poet's output, and is sometimes considered among the greatest love poems ever written. The poem encourages lovers to ignore the comments of others, and to live only for each other, since life is all too brief and death brings on a night of perpetual sleep.

Synopsis

The poem begins by calling on the poet's love, Lesbia, to scorn the rumours and insinuations of others, counselling that they should live their short lives to the full before the eternal night of death arrives. He then asks Lesbia to bestow on him innumerable kisses, so many that they lose count and the wicked and the jealous will not be able to call them to account for them.

Analysis

The poem is one of Catullus' first writings about Lesbia, clearly written at a very passionate stage of the affair. "Lesbia", the subject of many of Catullus' poems, seems to have been an alias for Clodia, the wife of the eminent Roman statesman, Clodius. The reference to rumours in the second and third lines probably refers to gossip going around the Roman Senate that Catullus was having an affair with Clodia, and Catullus urges Clodia to disregard what people are saying about them, so she can spend more time with him.

It is written in hendecasyllabic metre (each line has eleven syllables), a common form in Catullus' poetry. It abounds in liquid consonants and there is much elision of vowels, so that, read aloud, the poem is truly beautiful.

It can be seen as comprising two parts: the first six lines (down to "nox est perpetua una dormienda") being a kind of breathless seduction, and the following seven lines representing the resulting love-making, rising to an orgasmic climax with the exploding 'b's of 'conturbabimus illa' and then coasting to a quiescent close in the final two lines.

Interestingly, his mention of the "brief light" of life and the "perpetual night" of death in line 6 suggests a rather pessimistic view of life and a belief in no afterlife, a belief which would have been at odds with most Romans of the time. His mention of the "evil eye" in line 12 is linked to the (commonly held) belief in witchcraft, particularly the idea that, if the evil one knew of certain numbers relevant to the victim (in this case the number of kisses) any spell against them would be much more effective.

As one of Catullus' most celebrated poems, translated and imitated many times over the centuries, its influence can be traced forward to the poetry of the medieval troubadours as well as to many later authors of the Romantic school of the 19th Century. There have been many derivations from it (the English poets Marlowe, Campion, Jonson, Raleigh and Crashaw, to name just a few, wrote imitations of it), some more subtle than others.

Poem 75

Introduction

In this poem, Catullus writes to Lesbia, whom he calls "my Lesbia." In line one, he shares how his mind is reduced by her fault. This means he is hurt and confused. In the second line, he continues his sad elegiac poem to her by writing about how his mind has ruined itself by its devotion to her. With these two lines, it appears that Catullus has already lost Lesbia to Caelius.

In the third line, Catullus says that his mind cannot wish her well, even if she becomes the best woman. In the fourth line, he continues the thought and says he also cannot stop loving her. He finishes line four by saying that she did the worst that she could have done.

Throughout his life, Catullus loved Lesbia, but she wasn't always good to him. She was married to another man, and cheated on him with Catullus. She also was reported to have poisoned her husband, then had an affair with another man after Catullus left town for a short time. There are clearly things that Lesbia did that were not kind to Catullus. According to her historical account, she lived life on her own terms, even though Catullus wished she would live life on his terms, with only him.

This poem has the sound of an ancient Roman guilt trip, addressed toward Lesbia. He accuses her of reducing his mind and ruining it. He then writes about how she could become the best of women, which is a big snarky to say to someone who has ruined your mind. What is she supposed to say to him in response to this? I'm sorry? He says he will still love her, but she has done the worst she could do to him. Might he eventually become a stalker?

Sonnet 116

Summary

In 'Sonnet 116: Let me not to the marriage of true minds,' Shakespeare's speaker is ruminating on love. He says that love never changes, and if it does, it was not true or real in the first place.He compares love to a star that is always seen and never changing. It is real and permanent, and it is something on which a person can count. Even though the people in love

may change as time passes, their love will not. The speaker closes by saying that no man has ever truly loved before if he is wrong about this.

Themes

Shakespeare used some of his most familiar themes in 'Sonnet 116'. These include time, love, and the nature of relationships. In the fourteen lines of this sonnet, he delves into what true love is and whether or not it's real. He uses a metaphor to compare love to a star that's always present and never changes. He is so confident in this opinion that he asserts no man has ever loved before if he's wrong. Shakespeare also brings elements of time into the poem. He emphasizes that time knows no boundaries, and even if the people in the relationship change, the love doesn't.

Historical Background

Many believe the mysterious young man for whom this and many other of Shakespeare's sonnets were written was the Earl of Southampton, Henry Wriothesly. Wriothesly was Shakespeare's patron, and The Bard's Venus, Adonis, and Tarquin and Lucrece were dedicated to the young man.

Structure and Form

This is a true Shakespearean sonnet, also called an Elizabethan or English sonnet. This type of sonnet contains fourteen lines, separated into three quatrains (four lines) and ending with a rhyming couplet (two lines). The rhyme scheme of this sonnet is abab cdcd efef gg. Like most of Shakespeare's works, this sonnet is written in iambic pentameter, which means each line consists of ten syllables. Within those ten syllables, there are five pairs, which are called iambs (one stressed syllable followed by an unstressed syllable).

Literary Devices

Shakespeare uses several literary devices in 'Sonnet 116,' which include but are not limited to alliteration, examples of caesurae, and personification. The first, alliteration, is concerned with the repetition of words that begin with the same consonant sound. For example, "marriage" and "minds" in the first line, and "remover" and "remove" are in the fourth line.

Caeusrae is used when the poet wants to create a pause in the middle of a line. The second line of the poem is a good example. It reads: "Admit impediments. Love is not love". There is another example in line eight. It reads: "Whose worth's unknown, although his height is taken." The "pause" the poet uses might be marked with punctuation or intuited through the metrical pattern.

Personification is seen in the final sestet of the poem. There, Shakespeare personifies "Time" and "Love," something that he does more than once in his 154 sonnets. He refers to them as forces that have the ability to change lives purposefully.

Detailed Analysis

While this sonnet is clumped in with the other sonnets that are assumed to be dedicated to an unknown young man in Shakespeare's life, this poem does not seem to directly address anyone. In fact, Sonnet 116 seems to be the speaker's—in this case, perhaps Shakespeare—

ruminations on love and what it is. The best way to analyze Shakespeare's sonnets is to examine them line-by-line, which is what will follow.

Lines 1-2

In the first two lines, Shakespeare writes,

Let me not to the marriage of true minds

Admit impediments.

These lines are perhaps the most famous in the history of poetry, regardless of whether or not one recognizes them as belonging to Shakespeare. Straight away, Shakespeare uses the metaphor of marriage to compare it to true, real love.He is saying there is no reason why two people who truly love should not be together; nothing should stand in their way. Perhaps he is speaking about his feelings for the unknown young man for whom the sonnet is written.

Shakespeare was unhappily married to Anne Hathaway, and so perhaps he was rationalizing his feelings for the young man by stating there was no reason, even if one is already married, that two people who are truly in love should not be together.

Lines 3-4

The second half of the second line begins a new thought, which is then carried on into the third and fourth lines. He writes,

Love is not love

Which alters when it alteration finds,

Or bends with the remover to remove.

