

from Spenser's Sonnets • from Sidney's Sonnets



Edmund Spenser (1552–1599)

Born into a working-class family, Edmund Spenser attended the Merchant Taylors' School on a scholarship and managed to work his way through Cambridge University. During his university years, Spenser published his first poems.

Pay for Poetry Unlike many other poets of the day, Spenser depended on the payments he received for his work. When the queen's treasurer balked at paying him, he sent this verse to the queen: "I was promised on a time / To have reason for my rhyme. / From that time unto this season / I have received nor rhyme, nor reason." Spenser was paid immediately.

The Faerie Queene In 1580, Spenser took a position as secretary to the Lord Deputy of Ireland. On a visit to Ireland in 1589, Sir Walter Raleigh (see p. 248) read and was impressed with one of Spenser's unfinished poems. He persuaded Spenser to take the first three books of this long poem to London for publication. That poem became Spenser's greatest work, *The Faerie Queene*.

Written in an intentionally archaic style, *The Faerie Queene* recounts the adventures of several knights, each representing a virtue. This allegory of good and evil, dedicated to Queen Elizabeth I (who appears as the Faerie Queene in the poem), brought Spenser a small pension.

A Poet's Poet Spenser was an innovative poet. In *The Faerie Queene*, he created a new type of nine-line stanza, which was later named for him. He also created a sonnet form, known as the Spenserian sonnet, containing a unique structure and rhyme scheme. His sonnet sequence *Amoretti* is unique among such works—it is addressed to the poet's own wife, not some inaccessible, idealized beauty.



Sir Philip Sidney (1554–1586)

Sir Philip Sidney was a courtier, scholar, poet, and soldier—a true "Renaissance man." He attended both Oxford and Cambridge, and furthered his knowledge by traveling extensively through Europe. He became a favorite in the court of Queen Elizabeth I.

Groomed for Success Nephew of the earl of Leicester and son of the statesman Sir Henry Sidney, Philip Sidney was certainly well connected. Throughout his life, though, he carried himself with remarkable modesty. His schoolmate and, later, biographer Fulke Greville remarked on his "staidness of mind, [and] lovely and familiar gravity."

A Brave Soldier Around 1580, Sidney fell out of favor with the queen when he wrote a letter urging her not to marry the duke of Anjou. Eventually, he regained status with her and was knighted in 1583. In 1586, during a military engagement against the Spanish Catholics in Holland, Sidney was severely wounded. As he lay on the battlefield, he bravely insisted that the water offered to him be given to another wounded soldier. Twenty-six days later he died, to the great grief of his country.

Pioneering Sonneteer Sidney wrote the first great sonnet sequence in English, *Astrophel and Stella*. Before Sidney, Sir Thomas Wyatt and others had written excellent sonnets, but Sidney's were the first linked by subject matter and theme. Each sonnet addresses an aspect of Astrophel's love for Stella. This sonnet sequence was inspired by Penelope Devereux (Stella), to whom Sir Philip (Astrophel) had been engaged. The engagement was later broken, and Penelope married Lord Rich. Yet, for most readers, Stella's name will forever be linked with Astrophel's.

Preview

Connecting to the Literature

Expressing your heart is never easy, yet Elizabethan sonneteers like Spenser and Sidney were able to pour their hearts out in just fourteen lines.

Literary Analysis

The Sonnet

A **sonnet** is a fourteen-line lyric poem with a single theme. Each line in a sonnet is usually in iambic pentameter—five groups of two syllables, each with the accent on the second syllable. Sonnets take definite forms.

- The **Petrarchan sonnet** is divided into an eight-line octave, rhyming *abba abba*, followed by a six-line sestet, rhyming *cdecde*. Often, the octave poses a problem that is answered in the sestet.
- The **Spenserian sonnet** rhymes *abab bcbc cdcd ee*. Note the *abab* rhyme scheme in these lines of Spenser's:

One day I wrote her name upon the strand,
 But came the waves and washed it away:
 Again I wrote it with a second hand,
 But came the tide, and made my pains his prey.

In a **sonnet sequence**, sonnets are linked by theme or person addressed. As you read these sonnets, identify their form and how they are linked.

