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

POEM TEXT

Th' expense of spirit in a waste of shame
Is lust in action; and till action, lust
Is perjured, murderous, bloody, full of blame,
Savage, extreme, rude, cruel, not to trust;
Enjoyed no sooner but despisèd straight:
Past reason hunted; and, no sooner had,
Past reason hated, as a swallowed bait,
On purpose laid to make the taker mad:
Mad in pursuit, and in possession so:
Had, having, and in quest to have, extreme;
A bliss in proof and proved, a very woe;
Before, a joy proposed; behind, a dream.
All this the world well knows; yet none knows well
To shun the heaven that leads men to this hell.

SUMMARY

To waste energy in the pointless, embarrassing act: that's what it means to have sex. But until people have sex, their desires will be misleading, cruel, violent, shameful, wild, intense, inappropriate, merciless, and deceptive. As soon as people give in to their sexual desires, they hate them. Lust pushes people to irrationally chase after sex, even though, as soon as they have it, they hate the impulse that drove them toward sex in the first place—as though they were a fish that'd swallowed a fisherman's bait, a trap that was specifically set to attract them and make them go crazy. People go mad trying to fulfill their longings, and feel just as mad when actually doing so; such passions are intense and overwhelming regardless of whether people have already had sex, are in the middle of having sex, or are seeking out sex. Having sex feels great, but people are miserable once it ends; the prospect of sex is great, but once it's over, the pleasure vanishes as if it were all just a dream. Everyone knows this, but nobody has the good sense to resist the heavenly allure of sex in order to avoid the hellish torments of lust.

THEMES

LUST AND SHAME

"Sonnet 129" is about the painful side of sexual pleasure. The poem presents lust as an overwhelming urge that forces people to indulge in sex that, as soon as it ends, leaves them feeling depleted and ashamed. For the speaker, the fleeting physical satisfaction of sex isn't worth the emotional agony that follows. The fact that people keep indulging their lust anyway illustrates how powerful desire can be—so powerful, the speakers says, that it defies all "reason," compelling people to chase after something that they know will make them "mad."

According to the speaker, lust is merciless and unstoppable. It smolders inside people like a "murderous" energy, overriding all other considerations and making it near impossible to do anything else until people satisfy their craving for intimacy. In other words, sexual passion completely consumes people's good sense!

This intense, feverish state might be worth enduring, the speaker suggests, if sex itself were more rewarding. Yet the speaker believes that sex doesn't actually amount to much. It's a "waste," a mere "expense of spirit"—a phrase that implies that having sex *costs* something, as if people throw away precious energy when they indulge in their desire.

Because actually having sex seems to rob people of their "spirit," its aftermath is full of regret. People feel ashamed for seeking out satisfaction through sex, the poem implies, especially since that satisfaction disappears as soon as it has been "enjoyed." Post-sex embarrassed comes from people feeling foolish for having expended so much energy (both mentally and physically) on something so shallow and fleeting (in the speaker's summation, at least). And because of this apparently inevitable sense of shame, lust leads to nothing but "woe."

Such "woe" isn't enough to keep people from succumbing to their desires, however. "All this the world well knows," the speaker says, suggesting that everyone understands that lust is often more torturous than it is pleasurable. And yet, nobody "shun[s] the heaven that leads […] to this hell," meaning that, although everyone knows that indulging in lust will only lead to pointless agony, they do it anyway. Lust is simply too powerful for people to overcome, the poem illustrates, even if relenting to desire means torturing oneself.

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-14

LINE-BY-LINE ANALYSIS

LINES 1-2

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

The sonnet begins with a bold assertion: sex isn't worth the painful cost of lust. The speaker calls sex an "expense of spirit," to be more specific, a metaphor that implies that sex uses up one's mental and physical (and, of course, spiritual) energy.

This suggests that sex actually *costs* people something. Not only that, but it's little more than a "waste of shame"—an idea that frames sex not only as a pointless use of energy, but also as something that leads to guilt (perhaps because people feel ashamed of their feverish sexual desires once these desires have been satisfied).