Shakespeare is continuing with his thought that true love conquers all. In these lines, the speaker tells the reader that if love changes, it is not truly loved because if it changes or someone tries to "remove" it, nothing will change it. Love does not stop just because something is altered. As clichéd as it sounds, true love, real love, lasts forever.The second quatrain of Sonnet 116 begins with some vivid and beautiful imagery, and it continues with the final thought pondered in the first quatrain.

Lines 5-6

Now that Shakespeare has established what love is not—fleeting and ever-changing—he can now tell us what love is. He writes,

O no, it is an ever fixed mark

That looks on tempests and is never shaken…

Here, Shakespeare tells his readers that love does not shift, change, or move; it is constant and in the same place, and it can weather even the most harrowing of storms or tempests and is never even shaken, let alone defeated. While weak, it can be argued here that Shakespeare decides to personify love since it is something that is intangible and not something that can be defeated by something tangible, such as a storm.

Lines 7-8

In the next line, Shakespeare uses the metaphor of the North Star to discuss love. He writes,

It is the star to every wand'ring bark,

Whose worth's unknown, although his height be taken.

To Shakespeare, love is the star that guides every bark or ship on the water, and while it is priceless, it can be measured. These two lines are interesting and worth noting. Shakespeare concedes that love's worth is not known, but he says it can be measured. He neglects to tell his reader, but perhaps he is assuming the reader will understand the different ways one can measure love: through time and actions. With that thought, the second quatrain ends.

Lines 9-10

The third quatrain parallels the first, and Shakespeare returns to telling his readers what love is not. He writes,

Love's not Time's fool, though rosy lips and cheeks

Within his bending sickle's compass come…

Notice the capitalization of the word "Time." Shakespeare is personifying time as a person, specifically, Death. He says that love is not the fool of time. One's rosy lips and cheeks will certainly pale with age as "his bending sickle's compass come." Shakespeare's diction is important here, particularly with his use of the word "sickle." Who is the person with whom the sickle is most greatly associated? Death. We are assured here that Death will certainly come, but that will not stop love. It may kill the lover, but the love itself is eternal.

Lines 11-12

This thought is continued in lines eleven and twelve, the final two lines of the third quatrain. Shakespeare writes,

Love alters not with his brief hours and weeks,

But bears it out even to the edge of doom.

He is simply stating here that love does not change over time; instead, it continues on even after the world has ended ("the edge of doom").

Lines 13-14

Shakespeare uses lines thirteen and fourteen, the final couplet of Sonnet 116, to assert how truly he believes that love is everlasting and conquers all. He writes,

If this be error and upon me proved

I never writ, nor no man ever loved.

In this part of Sonnet 116, Shakespeare is telling his reader that if someone proves he is wrong about love, then he never wrote the following words, and no man ever loved. He is conveying here that if his words were untrue, nothing else would exist. The words he just wrote would have never been written, and no man would have ever loved them before. He is adamant about this, and his tough words are what strengthen the sonnet itself. The speaker and poet himself are convinced that love is real, true, and everlasting.

FAQs

What is the main theme of 'Sonnet 116?'

The main theme of the poem is the nature of true love, portrayed as unchanging, steadfast, and enduring regardless of life's challenges and the passage of time.

What metaphor does Shakespeare use to describe love?

Love is described through several metaphors, including an "ever-fixed mark" that withstands storms and a guiding star for wandering ships.

How does 'Sonnet 116' relate to the other sonnets in Shakespeare's sequence?

This sonnet is part of Shakespeare's sequence of 154 sonnets, and it stands out for its unambiguous meditation on the nature of true love.

How does Shakespeare portray time in this sonnet?

Time is depicted as a force that can alter physical beauty but is powerless against true love's enduring nature.

What is the significance of the concluding couplet?

The final couplet serves as a bold assertion of the truth of the poem's claims about love, challenging anyone to prove them wrong and linking the validity of the entire poem to the speaker's credibility.

Sonnet 127

Sonnet 127' is one of William Shakespeare's 154 sonnets. It is the first poem in the Dark Lady sequence of sonnets. They deal with the speaker (who is usually considered to be William Shakespeare himself) and his relationship with his mistress, the Dark Lady. This sonnet, and those which follow, are concerned with what's beautiful and how concepts of beauty are changing. The speaker is right at the heart of that.

As with the Fair Youth, there is no consensus in regard to who the Dark Lady is or if she was even a real person.

Sonnet 127
William Shakespeare

In the old age black was not counted fair,
Or if it were, it bore not beauty's name;
But now is black beauty's successive heir,
And beauty slandered with a bastard shame:
For since each hand hath put on Nature's power,
Fairing the foul with Art's false borrowed face,
Sweet beauty hath no name, no holy bower,
But is profaned, if not lives in disgrace.
Therefore my mistress' eyes are raven black,
Her eyes so suited, and they mourners seem
At such who, not born fair, no beauty lack,
Sland'ring creation with a false esteem:
Yet so they mourn becoming of their woe,
That every tongue says beauty should look so.

Summary

'Sonnet 127' by William Shakespeare is the first Dark Lady sonnet. It addresses the speaker's mistress's beauty and dark complexion. In the first lines of 'Sonnet 127,' the speaker spends several lines describing the fact that nowadays, women use makeup, and he finds himself irritated by it. It's hard to tell who is naturally beautiful and who is taking nature's power into her own hands and changing her appearance. Luckily for him, his mistress, the Dark Lady, doesn't use cosmetics. She has beautiful dark features that are just now starting to be considered beautiful. She's so striking, in fact, that her eyes seem to be mourning those who aren't naturally beautiful. They also influence those around them into thinking that her sadness about this fact is a new kind of beauty all its own.

Themes

Throughout 'Sonnet 127,' the poet engages with themes of beauty and transformation. He considers the past and the present and decides that the way women are today is less natural and less genuine than they were in the past. Before, it was easy to tell who was beautiful and who wasn't. But, today, women wear make-up and make it much more difficult. They all darken their complexions in a way that resembles the natural beauty of his mistress. The poet also spends lines alluding to how what's considered beautiful can change over time.

Structure and Form

'Sonnet 127' by William Shakespeare is a traditional sonnet that follows the pattern Shakespeare popularized. It contains fourteen lines that are divided into two quatrains, or sets of four lines, and one sestet, or set of six lines. They rhyme ABABCDCDEFEFGG as the vast majority of Shakespeare's sonnets do. In iambic pentameter, each line contains five sets of two beats, known as metrical feet. The first is unstressed, and the second is stressed. It sounds

something like da-DUM, da-DUM. The fifth line is a particularly good example of the pattern. The poem can also be divided into three sets of four lines and a final two-line couplet. The fourth line is a particularly good example of iambic pentameter.

Literary Devices

Shakespeare makes use of several poetic techniques in 'Sonnet 127'. These include but are not limited to examples of:

Alliteration: the repetition of words with the same consonant sound. For example, "bore" and "beauty" in line two and "beauty" and "bastard" in line four.

Enjambment: occurs when the poet cuts off a line before its natural stopping point—for example, the transition between lines ten and eleven.

Metaphor: a comparison between two unlike things using like or as. For example, Shakespeare compares his mistress's eyes to the dark feathers of a raven.

