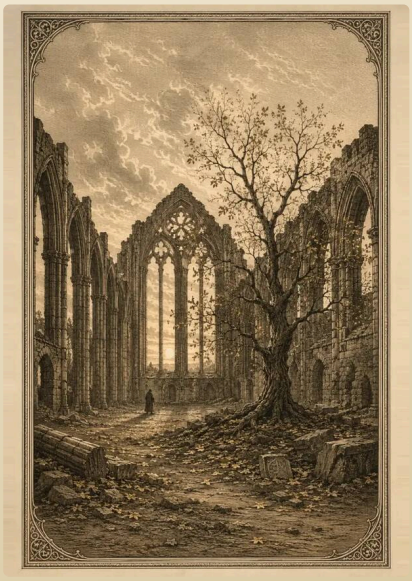
Daily Bard

STUDY CARDS

Shakespeare's Sonnets: study cards

50 quotations to learn by heart. The lines on the front; on the back, who says them and when, what they mean, and how to use them in an essay.



How to use the cards

Each card has one quotation from Shakespeare's Sonnets on the front. Say who speaks it, where it comes in the play, and what it means, then turn the card to check. Mark the ones you know and the deck will skip them next time on this device; keep turning the rest until they stick.

Every card comes from the **study guide** and the quotes-by-theme pages, so each one links back to the full analysis. On paper, print the PDF, cut along the dashed lines and fold each strip down the middle.

The cards

CARD 1 OF 50

From fairest creatures we
desire increase,
That thereby beauty's rose might
never die,

CARD 1 OF 50

The speaker · Sonnet 1

We want the most beautiful creatures to have offspring, so that the rose of beauty may never die out.

In an essay: Use it to establish the starting position: beauty is a shared inheritance that brings a duty. The poem's final phrase, "the world's due", confirms that the young man owes his beauty and does not own it.

CARD 2 OF 50

When forty winters shall besiege
thy brow
And dig deep trenches in thy
beauty's field,

CARD 2 OF 50

The speaker · Sonnet 2

When forty years have attacked your forehead and cut deep wrinkles into your beautiful face.

In an essay: Use it to show where the sequence starts: time as an external attacker and the young man as a place to defend. Pair it with Sonnet 60, where Time "delves the parallels in beauty's brow", to show the image returning when children are no longer the answer.

CARD 3 OF 50

But flowers distilled, though they with winter meet,
Leese but their show; their substance still lives sweet.

CARD 3 OF 50

The speaker · Sonnet 5

But flowers that have been distilled into perfume lose only their appearance when winter comes. Their essence lives on, still sweet.

In an essay: This is the first appearance of an idea the sequence relies on: beauty has an outside and an inside, and only the inside can last. Link it to Sonnet 54, where the same verb returns and it is verse, not a child, that "distils" the young man's truth.

CARD 4 OF 50

And nothing 'gainst Time's scythe can make defense
Save breed, to brave him when he takes thee hence.

CARD 4 OF 50

The speaker · Sonnet 12

Nothing can protect you against Time's scythe except children, who will defy him when he carries you off.

In an essay: This is the clearest statement of the first defence. Note what it concedes: Time still "takes thee hence". A child does not save the young man, only answers for him afterwards.

CARD 5 OF 50

And, all in war with Time for love of you,
As he takes from you, I engraft you new.

CARD 5 OF 50

The speaker · Sonnet 15

Fighting Time with everything I have because I love you, I renew you as fast as he takes from you.

In an essay: Use it as the hinge between the two defences. Then complicate it: the very next sonnet calls this same verse "my barren rhyme" and says a child would be "a mightier way". The confidence lasts for one couplet.

CARD 6 OF 50

Shall I compare thee to a summer's day?
Thou art more lovely and
more temperate.

CARD 6 OF 50

Sonnet 18

Shall I liken you to a summer's day? You are lovelier and milder.

CARD 7 OF 50

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

CARD 7 OF 50

Sonnet 18

As long as people live and read, this poem will live, and will keep you alive.

CARD 8 OF 50

And every fair from fair
sometime declines,
By chance or nature's changing
course untrimmed.

CARD 8 OF 50

The speaker · Sonnet 18

Every beautiful thing at some time falls away from its beauty, stripped of it by accident or by nature's ordinary course of change.

In an essay: Quote it to show that the promise of "eternal summer" is made in full knowledge of the rule it breaks. The beloved keeps "that fair thou ow'st" only inside the poem. The essay on "Shall I compare thee" reads the whole sonnet.

