

Literary Analysis Of “Sonnet 130”

Posted on September 5, 2019

Introduction

William Shakespeare’s “Sonnet 130” begins by refusing one of the most familiar gestures in traditional love poetry: it does not compare the beloved woman favorably with the sun. Instead, the speaker declares that his mistress’s eyes are “nothing like the sun” and continues through a series of comparisons in which her lips, skin, hair, cheeks, breath, voice, and movement fail to match idealized standards. Read superficially, these statements can sound insulting. Read in the context of the sonnet tradition, however, they expose the artificial language poets often use to praise beauty. (Shakespeare, 1609)

The poem’s central achievement is not that it rejects beauty or mocks the mistress. It distinguishes genuine affection from exaggerated verbal performance. Shakespeare uses the structure of the English sonnet, anti-Petrarchan imagery, controlled humor, and a decisive final couplet to argue that love does not require false comparison. The beloved is valuable as a real person, not because a poet can transform her into a collection of impossible natural wonders. (Shakespeare, 1609)

The Sonnet Tradition and the Poem’s Reversal

European love sonnets inherited many conventions associated with Petrarch and later imitators. A poet might describe a woman’s eyes as stars or suns, her lips as coral, her teeth or skin as snow, her cheeks as roses, and her hair as gold. These comparisons were intended to elevate the beloved, but repetition gradually turned them into predictable formulas. The woman could disappear behind the catalogue of admired objects.

“Sonnet 130” adopts that catalogue only to reverse it. The speaker names the conventional images—sun, coral, snow, roses, perfume, music, and divine movement—but denies that his mistress resembles them. The poem is therefore intelligible because readers recognize the tradition being challenged. Shakespeare does not create a completely new language of praise; he exposes the weaknesses of an old one by using its own materials. (Shakespeare, 1609)

This reversal is often called anti-Petrarchan. The term does not mean that the poem rejects love poetry altogether. It means that the speaker resists a mode of praise based on unattainable idealization. He replaces elevation with accuracy and ultimately claims that accuracy can support a stronger form of love.

Form: Three Quatrains and a Couplet

The poem follows the English, or Shakespearean, sonnet form: fourteen lines arranged as three quatrains followed by a final rhyming couplet. Its rhyme scheme is generally ABAB CDCD EFEF GG. The first twelve lines develop the pattern of negative comparison, while the couplet changes the direction of the argument. (Shakespeare, 1609)

The quatrains are not merely a list. They move through different senses and aspects of the body. The first quatrain concentrates on visual features: eyes, lips, skin, and hair. The second introduces cheeks and breath. The third turns toward sound and movement, comparing the mistress's speech with music and her walking with the imagined movement of a goddess. This progression gives the catalogue structure and prevents the humor from becoming random.

The couplet then provides the interpretive key. The speaker swears that his love is "as rare / As any she belied with false compare." The word "belied" is crucial. To belie someone is to misrepresent or falsify. Conventional praise may appear flattering, but it can become a lie because it describes a woman through comparisons that no human could satisfy. The speaker's refusal is therefore presented as a form of honesty. (Shakespeare, 1609)

Meter and Speaking Voice

Like most Shakespearean sonnets, the poem is written primarily in iambic pentameter, a line of five metrical feet that generally move from an unstressed to a stressed syllable. The meter creates a controlled conversational rhythm. The poem sounds formal enough to belong to the sonnet tradition while remaining close to spoken wit.

That balance matters. If the lines sounded purely casual, the critique of poetic convention would be less visible. If they were excessively ornate, the speaker would repeat the artificiality he opposes. The regular form allows Shakespeare to challenge convention from within it.

The voice is confident but not emotionally uncontrolled. The speaker does not beg, worship, or suffer theatrically. He observes, compares, and judges. His plainness is itself a rhetorical performance, yet it is a performance designed to expose other performances. The reader is invited to trust him because he appears willing to say what conventional lovers avoid saying.

Visual Imagery and the Body

The opening line creates an immediate surprise: "My mistress' eyes are nothing like the sun." Eyes in love poetry often shine with supernatural brightness. By denying the comparison, the speaker returns the mistress's eyes to ordinary human scale. He does not say that they are ugly. He says only that

they are not the sun. (Shakespeare, 1609)

The coral comparison works similarly. Coral is redder than her lips, and snow is whiter than her skin. The speaker's language acknowledges objective differences rather than turning color into praise. The reference to "dun" breasts is especially striking because it contradicts the period's conventional association of feminine beauty with idealized whiteness. Modern readers should avoid assuming that the poem offers a simple progressive rejection of racialized beauty standards; it remains a product of its culture. Yet within the poem's immediate argument, the line refuses to treat whiteness as a fact that must be invented for praise.