Detailed Analysis

Lines 1-4

In the old age black was not counted fair,
Or if it were, it bore not beauty's name;
But now is black beauty's successive heir,
And beauty slandered with a bastard shame:

In the first lines of 'Sonnet 127,' the speaker begins by addressing the fact that ideas about beauty are changing. He knows that in the past, a dark complexion wasn't considered beautiful. Or, if it was, he adds, no one admitted they thought so. It "bore not beauty's name," meaning no one called it beautiful. But, now, things have changed. "Black" is becoming more popular. It's more legitimate to call something dark beautiful than it is to call something light beautiful.

Lines 5-8

For since each hand hath put on Nature's power,
Fairing the foul with Art's false borrowed face,
Sweet beauty hath no name, no holy bower,
But is profaned, if not lives in disgrace.

In the next lines, the speaker asserts his opinion in regard to cosmetics. He's irritated by the fact that any woman can now turn to cosmetics as a way of enhancing their natural appearance. This feels unnatural to him, as if the woman is trying to take "Nature's power" into her own hands. They devalue beauty, he thinks. Then, when one sees something beautiful, it is less impactful than it would've been otherwise. He believes that true beauty, that which nature alone bestowed upon a woman, doesn't exist anymore.

Lines 9-14

Therefore my mistress' eyes are raven black,
Her eyes so suited, and they mourners seem
At such who, not born fair, no beauty lack,
Sland'ring creation with a false esteem:
Yet so they mourn becoming of their woe,
That every tongue says beauty should look so.

It's not until the ninth line of the poem that the speaker brings in his mistress, the Dark Lady. She has eyes that are "raven black," a great example of a metaphor. Her beauty matches the current fashion, but she doesn't have to improve herself with makeup. Her dark eyes appear to be in mourning for those who make themselves beautiful with makeup. These people are not naturally beautiful and are the exact demographic that Shakespeare's speaker (or perhaps the Bard himself) is annoyed with. The poem concludes with the speaker saying that the Dark Lady's beauty is so powerful that she's transforming what others think beauty should be in her sadness.

A Valediction: Forbidding Mourning

John Donne

John Donne is one of the most important English poets of his time. He was the best of the metaphysical poets and is remembered for his skill with conceits. This poem was written for Donne's wife Anne in either 1611 or 1612. It was penned before he left on a trip to Europe. It was not published until after his death, appearing in the collection Songs and Sonnets. "A Valediction: Forbidding Mourning' is divided into sets of four lines, or quatrains. Donne has also structured this piece with a consistent pattern of rhyme, following the scheme of abab. In regards to meter, Donne chose to use iambic tetrameter. This means that each line contains four sets of two beats. Generally, the first of these is unstressed and the second stressed.

There are a few moments though where this reverses and instead, the first syllable is stressed (trochaic tetrameter). One of these moments is in the first line of the third stanza with

the word “Moving.” The reversal of the rhythmic pattern here is a surprise, just as is the “Moving of th’ earth” which is being described.

A Valediction: Forbidding Mourning

As virtuous men pass mildly away,
And whisper to their souls to go,
Whilst some of their sad friends do say
The breath goes now, and some say, No:

So let us melt, and make no noise,
No tear-floods, nor sigh-tempests move;
'Twere profanation of our joys
To tell the laity our love.

Moving of th' earth brings harms and fears,
Men reckon what it did, and meant;
But trepidation of the spheres,
Though greater far, is innocent.

Dull sublunary lovers' love
(Whose soul is sense) cannot admit
Absence, because it doth remove
Those things which elemented it.

But we by a love so much refined,
That our selves know not what it is,
Inter-assured of the mind,
Care less, eyes, lips, and hands to miss.

Our two souls therefore, which are one,
Though I must go, endure not yet
A breach, but an expansion,
Like gold to airy thinness beat.

If they be two, they are two so
As stiff twin compasses are two;
Thy soul, the fixed foot, makes no show
To move, but doth, if the other do.

And though it in the center sit,
Yet when the other far doth roam,
It leans and hearkens after it,
And grows erect, as that comes home.

Such wilt thou be to me, who must,
Like th' other foot, obliquely run;

Thy firmness makes my circle just,
And makes me end where I begun.

Summary

'A Valediction: Forbidding Mourning' by John Donne describes the spiritual and transcendent love that Donne and his wife Anne shared. The poem begins with the speaker describing the death of a virtuous man. He goes to the afterlife peacefully, so much so that his friends are not sure if he is dead or not. Donne compares this kind of peaceful parting to the way he and his wife will separate. Rather than throwing an emotional fit, as a shallow couple would, they "melt" from one another.

In a similar metaphor, Donne also compares their love to the movement of the "celestial spheres." Even though these moments are invisible to those on earth, they are much more powerful than the highly visible "Moving of th' earth." The next analogy shows how their parting would be an "expansion" rather than a "breach." Their love will stretch, like gold leaf pounded thin.

The poem concludes with the well-known conceit comparing love to a drafting compass. Donne states that his wife is the leg that holds them steady, fixed point while he "roam[s]." It is due to her steadfastness that he always finds his way back.

Themes

As was common within Donne's poetry, there are pervading themes of death, the celebration of love and spirituality in this text. In regards to love, Donne spent the majority of the text trying to define what his love is like. Donne utilizes a number of images and analogies, which will be discussed later in this analysis, that accomplishes this. By the time the speaker gets to the end, he has come to the conclusion that no matter where he is, their love will live on.

The theme of spirituality is intimately connected with that of love. Donne's speaker, who is certainly Donne himself, declares the love he shares with his partner to be spiritual in nature. It goes beyond that which ordinary people experience. This means it can overcome any mundane barrier life throws at it.

The first lines of the text bring up death. He describes a group of friends who are gathered around the death bed of a "virtuous" man. They are discussing amongst themselves when this person is going to die, and which breath might be his last. By utilizing death to later speak on life, Donne is tapping into the tradition of Carpe Diem poetry. These types of poems promote a way of living that keeps in mind the ever-present prospect of death.

Images and Conceits

One of the most important and recognizable images associated with 'A Valediction: Forbidding Mourning' is that of a compass. It appears towards the end of the text, in line 26. It is important because it symbolizes the strength of their relationship, but also the balance that exists between the speaker and his wife.

Donne describes the compass as being "stiff" with a "fixed foot," this is his wife's part of the metaphor. She remains stationary while her husband, the speaker, "roam[s]" around. It is due to her steadfastness that he always finds his way back home. The speaker clearly sees this conceit, or comparison between two very unlike things, as a romantic. One should take note of the fact that the speaker's loyalty to his wife seems to hinge on her placidity. If she were to "roam" the entire balance would be thrown off.

Another image that is important to the text appears throughout the first half of the poem, that of natural, disastrous weather patterns. The first time one of these disasters is made clear is in the fifth line with the mention of a "flood" and a "tempest," or a powerful storm. In this instance, the weather is being used to show the exaggerated emotions of lesser love. The couple he is imagining cries and sighs outrageously as if hoping someone will take note of their passion.