CARD 9 OF 50

Yet do thy worst, old Time; despite
thy wrong,
My love shall in my verse ever
live young.

CARD 9 OF 50

The speaker · Sonnet 19

But do your worst, old Time. Whatever harm you do, my beloved will stay young for ever in my poetry.

In an essay: Use it to show the second defence stated without conditions, and notice that it comes one poem after the famous promise of Sonnet 18, discussed in the essay on "Shall I compare thee". The argument has moved from asking the young man to act to announcing what the poet can do alone.

CARD 10 OF 50

A woman's face with Nature's own
hand painted
Hast thou, the master mistress of
my passion;

CARD 10 OF 50

The speaker · Sonnet 20

You have a woman's face, painted by Nature herself and not by cosmetics, you who are both master and mistress of my deepest feeling.

In an essay: Use it to show that the central love of the sequence does not fit the conventions. The couplet appears to give the young man's body to women and to keep his "love" for the speaker. Readers disagree about whether that renounces desire or winks at it, and you can say that the poem keeps the question open.

CARD 11 OF 50

My glass shall not persuade me I am old
So long as youth and thou are of
one date,

CARD 11 OF 50

The speaker · Sonnet 22

My mirror will not convince me that I am old, as long as you and youth are the same age.

In an essay: Use it as the starting point: mortality first appears as something the speaker argues his way out of. Pair it with Sonnet 62, where the same mirror shows him "myself indeed" and the argument collapses.

CARD 12 OF 50

Like to the lark at break of day arising
From sullen earth, sings hymns at heaven's gate;

CARD 12 OF 50

Sonnet 29

My mood, like a lark rising at dawn from the gloomy ground, sings at the gate of heaven.

CARD 13 OF 50

For thy sweet love remembered such wealth brings
That then I scorn to change my state with kings.

CARD 13 OF 50

The speaker · Sonnet 29

Remembering your sweet love makes me so rich that I would refuse to swap places with kings.

In an essay: This is love as consolation, and it is the happiest version in the sequence. Complicate it by observing that nothing in the speaker's circumstances has altered, only his mind. Then set it beside Sonnet 87, where he is a king only "In sleep".

CARD 14 OF 50

Then can I drown an eye, unused to flow,
For precious friends hid in death's dateless night,

CARD 14 OF 50

The speaker · Sonnet 30

Then I, who do not often cry, can weep floods for dear friends hidden in death's endless night.

In an essay: Use it to show that the speaker knows mortality first as bereavement. The couplet claims that thinking of the friend means "All losses are restored". The later sonnets ask what happens when the speaker himself becomes one of the losses.

CARD 15 OF 50

If thou survive my well-contented day
When that churl Death my bones with dust shall cover,

CARD 15 OF 50

The speaker · Sonnet 32

If you live on after the day I am content to meet, when that brute Death covers my bones with dust.

In an essay: This quotation complicates the theme of immortal verse. Sonnet 55 says that rhyme will outlive marble. Here the speaker expects his rhyme to be "outstripped by every pen" and asks only to be read with affection. Mortality has made him humble about poetry and ambitious about love.

CARD 16 OF 50

Such civil war is in my love and hate
That I an accessary needs must be
To that sweet thief which sourly robs from me.

CARD 16 OF 50

The speaker · Sonnet 35

My love and my resentment are so much at war inside me that I cannot help becoming an accomplice of the sweet thief who bitterly robs me.

In an essay: Use it to show that love in the Sonnets includes complicity. The speaker sees that forgiving a fault is a way of "corrupting" himself, and he does it anyway. That self-knowledge is the sequence's characteristic note.

CARD 17 OF 50

O, how much more doth beauty beauteous seem
By that sweet ornament which truth doth give.

CARD 17 OF 50

The speaker · Sonnet 54

How much more beautiful beauty appears when it has the lovely decoration that truth adds to it.

In an essay: Use it for the moral test of beauty, and read it as praise with a warning inside. The young man is told that his truth will survive in verse, which assumes that he has it. The poems of betrayal elsewhere in the sequence make that assumption look hopeful.

CARD 18 OF 50

Not marble nor the gilded monuments
Of princes shall outlive this powerful rhyme,

CARD 18 OF 50

The speaker · Sonnet 55

Neither marble nor the gold-covered tombs of princes will last longer than this mighty poem.

In an essay: This is the boast at its most confident, and it follows classical poets who said that verse outlasts bronze and stone. Test it against the poem's ending: "You live in this". The young man is never named or described, so what has survived is the rhyme and its claim.

CARD 19 OF 50

Being your slave, what should I do but tend
Upon the hours and times of your desire?