All of this, the speaker says in line 2, is what "lust in action" amounts to ("lust in action" is yet another euphemistic way of talking about sex, since *acting* on *lust* means actually having sex). "Lust," then, is something capable of driving people to deplete their "spirit" and vitality as they go looking for a sexual release.

The first line establishes the sonnet's use of iambic pentameter, a meter consisting of five iambs (metrical feet made up of an unstressed syllable followed by a stressed syllable, da-DUM):

Th' ex**pense** | of **spir**- | it **in** | a **waste** | of **shame**

(Note that "Th' ex" is meant to be read as a *single* syllable here.) This is the standard meter for Shakespearean sonnets, and generally mimics the natural lilt of English speech.

The speaker also uses sibilance of /s/ and /sh/ sounds in these lines:

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

These soft sounds make the language feel gentle and inviting, reflecting the enticing nature of sexual desire. Sibilance also might call to mind the hissing of a snake, or a hushed whisper. The sounds of these lines thus evokes the slippery *deception* of lust, which the speaker believes pushes people towards torment. The poem's language itself illustrates just how difficult it is to resist sexual desire, even if such desire only leads to a "waste of shame."

LINES 2-4

and till action, lust
Is perjured, murderous, bloody, full of blame,
Savage, extreme, rude, cruel, not to trust;

The speaker goes on to describe lust as a merciless and overpowering force. The speaker focuses on the build up to sex in particular, when desire makes people go crazy with passion.

This kind of lust, the speaker argues, is "perjured, murderous, bloody, full of blame." To "perjure" is to purposefully tell a lie, usually in a way that violates some kind of oath. This word implies that lust is powerful enough to force people to deceive themselves, as if they've promised themselves that they won't act on their sexual yearnings yet violate this oath as soon as desire overtakes them.

Building on this idea, the speaker personifies lust itself as a "rude" and "cruel" person. It's clear that the speaker doesn't see lust as a pleasantly exciting feeling; instead, the speaker thinks of lust as a "savage" energy that is "not to [be] trust[ed]." Lust is nothing but a torturous preoccupation in the poem.

This outlook is pretty cynical, it makes sense given the speaker's general outlook on sex. The speaker makes clear in the very first line that sex is nothing but an "expense of spirit." If one sees sex as just a "waste of shame," it's no surprise that such a person would have a pessimistic perspective on the intense passion that leads to sex in the first place.

These lines are made up of one long list filled with asyndeton, as the speaker rattles off all the things wrong with lust without stopping for the pause of a conjunction. This makes the list feel quick and endless, as though the speaker is ready to go on and on when it comes to talking about how terrible lust is. The rapid barrage of descriptors pulls readers through at a breathless pace, with the flow of the language here mimicking the frantic state of excitement that people feel when they're at the mercy of lust.

LINES 5-8

Enjoyed no sooner but despisèd straight:
Past reason hunted; and, no sooner had,
Past reason hated, as a swallowed bait,
On purpose laid to make the taker mad:

The sonnet's second quatrain outlines the frustrating irony of lust and desire—pleasures that, according to the speaker, lead only to torment and agony.

The speaker unpacks this idea by first pointing out that people often want nothing more than to have sex but then, once they've had it, hate themselves for having given in to their desire. Sexual pleasure, the speaker implies, is thus:

Enjoyed no sooner but despisèd straight:

In other words, as soon as sex is over ("enjoyed"), people hate their lust—they hate having wanted to enjoy sex in the first place.

In lines 6 and 7, the speaker uses anaphora, repeating the phrase "past reason" to emphasize how strong the pull of lust is: it makes people lose their rationality or good sense. People ignore their better judgment and "hunt[]" down sexual pleasure

even knowing the cost.

The speaker then says that lust is like "a swallowed bait, / On purpose laid to make the taker mad." A baited trap (or a baited fishhook) is a perfect example of something that *seems* appealing but is, in the end, destructive and painful. Lust and sexual pleasure are similar, this simile suggests: they entice people who want to experience delight and physical satisfaction, but the irony is that they actually cause more distress than bliss.