Analysis of A Valediction: Forbidding Mourning

Stanza One

As virtuous men pass mildly away,

And whisper to their souls to go,

Whilst some of their sad friends do say

The breath goes now, and some say, No:

In the first stanza of 'A Valediction: Forbidding Mourning', the speaker begins with an image of death. He is speaking on the death of a man who is "virtuous." Due to his good nature, his death comes peacefully. Donne compares dying in this instance to "whisper[ing]" one's soul away. There is nothing traumatic about it. "Whisper" is a perfect example of onomatopoeia. The word sounds or resembles the noise it represents.

The dying man is not alone. There are "sad friends" around his bed who are unable to decide whether or not the man is dead. His final moments are so peaceful that there is no sign to tell the onlookers the end has come. They speak to one another asking if "The breath goes now" or not.

Stanza Two

So let us melt, and make no noise,

No tear-floods, nor sigh-tempests move;

'Twere profanation of our joys

To tell the laity our love.

The second stanza might come as something of a surprise to readers unused to Donne's complicated use of conceit. Rather than explaining what the first stanza was all about, it adds

additional information. The speaker is comparing the peaceful death of a virtuous man to the love he shares with the intended listener. When they separate they do so without the "tear-floods" and "sigh-tempests" of the shallow. Donne's speaker sees the way other partners are around one another and knows his relationship is better.

He and his partner would never be so crass as to expose their emotions to the "laity" or common people. It is something they keep to themselves. He states that it would be a "profanation," or disgrace to their "joy" to expose it. They will "make no noise" and remain on the high ground above those involved in lesser loves.

Stanza Three

Moving of th' earth brings harms and fears,

Men reckon what it did, and meant;

But trepidation of the spheres,

Though greater far, is innocent.

The third stanza introduces another image of natural disaster, the "Moving of th' earth" or an earthquake. It is something unexpected and unexplained. Earthquakes also bring along "harms and fears." These lines have been added to emphasize the absurdity of making a big deal over the speaker's departure.

The next two lines of 'A Valediction: Forbidding Mourning' are a bit more obscure. They refer to the celestial spheres, or concentric circles, in which the moon, stars, and planets moved. Although they are sectioned off, they still shake and vibrate in reaction to other events. Here the speaker is describing their "trepidation," or shaking. It is a greater shaking than that which an earthquake is able to inflict but it is unseen, innocent. This is another metaphor for how the speaker sees his relationship. It is not the showy earthquake but the much more powerful shaking of the celestial spheres.

Stanza Four

Dull sublunary lovers' love

(Whose soul is sense) cannot admit

Absence, because it doth remove

Those things which elemented it.

The speaker returns to describing the lesser love of others in the fifth stanza. It is "Dull" and it is "sublunary," meaning it exists under the moon rather than in the sky. Those who participate in these relationships are driven by their senses. The "soul" of the relationship is based on what one's senses can determine. Physical presence is of the utmost importance to these loves. They "cannot admit / Absence" because it "doth remove" the entire relationship. Everything shallow lovers have with one another is based on touch and sight.

Stanza Five

But we by a love so much refined,

That our selves know not what it is,

Inter-assured of the mind,

Care less, eyes, lips, and hands to miss.

The fifth stanza of 'A Valediction: Forbidding Mourning' provides a contrast to the fourth. He returns to his own relationship and speaks of himself and his wife as "we." They have a "refined" or well-tuned and highbrow relationship. Their love is so beyond the physical world that they, physical beings, have trouble understanding it. They "know not what it is."

The next two lines reiterate the fact that the love the speaker and his wife have is spiritual. It is more mental than it is physical. This means they are "Inter-assured of the mind" and do not care for the "eyes, lips, and hands." When they part these are not the elements they will miss about one another.

Stanza Six

Our two souls therefore, which are one,

Though I must go, endure not yet

A breach, but an expansion,

Like gold to airy thinness beat.

The sixth stanza begins with a fairly straightforward and recognizable declaration about marriage. They might have two separate souls but now they act as "one." It is due to this fact that when they part, they will not "endure" a "breach, but an expansion." Their love will stretch as gold does when it is beaten thin. It is the same, even when pushed to the limit. It is also important to take note of the fact that Donne chose to use gold as a representative of their love. He recognizes the elements of his relationship in its durability and beauty.

Stanza Seven

If they be two, they are two so

As stiff twin compasses are two;

Thy soul, the fixed foot, makes no show

To move, but doth, if the other do.

It is at this point in 'A Valediction: Forbidding Mourning' that the image of the compass, as discussed in the introduction, becomes important. First, Donne goes back on his previous statement about their "oneness." He knows there might be some doubt of their "inter-assured" relationship so he makes this concession. "If they," meaning himself and his wife, are "two" then they are the two legs of a compass.

Donne speaks of his wife as being the "fixed foot" of the device. She has the steady "soul" that remains grounded and never makes a "show / To move." His wife only moves if "the other do," meaning himself.

Stanza Eight

And though it in the center sit,

Yet when the other far doth roam,

It leans and hearkens after it,

And grows erect, as that comes home.

In the eighth stanza of 'A Valediction: Forbidding Mourning', the movement of the fixed foot is further described. Initially, it is in the center of their world, everything revolves around it. Then, if the other leg, the one compared to Donne, decides to "roam" far into the distance, it leans. This is the only movement that his wife makes. When he needs her to she "hearkens" after him then straightens up again, or "grows erect" when he comes home or returns to the fixed point.

Stanza Nine

Such wilt thou be to me, who must,

Like th' other foot, obliquely run;

Thy firmness makes my circle just,

And makes me end where I begun.

The final four lines describe the metaphor in full, just in case any part of the compass analogy was in doubt. The speaker is very much addressing his lines to his wife. He tells her that she will be to him the line that brings him back in. She has a "firmness" that makes his "circle just," or keeps it within a limited area. No matter what he does or where he roams, she will always get him back to where he began.

Ode on the Spring

Thomas Gray

‘Ode on the Spring’ belongs to the first period of Gray’s poetic career. It was written in 1742 and to that year also belong the Hymn to Adversity and the Ode on a Distant Prospect of Eton College. Most probably Gray derived the inspiration for writing this ode from James Thomson’s poem called Seasons. In ‘Ode on the Spring’, written during this first period (1742-50) of Gray’s poetic career, signs of Gray’s romantic temper are already in evidence. For instance, ‘Ode on the Spring’ is characterized by several romantic qualities though it also bears the eighteenth-century stamp in the form of personifications (some of which are absolutely needless), the use of what came to be known as “poetic diction” (which was subsequently rejected by the romantic poets), and a lot of moralizing.

Lo! where the rosy-bosom'd Hours,
Fair Venus' train appear,
Disclose the long-expecting flowers,
And wake the purple year!
The Attic warbler pours her throat,
Responsive to the cuckoo's note,
The untaught harmony of spring:
While whisp'ring pleasure as they fly,
Cool zephyrs thro' the clear blue sky
Their gather'd fragrance fling.

Where'er the oak's thick branches stretch

A broader, browner shade;
Where'er the rude and moss-grown beech
O'er-canopies the glade,
Beside some water's rushy brink
With me the Muse shall sit, and think
(At ease reclin'd in rustic state)
How vain the ardour of the crowd,
How low, how little are the proud,
How indigent the great!

