Sonnet 20: A woman's face with nature's own

POEM TEXT

A woman's face with nature's own hand painted
Hast thou, the master-mistress of my passion;
A woman's gentle heart, but not acquainted
With shifting change as is false women's fashion;
An eye more bright than theirs, less false in rolling,
Gilding the object whereupon it gazeth;
A man in hue, all hues in his controlling,
Which steals men's eyes and women's souls amazeth.
And for a woman wert thou first created,
Till nature as she wrought thee fell a-doting,
And by addition me of thee defeated
By adding one thing to my purpose nothing.
But since she pricked thee out for women's pleasure,
Mine be thy love and thy love's use their treasure.

SUMMARY

You have a feminine face, like a graceful painting made by nature herself—you, who are the lord and lady of my desire and love. You have a tender, caring heart, like that of a woman. But your heart is steadfast and true, unlike cheating women's hearts. Your eyes are brighter than women's eyes, and less wandering in their attention; everything you look at seems brighter, and almost golden. You look like a man, and you command everyone's attention, regardless of what they look like: men can't help but look at you, and the sight of you fills women with awe. In fact, you were originally intended to be a woman, until nature, while making you, became overly affectionate. She added one addition to you and in doing so, defeated me—by adding something that, for the purposes of my love for you, is inconsequential. But since nature created your body to be sexually appealing to women, they can enjoy your body, as long as I have your love.

THEMES

LOVE AND DESIRE

"Sonnet 20" is part of a sequence of Shakespeare's sonnets addressed to someone often referred as the "fair youth"—a young man with whom the speaker has an intimate relationship. In this particular sonnet, the speaker expresses love for and attraction to this young man, noting that despite nature having apparently designed the youth "for women's pleasure"—that is, made him a man—the *speaker* is the one who really has his heart.

Plenty of readers take the poem to be about homosexuality, though it's ambiguous whether the speaker has or wants a physical relationship with this young man. Either way, the poem can be read more broadly as pointing out the different kinds of love and connection that exist. The poem makes a clear distinction between the deeply romantic connection the *speaker* has with this young man, and the more surface-level relationships that this young man has with women. In this way, the poem suggests that love, intimacy, and even eroticism go well beyond physical desire.

The speaker expresses clear romantic attraction to the young man by complimenting his good looks and general disposition. The speaker comments on his beautiful face and eyes and also calls him the "master-mistress of [his] passion," the word "passion" emphasizing the powerful feelings the youth evokes in the speaker. The speaker also takes care to note that he is not just *physically* attracted to this young man, going on to praise his "gentle heart."

The young man may be attractive to both men *and* women, but the speaker insists that the relationships the fair youth has with women are *solely* physical—and thus inconsequential when compared to the relationship the speaker has with this person. When the speaker says that "nature [...] pricked thee out for women's pleasure," he's punning on the idea that the fair youth's body makes him sexually appealing to women. At the same time, the speaker emphasizes that these women are *only* involved with the fair youth's body (and, arguably, only with a certain aspect of his body!). The speaker even refers to these sexual relationships with women as "thy love's use," suggesting that in a sense these women are simply "using" this man's body. They might "treasure" his physical attractiveness, but they don't truly love him like the speaker does.

Importantly, too, the speaker only dedicates about a line and a half to the relationships that the young man has with women—implying that they're not worthy of that much time or attention. The speaker thus insists that while women might be involved with this young man physically, it's the relationship between the speaker and the fair youth that truly matters. At the end of the poem, the speaker asserts, "Mine be thy love," expressing his confidence that *he* is the one who has the fair youth's actual love. Ultimately, then, the poem implies that there is a deeper kind of romantic connection that goes beyond mere physical desire.

Do note that none of this necessarily means that the speaker

isn't *also* physically intimate with the young man; the speaker's suggestion that the fair youth only has sexual relationships with women could reflect the restrictive social norms at the time Shakespeare was writing—that is, this might just be a way for the speaker to express his affection for the young man without getting either of them into trouble. What's more, the poem can *also* be read as subtly implying that the speaker *does* have a physical relationship with the fair youth—a possibility that is unpacked more in the Line-by-Line section of this guide.

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-14

GENDER AND BEAUTY

A big part of what makes the young man so attractive to the speaker of "Sonnet 20" is the fact that he comes across as both conventionally masculine *and* feminine. He has the delicate beauty and gentle manner of women, but he has none of women's shiftiness or fickleness (to be clear, the speaker has a pretty narrow and misogynistic take on womanhood!). By depicting this beautiful person who cannot exclusively be defined as male *or* female, and who is attractive to both men *and* women, the poem celebrates a more fluid conception of beauty. It may even suggest that *ideal* beauty contains a mixture of conventionally male and female characteristics.

Throughout the poem, the speaker insists that this young man has both male and female qualities, and that all of these qualities in combination are precisely what make him so beautiful. For example, the speaker praises the fact that the young man has a "woman's face"—the implication being that this young man has features traditionally associated with femininity, such as delicacy and softness.

At the same time, the speaker depicts the fair youth as a "man in hue," implying that his appearance has masculine attributes as well. The speaker further suggests that the young man has a steady, commanding presence—something conventionally associated with masculinity.

The speaker further implies that this young man is particularly attractive because he *doesn't* completely adhere to the stereotypical norms of any one gender. For instance, the speaker praises the young man for having a "woman's gentle heart"; though he is traditionally masculine by being commanding and strong, he is also *more* attractive for not being stereotypically masculine in *all* ways.