The assonance of lines 7-8 adds propulsive rhythm to the lines, building up the poem's intensity as the speaker describes the inescapable allure of lust:

> Past reason hated, as a swallowed bait,
> On purpose laid to make the taker mad:

The speaker's language sounds pleasant even though the words themselves outline the utter frustration and torture that go hand-in-hand with lust.

LINES 9-12

> *Mad in pursuit, and in possession so:*
> *Had, having, and in quest to have, extreme;*
> *A bliss in proof and proved, a very woe;*
> *Before, a joy proposed; behind, a dream.*

The poem's third quatrain suggests that, ironically enough, lust leads to "woe." This is ironic because lust is *supposed* to lead to pleasure, not sadness and distress! But, the speaker argues, sex is only "a bliss in proof"—that sex only feels good in the moment. Once it's over—once "proved," that "'roof" now in the past tense—it's nothing but misery; sex doesn't create lasting satisfaction.

The speaker's point is just that everything about sex (the lust leading up to it, actually having sex, the immediate aftermath) is intense and overwhelming. It's "extreme" and "mad," driving people crazy with passion. And this passion, the speaker indicates, isn't always worth the effort, since the pleasure of having sex only lasts so long. At first, sex seems like a "joy," but once it has already happened, this "joy" feels like nothing but a "dream." This metaphorically presents sexual satisfaction as a fleeting thing: it's like a "dream" that suddenly vanishes when a person wakes up.

These lines are, like the rest of the poem, in iambic pentameter, which gives the language a bouncy, musical sound. Consider, for example, lines 11 and 12:

> A bliss | in proof | and proved, | a ver- | y woe;
> Before, | a joy | proposed; | behind, | a dream.

The rhythm of these lines is steady and predictable—as steady and predictable, perhaps, as the agonizing cycle of lust and shame.

LINES 13-14

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

The last two lines feature the sonnet's *volta*, or turn: the point in a sonnet when the speaker responds in some way to everything that's already been said. In the first three quatrains, the speaker argues that lust is torture. In the final couplet, though, the speaker expands upon this idea by insisting that everyone *knows* this but still puts themselves through the torment of sexual desire.

The metaphor comparing sex to "heaven" make sense of why it's so hard to pass it up: sex is so pleasurable that it's nearly impossible to go without it, even if this means enduring an all-consuming passion that is overwhelming and frustrating. In other words, people are willing to go through "hell" just to experience the fleeting joy of sex.

Line 13 is very alliterative, as the speaker repeats the /w/ and /n/ sounds:

> All this the world well knows; yet none knows well

This alliteration emphasizes the antimetabole of the phrase "the world well knows" and "none knows well." This spotlights the paradox that, even though everyone understands that lust leads to agony, nobody actually ignores their desires. The alliteration between "heaven" and "hell" does a similar thing, drawing attention to the idea that the heavenly bliss of sex leads to hellish shame and regret.

POETIC DEVICES

METAPHOR

The speaker uses several metaphors to talk about sex. The phrase "th' expense of spirit" in the first line, for example, frames sex as something that *costs* people their own "spirit" or vitality. Rather than framing sex as rewarding and uplifting, this metaphor insists that sex and lust do little more than wear people down.

Elsewhere, the speaker uses a metaphor to suggest that sexual pleasure is fleeting. In line 12, the speaker says:

> Before, a joy proposed; behind, a dream.

In this metaphor, the speaker presents the "joy" of sex as something that fades as quickly as a "dream." Such pleasure, the speaker intimates, isn't even real; it quickly recedes, even though people spend so much time chasing it.

The speaker also uses a simile in line 7 that compares lust to a

"swallowed bait," implying that sexual desire is like a trap of some kind. This trap has been "bait[ed]" so that it seems appealing. In reality, though, the trap has been set in order to make the person who "swallow[s]" it "mad." This outlines the idea that something as enticing as sex can, in the end, lead to agony.

The speaker also says that most people already know this but *still* end up chasing sexual pleasure. The speaker uses another metaphor to illustrate this destructive tendency in the sonnet's final two lines:

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

In this metaphor, "heaven" is the fleeting physical satisfaction of sex, and "hell" is the feeling of feverish desire that drives people crazy. These two things, the speaker says, are linked: the pursuit of satisfaction "leads" to suffering and torment. Ending the poem with this metaphor helps the speaker highlight the absurdity and irony of sexual desire, the promised pleasure of which *actually* leads to pain.

