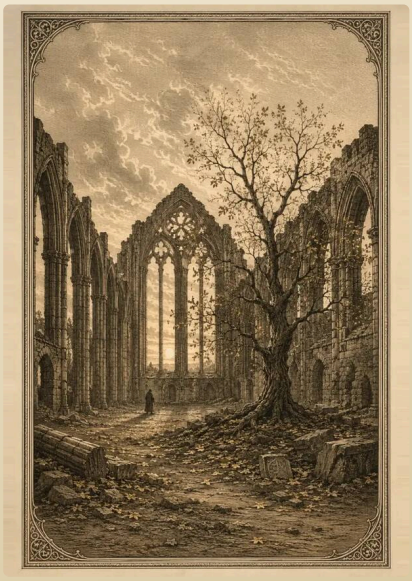
Daily Bard

QUESTIONS AND ANSWERS

Shakespeare's Sonnets: study questions and answers

Questions and model answers on the eight sonnets most often taught, then on the sequence as a whole, with five essay questions planned in outline. Every quotation is checked against the Folger text.



How to use these questions

Read the sonnet first, twice, and aloud if you can. Then cover the answers and try the questions. The comprehension questions check that you know what the poem says, quatrain by quatrain. The analysis questions ask how the poem works and why it is built as it is, and their answers are models of the kind of paragraph an essay needs. The questions on the whole sequence and the essay questions at the end ask you to connect poems.

The sonnets covered are the eight that the Sonnets study guide treats in most detail. Keep the Sonnets quotation sheet beside you, and write "the speaker", not "Shakespeare", for the voice of the poems.

Sonnet 18: "Shall I compare thee to a summer's day?"

Comprehension

1 **What question does the speaker ask in the first line, and how does he answer it?**

He asks whether he should compare the beloved to a summer's day. He answers immediately that the comparison falls short, because the beloved is "more lovely and more temperate". "Temperate" means mild and even, in weather and in character. Summer, as the next lines show, is neither.

2 **What faults does the speaker find in summer in lines 3 to 8?**

Summer is rough: winds "shake the darling buds of May". It is short: "summer's lease hath all too short a date". It is unreliable, because the sun is sometimes too hot and often clouded, "his gold complexion dimmed". The speaker then states the general rule that "every fair from fair sometime declines": every beautiful thing loses its beauty.

3 **What does the speaker promise from line 9 onwards, and what does the promise depend on?**

He promises that the beloved's "eternal summer shall not fade" and that Death will not boast of possessing the beloved, who will live "in eternal lines", that is, in this poem. The couplet gives the condition. The poem preserves him only "So long as men can breathe or eyes can see": the promise depends on readers.

Analysis

4 **How does Shakespeare use the volta in Sonnet 18?**

The volta (the turn in a sonnet's argument) comes at line 9 and is announced by one word: "But thy eternal summer shall not fade". Before it, the poem describes real weather in the present tense, with verbs of observation such as "shake" and "shines". After it, "summer" becomes a metaphor for the beloved's prime, and the verbs change to the confident future of "shall not". The turn also changes the poem's subject. Eight lines have been about the beloved and the season; the last six are increasingly about the poem, until the couplet points at itself with the repeated "this". The compliment has become a claim about the power of verse. The essay on Sonnet 18 follows this line by line.

5 **How does the language of law and ownership shape the poem's argument?**

Summer is given a tenant's rights and no more. It holds its season on a "lease" with "all too short a date", so its beauty is rented and must be handed back. The beloved, by contrast, will not "lose possession of that fair thou ow'st", where "ow'st" means "own". The legal metaphor turns a vague compliment into a precise distinction between holding something for a term and owning it outright. It also exposes the weakness of the claim. Nobody owns beauty in that way, and line 7 has just said so. The beloved's title is good only within the "eternal lines" of the poem, which is why the couplet has to insist that the poem will last.