And while the speaker praises the young man for having a "woman's face," he also suggests that this young man is superior because he does not meet *other* stereotypical qualities of women—such as being "false" or "changing." In other words, the young man has feminine *qualities* but is all the more attractive for not meeting this norm or stereotype completely. Instead, the poem suggests this young man is so beautiful because he encompasses the most beautiful and attractive traits traditionally associated with men *and* women.

Throughout the poem, then, the speaker presents a vision of beauty that doesn't completely adhere to any one gender in a strict or rigid way. Rather, the poem suggests that beauty—and even perhaps, ideal beauty—is far more fluid and flexible than people may assume.

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-14

LINE-BY-LINE ANALYSIS

LINES 1-2

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

The speaker describes someone who has a "woman's face," implying that this person has features that are traditionally feminine, delicate, and soft. The speaker then compares this person's face to a painting made by "nature's own hand," suggesting that this person's face is not only graceful and feminine, but also as beautiful as a work of art. By personifying nature as someone with a "hand" who "painted" this face, the speaker further suggests that nature took the time to make this person particularly beautiful.

In the second line of the poem, it becomes clear that the speaker is addressing this beautiful person directly. "Hast thou," the speaker says, a phrase that translates in modern English as "you have." After the enjambment at the end of the first line, then, the speaker reveals that he is speaking directly—and even, perhaps, privately—to the person with these beautiful, feminine features.

The speaker then goes on to identify this "you" as "the master-mistress of my passion." The phrase "master-mistress" suggests that this other person is both "master"—a male term for a lord or ruler—*and* "mistress"—a word that can refer to a female "master" but also to a lover or wife. The hyphen, combining the two words, implies that the object of the speaker's affections is both masculine *and* feminine. At the same time, the phrase suggests that this person has a kind of power over the speaker (as a "master") and is the speaker's lover or intimate partner (his "mistress").

The word "passion" is important here, simultaneously implying strong feeling, love, and desire. This beautiful person, then, who is both masculine *and* feminine, is a kind of "lord" or "lady" of the speaker's own "passion"—the singular focus of the speaker's love and attraction.

Sound links all three words together. First, alliterative /m/ sounds connect "master" and "mistress," emphasizing that this person encompasses qualities that are both masculine and feminine. Consonant /st/ sounds further link these words together. Then, the /ah/ sound of "master" repeats in "passion," reinforcing the connection between the two words and the power that this person has over the speaker's desire and love.

LINES 3-4

A woman's gentle heart, but not acquainted
With shifting change as is false women's fashion;

The speaker continues to praise this "thou," now describing this person's "gentle heart." This heart, the speaker emphasizes, is (like this person's face) that of a "woman."

Yet, as the speaker goes on to note, this person is *not* a woman—or at least, not a "false woman." While this person's "heart" is "gentle" (a trait often associated with femininity), it's certainly not "acquainted / With shifting change" in the way "false" women are.

The speaker is playing into the cultural stereotype of women as untrustworthy and changeable—and implicitly, as untrue in romantic relationships. Basically, he's saying that the person he's addressing is kind and gentle like a woman, but not fickle or dishonest like a woman (note that the speaker's ideas of what constitute womanhood are definitely sexist!). By juxtaposing the "thou" with these "false women," the speaker implies that this person is steadfast and trustworthy—traits traditionally associated with masculinity.

The sounds of these lines connect their ideas. Consonant /sh/ sounds link the words "shifting" and "fashion," reflecting the way that "fashion" tends to come and go (i.e., to shift). Alliterative /f/ sounds, meanwhile, connect "fashion" to "false," conveying the superficiality of these "false women."

These two lines also conclude the sonnet's first quatrain (or cluster of four lines) and complete the quatrain's ABAB rhyme scheme: "painted" find its rhyme in "acquainted," while "passion" rhymes with "fashion." Importantly, though, the speaker's sentence, and his description of this "thou," continue *past* the ending of this opening quatrain. These opening descriptions are just the *beginning* of the speaker's praise for this beautiful person.

LINES 5-6

An eye more bright than theirs, less false in rolling,
Gilding the object whereupon it gazeth;

As the sonnet moves into its second quatrain (it's second four-line stanza), the speaker goes on to describe how the person he's addressing is *different* from the women he evoked in the lines above. This "thou," the speaker says, has "[a]n eye more bright than theirs," meaning that this person's eyes are brighter—and implicitly more intelligent and attractive—than women's eyes.

The speaker adds that his beloved's eyes are "less false in rolling" than women's. This phrase repeats the word "false" from the previous lines, reinforcing the stereotype of women as unreliable and dishonest. The image of women's "rolling" eyes conveys a woman literally rolling her eyes (in a gesture of sarcasm or contempt) as well as a sense of wandering attention (including romantic attention).

The beautiful person the speaker addresses, though, has a different kind of gaze or look—one that "gild[s]" everything it touches, or every "object whereupon it gazeth." The word "gild" means to cover something with gold, so the speaker is saying that this person's eyes are so beautiful as to make everything around them appear golden or shining. One would thus hope, the speaker implies, to be the "object" of this gaze—to be metaphorically "gilded" or made more pure or beautiful by this person's attention. The alliterative /g/ sounds in "gilding" and "gazeth" convey the power this person has over the speaker's and his surroundings.

LINES 7-8

A man in hue, all hues in his controlling,
Which steals men's eyes and women's souls amazeth.

The speaker so far has praised the object of his affection for being like a woman in some ways but not others. Here, the speaker starts to praise this person's traditionally male qualities—including his commanding presence. Notably, this is the first place in the poem where the speaker actually uses a gendered pronoun (the possessive "his") when depicting the "thou," revealing that this person is a man.