Where Metaphor appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "Th' expense of spirit"
- **Lines 7-8:** "Past reason hated, as a swallowed bait, / On purpose laid to make the taker mad:"
- **Line 12:** "Before, a joy proposed; behind, a dream."
- **Lines 13-14:** " All this the world well knows; yet none knows well / To shun the heaven that leads men to this hell."

PERSONIFICATION

The speaker personifies lust, portraying it as a malicious and merciless force. Lust seems to have a sense of personal agency throughout the poem, as the speaker goes through all the ways that it torments people. Take lines 2-4:

> [...] lust
> Is perjured, murderous, bloody, full of blame,
> Savage, extreme, rude, cruel, not to trust;

Words like "savage," "rude," and "cruel" all make lust seem like a living person who is wild, unrelenting, and unkind.

This use of personification also presents sexual desire as if it has the agency to lead people astray—it is something people ought "not to trust." This is because it is "perjured" (meaning that it's built on lies) and "full of blame," suggesting that lust will trick people into acting against their own best interests. It's almost as if sexual desire is a sly criminal, given that it can so thoroughly deceive people. Personification thus helps the speaker bring lust to life, making it seem all the more real and threatening.

Where Personification appears in the poem:

- **Lines 2-4:** "lust / Is perjured, murderous, bloody, full of blame, / Savage, extreme, rude, cruel, not to trust;"

IRONY

The great irony of the speaker's disdain for lust is that sex is *supposed* to be pleasurable, yet the poem argues that actually acting on lust only leads to madness and "woe."

The speaker addresses this tension in line 5, saying, "Enjoyed no sooner but despisèd straight." In other words, people are very eager to joyfully indulge their lust, but as soon as they finish actually having sex, they hate the desire that overcame them. Of course, the speaker doesn't argue that sex itself is unpleasant, but that the entire experience—from the first pang of longing to the immediate aftermath of sex itself—ends up creating more overall agony than delight.

To complicate the matter, everyone *knows* that the very thing they hope will bring them pleasure (sex) has the power to overwhelm and torment them. In other words, people are well aware of this irony. And yet, nobody denies themselves the joy of sex in order to avoid the even more powerful "woe" of lust. Ironically, then, they open themselves up to emotional torture even though what they really want is pleasure.

Where Irony appears in the poem:

- Lines 2-8
- Line 11
- Lines 13-14

SIBILANCE

"Sonnet 129" is filled with sibilance that lends an enticing smoothness to the poem. Take, for example, line 4:

> Savage, extreme, rude, cruel, not to trust;

The hissing /s/ sounds here evoke a snake, and, in turn, deception; lust comes across as crafty and dangerous, as something that people can't resist despite knowing the pain it will cause. The same thing happens in the poem's opening lines, where /sh/ and /s/ sounds combine:

> Th'expense of spirit in a waste of shame
> Is lust in action; and till action, lust

These sounds are soft and whispery, suggesting the secrecy and, indeed, "shame" of lust. Their sounds are again deceptively gentle, evoking the way in which the promise of pleasure and satisfaction lure people into sex that drives them "mad."

Where Sibilance appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "Th' expense," "spirit," "waste," "shame"
- **Line 2:** "lust," "action"
- **Line 4:** "Savage," "extreme," "trust"
- **Line 5:** "sooner," "despisèd," "straight"
- **Line 6:** "Past," "sooner"
- **Line 7:** "Past," "swallowed"
- **Line 9:** "pursuit," "possession," "so"
- **Line 10:** "quest," "extreme"
- **Line 11:** "bliss"

CONSONANCE

Consonance adds texture and musicality to "Sonnet 129," drawing readers' attention to certain words and also evoking the speaker's state of mind throughout. Take line 3, which features consonance of the /r/, /d/, /b/, and /l/ sounds:

> Is perjured, murderous, bloody, full of blame,

This dense cluster of consonance (and especially the bold /b/ and /d/ sounds) adds a certain severity and intensity to the speaker's tone, underscoring the idea that lust can be cruel and relentless.