Still is the toiling hand of Care:
The panting herds repose:
Yet hark, how thro' the peopled air
The busy murmur glows!
The insect youth are on the wing,
Eager to taste the honied spring,
And float amid the liquid noon:
Some lightly o'er the current skim,
Some show their gaily-gilded trim
Quick-glancing to the sun.

To Contemplation's sober eye
Such is the race of man:
And they that creep, and they that fly,
Shall end where they began.
Alike the busy and the gay
But flutter thro' life's little day,
In fortune's varying colours drest:
Brush'd by the hand of rough Mischance,
Or chill'd by age, their airy dance
They leave, in dust to rest.

Methinks I hear in accents low
The sportive kind reply:
Poor moralist! and what art thou?
A solitary fly!
Thy joys no glitt'ring female meets,
No hive hast thou of hoarded sweets,
No painted plumage to display:
On hasty wings thy youth is flown;
Thy sun is set, thy spring is gone—
We frolic, while 'tis May.
Ode on Spring by Thomas Gray

Analysis of Ode on the Spring

Stanza One

Lo! where the rosy-bosom'd Hours,

Fair Venus' train appear,

Disclose the long-expecting flowers,

And wake the purple year!

The Attic warbler pours her throat,

Responsive to the cuckoo's note,

The untaught harmony of spring:

While whisp'ring pleasure as they fly,

Cool zephyrs thro' the clear blue sky

Their gather'd fragrance fling.

Behold! The Hours, which have a rosy complexion and which attend upon the beautiful goddess called Venus (the goddess of beauty and love), have appeared on the scene and are bringing into view the buds which have long been expecting to open into flowers. These Hours represent the pretty colours of that time of the year when the year seems to have awakened from its sleep. It is the season of spring which has arrived. The nightingale, which has a long history going back to the ancient times in Greece, is singing in a rich voice; and it is singing in response to the singing of the cuckoo. Both these birds sing spontaneously, and their singing is part of the music of this season.

While the birds are singing, cool winds blow through the blue sky which is free from clouds in this season; and these winds seem to be producing joyous sounds as they blow. The winds are also scattering the sweetness which they have gathered from the blooming flowers. This stanza is marked by both neo-classical characteristics and the romantic temper of the poet. The time of spring is personified as the "rosy-bosom'd Hours" which are regarded as the attendants of Venus. The winds and the breezes have been personified as Zephyrs (that is, the followers of Zephyrus, the god of winds).

The nightingale is described as "the Attic warbler", and this is an example of poetic diction. The romantic temper of the writer is seen in his interest in, and his keen observation of, natural phenomena and natural processes.Nature emerged as a new theme in the poetry of Gray and others of the same group of poets who are regarded as the harbingers of the Romantic movement, though these poets could not get completely free of the prevailing neo-classical style of writing of which Alexander Pope was the principal representative.

Stanza Two

Where'er the oak's thick branches stretch

A broader, browner shade;

Where'er the rude and moss-grown beech

O'er-canopies the glade,

Beside some water's rushy brink

With me the Muse shall sit, and think

(At ease reclin'd in rustic state)

How vain the ardour of the crowd,

How low, how little are the proud,

How indigent the great!

At places an oak tree spreads its thick branches, casting on the ground below a shade which is larger and browner in colour than the branches themselves. At other places the beech tree, which has a rough and uneven trunk with the green moss growing upon it, seems to serve as an overhead covering for the open space in the valley. Amid this scene, I would sit down on the bank of a river or a brook by the side of which grows a kind of grass called "rush"; and by my side would sit the goddess who presides over the writing of poetry.

Together we (I and the Muse) would sit comfortably in a leaning posture and the rural style. Together we would meditate upon the futility of all the noisy endeavours of the city crowds, and we would also meditate upon the smallness and insignificance of the people in the city who feel proud of themselves, and upon the extreme poverty of those persons who think themselves to be very rich and exalted.

Stanza Three

Still is the toiling hand of Care:

The panting herds repose:

Yet hark, how thro' the peopled air

The busy murmur glows!

The insect youth are on the wing,

Eager to taste the honied spring,

And float amid the liquid noon:

Some lightly o'er the current skim,

Some show their gaily-gilded trim

Quick-glancing to the sun.

The shepherd, who busily and anxiously looks after the welfare of his sheep and who has to work very hard, is resting at this time and is therefore making no movements or noise. The sheep, which had been running about breathlessly during the day, are also now at rest. (Or, the sheep which were breathless on account of the heat are now peaceful). And yet the silence is not absolute or complete. Certain sounds are audible. In fact, the air seems to be thick with sounds which indicate some kind of activity, though these sounds are low.

The sounds are coming from the insects which are passing through the prime of their existence, and which are fluttering their wings as they fly about through the air. These insects are eager to taste the sweetness of the flowers which bloom during this season (namely spring). These insects fly in a leisurely manner on the surface of some brook at noon-time.Some of these insects fly lightly over the flowing water of the brook and they almost touch the surface in the course of their flight, while others are making a display of their bright colours and their neat wings. The insects cast quick glances upwards to look at the sun.

Stanza Four

To Contemplation's sober eye

Such is the race of man:

And they that creep, and they that fly,

Shall end where they began.

Alike the busy and the gay

But flutter thro' life's little day,

In fortune's varying colours drest:

Brush'd by the hand of rough Mischance,

Or chill'd by age, their airy dance

They leave, in dust to rest.

To the eyes of a serious-minded and contemplative on-looker, such also is the fast journey of a human being through life. The insects, both those which crawl on the ground and those which fly through the air, shall end their existence in the same way as they began. The insects of either kinds, whether they are busy or whether they are carefree, spend their short existence, merely fluttering their wings, regardless of every other consideration. They are all dressed in the different colours with which Fate has endowed them. Some of these insects shall get killed by an accidental blow from someone, and some of them shall die a natural death in

due course. These flying insects would ultimately cease their movements through the air and would end their existence to rest on the ground below where they would mingle with the dust.

Stanza Five
Methinks I hear in accents low

The sportive kind reply:

Poor moralist! and what art thou?

A solitary fly!

Thy joys no glitt'ring female meets,

No hive hast thou of hoarded sweets,

No painted plumage to display:

On hasty wings thy youth is flown;

Thy sun is set, thy spring is gone—

We frolic, while 'tis May.

I think I hear, in low voices, a reply to what I have said. I hear a reply from the creatures belonging to the playful race of insects and worms. This is what they have to say me in their reply: "You are a miserable preacher delivering sermons to others. What are you yourself? You are no better than a lonely fly. You have no woman, dressed in bright and shinning garments or wearing jewellery, to keep you company and to serve as a source of pleasure to you. You possess no storehouse full of accumulated pleasures from which you can draw any happiness at your will. You have no gaudy garments or showy equipment to display. Your youthful years have already passed, and they have passed in a hurried manner. The years of your prime are over, and thus the spring of your life has already ended while we are still enjoying our spring and are flying about merrily.