This person's masculinity is part of what makes him so commanding and attractive to the speaker. He is "[a] man in hue," the speaker says, adding that "all hues" are "in his controlling." "Hue" can mean "complexion," and also historically refers to someone's character. This phrase, then, suggests that this person is manly in character and commands the attention of all "hues"—of all people.

The speaker reinforces this idea in the next line, describing how the poem's addressee is attractive to both men *and* women. His "hue," the speaker says, "steals men's eyes and women's souls amazeth," meaning that men can't help but look at him and that women are awestruck by his appearance. Alliteration and sibilance link "steals," "eyes," and "souls," conveying the powerful effect this person's presence has on all those around him.

The repetition of "hue" and "hues" is also important in these lines. At an immediate level, the repetition of the word shows just how commanding and attractive this person is, since his mere presence calls the attention of everyone else.

Additionally, the word "hue" may contain a clue regarding the identity of the person the speaker's addressing. In Shakespeare's time—and in the original version of the

poem—the word was spelled "*hew*," and every line of the poem contains some iteration of *hew* or *hews*—some combination of the letters "h," "e," "w," and "s."

These letters are thought to refer to either William Herbert, the Third Earl of Pembroke, or Henry Wriothesley, the Third Earl of Southampton, both of whom were patrons of Shakespeare. Notably, an early portrait of Henry Wriothesley shows a distinctly androgynous young man with long hair, blush, lipstick, and earrings, and scholars have dated this portrait to the time Shakespeare wrote these poems.

The word "hues" (or, as it was originally, "hews") may deliberately link together the "He" of "Henry" and the "WS" of "William Shakespeare"—or alternately, could be read as spelling out the entirety of Wriothesley's name and title: "Henry" ("Earl") "Wriothesley" ("Southampton"). The repetition in this line, then, may be a coded way of reinforcing the sonnet's private message: perhaps that this "hew" of Henry Wriothesley, has the "he" of "WS"—William Shakespeare—"in his controlling."

With the ending of these lines, the sonnet concludes its second quatrain, with a CDCD rhyme scheme consistent with the sonnet form; "controlling" in line 7 rhymes with "rolling" from line 5, and "amazeth" at the end of line 8 rhymes with "gazeth" in line 6. Importantly, too, these lines signal the conclusion of a sentence that has extended over the first eight lines of the poem.

LINES 9-10

And for a woman wert thou first created,
Till nature as she wrought thee fell a-doting,

What the speaker says in this line is notably similar to what he said at the opening of the poem. Then, he praised this person's feminine qualities and emphasized these qualities with the repetition of the word "woman." Here, the speaker remarks that the poem's addressee was originally "created," or intended, "for a woman." Within Shakespeare's time, this means that the person was originally "created" *to be* a woman. Interestingly, though, the word "for" also conveys a double meaning, suggesting that this person was originally created to be *with* a woman, romantically.

Yet, the speaker goes on to say, "nature as she wrought thee fell a-doting." What the speaker means here is that while making the poem's addressee, nature (specifically personified as female) became overly affectionate, "doting" on this person who was first intended to be a woman. These lines create another level of meaning in the poem, since the speaker suggests that nature—again treated as a female entity here—become enamored with the woman that "she" (nature) was creating.

Implicitly, then, nature—perhaps because "she" is nature, and thus invested in biological reproduction—intervened, changing this person at the last moment into a man. In other words, the speaker might subtly be implying that nature herself wanted to be sexually intimate with the speaker's beloved, and that's why she changed him into a man.

The alliterative /w/ sounds in "woman" and "wert" (an archaic form of "were") connect these words, implying that this person *was* at some point a woman, at least in some sense. Meanwhile, the word "fell" in describing nature's actions suggests that in changing this person, nature "fell" in some way, or "failed" this person who "should" have remained female. The alliterative sound echo of /f/ sounds in "first" and "fell" reinforce this sense, suggesting that this person's "first" or "original" state was that of a woman.

LINES 11-12

And by addition me of thee defeated
By adding one thing to my purpose nothing.

The speaker goes on to describe *how* nature changed this person: nature, the speaker says, added "an addition" to this person's body—that is, nature gave him male anatomy. In doing so, the speaker remarks, "me of thee defeated."

The speaker more specifically says that nature, by making this beautiful person a man, "defeated" the speaker in his desire "[b]y adding one thing to my purpose nothing." This line can be read as indicating that the "addition" to the addressee's body (i.e., his penis) prevents the speaker from being physically intimate with him. In other words, readers can interpret these lines as meaning that the speaker *could* have been with his beloved sexually he had remained a "woman" as originally intended, but the speaker *can't* physically be with him now since he's a man (keep in mind that this is a very old poem, and that it's relying on a narrow interpretation of sex to make its point here).

However, these lines contain layers of alternate and even contradictory meanings. For instance, the word "defeated" can also be read as subtly flirtatious or romantic: just as nature "fell" in becoming enamored with this beautiful person, the speaker, too, has been "defeated" by his beauty. That is, speaker might be saying that he's been fully "defeated" by his beloved—and thus defeated by nature too, given that she's the one who made the beloved so attractive.

The line "By adding one thing to my purpose nothing" is also complex and potentially coded. On the one hand, the speaker might just be saying that this beautiful person's "addition" makes it impossible for them to be together physically; nature's "addition" to the young man doesn't do anything for the speaker, doesn't help his "purpose," his relationship, in any way. But the line can also be read as meaning that, as far as the speaker is concerned, this beautiful person's "addition" is "nothing"—"no *thing*"—of any consequence, that it makes no difference in the nature of his love and desire for this person!

Additionally, in Shakespeare's time, the word "nothing" was a

pun or euphemism for a *woman's* anatomy (i.e., for a vagina). This pun adds yet *another* level of complexity to the line; the speaker could be saying that to him, the "one thing" that has been added to this person is the "equivalent" of what a woman's anatomy might be to another man.