In other moments, though, consonance actually makes the language sound rather soothing, as is the case when the speaker repeats the /v/ sound (among other forms of consonance) in lines 10 and 11:

> Had, having, and in quest to have, extreme;
> A bliss in proof and proved, a very woe;

The /v/ sound in this moment adds a pleasant richness to these lines. The speaker thus uses consonance to make the language sound appealing even though the overall tone of the poem is one of distress and frustration.

Where Consonance appears in the poem:

- Line 1
- Line 2
- Line 3
- Line 4
- Line 5
- Line 6
- Line 7
- Line 8
- Line 9
- Line 10
- Line 11
- Line 12
- Line 13
- Line 14

ASSONANCE

Assonance works much like sibilance, consonance, and alliteration, filling the poem with music and drawing readers' attention to certain words. The assonant long /ay/ sound, for example, adds extra oomph to the phrase "waste of shame," quickly and emphatically highlighting what the speaker believes to be the downside of sex.

Nowhere is assonance more apparent than in lines 7 and 8, when the speaker once more uses the long /ay/ sound:

> Past reason hated, as a swallowed bait,
> On purpose laid to make the taker mad:

The strong assonance here makes the speaker's tone all the more insistent; the return to the same vowel sound again and again turns up the volume on the people and suggests the speaker's building agony and frustration.

Where Assonance appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "waste," "shame"
- **Line 3:** "perjured," "murderous"
- **Line 4:** "rude," "cruel"
- **Line 7:** "hated," "bait"
- **Line 8:** "laid," "make," "taker"
- **Line 11:** "woe"
- **Line 12:** "proposed"
- **Line 13:** "knows," "knows"
- **Line 14:** "heaven," "men"

ALLITERATION

The alliteration in "Sonnet 129" serves the same function as the poem's sibilance, consonance, and assonance: it increases the song-like quality of the speaker's language and draws attention to various phrases.

In the middle of the poem, for example, alliterative word pairs highlight the contrast between how people feel before and after sex. No "sooner" is sex "enjoyed," the speaker says in line 5, than it becomes "despised straight." The /s/ sounds links the feelings that fall on either side of sex itself.

The same thing happens throughout the poem. In lines 6-7, for instance, the speaker alliterates on the /h/ sound to emphasize the connection between having sexual desire ("hunting" for sex), actually having sex, and then hating sexual desire:

> Past reason hunted; and, no sooner had,
> Past reason hated, as a swallowed bait,

The shared /m/ sounds of "make" and "mad" work in the same way, the shared sounds underscoring the *connection* between lust and madness—the former of which is directly responsible for ("make[s]") people crazy ("mad").

The sharp /p/ sound in "pursuit" and "possession" returns to the idea that lust leads not to pleasure, but to agony: people are "mad" when seeking out, or "pursuing," sex, and they're "mad" when they're in "possession" of sex too! All this alliteration underscores the speaker belief that indulging lust (i.e., having sex) doesn't *solve* anything—it doesn't *rid* people of their lustful desires, at least not for long.

Finally, note the strong alliteration at the end of the poem on /w/ and /n/ sounds:

> All this the world well knows; yet none knows well

This alliteration adds a sense of urgency and exasperation to the speaker's closing words, underscoring the speaker's frustration at the fact that people indulge their lust despite knowing the consequences.

Where Alliteration appears in the poem:

- **Line 3:** "bloody," "blame"
- **Line 5:** "sooner," "straight"
- **Line 6:** "hunted," "had"
- **Line 8:** "make," "mad"
- **Line 9:** "pursuit," "possession"
- **Line 12:** "Before," "behind"
- **Line 13:** "world," "well," "none," "knows"
- **Line 14:** "heaven," "hell"

CAESURA

The poem is full of caesuras, which the speaker uses to add emphasis to certain ideas and to vary the rhythm of the poem's language.