The hair comparison is deliberately comic: "If hairs be wires, black wires grow on her head." The image sounds harsh because "wires" lack softness and warmth. However, the line targets the convention of golden-wire hair as much as it describes the mistress. The speaker follows the convention's logic to an absurd result. If poets insist on treating hair as wire, then her dark hair must be black wire. The joke reveals how strange the metaphor already was. (Shakespeare, 1609)

Roses, Breath, and the Limits of Perfumed Praise

In the second quatrain, the speaker says he has seen red and white roses but sees no such roses in the mistress's cheeks. Again, the issue is not whether her face has color. It is whether cheeks should be treated as flowers. The phrase "damasked" evokes mixed red and white roses and the elaborate color language of courtly beauty. The mistress's face remains human rather than botanical.

The poem then moves from sight to smell. Some perfumes provide more pleasure than the breath that "reeks" from the mistress. The verb can sound disgusted to modern readers, but in early modern usage it could mean simply to give off an odor, though the comparison remains intentionally unromantic. The speaker refuses the fiction that a human mouth naturally smells sweeter than perfume. (Shakespeare, 1609)

This section is central to the poem's realism. Love poetry often transforms bodily existence into something clean, distant, and decorative. Shakespeare's mistress breathes, speaks, and walks. She has a body rather than an icon. The poem's affection is grounded in that embodied reality.

Sound, Music, and Movement

The third quatrain becomes more openly generous. The speaker says he loves to hear his mistress speak, even though music has a more pleasing sound. The admission separates preference from comparison. He can enjoy her voice without claiming it is objectively superior to music. Love does not require ranking every quality above all other experiences.

The final comparison concerns movement. The speaker has never seen a goddess walk, but he knows

his mistress “treads on the ground.” Conventional poetry may describe a woman as divine and floating, but this woman walks as a mortal. The verb “treads” has weight. It resists the fantasy that beauty should remove a woman from physical life. (Shakespeare, 1609)

The line also contains a philosophical distinction. A goddess belongs to imagination, myth, or representation. The mistress belongs to the world. The speaker chooses relationship with the real over worship of an abstraction.

Tone: Satire, Affection, and Risk

The tone combines satire and tenderness, but the balance is delicate. The poem risks humiliating the mistress because it invites laughter at descriptions of her body. Some readers therefore question whether the final couplet fully repairs the first twelve lines. Honesty can itself become a pose, and a lover might use “truth” as permission for cruelty.

That objection is valuable because it prevents the poem from being reduced to a simple moral lesson. The mistress does not speak. The male speaker controls both the description and the declaration of love. Readers cannot know how she would respond to being represented through these comparisons. The poem critiques one form of objectification while still cataloguing a woman’s physical features.

Nevertheless, the satire’s primary target is the poetic tradition. The exaggerated bluntness is designed for readers familiar with false comparison. The couplet insists that the beloved is not diminished by lacking mythical attributes. The speaker regards his love as rare precisely because it does not depend on them.

Truth and the Ethics of Praise

The poem raises a broader question: does praise honor a person when it requires lying about them? Conventional comparisons may flatter, but they can also imply that ordinary humanity is insufficient. A woman must resemble the sun, snow, roses, perfume, music, and a goddess before she deserves admiration. “Sonnet 130” rejects that requirement.

The speaker’s alternative is not complete descriptive neutrality. He still shapes language for effect, and his “plainness” is carefully constructed. Yet the poem recognizes that love and judgment can coexist. To love someone is not to lose the ability to perceive difference. The beloved can be ordinary by conventional standards and still be incomparable in personal value.

This distinction gives the final couplet its force. The speaker does not suddenly announce that the earlier statements were false. He says his love is as rare as the love described through false praise. The poem changes the criterion of value from resemblance to ideal objects to the truth of attachment. (Shakespeare, 1609)

Conclusion

“Sonnet 130” is memorable because it turns the machinery of the love sonnet against its own clichés. Shakespeare uses a familiar sequence of comparisons and systematically refuses each one. The poem’s three quatrains move through sight, smell, sound, and motion, while the final couplet reveals that the refusals are not evidence of absent love. They are a protest against praise that misrepresents its subject. (Shakespeare, 1609)

The poem is not free from ambiguity. Its humor can sound cruel, and the silent mistress remains subject to the speaker’s gaze. Yet that tension strengthens the analysis by showing that honesty, satire, and affection do not always fit together comfortably. Ultimately, the sonnet argues that a real person need not become a goddess to be loved. Its most radical praise is the decision to let the mistress remain human.

Works Cited

Folger Shakespeare Library. [“Sonnet 130.”](#)

Shakespeare, William. *Shakespeare’s Sonnets*. First published 1609.