These lines, then, may convey multiple meanings at once. On the surface, the speaker seems to be suggesting that nature's "addition" to this person's body diminishes his desire to be with this person physically or makes a sexual relationship between them impossible. Yet the sound play, punning, and general tone of the poem suggests that a very different reading is also possible: the speaker, in a sense, is saying one thing (that accords with societal expectations), but *meaning*, in his private address to this person, quite another.

LINES 13-14

> *But since she pricked thee out for women's pleasure,*
> *Mine be thy love and thy love's use their treasure.*

In its closing couplet, a Shakespearean sonnet traditionally responds to or resolves the issue or problem that it has wrestled with throughout. Here, the apparent problem or tension in the poem is that between the speaker's love and attraction for this person and the fact that nature created this person with a male body. According to traditional societal expectations, this fact would make it impossible for the speaker and his beloved to be together physically. (Notably, though, given the layers of meaning in the preceding lines, this is arguably not a true "problem" to the speaker, but rather a problem or tension the poem is posing simply because it might be considered a "problem" by common societal standards.)

The speaker offers his own resolution to this tension. Nature "pricked thee out for women's pleasure," the speaker says, with the word "pricked" being a pun on the fact that nature created this person with a male body ("prick" is slang for penis). The alliteration here with "pleasure" emphasizes that the man is (in the poem's vision at least) made for having sex with women.

Because of this, the speaker says, "Mine be thy love and thy love's use their treasure"—in other words, women can enjoy, or "use" this person's body, as long as the speaker has this person's true "love." He's essentially saying, "Your love belongs to me, even if women get to treasure your body." This ending seems to resolve the problem of the poem by suggesting that this beautiful person can be with women sexually and with the speaker romantically, in the sense of emotional connection. This is a very common and totally valid interpretation of the poem.

Again, though, these lines contain layers of punning and double meaning that suggest *another* possible reading. Note the repetition of the phrase "my love":

> Mine be thy love and thy love's use their treasure.

At the end of the line, the speaker seems to be referring to the beautiful person's "love" in terms of his male anatomy; women can "treasure" his "love's use"—that is, they appreciate his male body. This second iteration of the word, then, seems to allude to the "addition" that nature made on this person's body in the first place. In plain English, "love" here seems to refer to the beloved's penis itself, the "use" of which is women's "treasure."

Carrying this double meaning back through the line, then, the poem has evoked *two* "loves"—*two* representations of male anatomy—which are tied together by the words "mine" and "thy." In other words, the poem has doubled *both* the idea of *emotional* love between the speaker and the fair youth *and* the implicit presence of two male bodies linked together physically. Put simply, the speaker could (albeit very subtly) be saying, "My 'love' is your love"—which, given that "love" seems to refer to "male anatomy" later in the line, could *also* mean "my body is your body."

This doubling and subtle repetition might suggest that the "thou" may *continue* to be with women physically, but this doesn't *preclude* him having a relationship of love, desire, *and* physical connection with the speaker. In fact, the poem's ending suggests that this connection is far more complete and lasting than the young man's relationship with women. While they may simply "treasure" his body and its "use," it is the speaker who has offered a vision of complete love and connection with this young man, praising not just one aspect of his body, but his entire person. This is a more complicated reading to be sure—but then again, the speaker is perhaps being purposefully obtuse and ambiguous given that homosexual relationships weren't exactly encouraged in Elizabethan England.

POETIC DEVICES

ANAPHORA

The speaker uses anaphora at the beginning of the poem to emphasize the fair youth's feminine qualities. "A woman's face [...] Hast thou," the speaker says, and then notes that the fair youth also has "A woman's gentle heart." This repetition of "A woman's" reinforces the traditionally feminine traits of the fair youth, and may even lead the reader to assume that the fair youth is a woman.

In addition to emphasizing these feminine qualities, this anaphora also builds dramatic tension into the beginning of the poem. These opening lines lead the reader to wonder *who* the "thou" is who has these qualities, and also whether this "thou" is male or female. This tension then builds as the anaphora repeats—now changed—in line 7, with "A man in hue." Here, what repeats is the word "A" and a noun, but that noun has now changed from "woman" to "man."

The anaphora in the poem, then, sets up this crucial turn, as the speaker makes clear that the fair youth is not only feminine but

also masculine: he embodies qualities traditionally associated with *both* genders, and is the more beautiful because of it.

Where Anaphora appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "A woman's"
- **Line 3:** "A woman's"
- **Line 7:** "A"

JUXTAPOSITION

While the speaker emphasizes the fair youth's feminine and masculine qualities, he *also* juxtaposes the fair youth with stereotypes associated with both genders. Most notably, the speaker contrasts the fair youth's "woman's face" and "woman's gentle heart" with "false women's fashion."

In juxtaposing the fair youth with the negative qualities of "false" women, the speaker invokes misogynist clichés of women as unreliable and less steadfast in romantic love. The speaker brings up these stereotypes in order to show that the fair youth does *not* have these qualities. In other words, the youth may be like a woman in that he's lovely and kind, but he's also decidedly *not* like a woman in terms of being fickle, shallow, or dishonest.

At the same time, the speaker subtly contrasts the fair youth with stereotypes associated with men. For instance, when the speaker describes the fair youth as having a "woman's gentle heart," he implicitly suggests that men's hearts are not as gentle or caring. In doing so, then, the speaker also juxtaposes the fair youth with stereotypical norms of masculinity. Throughout the poem, this juxtaposition works to convey the young man's unique beauty and attractiveness, as the speaker suggests that he has only the *positive* traits traditionally associated with both men and women.