The caesuras in line 2, for example, slow the poem's pace:

> Is lust in action; || and till action, || lust

The first of these caesuras breaks up the line, giving readers a moment to digest the poem's opening sentence ("Th'expense of spirit in a waste of shame / Is lust in action"). The second caesura also opens up a small space in the line, as the speaker winds up to deliver the long list of adjectives that describe lust as an overwhelming force.

The poem is generally full of stops and starts, as the speaker jumps back and forth between talking about the different stages of sexual desire: the lust that comes before sex, the actual act of lovemaking, and the immediate aftermath. The short, choppy rhythm created by these caesuras thus aligns with the many abrupt shifts that take place throughout the poem, making the poem feel somewhat feverish and disorganized—an effect that illustrates just how thoroughly lust frazzles the speaker.

Where Caesura appears in the poem:

- **Line 2:** "action; and," "action, lust"
- **Line 3:** "perjured, murderous," ", bloody," ", full"
- **Line 4:** "Savage, extreme," ", rude," ", cruel," ", not"
- **Line 6:** "hunted; and," ", no"
- **Line 7:** "hated, as"
- **Line 9:** "pursuit, and"
- **Line 10:** "Had, having," ", and," "have, extreme"
- **Line 11:** "proved, a"
- **Line 12:** "Before, a," "proposed; behind," ", a"
- **Line 13:** "knows; yet"

REPETITION

The repetition in "Sonnet 129" adds a sense of emphasis and insistence to the speaker's words. Take line 2, when the speaker repeats the word "lust":

> Is lust in action, and till action, lust

This diacope calls attention to the poem's main concern, underscoring how overwhelming and inescapable sexual desire feels to the speaker.

Repetition appears again in lines 6 and 7, when anaphora emphasizes the fact that lust pushes people to act irrationally, or beyond the limits of "reason" and good sense:

> Past reason hunted; and, no sooner had,
> Past reason hated, as a swallowed bait,

The parallelism of these lines (which follow the same grammatical and logical structure) highlights the paradox at the heart of the poem: people irrationally seek out sexual pleasure, well aware that they'll hate themselves having "swallowed" the "bait."

Elsewhere, the speaker uses repetition as a way of playing with the language. For instance, line 10 features polyptoton, as the speaker riffs on the various conjugations of the verb "to have":

> Had, having, and in quest to have, extreme;

The past tense, present tense, and future tense of this verb illustrates that sexual desire is *always* intensely overwhelming ("extreme"). The implication, then, is that the frenzied emotional state that comes along with lust is something that never fully goes away.

In the poem's final couplet, antimetabole again highlights the paradoxical nature of sexual desire:

> All this the world well knows; yet none knows well

Everyone fully understands all the downfalls of lust, yet no one

knows how to stop themselves from seeking out pleasure that leads to such pain.

Where Repetition appears in the poem:

- **Line 2:** "lust," "lust"
- **Line 4:** "extreme"
- **Line 5:** "no sooner"
- **Line 6:** "Past reason," "no sooner"
- **Line 7:** "Past reason"
- **Line 8:** "mad"
- **Line 9:** "Mad"
- **Line 10:** "Had," "having," "have," "extreme"
- **Line 11:** "proof," "proved"
- **Line 13:** "well knows," "knows well"

VOCABULARY

Expense (Line 1) - Expenditure. To expend something is to use it up.

Spirit (Line 1) - Energy or some kind of life-source. Shakespeare may also be using the word as a euphemism for semen.

Lust (Line 2) - Sexual desire.

Perjured (Line 3) - To "perjure" is to purposefully lie about something, especially under oath. The suggestion here is that lust is deceitful and misleading.

Savage (Line 4) - Wild and uncontrolled.

Despisèd (Line 5) - Hated.

Straight (Line 5) - Immediately.

Past Reason (Line 6, Line 7) - Beyond all reason or good sense.

Hunted (Line 6) - Pursued.

Bait (Line 7) - Something enticing (like a tasty bit of food) used to lure an unsuspecting victim into some kind of trap.

Laid (Line 8) - Set (as in "to set a trap").

Mad (Line 8, Line 9) - Crazy or tormented.

