Shakespeare’s Sonnets

- **General information**
  - 154 sonnets in total
  - First publication: May 20th, 1609, in *Shakespeare’s Sonnets, Never Before Imprinted*, as a quarto (=a certain book format)
  - 1 – 126 addressed to ‘young man’ or ‘fair youth’ → homoerotic aspect, unusual at the time
  - 127 – 154 addressed to ‘dark lady’ (who is never actually called like that), who has betrayed the speaker with the man of the first 126 sonnets
  - Little is known about the circumstances of their publication or writing
  - Sonnets out of fashion at the time → little commercial success initially

- **Structure**
  - Elizabethan sonnet as used by Shakespeare:
    - Fourteen lines: Three quatrains + rhyming couplet
    - Rhyme scheme: abab – cdcd – eef – gg
    - **Antithetical structure**: New stanzas often introduce new (contrast)ing thoughts, mostly marked by a word that indicates change, e.g. “but”, “yet”, “save” (=except for)
    - No clear volta (turning point; cf. Italian sonnet) → can appear between any stanzas
    - (heroic) couplet at the end: witty remark / climax / epigram / echo / conclusion / synthesis / counter → often sums up the message of the sonnet, sometimes in an ironic way.
    - Meter: lambic pentameter (ten syllables, –x –x –x –x, x=stressed syllable)

- **Language devices**
  - Use of **personification**, especially to explore the natures of abstract things like time, death, love and poetry, but also, day and night, nature or good and evil are turned into people in the sonnets. This also adds a dramatic quality to the sonnets, reminiscent of Shakespeare’s plays in some instances.
  - Variable **tone** of the speaker, underlining the range of emotion expressed and creating specific moods: lyrical, joyous, passionate, enigmatic, anguished, defiant, sensuous, meditative, self-questioning, ironic, sincere.
  - Extensive use of **antithesis** to depict conflicts, which are a key in literature. **Oxymorons** are found very often.
  - Likewise, **paradox** as a strong means of establishing ideas that seem opposed to reason yet are made compatible in sonnets and stress the complex nature of phenomena, especially the irrational character of love.
  - **Imagery**: Essential feature of every sonnet, providing the reader with lively visions of the subject addressed. Areas include commerce, the law, music, alchemy, astrology, painting, perfume, medicine, navigation/the sea, nature, the weather, etc.
Iterative metaphors often dominate sonnets throughout, providing a framework for all feelings expressed and emphasizing different aspects that all fit into one image.

The personal appeal of the sonnets is highlighted by the ubiquitous pronouns.

- **Recurring Themes**
  - **Love**
    - The central topic discussed in most sonnets, either directed at the young man or the dark lady.
    - Takes very different form in the speaker’s reaction: pure devotion, jealousy, criticism, suspicion, melancholy, joy, sorrow, tenderness, self-conscience, lust, fear, comfort
    - **Ambiguity:** Ideal love vs. betrayal, outer appearance vs. real personality; the trappings of desire
  - **Time**
    - Mostly seen as a ruthless, destructive, indifferent force, challenging the immortality of feelings like love.
    - Corrupting influence on outer appearance and youth (transience of beauty); bringing about mortality and decay.
    - Carpe diem: Shakespeare’s sonnets challenge time and its impact, not accepting it and therefore not urging for proper use of time, as other literature from Shakespeare’s day did.
    - Poetry, love and procreation can withstand time, according to the sonnets, living on forever.
  - **Poetry**
    - Self-reflection: The speaker often questions the quality or form of his own work in the sonnets.
    - Countering conventions of poetry writing.

- **Relationship to Elizabethan poetry tradition**
  - Shakespeare deviates from social and lyrical conventions of his day in different ways.
    - Reflection of poetry-writing itself → illusion is broken.
    - ‘Anti-Petrarchan theme’: Mocking of ‘Courtly Love’ as coined by Petrarch (cf. Sonnet 130), trying to break free from the self-enslaving idea of love predominantly seen in poetry at the time. Especially the hyperbolic idealism often found in Elizabethan poetry is abandoned, for example in the use of unfavourable metaphors concerning the fair youth or the lady.
    - Homosexuality expressed in address of young man, in contrast to the Petrarchian tradition, which always addressed an unattainable woman.
    - The ‘dark lady’ does not conform to the Elizabethan ideal of beauty; she is imperfect, lustful, and available to other men.

- **Relevance today**
  - The Sonnets were quite progressive at the time they were published, yet certain conventions, for instance those concerning relationships, can only be understood
against the backdrop of their historical context and thus can hardly be transferred to today.

- Topics include timeless ones concerning the human condition, especially love, which explains the popularity of Shakespeare’s sonnets today; Sonnet 116 remains a common sight at weddings.
- A major feature of Shakespeare’s work is the poet’s language, which has earned both his sonnets and his plays the status as a prime example of English literature and of the beauty of the English language. His insight, ingenious employment of words and highly variable style has evoked high praise for centuries.