Sonnet 20: "A woman's face with Nature's own hand painted"

Comprehension

6 **How does the speaker describe the young man in the first eight lines?**

He has a woman's face, coloured by Nature and not by cosmetics, and a woman's gentle heart without the changeability the speaker attributes to women. His eye is brighter than a woman's and "less false in rolling". He attracts both sexes: his appearance "steals men's eyes and women's souls amazeth". The speaker calls him "the master mistress of my passion".

7 **What story does the speaker tell about how the young man was made?**

Nature first intended him to be a woman. While making him she "fell a-doting", that is, fell in love with her own work, and added "one thing" that made him a man. The speaker says this addition "defeated" him, since the one thing is "to my purpose nothing".

8 **What does the couplet propose?**

Because Nature "pricked thee out for women's pleasure", the speaker proposes a division. He will have the young man's love, and women will have "thy love's use", meaning its physical enjoyment. "Treasure" continues the financial sense of "use" as interest on a loan.

Analysis

9 **How do form and wordplay present the young man as someone who crosses categories?**

The phrase "master mistress" joins two words that normally exclude each other. It has no single meaning: he may be a man who holds the place a mistress holds in other love poems, or the supreme mistress. The form supports the idea. Every line has a feminine ending (an extra unstressed final syllable), as in "painted" and "passion", so the masculine rhymes usual in the Sonnets are replaced throughout. The puns are bawdy. "Pricked thee out" means "selected", and also refers to the male body, and "nothing" could be slang for the female body. Comic wordplay lets the speaker talk about desire while seeming to dismiss it.

10 **Does Sonnet 20 renounce physical desire for the young man?**

The question is genuinely open, and the two strongest readings disagree. On the first, the poem says plainly that the young man's sex puts him beyond the speaker's "purpose", and the couplet separates love, which the speaker keeps, from physical "use", which belongs to women. It describes an intense friendship. On the second, the poem protests too much. It lingers on the young man's body, calls him the object of the speaker's "passion", and jokes about what it claims not to want. A careful answer does not force a modern label on the poem. It shows that Shakespeare keeps both possibilities alive, and that the joking tone is how he does it.

Sonnet 29: "When in disgrace with fortune and men's eyes"

Comprehension

11 **What is the speaker's situation in the first four lines?**

He is out of luck and out of favour, "in disgrace with fortune and men's eyes". Alone, he weeps over his "outcast state". His prayers go unanswered: he troubles "deaf heaven" with "bootless" (useless) cries. He looks at himself and curses his fate.

12 **What does the speaker envy in other men?**

He wishes he were like someone “more rich in hope”, with better prospects. He envies one man’s looks and another’s friends. He wants “this man’s art and that man’s scope”: one man’s skill and another’s range or opportunity. He is least content with “what I most enjoy”, so even his own gifts give him no pleasure.

13 **What changes the speaker’s mood, and how does the poem end?**

By chance (“Haply”) he thinks of the beloved. His state then rises “Like to the lark at break of day arising / From sullen earth” and “sings hymns at heaven’s gate”. The couplet says that the memory of the beloved’s love brings such wealth that he would “scorn to change my state with kings”.

Analysis

14 **How does the syntax of Sonnet 29 enact the speaker’s change of mood?**

The sonnet is one sentence. It begins with a subordinate clause, “When”, and then heaps up verbs and participles, “beweep”, “curse”, “Wishing”, “Desiring”, “despising”, without reaching a conclusion. The reader waits nine lines for the sentence to resolve, and that waiting is the experience of brooding. The resolution comes in line 10 with the simplest words in the poem: “Haply I think on thee”. The sentence then speeds up. Enjambment (sense running over the line ending) carries “arising” into “From sullen earth”, so the syntax lifts as the lark does. Shakespeare makes the grammar sink and rise with the mind it describes.