Critical Appreciation

The poem, 'Ode on the Spring' by Thomas Gray, has a lyrical quality in which the neo-classical poetry of the eighteenth century was sadly wanting, and which appeared chiefly in the work of Thomas Gray and a few others who are regarded as the pioneers of the Romantic movement in English poetry. If this poem is judged as an ode, we have to note the fact that it does not conform to any ancient classical pattern or form of the ode, somewhat akin to the odes of the ancient classical poet Horace who wrote regular odes, very unlike the Pindaric ones. (An ode by Horace is written in uniform stanzas, each of the same length and each observing the same rhyme-scheme). Each stanza in this poem consists of ten lines and the rhyme-scheme in all the stanzas is the same. Thus, this Ode is different from "The Progress of Poesy and The Bard" which are Pindaric odes by Gray. You can read more poetry by Thomas Gray here.

There is an undercurrent of melancholy in this poem, and this is a romantic feature. The personal element appears in the lines where Gray imagines himself as sitting in the company of the Muse by the riverside, but here again, we have the neo-classical tendency to moralize upon a situation or to draw a moral from what is being observed. The personal element is more particularly to be found in the final stanza where Gray speaks of himself as a solitary man having no worldly possessions to display, with his youth already "Flown".

It is Gray's interest in, and close observation of, natural objects, natural scenery, natural phenomena, and natural processes that are the most prominent romantic feature of this poem. We have several pictures of Nature that bear witness not only to Gray's interest in Nature but also to his talent for vivid imagery. Indeed, the pictorial quality and the imagery of Nature are the most attractive features of this poem.

La Belle Dame Sans Merci

John Keats

'La Belle Dame sans Merci' is a poignant reflection of Keats' own life and emotions, encapsulating themes of unrequited love, illness, and social barriers.

John Keats was an English poet and one of the most important of the Romantics. His work is often compared to Lord Byron's and Percy Bysshe Shelley's. 'La Belle Dame sans Merci' is a ballad from the Romantic period. It was part of a literary movement that had arisen to counter the theories of the Age of Enlightenment – to bring back imagination, beauty, and art to a culture that had become science-based, theoretical, and realist. Romantic writers saw the violence of the French Revolution as proof of the failure of science and reason, and the suffocation of the human spirit. Most of John Keats' prolific works were written in 1819, shortly after he met the love of his life, Fanny Brawne, and contracted a mortal disease. Keats' poems focus on a return to beauty: Greek myth, fairies, idealism, nature, and individualism are all prominent themes in not just his work, but of Romantic literature as a whole.

Text

Ah, what can ail thee, wretched wight,
Alone and palely loitering;
The sedge is withered from the lake,
And no birds sing.

Ah, what can ail thee, wretched wight,
So haggard and so woe-begone?
The squirrel's granary is full,
And the harvest's done.

I see a lilly on thy brow,
With anguish moist and fever dew;
And on thy cheek a fading rose
Fast withereth too.

I met a lady in the meads
Full beautiful, a faery's child;
Her hair was long, her foot was light,
And her eyes were wild.

I set her on my pacing steed,
And nothing else saw all day long;
For sideways would she lean, and sing
A faery's song.

I made a garland for her head,
And bracelets too, and fragrant zone;
She looked at me as she did love,
And made sweet moan.

She found me roots of relish sweet,
And honey wild, and manna dew;
And sure in language strange she said,
I love thee true.

She took me to her elfin grot,
And there she gazed and sighed deep,
And there I shut her wild sad eyes—
So kissed to sleep.

And there we slumbered on the moss,
And there I dreamed, ah woe betide,
The latest dream I ever dreamed
On the cold hill side.

I saw pale kings, and princes too,
Pale warriors, death-pale were they all;
Who cried—"La belle Dame sans merci
Hath thee in thrall!"

I saw their starved lips in the gloam
With horrid warning gaped wide,
And I awoke, and found me here
On the cold hill side.

And this is why I sojourn here
Alone and palely loitering,
Though the sedge is withered from the lake,
And no birds sing.

Summary

‘La Belle Dame sans Merci’ by John Keats is a beautiful poem about a fairy who condemns a knight after seducing him with her singing and looks. The first three stanzas introduce the unidentified speaker and the knight. The speaker comes across the knight wandering around in the dead of winter when “the sedge has withered from the lake/ And no birds sing.” In this way, Keats depicts a barren and bleak landscape.

The knight responds to the speaker, telling him how he met a lady in the meadows who was “full beautiful, a faery’s child”. Here, Keats’ language sweetens. The first three stanzas were bitter and devoid of emotion, but the introduction of the “lady in the meads” produces softness in the language of the knight. He reminisces on the lady’s beauty and her apparent innocence – her long hair, light feet, and wild eyes – and on her otherworldliness, as well. Moreover, he describes his sweet memories of the Lady: feeding each other, giving her presents, traveling with her, and being together.

In the eighth stanza, the lady weeps for she knows that they cannot be together as she is a fairy, and he is a mortal. She lulls him to sleep out of which he does not immediately wake. In his dream, the knight sees pale people like kings, princes, and warriors. They tell him that he has been enthralled by the woman without mercy. He wakes up from the nightmare alone, on the cold hillside, and tells the persona that is why he stays there, wandering, looking for the lady. The last stanza leaves the fate of the knight ambiguous.

Meaning

Keats’ ballad ‘La Belle Dame sans Merci’ describes the short encounter between a knight and a fairy lady. The title of the poem is interesting as it isn’t Keats’ own invention. He adopted the title of Alain Chartier’s French courtly poem ‘La Belle Dame Sans Mercy’. In French, the phrase means, “A Beautiful Lady Without Mercy“. Readers can see the variation of the words “Mercy” and “Merci”. It seems that Keats went with the French spelling of the word. Alain Chartier wrote that poem presumably in 1424 and the poem consists of 100 stanzas. Whereas, Keats’ poem is comparably short and doesn’t follow Chartier’s octosyllabic line pattern. Apart from that, as the poet chose directly a French phrase, the title also follows the French pronunciation.

Structure and Form

‘La Belle Dame sans Merci’ is after the form of the lyrical ballad. Many well-known poets of the romantic era used this form in their written works. This particular ballad has a meter and rhyme scheme that produces a flow that engages the reader. The poem is written in iambic tetrameter, which simply means that the stress falls on four words per line. The effect of this scheme is that it flows like a song, smoothly and with rhythm. Thus, it is called a lyrical ballad. The rhyme and rhythm are all designed to lure the reader in, just as the knight in the poem was lured in by the beautiful fairy-woman.

Keats wrote this in an outdated form of poetry that capitalizes on simple language and imagery to bring across its story. By utilizing the ballad form, it lends the poem an air of timelessness, and an almost novelistic approach to imagery. Even the story itself is evocative of the ballad tradition. Ballads were used as entertainment, and their length was supposed to keep listeners engaged, as the ballad was a form of oral poetry.

Tone and Mood

The tone and mood of this poem are also designed to help the readers to identify with John Keats' feelings as he neared the end of his life. One could argue that the Knight in this poem is Keats himself. Although there are some differences between his life and the knight's story, there are certainly plenty of similarities that would suggest that he uses the knight as a speaker to proclaim to the world just what he feels as he neared his untimely death.

Literary Devices

Keats' 'La Belle Dame sans Merci' contains several literary devices that make the emotional story of the "knight-at-arms" more heart-touching to the readers. These include but are not limited to:

Anaphora: The poem begins with an apostrophe. Using it, the poet introduces the knight as well as evokes his spirit into the poem.