Comparing Literary Works

Notable writers of the Elizabethan Age such as Spenser and Sidney made their mark by writing sonnet sequences. To connect one hundred or more poems without growing dull, they used a basic fictional situation:

- The speaker in the sequence is in love—some sonnets may explain the depth of his love, while others may praise his beloved.
- His love is unfulfilled—poems may dramatize his hopes and disappointments or analyze the nature of love.

As you read, compare Spenser's and Sidney's uses of this basic situation.

Reading Strategy

Paraphrasing

To **paraphrase** a poem, read until you find a complete thought. Then, distinguish between essential and non-essential information. Restate the essential information in your own words. Use a chart like this one to help.

Vocabulary Builder

deign (dān) *v.* condescend; lower oneself (p. 240)

assay (a sā) *v.* try (p. 242)

devise (di viz) *v.* work out or create; plan (p. 242)

wan (wān) *adj.* sickly; pale (p. 243)

languished (lan' gwisht) *adj.* weakened; dulled (p. 243)

balm (bām) *n.* ointment or other thing that heals or soothes (p. 244)

Poet's Lines

"One day I wrote her name upon the strand,
 But came the waves and washed it away."

Paraphrase

One day the speaker wrote his beloved's name in the sand at the beach, but the waves came and erased his writing.

Sonnet 1

Edmund Spenser

Background Elizabethans believed that they lived in an orderly world based on a grand universal design. For example, they imagined that the heavens were so perfectly balanced that the planets and stars created a glorious music, which they called the “music of the spheres.” It is hardly surprising that the sonnet, a perfectly designed little poem, became wildly popular. In many sonnets, lovers are idealized and compared to other “perfect” things, such as the sun and stars.

Happy ye leaves when as those lily hands,
Which hold my life in their dead doing¹ might,
Shall handle you and hold in love's soft bands,
Like captives trembling at the victor's sight,
5 And happy lines, on which with starry light,
Those laming² eyes will deign sometimes to look
And read the sorrows of my dying spright,³
Written with tears in heart's close⁴ bleeding book.
And happy rhymes bathed in the sacred brook
10 Of Helicon⁵ whence she derived is,
When ye behold that angel's blessed look,
My soul's long lacked food, my heaven's bliss.
Leaves, lines, and rhymes, seek her to please alone,
Whom if ye please, I care for other none.

1. **doing** killing.

2. **laming** flashing.

3. **spright** spirit.

4. **close** secret.

5. **sacred . . . Helicon** In Greek mythology, the Helicon mountains were the home of the Muses, goddesses of the arts, and the site of the Hippocrene, the fountain from which the waters of poetic inspiration flowed.

Vocabulary Builder

deign (dān) v. condescend;
lower oneself

Sonnet 35

Edmund Spenser

My hungry eyes through greedy covetize,¹
Still² to behold the object of their pain,
With no contentment can themselves suffice:
But having pine³ and having not complain.
5 For lacking it they cannot life sustain,
And having it they gaze on it the more:
In their amazement like Narcissus⁴ vain
Whose eyes him starved: so plenty makes me poor.
Yet are mine eyes so fillèd with the store
10 Of that fair sight, that nothing else they brook,
But loathe the things which they did like before,
And can no more endure on them to look.
All this world's glory seemeth vain to me,
And all their shows but shadows, saving she.

1. **covetize** *v.* excessive desire.

2. **Still** *adv.* always.

3. **pine** *v.* yearn.

4. **Narcissus** in Greek mythology, a youth who fell in love with his own reflection in a pool, wasted away with yearning, and was changed after his death into the narcissus flower.

▼ Critical Viewing

How does the sight of the distant horizon, as in this photograph, suggest the "desire" eyes may have to see, referred to in Sonnet 35? [Speculate]

✓ Reading Check

What does the speaker long for, even though it causes him pain?

Sonnet 75

Edmund Spenser

One day I wrote her name upon the strand,¹
But came the waves and washèd it away:
Again I wrote it with a second hand,
But came the tide, and made my pains his prey.
5 "Vain man," said she, "that dost in vain assay,
A mortal thing so to immortalize,
For I myself shall like to this decay,
And eek² my name be wipèd out likewise."
"Not so," quod³ I, "let baser things devise
10 To die in dust, but you shall live by fame:
My verse your virtues rare shall eternize,
And in the heavens write your glorious name.
Where whenas death shall all the world subdue,
Our love shall live, and later life renew."