15 **How do the repeated word “state” and the references to heaven measure the change?**

“State” appears three times. First it is the speaker’s “outcast state”, his social condition. Then “my state” is his state of mind, which rises like the lark. Finally he will not change his “state with kings”, where the word also suggests royal splendour. One word tracks the movement from shame to riches. Heaven changes too. In line 3 it is “deaf” to his cries. In line 12 his spirit “sings hymns at heaven’s gate”: complaint has become praise. Note what has not changed. His fortune is the same as before. The wealth is a thought, “thy sweet love remembered”, which makes the consolation moving and also fragile.

Sonnet 60: “Like as the waves make towards the pebbled shore”

Comprehension

16 **What comparison opens the poem?**

Our minutes are compared to waves moving towards a stony beach. Each wave takes the place of the one before it, and all press forward: “In sequent toil all forwards do contend”. In the same way our minutes “hasten to their end”.

17 **What does the second quatrain describe?**

It describes a human life in terms of the sun’s course. “Nativity”, the newborn, starts in “the main of light”, a broad sea of light, and “Crawls to maturity”. Once it is “crowned” at its height, “Crooked eclipses” fight against its glory. The quatrain ends: “Time that gave doth now his gift confound”. The giver destroys his own gift.

18 **What does the couplet claim?**

It claims that the speaker’s poetry will survive into future ages: “to times in hope my verse shall stand”. The verse will go on praising the beloved’s worth “despite his cruel hand”, that is, despite the hand of Time.

Analysis

19 **How does Shakespeare use the three quatrains to build a picture of time?**

Each quatrain gives time a different image, and each is harsher than the last. In the first, time is the sea: impersonal, repetitive and without malice. The even rhythm of “So do our minutes hasten to their end” imitates the regular arrival of waves. In the second, time is the arc of a life, and the verb “Crawls” makes growth slow while the fall is sudden. Only in the last line of that quatrain is Time named and given a will. In the third he is an active destroyer who will “transfix”, who “delves” and “Feeds”, and who carries a “scythe”. The structure moves from a natural process to a personal enemy, so that by line 12 the reader feels time as an attack.

20 **How convincing is the couplet as an answer to the rest of the poem?**

Two readings are possible. On the first, the couplet wins the argument. Line 12 says “nothing stands”, and the couplet takes up the same verb to contradict it: “my verse shall stand”. The firm “shall” and the phrase “And yet” set poetry against the scythe. On the second, the couplet is outweighed. Time has had twelve lines of vivid imagery and verse has two plain ones. The phrase “in hope” may mean only that the future ages are hoped for, but it lets doubt into the claim. A strong answer notes that the poem praises the beloved’s “worth” without ever describing it. What stands is the verse.



Sonnets reward being read one at a time and more than once. **Daily Bard** is an iPhone and iPad app that shows one Shakespeare passage a day, checked against the Folger text, with a plain-English reading on the back of the leaf.

Sonnet 73: “That time of year thou mayst in me behold”

Comprehension

21 **What three images does the speaker use for himself?**

In the first quatrain he is late autumn, when “yellow leaves, or none, or few” hang on boughs that shake in the cold. In the second he is twilight, the light that “after sunset fadeth in the west”. In the third he is a dying fire, glowing on “the ashes of his youth”.

22 **What is “Death’s second self” in line 8?**

The phrase describes “black night”, which takes the twilight away. Night is death’s double because it “seals up all in rest”: it closes everything in sleep, as death closes a life. The verb “seals” suggests something shut for good.

23 **What does the couplet say about the person addressed?**

It says that the listener sees all these signs of age, and that seeing them “makes thy love more strong”. He loves well what he “must leave ere long”, that is, what he must soon lose. The poem ends on the listener’s feelings, not the speaker’s.

Analysis

24 **How does the structure of Sonnet 73 convey the speaker's sense of ageing?**

The three quatrains shrink in scale. The first image is a season, the second a single day, the third the last hour of a fire, so that time seems to run out as the poem proceeds. Each quatrain is one sentence, and each begins by directing the listener's gaze: "thou mayst in me behold", then "In me thou see'st" twice. The repetition is insistent, as if he feared that the young man would look away. Death also comes closer in the wording. It is unnamed in the first quatrain, appears as "Death's second self" in the second, and becomes the "death-bed" in the third. Within line 2 the order "yellow leaves, or none, or few" hesitates, like someone counting what is left.