Metaphor: In "squirrel's granary" the poet uses a metaphor. Here, the poet refers to the squirrel's hole. In "fever-dew" there is a metaphor and the comparison is between the dew and the fever.

Personal Metaphor: In "starved lips" there is a personal metaphor.

Metonymy: The word "death-pale" is a metonym. The kings and princes look pale as they have died. It's a reference to the cause in place of the effect of being pale.

Synecdoche: The poet refers to the color of the lily in the line "I see a lily on thy brow". It's a use of synecdoche.

Alliteration: It occurs when the poet uses the same consonant sounds at the beginning of lines. For example, "Full" and "faery" in line two of the fourth stanza and "light" and "long" in the following line. The phrase "her hair" contains another alliteration.

Circumlocution: The phrase, "fragrant zone" contains this device. It seems that the knight has made a garland that touches the lady's bosom.

Allusion: There is a biblical allusion in the line, "And honey wild, and manna-dew".

Palilogy: The poet uses this device by repeating the word, "wild" twice.

Repetition: The last stanza contains a repetition of the idea present in the first line of the poem.

Caesura: It occurs when the poet uses a pause in the middle of a line. For example, "And there I dreamed—Ah! woe betide!—" and "Full beautiful—a faery's child."

Imagery: It can be seen through the powerful images in the knight's dreams as he's forced to suffer terrible nightmares. For example, "I saw their starved lips in the gloam, / With horrid warning gapèd wide."

Analysis, Stanza by Stanza

Stanza One

O what can ail thee, knight-at-arms,

Alone and palely loitering?

The sedge has withered from the lake,

And no birds sing.

With the opening stanza of 'La Belle Dame sans Merci,' the speaker sets up the scene and the subject of this poem. The speaker comes upon a knight. He knows that this man is a knight upon seeing him, but he quickly reveals that this knight is not behaving as one might expect a knight to behave. The character does not seem brave and valiant. Rather, he is alone and "loitering". He seems to be wandering about aimlessly.

The speaker wonders why, and he asks. He also remarks about the time of year and claims that "the sedge has withered from the lake/ And no birds sing". Here, he is indicating that spring is over, and there is no lively singing or springtime beauty in the atmosphere. He wonders why the knight would be wandering about, pale and lonely, during this time of the year. It is probably growing cold, as the birds have flown south already. The speaker finds it concerning that this knight is sickly and alone, without shelter, at this time of the year.

It is important to note here that during the summer of 1818, Keats' younger brother Tom succumbed to tuberculosis. In the very same year, Keats began exhibiting symptoms of the disease, and thus impending death was heavy on his mind. It gets reflected in the very first stanza of the poem.

Stanza Two

O what can ail thee, knight-at-arms,

So haggard and so woe-begone?

The squirrel's granary is full,

And the harvest's done.

With this stanza, the reader can grasp the full picture of what the Knight looks like. The speaker describes him as "alone", "pale", "haggard", and "woe-begone". The setting is also described. It seems that the harvest is done. Therefore, the reader can imagine the bare, dry ground and the silence of nature after the birds have already flown south. Overall, this description gives 'La Belle Dame sans Merci' a very gloomy tone. The subject is down-trodden, and nature itself seems stripped of all joy. The birds have ceased their singing and the squirrels have stored up enough food to go into hiding. Thus, the lonely knight is left utterly alone.

Stanza Three

I see a lily on thy brow,

With anguish moist and fever-dew,

And on thy cheeks a fading rose

Fast withereth too.

In this stanza, the speaker informs the knight that he looks very ill. He tells him that his face is as pale as a lily and that his face looks moist with sweat as if he had a fever. All of his colors are fading quickly from his cheeks. It appears the speaker is very concerned about the

knight's health. He speaks to the knight to make sure he is aware of how ill he is. In the following stanza, the knight answers him.

Stanza Four

I met a lady in the meads,

Full beautiful—a faery's child,

Her hair was long, her foot was light,

And her eyes were wild.

The speaker is now the knight as he gives answers to the concerns of the first speaker. He tells him of a lady that he met and describes her long hair and her light step. Her eyes were "wild". It is clear from this stanza, that the knight fell in love at the first sight of this lady he describes. He describes her as not quite human. The knight doesn't refer to her as fully fairy, but he does call her a "faery's child" which gives the reader the impression that she is at least half fairy.

Stanza Five

I made a garland for her head,

And bracelets too, and fragrant zone;

She looked at me as she did love,

And made sweet moan

In this stanza, the knight describes his relationship with this lady. It appears that he won her heart. He made her a garland of flowers for her head. Then he made her bracelets from flowers. He also adorned her private parts with flowers. This is implied when he says that he put flowers on her "fragrant zone". Then the knight implies that he made love to this woman. He says that "she looked at [him] as she did love" and that she made a sweet moan. This implies that the two were intimate with one another.

Stanza Six

I set her on my pacing steed,

And nothing else saw all day long,

For sidelong would she bend, and sing

A faery's song.

The sixth stanza can be read as an extension of the previous stanza, where the lady riding the knight's stallion is an extended metaphor for their continued sexual relations. On the other hand, it could be read literally. In this case, the knight would have placed her on his horse

and watched her ride “all day long” while she sang. In either case, the knight is so entirely absorbed with this woman that he sees and hears nothing else. He is devoted to her the entire day long.

Stanza Seven

She found me roots of relish sweet,

And honey wild, and manna-dew,

And sure in language strange she said—

‘I love thee true’.

This stanza continues to describe the fairy woman’s supernatural qualities. She feeds him sweet roots, wild honey, and manna. The “roots of relish sweet” refer to her human qualities, but the manna and the wild honey are symbolic of her supernatural qualities. In the Jewish religion, it is told that God fed the Israelite’s bread from heaven called manna. This same God promised the Israelites a land flowing with milk and honey. Thus, the fact that the fairy-woman was able to feed him bread from heaven, wild honey, and roots suggests that the fairy is part human, part supernatural. The reference to “language strange” is yet another evidence of the lady’s unnatural lineage.

Stanza Eight

She took me to her Elfin grot,

And there she wept and sighed full sore,

And there I shut her wild wild eyes

With kisses four.

The knight continues to describe the fairy woman’s qualities. He describes her cave, or “grot” as something elf-like in nature. Then, he gives her human characteristics once again when he says that “she wept and sighed full sore”. He does not explain why she cried, but he does imply that he wiped her tears away with his kisses. This occurs between the knight and the fairy-woman allows the reader to understand the depth of their relationship. Earlier in ‘La Belle Dame sans Merci’, they connected physically. Here, they connect emotionally as the knight is there to wipe away her tears.

Scholars are divided on the precise motives of the lady while classes of scholars believe that the lady’s weeping in the “Elfin grot” does bring up the ideas of undivided love. Several scholars believe otherwise. However, it seems that it is the latter. The lady understands that they cannot be together, and chooses to leave him to sleep.

Stanza Nine

And there she lullèd me asleep,

And there I dreamed—Ah! woe betide!—

The latest dream I ever dreamt

On the cold hill side.