1. strand beach.
2. eek also.
3. quod said.

Critical Reading

1. **Respond:** Which of Spenser's sonnets do you like the best? Why?
2. (a) **Recall:** In Sonnet 1, what are the three things the speaker addresses?
(b) **Interpret:** What does the speaker hope their combined effect will be on the lady?
3. (a) **Recall:** In Sonnet 35, what do the speaker's eyes desire?
(b) **Interpret:** Describe the state that desire produces in him.
4. (a) **Interpret:** In Sonnet 75, why does the lady say the speaker's efforts are futile? (b) **Summarize:** Summarize the speaker's response.
(c) **Draw Conclusions:** What connection does the poem make between immortality and poetry?
5. **Compare and Contrast:** Compare and contrast the relationship between the speaker and his love in each of the sonnets.
6. **Take a Position:** Are these speakers overreacting to their situations? Explain.

Vocabulary Builder

assay (a sã) v. try

devise (di viz') v. work out or create; plan

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Sonnet 31

Sir Philip Sidney

With how sad steps, O Moon, thou climb'st the skies!
How silently, and with how wan a face!
What, may it be that even in heavenly place
That busy archer¹ his sharp arrows tries?
5 Sure, if that long-with-love-acquainted eyes
Can judge of love, thou feel'st a lover's case.
I read it in thy looks, thy languished grace,
To me, that feel the like, thy state describes.²
Then even of fellowship, O Moon, tell me
10 Is constant love deemed there but want of wit?³
Are beauties there as proud as here they be?
Do they above love to be loved, and yet
Those lovers scorn whom that love doth possess?
Do they call virtue there ungratefulness?


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1. **busy archer** Cupid, the Roman god of love.
2. **describes** reveals.
3. **wit** intelligence.

Vocabulary Builder
wan (wān) adj. sickly; pale

languished (lan' gwisht)
adj. weakened; dulled

 **Reading Check**

What does the speaker claim he and the moon have in common?



▲ Critical Viewing Which details of this photograph of the moon convey the mood of Sonnet 31? [Evaluate]

Sonnet 39

Sir Philip Sidney

Come sleep! O sleep, the certain knot of peace,
The baiting place¹ of wit, the balm of woe,
The poor man's wealth, the prisoner's release,
The indifferent² judge between the high and low;
5 With shield of proof³ shield me from out the prease⁴
Of those fierce darts Despair at me doth throw:
O make in me those civil wars to cease;
I will good tribute pay, if thou do so.
Take thou of me smooth pillows, sweetest bed,
10 A chamber deaf to noise, and blind to light,
A rose garland, and a weary head:
And if these things, as being thine by right,
Move not thy heavy grace, thou shalt in me,
Livelier than elsewhere, Stella's image see.

1. **baiting place** place for refreshment.
2. **indifferent** impartial.
3. **proof** proven strength.
4. **prease** crowd.

Critical Reading

1. **Respond:** Do you sympathize with the speakers? Explain.
2. (a) **Recall:** In Sonnet 31, how does the moon appear to the speaker?
(b) **Infer:** To what does the speaker attribute the moon's mood?
(c) **Analyze:** How does the speaker reveal his own situation by addressing the moon?
3. (a) **Recall:** What benefits does the speaker attribute to sleep in lines 1–4 of Sonnet 39? (b) **Recall:** What "reward" does he promise sleep in lines 13–14? (c) **Interpret:** Judging from this "reward," why does he crave sleep?
4. **Draw Conclusions:** What conclusion can you draw about each speaker's relationship with his lady?
5. **Generalize:** Do you think both sonnets express moods that people in love always experience? Explain.

Vocabulary Builder
balm (bām) *n.* ointment or other thing that heals and soothes

Literary Analysis
The Sonnet How does the rhyme scheme of lines 1–8 make this sonnet different from a typical Spenserian or Petrarchan sonnet?

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