25 **Is the couplet a statement or a plea?**

Its grammar is a statement: "This thou perceiv'st, which makes thy love more strong". The speaker reports what the listener feels. But nobody can know another person's love so surely, and the poem has spent twelve lines displaying the speaker's decay to someone younger. Read in that light, the couplet tells the listener what he ought to feel, and it is a request for love disguised as a fact. The ambiguous verb supports this. To "leave" is to lose through death, and it can also mean to abandon. The fear behind the poem may be less of dying than of being left. Compare Sonnet 116, where love ignores time. Here love is asked to grow because of it.

Sonnet 116: "Let me not to the marriage of true minds"

Comprehension

26 **What does the speaker refuse to do in the opening lines?**

He refuses to "Admit impediments" to "the marriage of true minds". The phrase echoes the marriage service, in which anyone who knows of an impediment to a wedding is asked to declare it. He then defines love by what it is not: "Love is not love / Which alters when it alteration finds".

27 **What two images describe love in the second quatrain?**

Love is "an ever-fixed mark", a sea-mark such as a beacon, which faces storms and "is never shaken". It is also "the star to every wand'ring bark", the star by which a ship off course can steer. The star's "worth's unknown, although his height be taken": its altitude can be measured, and its value cannot.

28 **What does the couplet stake on the argument?**

The speaker says that if he is wrong, and it is "upon me proved", then "I never writ, nor no man ever loved". Since he plainly has written, and since people have loved, the couplet dares the reader to deny the definition.

Analysis

29 **How does Shakespeare present the relationship between love and time in the third quatrain?**

Time is personified as a reaper with a sickle, and love is said to be not his "fool", meaning his jester or dupe. The quatrain is honest about what Time can do. "Rosy lips and cheeks" do come "Within his bending sickle's compass", so beauty will be cut down. Love is saved by being located somewhere other than in beauty. Time is then belittled: his units are "brief hours and weeks", while love "bears it out even to the edge of doom", the Day of Judgement. The alliteration of "But bears" and the heavy final word "doom" give that line the sound of endurance. Shakespeare concedes the body to time and claims constancy for love.

30 **Is Sonnet 116 a confident definition of love or an anxious one?**

Both readings can be supported. The poem sounds confident: its statements are general, its images are fixed points, and its couplet is a wager the speaker expects to win. That is why it is so often read at weddings. Yet the poem is built from negatives: "not", "no", "never" and "nor" recur from the first line to the last. A definition that must deny so much seems to be answering an objection, and "O, no" sounds like a protest. The neighbouring sonnets, in which the speaker admits his own unfaithfulness, give the objection a source. The essay on Sonnet 116 argues the case in full.

Sonnet 129: "Th' expense of spirit in a waste of shame"

Comprehension

31 **How does the opening define "lust in action"?**

It is "Th' expense of spirit in a waste of shame": a spending of vital energy in a shameful waste. "Expense" and "waste" are terms from money, so acting on lust is presented as a ruinous transaction. "Spirit" has a bodily as well as a moral sense.

32 **What does the poem say lust is like before, during and after it is satisfied?**

Before, it is "perjured, murd'rous, bloody, full of blame" and is "Past reason hunted". During, it is "A bliss in proof", a joy while experienced. Afterwards it is "despised straight" and "Past reason hated": "a very woe" and, looking back, "a dream".

33 **What does the couplet conclude?**

That everyone knows all this and nobody acts on the knowledge. "All this the world well knows, yet none knows well / To shun the heaven that leads men to this hell". The pleasure is the "heaven", and the shame that follows is the "hell".