In many ways, the poem's juxtapositions reinforce gender stereotypes of Shakespeare's time, bringing up such stereotypical views without question. At the same time, however, the poem can also be read as subtly challenging or subverting these stereotypes. While these stereotypes of women are essentializing—implying that all women essentially "are" these things—the speaker depicts a fair youth who is feminine in certain ways but masculine in others. In other words, the fair youth *is* in a certain sense "a woman"—at least in his "face" and his "heart"—yet doesn't conform to cultural clichés of femininity. This suggests that it might be the clichés *themselves* that are "false," since it is possible for someone to encompass aspects of two genders without adhering to *all* the stereotypes of either.

Where Juxtaposition appears in the poem:

- **Lines 3-5:** "A woman's gentle heart, but not acquainted / With shifting change as is false women's fashion; / An eye more bright than theirs, less false in rolling,"
- **Line 14:** "Mine be thy love and thy love's use their treasure."

METAPHOR

The speaker uses subtle metaphors when depicting the fair youth's beauty and the effect he has on those around him. Specifically, the speaker says that the fair youth's eyes "gil[d] the object whereupon [they] gazeth," and that his "hue," or complexion, "steals men's eyes."

In the first description, the speaker suggests that the fair youth's eyes are so "bright" that they seem to "gild," or cover with gold, everything that his gaze falls upon. Of course, the fair youth doesn't *actually* turn everything around him to gold, but this metaphor subtly suggests that the fair youth has a kind of beauty that is so radiant, it seems to imbue everything around him with a kind of warm, golden glow.

Later, when the speaker says that the fair youth's "hue," or complexion "steals men's eyes," he uses the metaphor of "stealing" to convey how much this young man captures other men's attention. The metaphor means that other men can't help but look at him and their attention is "taken" by his appearance.

These metaphors suggest, then, that the fair youth's beauty goes beyond ordinary kinds of beauty. Instead, he has a kind of captivating presence and radiant appearance that changes everyone and everything within his presence.

Where Metaphor appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "A woman's face with nature's own hand painted"
- **Line 6:** "Gilding the object whereupon it gazeth;"
- **Lines 7-8:** "A man in hue, all hues in his controlling, / Which steals men's eyes and women's souls amazeth."

PERSONIFICATION

In addition to the metaphors the speaker uses to describe the fair youth, the poem also makes use of personification to depict how this young man was first "created." In the first line of the poem, the speaker subtly personifies nature, saying that the fair youth's face was "painted" by "nature's own hand." This personification suggests that nature, like an artist, created this young man's beauty with special care and attention.

Later, the speaker returns to this personified depiction of nature. Again describing how the fair youth was first "created," the speaker says that nature "fell a-doting" while "she wrought thee." These lines conjure a scene in which nature—as a personified, feminine presence—created the fair youth and fell in love with him in the process, turning him from the "woman" he was originally intended to be into a man.

This later instance of personification has several effects. First,

the poem sets up nature as a kind of person with agency, who intervenes in the creation of the fair youth and changes him from the "woman" he was "first created" to be into the man he now is.

At the same time, this personification creates another level of meaning in the poem. Implicitly, nature first "fell a-doting," or became affectionate and fell in love, when the fair youth *also* was feminine. In other words, the poem subtly creates a scene in which the feminine nature became enamored with the feminine fair youth. Yet nature, presumably because "she" is nature and invested in biological reproduction, added an "addition" to the fair youth to make him male (and thus make reproduction possible).

Throughout the poem, the presence of nature as a personified presence creates an element of dramatic tension. In a sense, since the speaker says that nature "defeated" him in his love for the fair youth, it is almost as though nature is another person, a rival for the fair youth's love. In contrast to these actions of nature, though, the speaker continues to love the fair youth—and to trust that he has the fair youth's love as well.

Where Personification appears in the poem:

- **Lines 1-2:** "A woman's face with nature's own hand painted / Hast thou"
- **Lines 8-13:** "Which steals men's eyes and women's souls amazeth. / And for a woman wert thou first created, / Till nature as she wrought thee fell a-doting, / And by addition me of thee defeated / By adding one thing to my purpose nothing. / But since she pricked thee out for women's pleasure,"

CAESURA

"Sonnet 20" uses caesurae to manage pacing and also to create subtle levels of meaning in the poem. In line 2, for example, the pause after "Hast thou" creates a breath, a moment of dramatic tension, before the speaker declares the young man to be "the master-mistress of my passion."

In line 3, the caesura creates a clear distinction between the way the fair youth is *like* and is *not like* a woman:

> A woman's gentle heart, but not acquainted

The pause here allows for the speaker's shift in thought, emphasizing that, despite having a woman's tenderness, the young man *isn't* fickle or shallow, as women so often are (in the speaker's mind, at least). The caesura in line 5 does something similar, granting the speaker space to expand upon his compliment; the young man's eyes are not just "more bright than theirs," but they're also "less false in rolling."

The caesura in line 7 adds a bit of gravitas to the speaker's declaration that the fair youth is definitively a man, with a commanding presence over "all hues." Caesura creates a pause after the speaker's statement that he's "A man in hue," and generally slows the line's pace.

The end of the poem stops using caesura for the most part. The poem speeds up as the speaker meditates on the fact that nature made the fair youth male bodied, and this shift in speed suggests that this fact is not worth that much time or attention.