CARD 19 OF 50

The speaker · Sonnet 57

Since I am your slave, what else should I do but wait on whatever hours and moments you choose?

In an essay: A useful quotation for the imbalance of power between the speaker and a social superior. It also tests Sonnet 116. There love is "not Time's fool". Here love is a fool who "thinks no ill" whatever the beloved does, so constancy shades into self-abasement.

CARD 20 OF 50

Like as the waves make towards the pebbled shore,
So do our minutes hasten to their end,

CARD 20 OF 50

Sonnet 60

Just as waves move towards the stony shore, so our minutes hurry to their end.

CARD 21 OF 50

Time doth transfix the flourish set on youth
And delves the parallels in beauty's brow,
Feeds on the rarities of Nature's truth,
And nothing stands but for his scythe to mow.

CARD 21 OF 50

The speaker · Sonnet 60

Time pierces the bloom of youth, digs lines in a beautiful forehead, eats up nature's finest things, and nothing stands except to be cut down by his scythe.

In an essay: Use the proportions. Time gets twelve lines and verse gets two, and those two speak only of "hope". Compare this with the certainty of Sonnet 55 to argue that the claim for poetry weakens as the description of Time grows more exact.

CARD 22 OF 50

But when my glass shows me myself indeed
Beated and chopped with tanned antiquity,

CARD 22 OF 50

The speaker · Sonnet 62

But when my mirror shows me as I really am, battered and cracked and leathery with age.

In an essay: Use it to show the speaker turning on himself the unsparing eye he turned on the young man in the early sonnets. Sonnet 2 warned of "deep trenches" in another man's brow. Now the damage is his own.

CARD 23 OF 50

Ruin hath taught me thus to ruminate,
That Time will come and take my love away.

CARD 23 OF 50

The speaker · Sonnet 64

Seeing ruin has taught me to reflect that Time will come and take my beloved from me.

In an essay: This is the essential counter-example. If you are asked whether the Sonnets defeat time, Sonnet 64 shows a poem in which no weapon is even picked up. It also borders on the theme of mortality: the loss feared here is personal.

CARD 24 OF 50

O, none, unless this miracle have might,
That in black ink my love may still
shine bright.

CARD 24 OF 50

The speaker · Sonnet 65

Nobody can, unless this miracle should have power: that my beloved may go on shining brightly in black ink.

In an essay: Use it to argue that the promise of immortal verse is a wager and not a certainty. The move from "shall" to "may" is small, precise evidence for that reading.

CARD 25 OF 50

Tired with all these, from these would I
be gone,
Save that, to die, I leave my love alone.

CARD 25 OF 50

The speaker · Sonnet 66

Sick of all these things, I would gladly leave them behind, except that by dying I would leave my beloved alone.

In an essay: This is the essential complication. Here death is wanted, and love is the reason to refuse it. It compares well with Hamlet's reasoning in the essay on "To be, or not to be", where what restrains him is fear, not love.

CARD 26 OF 50

Thus is his cheek the map of
days outworn,
When beauty lived and died as flowers
do now,

CARD 26 OF 50

The speaker · Sonnet 68

So his face is a record of times long past, when beauty lived and died naturally, as flowers still do.

In an essay: Use it to connect beauty with authenticity, and keep it ready for the mistress poems. Sonnet 127 uses the same charge of bastardy against cosmetics, and argues from it that dark colouring is now beauty's rightful heir.

CARD 27 OF 50

No longer mourn for me when I
am dead
Than you shall hear the surly sullen bell
Give warning to the world that I am fled
From this vile world with vilest worms
to dwell.

CARD 27 OF 50

The speaker · Sonnet 71

When I am dead, mourn for me only as long as you hear the gloomy bell telling the world that I have left this foul place to live with the foulest worms.

In an essay: Offer both readings. It is selfless: he would rather be forgotten than cause pain. It is also a plea, since nobody could be told "I love you so" in these terms and then forget. Keep both in play.

CARD 28 OF 50

Upon those boughs which shake against the cold,
Bare ruined choirs where late the sweet birds sang.

CARD 28 OF 50

Sonnet 73

On the branches shivering in the cold: bare, ruined choir stalls where birds sang not long ago.

CARD 29 OF 50

This thou perceiv'st, which makes thy love more strong,
To love that well which thou must leave ere long.

CARD 29 OF 50

Sonnet 73

You see all this, and it makes you love more strongly what you must soon lose.

CARD 30 OF 50

In me thou see'st the glowing of such fire
That on the ashes of his youth doth lie,
As the death-bed whereon it must expire,
Consumed with that which it was nourished by.