Analysis

34 **How do syntax and rhythm make the reader feel what the poem describes?**

The first twelve lines are a single sentence that never settles. After the opening statement it becomes a list of adjectives with hardly a conjunction between them: "Savage, extreme, rude, cruel, not to trust". The heavy stresses and commas break the iambic rhythm into jolts. Line 10 runs the stages of desire together, "Had, having, and in quest to have", and gives them in reverse order, moving backwards from satisfaction to pursuit as though the cycle were starting again. The repeated "Past reason" at the start of two lines makes hunting and hating mirror each other. The form enacts compulsion. The sentence cannot stop any more than the appetite can.

35 **Why does it matter that the poem never says "I" or "you"?**

Almost every other sonnet is addressed to someone by a speaker who names himself. Sonnet 129 has no first or second person at all. Its subjects are "lust", "the world" and "men". One effect is authority: the poem reads as a law of human nature, like a sermon. A second effect is evasion. Placed near the start of the poems about the mistress, it sounds like one man's disgust at himself, and the impersonal grammar lets him avoid saying so. The simile of the "swallowed bait", laid "On purpose" to drive the taker mad, even shifts the blame on to whoever set the trap. The poem knows everything about lust except how to own it.

Sonnet 130: “My mistress’ eyes are nothing like the sun”

Comprehension

36 **What does the speaker say about his mistress’s eyes, lips, breasts and hair?**

Her eyes are “nothing like the sun”. Coral is “far more red” than her lips. Her breasts are “dun”, a dull brownish colour, not white as snow. Her hair is like “black wires”. Each statement denies a standard comparison of love poetry.

37 **What does he say about her cheeks, breath, voice and walk?**

He sees no roses in her cheeks. Some perfumes are more delightful than her breath. He loves to hear her speak, though he knows that “music hath a far more pleasing sound”. He has never seen a goddess walk, and his mistress “treads on the ground”.

38 **What does the couplet say?**

It reverses the direction of the poem. The speaker swears that he thinks his love “as rare / As any she belied with false compare”: as precious as any woman who has been misrepresented by false comparisons. “Belied” means lied about.

Analysis

39 **How does Shakespeare use and mock the conventions of Petrarchan love poetry?**

Poets following Petrarch praised a lady through a blazon (a catalogue of her features), with eyes like suns, lips like coral and skin like snow. Shakespeare keeps the catalogue and denies every item. The method is flat statement: “nothing like”, “no such roses”. The conditional “If hairs be wires” exposes how odd the convention already was, since golden hair was routinely praised as wire. The volta is held back until line 13, later than in most of the sonnets, so that twelve lines of apparent insult are overturned in two. The target is then named as “false compare”. The poem is a love poem about how love poems lie.

40 **Is Sonnet 130 a compliment or an insult?**

The stronger reading is that it is a compliment. The speaker's honesty is a form of respect, and details such as "I love to hear her speak" show real affection. A woman who "treads on the ground" is at least real, unlike a goddess. The oath "by heaven" gives the couplet the sound of sincerity. There is another side. The comedy depends on listing a silent woman's shortcomings for the amusement of readers, and "reeks" is not flattering, even though the verb could then simply mean to be breathed out. The later poems to the mistress are far harsher, and they make it harder to read this one as simple praise. A good answer weighs the couplet against the catalogue.

The sequence as a whole

41 **How is the 1609 sequence arranged, and why should we be careful about reading it as a story?**

The 154 sonnets were printed together in 1609. Sonnets 1 to 126 are traditionally read as addressed to a young man: the first seventeen urge him to have children, and the rest explore the speaker's love for him. Sonnets 127 to 152 concern a dark-haired mistress, and the last two retell a myth about Cupid. We do not know whether Shakespeare approved the publication or chose the order, and many individual poems do not state the sex of the person addressed. Any plot is therefore an inference from the arrangement. The labels "Fair Youth" and "Dark Lady" are later critics' terms. Use them as conveniences and base your argument on the words of particular poems.