The final caesura comes in the poem's closing line, through the implied pause after the speaker says, "Mine be thy love." (Though the line is often printed without a comma, we'd argue that the reader naturally pauses before that "and" as *though* at a comma; keep in mind that editorial choices and punctuation norms shift over time.) The use of caesura, then, returns as the speaker reasserts his love for the fair youth—and also his confidence that *he* has the fair youth's love. In other words, the poem slows down again at the moment that the speaker reaffirms the lasting, true quality of this relationship.

Where Caesura appears in the poem:

- **Line 2:** "thou, the"
- **Line 3:** "heart, but"
- **Line 5:** "theirs, less"
- **Line 7:** "hue, all"
- **Line 14:** "love and"

ENJAMBMENT

Most of the poem's lines are end-stopped, but the poem does use occasional enjambment to speed things up or create moments of anticipation. The opening quatrain contains two enjambed lines, for example:

> A woman's face with nature's own hand painted
> Hast thou, the master-mistress of my passion;
> A woman's gentle heart but not acquainted
> With shifting change as is false women's fashion;

These enjambments propel the reader over the line endings. In the first instance, the reader must speed over the line ending to learn *who* has this woman's face—and then discover that it is a "thou," a person whom the speaker addresses directly. Then, in the second enjambment, the reader moves over the line ending to understand what "false women" are like—and thus what the fair youth is *not* like. In this instance, the enjambment subtly divides the fair youth—and his "gentle heart"—from the negative qualities stereotypically associated with women, such as being "false," or dishonest and changeable.

In both cases, the enjambments mean that the reader must keep reading in order to understand more about the fair youth. These moments of enjambment, then manage the poem's pacing but *also* create dramatic tension in the poem.

Where Enjambment appears in the poem:

- **Lines 1-2:** "painted / Hast"
- **Lines 3-4:** "acquainted / With"

END-STOPPED LINE

"Sonnet 20" is mostly end-stopped. All these end-stopped lines convey the steadfastness of the speaker's love for the fair youth, since he communicates this love in a very even-handed, paced way. At the same time, it's noteworthy that these end-stopped lines are not *full* stopped; the first eight lines of the poem are part of one long, continual sentence, which, in turn, suggests that the speaker could go on and on in his praise.

One particularly interesting/ambiguous moment of end-stop appears in line 11. The speaker says that nature, in creating the fair youth, "by addition me of thee defeated." This line can be read as a complete clause, and the sentence *could* end here—a reading that suggests the line is end-stopped.

Yet the speaker goes on to add an "addition" to the sentence, in line 12: "By adding one thing to my purpose nothing." This additional clause that reiterates nature's actions makes the preceding line ending retroactively seem enjambed. In effect, by further modifying the preceding clause, one could read the line ending at "defeated / By," as a moment of enjambment.

A closer look suggests that the preceding line ending *is* in fact end-stopped, as it concluded with the ending of a phrase. Yet the speaker has made it, in a way, *appear*, enjambed, by tacking on this extra clause. Interestingly, too, the clause itself seems like a mere "addition," since the speaker essentially repeats the previous phrase "by addition" in "By adding." The poem enacts, then, what the speaker describes, as the sentence continues for an additional, repetitive phrase that is, to the poem's and speaker's purpose "nothing." This moment of apparent enjambment calls attention to this "addition" to the fair youth himself, suggesting that in the eyes of the speaker, it is needless but also, in a sense, inconsequential as far as the speaker's love is concerned.

Where End-Stopped Line appears in the poem:

- **Line 2:** "passion;"
- **Line 4:** "fashion;"
- **Line 5:** "rolling,"
- **Line 6:** "gazeth;"
- **Line 7:** "controlling,"
- **Line 8:** "amazeth."
- **Line 9:** "created,"
- **Line 10:** "a-doting,"
- **Line 11:** "defeated"
- **Line 12:** "nothing."
- **Line 13:** "pleasure,"
- **Line 14:** "treasure."

ALLITERATION

"Sonnet 20" makes use of alliteration throughout, creating both music and meaning. First, when the speaker praises the fair youth as the "master-mistress of [his] passion," alliterative /m/ sounds emphasize that hyphenated phrase—one that conveys the simultaneous masculinity and femininity of the fair youth. This alliteration also conveys the power the fair youth has over the speaker (as the "master" of his passion) and subtly implies that at the same time, the fair youth is the speaker's lover or intimate partner (his "mistress").

As the poem progresses, the speaker uses alliteration to describe the fair youth and differentiate him from "false women." The alliterative /f/ sounds in "false" (which repeats in lines 4 and 5) and "fashion" in line 4 reinforce the superficiality of these women. The fair youth, however, is *different* from these women, a difference the speaker emphasizes through the alliterative hard /g/ sounds in "gilding" and "gazeth," used to describe the fair youth's eyes. In other words, the music of the poem assigns different sounds to the fair youth than those /f/ sounds associated with "false women," reinforcing the profound difference between them, even though the fair youth is feminine in certain ways.

Alliteration also emphasizes the fair youth's unique presence and beauty. His attractiveness is such, the speaker says, that he "steals men's eyes and women's souls amazeth"; here, even over a gap of several words, the reader hears the sibilant alliteration of "steals" and "souls." This sibilant alliteration conveys the singular power of the fair youth's presence, and the effect he has on all around him.

Finally, the speaker uses alliteration throughout the second part of the poem, when describing how nature created the fair youth and made him male bodied. First, the speaker emphasizes that the fair youth was "originally" intended to be a woman: "for a woman wert thou first created," he says, the alliterative /w/ sounds reinforcing this idea. Nature, though, "fell a-doting" and "defeated" the speaker, /d/ sounds linking "doting" and "defeated" and emphasizing that it was nature's own affection for the fair youth that led her to change his body to that of a man.