**Further information:**
- Gibson, Rex: *The Sonnets*.

**Examples of sonnets**
- Sonnet 18

> Shall I compare thee to a summer's day?  
> Thou art more lovely and more temperate.  
> Rough winds do shake the darling buds of May,  
> And summer's lease hath all too short a date.

> Sometime too hot the eye of heaven shines,  
> And often is his gold complexion dimmed;  
> And every fair from fair sometime declines,  
> By chance, or nature's changing course, untrimmed:

> But thy eternal summer shall not fade  
> Nor lose possession of that fair thou ow'st,  
> Nor shall Death brag thou wand'rest in his shade  
> When in eternal lines to time thou grow'st.

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

- Sonnet 27

> Weary with toil, I haste me to my bed,  
> The dear repose for limbs with travel tired;  
> But then begins a journey in my head,  
> To work my mind, when body's work's expired:

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

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

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

Sonnet 116

LET me not to the marriage of true minds  
Admit impediments. Love is not love  
Which alters when it alteration finds,  
Or bends with the remover to remove:

O, no! it is an ever-fixed mark,  
That looks on tempests and is never shaken;  
It is the star to every wandering bark,  
Whose worth's unknown, although his height be taken.

Love's not Time's fool, though rosy lips and cheeks  
Within his bending sickle's compass come;  
Love alters not with his brief hours and weeks,  
But bears it out even to the edge of doom.

If this be error and upon me proved,  
I never writ, nor no man ever loved.

Sonnet 130

MY mistress' eyes are nothing like the sun;  
Coral is far more red than her lips' red;  
If snow be white, why then her breasts are dun;  
If hairs be wires, black wires grow on her head.

I have seen roses damask'd, red and white,  
But no such roses see I in her cheeks;  
And in some perfumes is there more delight  
Than in the breath that from my mistress reeks.

I love to hear her speak, yet well I know  
That music hath a far more pleasing sound;  
I grant I never saw a goddess go;  
My mistress, when she walks, treads on the ground:

And yet, by heaven, I think my love as rare  
As any she belied with false compare.
Other Elizabethan Poetry

- **Petrarchan / Italian Sonnet**
  - **Structure**
    - one octave is followed by a sestet
    - the rhyme scheme is abba abba in the octave and can vary in the sestet (e.g. cde cde or cdc cdc)
    - the octave introduces the problem and the sestet applies a solution
    - between the octave and the sestet lies the volta=turning point
    - no inherent metre applied

  - **Recurring Themes**
    - praising of ideal woman
    - mixture of frustration and self-accusations
    - obsessive wooing
    - love perceived as a virtue
    - concept of love at first sight
    - fulfilment/reply of love in the hereafter
    - lovesickness and yearning because of the unreachable beloved

- **Courtly Love**
  - widely spread concept in medieval literature
  - most important facet to serve the lady
  - passionate devotion for beloved
  - worship through heroic behaviour
  - desire expressed by varnished description of the woman’s beauty
  - usually coincides with the lady’s rejection
• **Examples of sonnets**

  o John Milton: Sonnet 7

    THE long love that in my thought doth harbor,
    And in mine heart doth keep his residence,
    Into my face presseth with bold pretense
    And therein campeth, spreading his banner.
    She that me learneth to love and suffer
    And will that my trust and lust's negligence
    Be reined by reason, shame, and reverence
    With his hardiness taketh displeasure.

    Wherewithal unto the heart's forest he fleeth,
    Leaving his enterprise with pain and cry,
    And there him hideth, and not appeareth.
    What may I do, when my master feareth,
    But in the field with him to live and die?
    For good is the life ending faithfully.

  o Petrarchan Sonnet 140

    Sir Thomas Wyatt:

    THE long love that in my thought doth harbor,
    And in mine heart doth keep his residence,
    Into my face presseth with bold pretense
    And therein campeth, spreading his banner.
    She that me learneth to love and suffer
    And will that my trust and lust's negligence
    Be reined by reason, shame, and reverence
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    Wherewithal unto the heart's forest he fleeth,
    Leaving his enterprise with pain and cry,
    And there him hideth, and not appeareth.
    What may I do, when my master feareth,
    But in the field with him to live and die?
    For good is the life ending faithfully.
Henry Howard:

LOVE, that doth reign and live within my thought,
And built his seat within my captive breast,
Clad in the arms wherein with me he fought,
Oft in my face he doth his banner rest.
But she that taught me love and suffer pain,
My doubtful hope and eke my hot desire
With shamefast look to shadow and refrain,
Her smiling grace converteth straight to ire.

And coward Love, then, to the heart apace
Taketh his flight, where he doth lurk and plain,
His purpose lost, and dare not show his face.
For my lord's guilt thus faultless bide I pain,
Yet from my lord shall not my foot remove:
Sweet is the death that taketh end by love.