With this stanza, readers can begin to feel a little uncertain about this fairy-woman. They should question why she is lulling this Knight to sleep. In the previous stanza, she cried, and there, no reason was offered for her tears. Now, she lulls him to sleep. The knight has a dream. It is a nightmare. For in his recollection of this dream, he cries out "Ah! Woe betide!" which suggests that this dream was woeful. Then he says that this was "the latest dream I ever dreamt" which suggests that it was the last dream that he would ever dream. He does not explain how he knows that this was the last dream he would ever have, but he seems so confident of it that the reader does not question it.

Suddenly, this poem has taken a turn for the worse. Something awful has happened, and the reader can begin to understand that the fairy-woman is at fault, but there are no specifics given just yet.

Stanza Ten

I saw pale kings and princes too,

Pale warriors, death-pale were they all;

They cried—'La Belle Dame sans Merci

Thee hath in thrall!'

At this point, the knight begins to describe the "pale kings and princes" that he saw in his dream. In this case, "pale" is a symbol of death. Since 'La Belle Dame sans Merci' has already introduced biblical symbols of the supernatural, it is not too far-fetched to conclude that the pale warriors and princes and kings are all after the likeness of the pale horse in the book of Revelation, the final book of the New Testament. The pale horse and rider of the Bible symbolize death and bring destruction. This poem continues to become more and more nightmarish as it continues. All of the pale kings, princes, and warriors cry out "La Belle Dame sans Merci". This, of course, is the title of the poem. It is in French, and it translates to read "The Beautiful Woman Without Mercy".

Suddenly, amid his dream, the Knight becomes aware of what is happening to him. He has been seduced by a woman who would show him no mercy. Not only that, but he is one of many who have come to ruin at the hands of this fairy-woman.

Stanza Eleven

I saw their starved lips in the gloam,

With horrid warning gapèd wide,

And I awoke and found me here,

On the cold hill's side.

The knight comes to the full realization of what has happened to him. Every man that the fairy has ever seduced has died. He describes these dead men that were in his dream. They have "starved lips" and they looked at him "with horrid warning" but it was too late. The knight had already been seduced, and as a consequence of his moment of pleasure, he now faces death. When he awoke from his dream, he found himself "on the cold hill's side" with no fairy-woman in proximity. From the original description of the knight, the readers can conclude that he is, in fact, dying.

Stanza Twelve

And this is why I sojourn here,

Alone and palely loitering,

Though the sedge is withered from the lake,

And no birds sing.

In the final stanza, the knight finally answers the original question of the first speaker. He claims that because of being seduced by the fairy-woman, he now sojourns "alone and palely loitering" in his near-death state. Keats ends 'La Belle Dame sans Merci' with the line with which the first stanza ends. He repeats the first speaker's observation that "the sedge is withered from the lake/ And no birds sing".The readers are left to grieve the loss of the knight. He dies alone with no one to comfort him in his last moments. Not even the birds are there to sing a song to offer comfort in his death. He is utterly alone in his last moments, and all because he was seduced by that beautiful fairy-woman without mercy.

Although the language used is simple, Keats manages to create two parallel universes. The real world, where the knight is found alone, and palely loitering, is dark and dismal and wintery. The other world, where the Lady lives, seems exotic and beautiful, with such glorious foods as honey wild and manna-dew. The nightmarish imagery that exists between the worlds can be taken to be part and parcel of the lady's world, as it is she who whisks young men away, willing or unwilling, to their doom.

Themes

'La Belle Dame sans Merci' contains several themes such as dejection in love, heartbreak, sadness, death, and illusion vs reality. The most important theme of the poem is dejection in love. There is a sense of separation in the knights that makes him appear lifeless. His loitering in the wild without any hope depicts the need for love in his life. The lady's illusory existence makes him sadder about his reality. The person with whom he had spent some time, doesn't exist at all. This thought pains the knight deep. Apart from that, the themes of sadness and heartbreak go side by side in the poem. The knight's mental condition is so sad that the poet thinks even nature laments his loss.

It isn't fallacious to think that the theme of death is also an integral part of the poem. While writing this poem, the poet was going through a similar kind of condition. It seems that through the story of the knight the poet somehow tried to express his feelings. He knew about his approaching death and also aware of the fact that unison with his beloved wasn't possible.

As being close to entering the gate of death, the poet's mind was flooded with the thoughts of oblivion.

The first two stanzas reflect not only the knight's but also the poet's state of mind. In the tenth stanza, the theme of death is visible. Here, the dead kings and princes remind the knight that the lady without pity captivated his mind. Hence, it's useless to wait any longer for her.

Historical Context

John Keats wrote 'La Belle Dame sans Merci' in the summer of 1819 when he was dying from tuberculosis. Then he was in Wentworth Palace, the home of his friend Charles Armitage Brown. Their neighbors at Wentworth Palace were Fanny Brawne and her mother, and because they lived in the other half of Wentworth Palace, they saw each other daily. After a while, he fell in love with Fanny Brawne, though being poor, he could not marry her.

He had already seen his mother and brother die from this terrible disease before he contracted it himself. The knowledge of his imminent death likely inspired this poem. While his mother died in 1810, he contracted the same disease in 1819. He had seen the effect that the disease had on his mother and his brother, and he knew what was to come for himself.

Even more tragic than his contraction of tuberculosis is that he was newly engaged and desperately in love. He claimed that he could bear to die, but he could not bear to leave his love. It is not difficult to make a connection between this poem and Keats' life. Although he does not appear to view his real-life love as the cause of his death, there remain striking parallels. Both the knight in this poem and John Keats himself fell in love shortly before death. Both were unable to enjoy love for very long before death became imminent in their lives.

FAQs

What does 'La Belle Dame sans Merci' mean in English?

The meaning of "La belle dame" is "the beautiful lady". The French preposition "sans" means "without" and "merci" is a French exclamation for saying "thank you". But the word "merci" stands for the English word "mercy" in the title of Keats' poem. Literally, it means "The Beautiful Lady Without Mercy".

How is 'La Belle Dame sans Merci' a romantic poem?

Keats' 'La Belle Dame sans Merci' is a pure romantic poem. Several characteristics of romantic poetry can be found in this poem such as imagination, nature, melancholy, medievalism, supernaturalism, and subjectivity.

How is 'La Belle Dame sans Merci' a tragedy?

This ballad presents a tragic character and his destiny after being deceived by the unmerciful lady. Keats' speaker describes his present condition by depicting his mental state as well as the ambiance around the character. It is a tragic poem as the hero suffers badly for the choice (intentional or unintentional) he made after encountering the lady for the first time.

What is the nature of "La Belle Dame"?

The "La Belle Dame" was "sans merci" or without mercy as the title of the poem asserts. Her physical beauty was so lucrative that the knight could not help but fall in love with her in the first instance. Her "wild eyes" hints at the nature of the lady. She stole the knight's heart but she abstained hers.

What did the beautiful lady give the "knight-at-arms" to eat?

The beautiful lady gave sweet roots, wild honey, and manna-dew to the “knight-at-arms”.

Why is the knight in ‘La Belle Dame sans Merci’ so pale and ill?

The knight was all alone on the cold hill’s side when he awoke from his dream. The lady who said, “I love thee true” left him after she lulled him to sleep. For the abrupt ending of his love story, he was extremely sad and his physical appearance reflected his mental state

What does the knight gift the beautiful lady?

The knight gifted the lady a handmade garland, bracelets, and last but not least four warm kisses.