

SONNET 130 – WILLIAM SHAKESPEARE

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

BACKGROUND

This is sonnet number 130 in a series of 154 sonnets. It parodies the famous (and often over-the-top) Petrarchan sonnets in which poets described their partners in highly exaggerated and unrealistic ways. Although this poem contains similar themes as found in traditional sonnets (Female Beauty, Love and Admiration), Shakespeare does not idealise his beloved. He describes her in ways which are realistic and, therefore, more accurate and 'real'.

This is a Shakespearean or Elizabethan sonnet. It consists of three quatrains (4 lines each) and a rhyming couplet (2 lines). The rhyming couplet serves as a final argument to drive home the speaker's point. There is a lot of hyperbole in the poem: all of the comparisons are exaggerated to emphasise the absurdity of Petrarchan ideals.

SUMMARY

Shakespeare uses eight 'anti-compliments' (negative comparisons) to describe the uniqueness and beauty of his beloved. However, in the couplet he states that BECAUSE she is normal and 'real', he does not need to exaggerate her looks or his love for her. He loves her just the way she is – perfect in her imperfection. In other words, she is perfect to HIM – he does not need an idealised and superficial woman.

Although he seems critical and rather rude in the first 12 lines, the reader realises that he is, in fact, sincere in his love for her. He does not need exaggerated and unrealistic comparisons to declare his genuine love for her. In being so brutally honest, he has ironically given her a heightened beauty, simply because he does not dote on her outward appearance.

FORM/STRUCTURE

This is a Shakespearean or Elizabethan sonnet. It consists of three quatrains (4 lines each) and a rhyming couplet (2 lines). The rhyme scheme is consistent with this format: abab cdcd efef gg. The couplet serves as a final argument to drive home the speaker's point. The rhythm of the poem is consistent, too, and follows traditional iambic pentameter. There are 10 syllables in each line.

LINE 1

My mistress' eyes are nothing like the sun;

Mistress – this was a more general reference meaning "my love" or "my darling", and not as would use the term today. When we use the word "mistress," it's usually to refer to a woman who is dating a married man.

When Shakespeare was writing this sonnet it was all the rage to compare a lover's eyes to the sun and sunlight – Shakespeare completely negates this, using the phrase 'nothing like' to emphasise the fact that this female's eyes are not bright. In this simile, the mistress' eyes are being compared to the sun. The sun creates the image of something bright and shiny. However, since the mistress' eyes are "nothing" like sun, her eyes are the opposite of bright and shiny. The speaker's use of the simile indicates that the woman's eyes are just plain and ordinary or nothing special.

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Table of Contents Grade 12 English Poems Study Guide

1. Understanding the eBook Grade 12 English Poems Study Guide
 - The Rise of Digital Reading Grade 12 English Poems Study Guide
 - Advantages of eBooks Over Traditional Books
2. Identifying Grade 12 English Poems Study Guide
 - Exploring Different Genres
 - Considering Fiction vs. Non-Fiction
 - Determining Your Reading Goals
3. Choosing the Right eBook Platform
 - Popular eBook Platforms
 - Features to Look for in an Grade 12 English Poems Study Guide
 - User-Friendly Interface
4. Exploring eBook Recommendations from Grade 12 English Poems Study Guide
 - Personalized Recommendations

- Grade 12 English Poems Study Guide User Reviews and Ratings
- Grade 12 English Poems Study Guide and Bestseller Lists
- 5. Accessing Grade 12 English Poems Study Guide Free and Paid eBooks
 - Grade 12 English Poems Study Guide Public Domain eBooks
 - Grade 12 English Poems Study Guide eBook Subscription Services
 - Grade 12 English Poems Study Guide Budget-Friendly Options
- 6. Navigating Grade 12 English Poems Study Guide eBook Formats
 - ePub, PDF, MOBI, and More
 - Grade 12 English Poems Study Guide Compatibility with Devices
 - Grade 12 English Poems Study Guide Enhanced eBook Features
- 7. Enhancing Your Reading Experience
 - Adjustable Fonts and Text Sizes of Grade 12 English Poems Study Guide
 - Highlighting and Note-Taking Grade 12 English Poems Study Guide
 - Interactive Elements Grade 12 English Poems Study Guide
- 8. Staying Engaged with Grade 12 English Poems Study Guide
 - Joining Online Reading Communities
 - Participating in Virtual Book Clubs
 - Following Authors and Publishers Grade 12 English Poems Study Guide
- 9. Balancing eBooks and Physical Books Grade 12 English Poems Study Guide
 - Benefits of a Digital Library
 - Creating a Diverse Reading Collection Grade 12 English Poems Study Guide
- 10. Overcoming Reading Challenges
 - Dealing with Digital Eye Strain
 - Minimizing Distractions
 - Managing Screen Time
- 11. Cultivating a Reading Routine Grade 12 English Poems Study Guide
 - Setting Reading Goals Grade 12 English Poems Study Guide
 - Carving Out Dedicated Reading Time
- 12. Sourcing Reliable Information of Grade 12 English Poems Study Guide
 - Fact-Checking eBook Content of Grade 12 English Poems Study Guide

- Distinguishing Credible Sources
- 13. Promoting Lifelong Learning
 - Utilizing eBooks for Skill Development
 - Exploring Educational eBooks
- 14. Embracing eBook Trends
 - Integration of Multimedia Elements
 - Interactive and Gamified eBooks

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