Pursuit (Line 9) - The act of chasing something down.

Possession (Line 9) - To "possess" something is to own it. By taking "possession" of sexual desire, the speaker is talking about actually having sex.

Quest (Line 10) - A long journey or search.

Bliss (Line 11) - Extreme happiness.

Woe (Line 11) - Intense sadness.

Shun (Line 14) - To reject or avoid.

FORM, METER, & RHYME

FORM

"Sonnet 129" is, of course, a sonnet! More specifically, it's a Shakespearean sonnet, meaning that it consists of 14 lines that can be divided into three quatrains (four-line stanzas) and a final rhyming couplet:

- Quatrain
- Quatrain
- Quatrain
- Couplet

The speaker spends the first three quatrains listing the many ways that lust can torment people, detailing the irony that the pursuit of sexual pleasure is often pretty agonizing. In the poem's turn—which happens in the final couplet—the speaker suggests that people are well aware of how tormenting lust is but don't have the strength to turn away from it. Sexual desire is so powerful, it seems, that people *willingly* put themselves through "hell" just to chase the brief, "heaven[ly]" pleasures of sex.

METER

Like most sonnets, "Sonnet 129" is written in iambic pentameter. This means that each line consists of five iambs, metrical feet made up of an unstressed syllable followed by a stressed syllable (da-DUM). Take, for example, the first line:

Th' expense | of spi- | rit in | a waste | of shame

The iambs in this line create a da-DUM da-DUM rhythm that subtly echoes the natural cadence of English speech. (Note that "Th' ex-" here is meant to scan as one syllable; it's also possible not to stress "in" in the above line, but that's a very minor variation and the meter would still be considered iambic pentameter).

The speaker makes a number of metrical substitutions throughout the sonnet, mixing up the easy bounce of iambic pentameter to add interest and emphasis to certain lines. Often these non-iambic feet appear alongside the poem's many caesuras. Line 4 is a perfect example of this:

Savage, | extreme, | rude, cruel, | not to trust;

The first foot of this line is a trochee, or a foot made up of a stressed syllable followed by an unstressed syllable: "Savage." The next foot returns to the iambic rhythm, but the fact that the line contains so many caesuras (indicated by the commas above) forces an extra stress in the third foot: "rude, cruel." This is a spondee, or two consecutive stressed syllables. The next foot again looks like a trochee ("not to"), and the line ends

without its final expected beat (there are only nine syllables here).

In deviating so far from iambic pentameter like this, the speaker makes the language feel less predictable and keeps readers on their toes. The frequent pauses and occasional falling rhythms (that is, feet starting with a stressed syllable and moving to an unstressed one) convey the speaker's anger and frustration.

RHYME SCHEME

"Sonnet 129" follows a standard Elizabethen sonnet rhyme scheme, which looks like this:

ABAB CDCD EFEF GG

This rhyme scheme creates a sense of consistency and steadiness. The predictability of the rhyme scheme might reflect the predictable cycle of lust and shame. The pull of the clear, full lines throughout the poem also grant the speaker's words a feeling of forward momentum; the rhyme scheme swiftly propels readers through the poem, just as lust propels people to "hunt" after their desires.

SPEAKER

There's no concrete information about the speaker of "Sonnet 129." The only thing that is perfectly clear is that this person doesn't think too highly of lust, believing sexual desire to a "cruel" yet irresistible force that drives people "mad."

However, the rest of Shakespeare's 154 sonnets provide contextual clues about the speaker's identity. Many of the other sonnets make it clear that the speaker is an aging poet who has a strong connection with a younger man and, later, a tumultuous relationship with a woman known as the "Dark Lady." Many readers believe that the speaker is actually Shakespeare himself, though there's no saying for sure if this is actually the case. In any case, everyone agrees that the speaker is somebody who gets hung up on both the joys and challenges of romance.

SETTING

"Sonnet 129" doesn't mention a specific time or place. This is because the poem is about what it's like to experience lust, not about a particular person, relationship, or story. The speaker talks about lust in a broad, somewhat abstract way, never explicitly stating that these observations apply to the speaker's own experience. The poem is therefore applicable to almost *any* setting.