The speaker continues to emphasize nature's actions through the alliterative /p/ sounds in "purpose," "pricked," and "pleasure." These last instances of alliteration stand out in the poem and suggest, at one level, that the fair youth's male body has made him definitively "for women's pleasure."

Where Alliteration appears in the poem:

- **Line 2:** "master-mistress"
- **Line 4:** "false," "fashion"
- **Line 5:** "than theirs"
- **Line 6:** "Gilding," "gazeth"

- **Line 7:** "hue," "hues," "his"
- **Line 8:** "steals," "souls"
- **Line 9:** "woman wert"
- **Line 10:** "doting"
- **Line 11:** "defeated"
- **Line 12:** "purpose"
- **Line 13:** "pricked," "pleasure"

CONSONANCE

In addition to its moments of alliteration, the poem also uses consonance to link words and their meanings together. For example, in the phrase "master-mistress," the consonant /st/ sounds in both words (alongside the alliterative /m/ sounds) reinforce the connection between them, and the sense that the fair youth is *both* master and mistress to the speaker.

As the poem goes on, the consonance of "shifting" and "fashion" reinforces the "shifting" or changeable quality of these women, as well as their superficiality, since the speaker suggests that they are concerned mostly with "fashion" (that is, with whatever they like in a particular moment).

Sibilant /s/ and /z/ sounds fill line 8 as the speaker describes the effect that the fair youth's beauty has on all those around him. His "hue," or complexion/appearance, "steals men's eyes and women's souls amazeth." The gentle, buzzing sounds suggest the way that the young man essentially hypnotizes others with his beauty and presence.

The speaker again uses consonance in the second half of the poem, here describing how nature made an "addition" to the fair youth and in doing so "defeated" the speaker. The /d/ sounds in "addition," "defeated" and "adding" reinforce the connection between nature having made the fair youth male bodied and the speaker being "defeated" in his love and desire for the fair youth.

Where Consonance appears in the poem:

- **Line 2:** "Hast," "master-mistress"
- **Line 3:** "gentle heart," "not acquainted"
- **Line 4:** "shifting," "false," "fashion"
- **Line 5:** "than theirs," "less false," "rolling"
- **Line 6:** "Gilding," "gazeth"
- **Line 7:** "hue," "hues," "his"
- **Line 8:** "steals men's eyes," "women's souls amazeth"
- **Line 9:** "woman wert"
- **Line 10:** "doting"
- **Line 11:** "And," "addition," "defeated"
- **Line 12:** "adding," "one," "thing," "purpose," "nothing"
- **Line 13:** "pricked," "pleasure"
- **Line 14:** "treasure"

ASSONANCE

The poem contains numerous instances of assonance, lending it a sense of lyricism and musicality; the poem simply *sounds* beautiful and interesting. At the same time, assonance draws attention to certain words and thematic ideas in the poem.

In line 1, for example, the shared long /ay/ sounds in "face," "nature," and "painted" emphasize the idea that the fair youth is akin to a work of art (a painting) and that he has a kind of natural grace. The short /ah/ sounds in "hast," "master," and "passion" then emphasize the strong feelings the speaker has for the fair youth, reinforcing the fact that this young man is the true "master" of the speaker's love and desire.

As the poem progresses, that long /ay/ sound reappears in "not acquainted" and "change," drawing attention to the fact that the speaker's beloved knows nothing of women's fickleness. The long /i/ sounds in "eye" and "bright," meanwhile, simply add a sense of oomph to the speaker's praise of his beloved's shining eyes.

Later, the long /ee/ sounds in "me of thee defeated" quickens the phrase, creating a sense of resignation on the speaker's part as he seemingly acknowledges that he and the fair youth can't be together physically. Yet in the very last line, the speaker asserts "Mine be thy love," showing that he knows *he* is the one who truly has the fair youth's heart. Here, the assonant long /i/ sounds in "Mine" and "thy" reinforce this assertion, connecting the speaker and the fair youth at the level of the poem's music.

Where Assonance appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "face," "nature's," "painted"
- **Line 2:** "Hast," "master," "passion"
- **Line 3:** "acquainted"
- **Line 4:** "With shifting," "change"
- **Line 5:** "eye," "bright," "false"
- **Line 6:** "object whereupon"
- **Line 11:** "me," "thee defeated"
- **Line 12:** "one thing," "nothing"
- **Line 13:** "since," "pricked"
- **Line 14:** "Mine," "thy"

REPETITION

The poem uses several kinds of repetition to create emphasis and meaning (note that the poem's use of anaphora is discussed separately in this guide). For example, the speaker uses diacope in the repetition of "false" in lines 4 and 5, repeatedly calling attention to women's apparent lack of trustworthiness; the fair youth, by contrast, is steadfast and commanding.

Later, the speaker again uses diacope by repeating the word "hue[s]." Here, this repetition again emphasizes the fair youth's singular commanding presence, since his own "hue," or complexion and character, commands the attention of all other "hues"—everyone around him. This repetition may also contain

clues to the identity of the fair youth:

- Critics have speculated that the word "hue"/ "hues," which in Shakespeare's time was spelled "hew"/ "hews," is important for the repetition of the letters "h," "e," "w," and "s," which actually repeat throughout the poem.
- Specifically, scholars have explored the possibility that the letters "h" and "e" may refer to either William Herbert, Third Earl of Pembroke, or Henry Wriothesley, Third Earl of Southampton.
- In this reading, the poem may deliberately link together the "he" of Herbert or Henry with the "w" and "s" of William Shakespeare's own name. Such complex levels of coding and word play were not uncommon at the time the poem was written.