42 **Who is the speaker of the Sonnets, and why should we not simply call him Shakespeare?**

The speaker is a poet, older than the young man and aware of lower status. He is devoted, jealous and unusually frank about his own faults: he is found "myself almost despising" in Sonnet 29 and admits in Sonnet 138 that "I do believe her though I know she lies". He may share experiences with Shakespeare, but nothing in the poems can be checked against the life, and no identification of the people involved has been proved. Sonnet sequences were also a literary fashion with conventions of their own. Treat the "I" as a constructed voice. This is more than caution: it lets you ask how the effect of confession is produced by form and language.

43 How does the speaker's defence against time change across the sequence?

It changes three times. In Sonnets 1 to 17 the defence is children: nothing can resist "Time's scythe" except "breed". From Sonnet 18 it is poetry, since the beloved will live "in eternal lines", and Sonnet 60 hopes that "my verse shall stand". In Sonnet 116 it is love itself, which is "not Time's fool" even though beauty is lost. Sonnet 73 then goes further and makes the shortness of time a reason for loving "more strong". Each defence concedes more than the one before, and that growing honesty is what gives the sequence its direction. The page on time in the Sonnets follows this in detail.

44 How does Shakespeare use the final couplet in the sonnets studied here?

He uses it differently almost every time. In Sonnet 18 it clinches the argument with a claim that verse gives life. In Sonnet 29 it sums up the recovery in the image of kings. In Sonnet 60 it answers twelve lines about Time with a hope. In Sonnet 73 it turns from the speaker to the listener. In Sonnet 116 it stakes everything on a dare. In Sonnet 129 it steps back to a general truth. In Sonnet 130 it reverses the whole poem with "And yet". In Sonnet 20 it strikes a bargain. The couplet is where a sonnet declares what kind of poem it has been, and it is always worth asking whether two lines can carry the weight placed on them.

45 How do the sonnets about the mistress differ from the sonnets to the young man?

The difference is of tone as much as of subject. The young man is idealised, even when he hurts the speaker: he is offered an "eternal summer", and love for him is described as a guiding star. The mistress is desired without being admired. Poems about her deal with lust, as in Sonnet 129, with mutual deceit, as in Sonnet 138, and with self-disgust. Time, the great enemy of the earlier poems, almost vanishes. Sonnet 130 is the exception in mood, affectionate and comic. The contrast is not perfectly tidy, since the young man is also accused of faults and the speaker of servility. But in general the first group asks how love can last and the second asks whether desire can be trusted. See the page on love in the Sonnets.

46 Which kinds of imagery recur across the sonnets, and what do they allow Shakespeare to do?

Four fields recur. The natural cycle of seasons, days and flowers presents human life as part of a process that cannot be stopped, as in the "yellow leaves" of Sonnet 73. Law and finance, as in "summer's lease" and "Th' expense of spirit", treat beauty and desire as things held, owed and spent. Navigation gives love a fixed point in Sonnet 116. Personification turns Time and Death into opponents who can be addressed and defied. What these have in common is that they make abstract ideas concrete enough to argue with. The close reading toolkit gives a method for analysing an image: say what is compared, what the comparison brings with it, and why it matters at that point.

Essay questions with outline answers

I **"The Sonnets are more interested in poetry than in the people they address." How far do you agree?**

Thesis: The Sonnets often make verse their hero, but the speaker's fear of not being loved shows that people matter more than the boasts admit.

- **Point 1:** Sonnet 18 ends by pointing at itself, "So long lives this". The beloved is never described, and the poem's subject becomes its own survival.
- **Point 2:** Sonnet 60 sets "my verse" against Time. It praises the beloved's "worth" and gives no detail of it: what we are shown is the poet's power.
- **Point 3:** Sonnet 130 is an argument about writing. Its real target is "false compare", the dishonesty of other poets.
- **Counter-argument:** Sonnets 29 and 73 need another person to be complete. The lark rises only because "I think on thee", and Sonnet 73 ends on the listener's love, not on verse.

Conclusion: Poetry is the speaker's weapon and his pride, but he uses it because he cares about someone, and the most moving sonnets say so.