Having said that, though, most people read "Sonnet 129" in the context of the rest of Shakespeare's 154 sonnets, which are most likely set when Shakespeare wrote them: in the 1590s. It's thus reasonable to assume that "Sonnet 129" is set against the backdrop of Renaissance England.

CONTEXT

LITERARY CONTEXT

"Sonnet 129" belongs to the "Dark Lady" sequence of Shakespeare's of 154 sonnets. Whereas the first 126 of these sonnets (known as the "Fair Youth" sequence) are about the strong connection that the speaker (often taken to be Shakespeare himself) has with a young man, the sonnets in the Dark Lady chunk are more blatantly sexual and often present romantic passion as a sickness. This is clearly the case in "Sonnet 129," which frames lust as an overpowering, misery-inducing force.

Whereas the sonnets about the Fair Youth tend to be wistful and affectionate, many of the sonnets about the Dark Lady are full of intense, self-destructive passion. "Sonnet 129" doesn't even mention the Dark Lady, instead focusing on the ravaging effects of lust. This negative perspective on desires foreshadows pieces like "Sonnet 147," in which the speaker uses an extended metaphor to compare his love for the Dark Lady to a "fever" that has overtaken him.

The sonnet form was popularized in the 14th century by the Italian poet Francesco Petrarch, who wrote many sonnets about unrequited love. Many of the sonnets written in the next 400 years were, in some way or another, also about love, and Shakespeare's 154 sonnets are no exception. However, "Sonnet 129" isn't about *unrequited* love—in fact, it's about what happens when people actually get what they want.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Along with the 154 other Shakespearean sonnets, "Sonnet 129" was published in 1609. Shakespeare actually wrote most of the sonnets much earlier than this, though nobody knows *exactly* when he composed them. That said, most people agree that he produced the sonnets in the 1590s—a relatively calm period in English history.

In 1588, Britain defeated the Spanish Armada, a fleet of 130 ships sent by Spain to dethrone Queen Elizabeth. This victory led to a peaceful period in which artists like Shakespeare were given the space and time to focus on their craft. Shakespeare wrote several of his most famous plays during the 1590s, but the plague outbreak of 1592 meant that theaters had to close. Some speculate that this gave Shakespeare extra time to write and perhaps even encouraged him to focus on poetry; not only did he write the sonnets in this era, but he also published the narrative poem *Venus and Adonis* while the theaters were shut down.

MORE RESOURCES

EXTERNAL RESOURCES

- 1609 Printing — Take a look at what it would have been like to read "Sonnet 129" when it was first published in 1609. (https://archive.org/details/shakespearesson01shakgoog/page/n120/mode/2up)
- Shakescleare Translation — Our Shakescleare modern translation of the sonnet. (https://www.litcharts.com/shakescleare/shakespeare-translations/sonnets/sonnet-129)
- The Bard Himself — Learn more about Shakespeare in this brief overview of his life and work. (https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poets/william-shakespeare)
- Sonnet Sequences — Check out the British Library's simple break down of Shakespeare's 154 sonnets and how they're sequenced. (https://www.bl.uk/works/shakespeares-sonnets#)
- A Reading of the Poem — Watch Voldemort—er, the actor Ralph Fiennes—read "Sonnet 129." (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LHMsu9b2xls)

LITCHARTS ON OTHER WILLIAM SHAKESPEARE POEMS

- Sonnet 116: Let me not to the marriage of true minds
- Sonnet 130: My mistress' eyes are nothing like the sun
- Sonnet 138: When my love swears that she is made of truth
- Sonnet 147: My love is as a fever, longing still
- Sonnet 18: Shall I compare thee to a summer's day?
- Sonnet 19: Devouring Time, blunt thou the lion's paws
- Sonnet 20: A woman's face with nature's own hand painted
- Sonnet 29: When, in disgrace with fortune and men's eyes
- Sonnet 30: When to the sessions of sweet silent thought
- Sonnet 55: Not marble nor the gilded monuments
- Sonnet 71: No longer mourn for me when I am dead
- Sonnet 73: That time of year thou mayst in me behold

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