CARD 30 OF 50

The speaker · Sonnet 73

In me you see the glow of a fire lying on the ashes of its own youth, as on a deathbed where it must go out, choked by what once fed it.

In an essay: The guide's key quotations cover the "Bare ruined choirs" and the couplet, so use this quatrain to show the structure tightening. Then weigh the couplet's claim that all this "makes thy love more strong": it is phrased as a fact, and it works as a request.

CARD 31 OF 50

The earth can have but earth, which is his due;
My spirit is thine, the better part of me.

CARD 31 OF 50

The speaker · Sonnet 74

The earth can only take earth, which is what it is owed. My spirit, the better part of me, is yours.

In an essay: This is the nearest the speaker comes to claiming immortality for himself, and it is a modest version. He does not say the world will read him. He says one reader will keep him. Contrast the public audience promised to the young man in Sonnet 55.

CARD 32 OF 50

Your name from hence immortal life shall have,
Though I, once gone, to all the world must die.

CARD 32 OF 50

The speaker · Sonnet 81

From this poem your name will have everlasting life, though I, once dead, must be dead to everyone.

In an essay: Use it to argue that the Sonnets divide immortality unequally. The beloved is to live "in the mouths of men"; the poet claims nothing for himself except the power of "my pen". Whether that is humility or a quiet boast is open.

CARD 33 OF 50

Thus have I had thee as a dream doth flatter,
In sleep a king, but waking no such matter.

CARD 33 OF 50

The speaker · Sonnet 87

So I possessed you the way a flattering dream works: a king while asleep, and nothing of the kind on waking.

In an essay: Use it as the counterpart to Sonnet 29: the wealth and kingship that love gave are now shown to have been a dream. You can also argue that the humility is double-edged, since calling the young man "too dear" hints that he knows his price.

CARD 34 OF 50

For sweetest things turn sourest by their deeds;
Lilies that fester smell far worse than weeds.

CARD 34 OF 50

The speaker · Sonnet 94

The sweetest things become the sourest through what they do. Rotting lilies smell much worse than weeds.

In an essay: This is the essential quotation for beauty and corruption. Sonnet 54 hoped that truth would accompany beauty. Sonnet 94 considers what follows if it does not: the beautiful person who behaves badly is worse than the plain one. Note that the judgement is made by smell, the sense that detects what the eye misses.

CARD 35 OF 50

Ah, yet doth beauty, like a dial hand,
Steal from his figure, and no pace perceived;

CARD 35 OF 50

The speaker · Sonnet 104

And yet beauty, like the hand of a clock, creeps away from its place without any movement being seen.

In an essay: Use it to complicate the idea that the young man's beauty is exempt from time. It also introduces the unreliable eye before the mistress poems make it a central subject. The page on time follows the larger argument.

CARD 36 OF 50

Love is not love
Which alters when it alteration finds
Or bends with the remover to remove.

CARD 36 OF 50

Sonnet 116

Love that changes when things change, or leaves when the other person leaves, is not really love.

CARD 37 OF 50

Love's not Time's fool, though rosy lips and cheeks
Within his bending sickle's compass come;

CARD 37 OF 50

Sonnet 116

Love is not Time's plaything, even though youthful beauty falls within reach of his curved sickle.

CARD 38 OF 50

O, no, it is an ever-fixed mark
That looks on tempests and is never shaken;
It is the star to every wand'ring bark,

CARD 38 OF 50

The speaker · Sonnet 116

No: love is a permanent sea-mark that faces storms and is never moved. It is the star that every wandering ship steers by.

In an essay: This is the ideal against which every other quotation on this page should be measured. The strongest essays do not treat it as the sequence's settled view. Ask why it must be asserted so forcefully, nearly thirty poems after "Farewell" and shortly before the poems to the mistress.

CARD 39 OF 50

This I do vow, and this shall ever be:
I will be true despite thy scythe and thee.

CARD 39 OF 50

The speaker · Sonnet 123

I swear this, and it will always be so: I will stay faithful in spite of your scythe and of you.

In an essay: Use it for the third defence, and link it to "Love's not Time's fool" in Sonnet 116, analysed in the essay on "Let me not to the marriage of true minds". Both poems concede beauty to the scythe and keep only constancy. The page on love in the Sonnets asks whether the sequence lives up to that vow.

CARD 40 OF 50

Her audit, though delayed, answered must be,
And her quietus is to render thee.

CARD 40 OF 50

The speaker · Sonnet 126

Nature's account, though put off, must be settled in the end, and she can only clear her debt by handing you over.