II **How does Shakespeare present the relationship between love and time in the Sonnets?**

Thesis: Time is the measure of love in the Sonnets: love first tries to rescue beauty from time, then defines itself as what time cannot change, and finally draws strength from time's passing.

- **Point 1:** In Sonnet 18 love acts through verse to keep the beloved's "eternal summer" from fading. Time is an enemy to be outlasted.
- **Point 2:** In Sonnet 116 beauty is conceded to Time's "bending sickle's compass", and love is redefined as constancy: "Love's not Time's fool".
- **Point 3:** In Sonnet 73 time becomes the cause of love's intensity. Knowing that he must lose the speaker "makes thy love more strong".
- **Counter-argument:** Sonnet 60 gives Time twelve lines and the reply two. There "nothing stands but for his scythe to mow", and love is not mentioned as a defence at all.

Conclusion: The sequence never lets love defeat time outright, but it changes what winning would mean, from keeping beauty to keeping faith.

III **"The speaker of the Sonnets is more honest about himself than about those he loves." Discuss.**

Thesis: The speaker examines himself with a frankness that he rarely extends to the young man or the mistress, who are idealised or blamed more than they are understood.

- **Point 1:** Sonnet 29 lists his envy without excuse, "Desiring this man's art and that man's scope", until he is "myself almost despising".
- **Point 2:** Sonnet 138 admits self-deception as a policy: "I do believe her though I know she lies". He sees exactly what he is doing.
- **Point 3:** The loved ones are never heard. The young man is "more lovely and more temperate" than summer and has no features, and the mistress is known only through a catalogue of what she is not.
- **Counter-argument:** The honesty can be a performance. Sonnet 73 displays the speaker's decay in order to secure love, and Sonnet 129 avoids saying "I" at all.

Conclusion: The Sonnets are a portrait of one mind, and their candour about that mind is real, but it is also the means by which the speaker asks to be loved.

IV **How does Shakespeare use images of the natural world to explore human experience in the Sonnets?**

Thesis: Nature in the Sonnets is a standard of change against which human hopes are tested, and Shakespeare both relies on natural comparisons and questions them.

- **Point 1:** Seasons measure a human life. Summer in Sonnet 18 has "all too short a date", and in Sonnet 73 the speaker is the season of "yellow leaves".
- **Point 2:** Sea and sky give scale. The waves of Sonnet 60 make time relentless, and the storm and star of Sonnet 116 make love a fixed point in a moving world.
- **Point 3:** Small creatures and plants carry feeling. The "darling buds of May" make beauty fragile, and the lark of Sonnet 29 rises "From sullen earth" as the mind does.
- **Counter-argument:** Sonnet 130 refuses nature as a source of praise. Sun, coral, snow and roses are all rejected, and such comparison is called "false".

Conclusion: Natural imagery lets the poems think about time and feeling in concrete terms, while Sonnets 18 and 130 remind us that a person is never the same as the thing compared.

V **“The sonnets about the mistress destroy the ideals that the sonnets to the young man build.” How far do you agree?**

Thesis: The mistress sonnets do not destroy the ideals so much as expose strains that were already present in the poems to the young man.

- **Point 1:** The young man poems build high ideals: beauty preserved in “eternal lines”, and love as “an ever-fixed mark”.
- **Point 2:** The mistress poems answer them. Sonnet 129 shows desire as “Past reason hunted” and then “Past reason hated”, and the couplet admits that nobody can “shun” it.
- **Point 3:** Yet Sonnet 130 builds an ideal of its own: love that needs no flattery and thinks a real woman “as rare” as any goddess of poetry.
- **Counter-argument:** The ideals were under pressure before Sonnet 127. Sonnet 73 fears being left, and the insistent negatives of Sonnet 116 suggest a speaker arguing against doubt.

Conclusion: The two groups are best read as one argument about what love can honestly claim, with the later poems saying aloud what the earlier ones imply.

For more practice, the theme pages on beauty and mortality each end with a model paragraph and four further questions, and the essay planner gives a frame for comparing two poems.



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