In an essay: Use it to show where the argument with Time ends for the young man. There is no child, no claim for verse and no vow, only a debt that falls due. Set it against the boast of Sonnet 55 in a conclusion.

CARD 41 OF 50

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,

CARD 41 OF 50

The speaker · Sonnet 127

In former times dark colouring was not thought beautiful, or if it was, it was not called beauty. But now black is beauty's lawful heir.

In an essay: Use it to show Shakespeare redefining a convention, and be cautious about how far it goes. The poem praises darkness mainly by attacking false fairness, and later sonnets use "black" as moral blame. Critics concerned with race ask what the opposition of fair and black assumes, and that question is worth raising.

CARD 42 OF 50

Th' expense of spirit in a waste of shame
Is lust in action;

CARD 42 OF 50

Sonnet 129

Acting on lust is a spending of vital energy in a shameful waste.

CARD 43 OF 50

All this the world well knows, yet none knows well
To shun the heaven that leads men to this hell.

CARD 43 OF 50

The speaker · Sonnet 129

Everybody knows all this perfectly well, yet nobody knows how to avoid the heaven that leads men into this hell.

In an essay: Use it to mark the division the sequence makes between love and lust. Sonnet 116 gave love a calm definition. Sonnet 129 gives lust a definition too, in one breathless twelve-line sentence. The contrast in syntax is itself the argument.

CARD 44 OF 50

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

CARD 44 OF 50

Sonnet 130

And yet I swear my beloved is as precious as any woman misrepresented by false comparisons.

CARD 45 OF 50

My mistress' eyes are nothing like
the sun;
Coral is far more red than her lips' red;

CARD 45 OF 50

The speaker · Sonnet 130

My mistress's eyes are not at all like the sun. Coral is much redder than her lips.

In an essay: Use it to argue that the Sonnets separate beauty from the conventional signs of beauty. Then test the poem against its neighbours. Here honesty about her looks is a form of respect. In Sonnet 137 the same honesty turns into an accusation against his own eyes.

CARD 46 OF 50

They know what beauty is, see where
it lies,
Yet what the best is take the worst to be.

CARD 46 OF 50

The speaker · Sonnet 137

My eyes know what beauty is and can see where it is found, and yet they take the worst for the best.

In an essay: This is where the theme ends: beauty is no longer a property of the person looked at, since everything depends on a compromised observer. Compare the first sonnet, where the young man was "contracted" to his own eyes. The sequence begins with one man deceived by sight and ends with another.

CARD 47 OF 50

When my love swears that she is made
of truth
I do believe her though I know she lies,

CARD 47 OF 50

The speaker · Sonnet 138

When my mistress swears that she is entirely faithful, I believe her, even though I know she is lying.

In an essay: Set it against the "marriage of true minds". The same word, truth, is at stake, and here it is cheerfully given up by both sides. You can argue that this is a debased love or a realistic one. The poem supports both readings.

CARD 48 OF 50

Two loves I have, of comfort
and despair,
Which like two spirits do suggest
me still.

CARD 48 OF 50

The speaker · Sonnet 144

I have two loves, one that comforts me and one that brings despair, and like two spirits they are always prompting me.

In an essay: Use it when writing about the sequence as a whole, and question its terms. Critics interested in gender and race have pointed out how much the contrast of "fair" man and dark woman takes for granted. Notice too that the speaker blames the woman for a betrayal in which the man must share.

CARD 49 OF 50

So shalt thou feed on Death, that feeds on men,
And Death once dead, there's no more dying then.

CARD 49 OF 50

The speaker · Sonnet 146

In this way you will feed on Death, who feeds on people, and once Death is dead there will be no more dying.

In an essay: Use it as the endpoint. For once the answer to mortality is neither a child, nor verse, nor the beloved's memory. It is religious and solitary, and no other person appears in the poem.

CARD 50 OF 50

My love is as a fever, longing still
For that which longer nurseth the disease,

CARD 50 OF 50

The speaker · Sonnet 147

My love is like a fever that keeps craving the very thing that prolongs the illness.

In an essay: This is the furthest point from Sonnet 116. Love was a star to steer by; now it is a disease that has driven reason away. The sonnet ends by calling the mistress "as black as hell, as dark as night", which tells you more about his state than hers.

Next steps

When the deck is easy, write with it: take three cards and turn them into a paragraph with the essay planner, or test yourself on the quotation sheet and the questions and answers. For one passage a day without trying, Daily Bard puts a quotation and its plain-English reading on your phone each morning.



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