As the poem goes on, the speaker uses polyptoton with "by addition" and "by adding" in lines 11 and 12. The speaker is basically saying *the same thing twice* in these lines—that nature thwarted the speaker's physical relationship with the young man by making him a man. This verbal repetition is thus not necessary to make the speaker's meaning clear—just like the nature's "addition" to the fair youth is not necessary for the purposes of the speaker's relationship with him.

Finally, in the last line, the speaker uses a device called anadiplosis:

> Mine be thy love and thy love's use their treasure.

This does a few things. First, since the speaker *repeats* the core of the phrase, this calls attention to how the phrase *changes* (i.e., it becomes possessive). This repetition, then, emphasizes what is *different* between the speaker's relationship with the fair youth and the fair youth's relationship with women: the speaker has the fair youth's true "love," while women only enjoy this love's "use"—implicitly, the use of the fair youth's body.

This slight shift in meaning suggests that the repetition of this word could also be read as an instance of antanaclasis, when a word is repeated with a different *meaning* in each iteration. The second iteration of the word suggests that the speaker isn't referring to the fair youth's *actual* love (which belongs to the speaker), but rather to the aspect of the fair youth's body that nature "added" to him (i.e., his male anatomy). It is the "use" of this "addition" that women may continue to "treasure" through sexual relationships with the fair youth.

Reading the repetition of "love" this way creates another level of meaning in the line. If the speaker is using "love" here as a kind of euphemism for the fair youth's male body, then the line has, in effect, created the presence of *two* male bodies—two "loves"—linked together through the repeating word. This final repetition, then, can be read as connecting the speaker and the fair youth together both in terms of their emotional, romantic love, and at a physical level, suggesting that both forms of intimacy are present within the poem.

Where Repetition appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "A woman's"
- **Line 3:** "A woman's"
- **Line 4:** "false women's"
- **Line 5:** "false"
- **Line 7:** "A man," "hue," "hues"
- **Line 11:** "by addition"
- **Line 12:** "By adding"
- **Line 14:** "thy love," "thy love's"

PUN

"Sonnet 20" contains a pun in line 13. When the speaker says here that nature "pricked thee out for women's pleasure," he puns on the word "prick" (a euphemism for male anatomy). In other words, the speaker is playing with the idea that meaning nature "picked" this person for "women's pleasure" by giving him a "prick" (i.e., male anatomy).

While perhaps not a true pun, a closely related device is the oxymoron of "master-mistress" in line 2. This doesn't make sense at first glance; how can someone be both a master and a mistress? On one level, the speaker is simply emphasizing the idea that the fair youth contains both male and qualities—that he's both traditionally masculine and feminine.

On another level, the speaker is playing with the broader meanings of these words. The fair youth is "master" not just because he's masculine, but because he controls the speaker (in the sense that the speaker is enthralled by his love for the fair youth). The word "mistress" can simply be the feminine version of "master," but can also refer to a woman having an extramarital affair. As such, the young man is perhaps like a "mistress" not just because he's effeminate in certain ways, but because he's the speaker's lover.

Where Pun appears in the poem:

- **Line 2:** "master-mistress of my passion"
- **Line 13:** "But since she pricked thee out for women's pleasure,"

VOCABULARY

Master-mistress (Line 2) - The speaker refers to the fair youth as the "master-mistress of [his] passion." This hyphenated word brings together two words—"master" and "mistress." The word "master" can mean a lord or ruler; it can also mean a virtuoso, as in the sense of a "master" artist. The word "mistress," meanwhile, can refer to a *female* lord (or lady) or ruler, but it

also refers to someone's wife or lover. This hyphenated word, then, suggests that the fair youth is "master" of the speaker's love and desire—he has ultimate power over it—and is also the speaker's "mistress," his lover or intimate partner.

Acquainted (Line 3) - To be "acquainted" with something means to know or be familiar with it.

False (Line 4, Line 5) - Fake or dishonest.

Fashion (Line 4) - A "fashion" can be a social trend. It can also refer to a superficial manner or way of being. Both meanings are present in the poem, as the speaker conveys the superficiality of these "false women" by saying that they act in these changeable ways simply because it's their "fashion"—their manner or chosen way of acting.

Rolling (Line 5) - When the speaker describes "false women's" eyes as "rolling," he means that they roll their eyes in the familiar gesture of contempt or sarcasm. The word also, though, suggests that the attention of these women is unreliable and constantly changing; their eyes "roll" from one object of attention to the next.

Gilding (Line 6) - To "gild" something means to cover it with a fine layer of gold.

Gazeth (Line 6) - The word "gazeth" is an archaic form of "gaze" or "gazes," from the verb "to gaze," which means, "to look at." In this line, the speaker means that everything the fair youth looks at seems to be "gilded" or touched with gold.

Hue (Line 7) - Someone's "hue" refers to their complexion (the color of their skin) and also their character or general bearing.

Steal (Line 8) - To "steal" something means to take it from someone without their knowledge or against their will. In the poem, the speaker uses the word metaphorically to suggest that men can't help but look at the fair youth, since he is so attractive; he thus "steals" their eyes.

Amazeth (Line 8) - "Amazeth" is an archaic form of "amaze" or "amazes." The speaker means that the sight of the fair youth amazes women's souls.

Wert (Line 9) - "Wert" is an archaic form of "were."

A-doting (Line 10) - The word "a-doting" means "to doting," in the sense that nature "fell to doting," or began to dote over the fair youth. The word "to dote" means to become overly affectionate or enamored. Essentially, the speaker means that nature began to be overly affectionate toward or enamored with the fair youth.

Purpose (Line 12) - A "purpose" is the reason for which something exists. One's "purpose" can also refer to one's intent. In the poem, then, the speaker refers to his "purpose," meaning his intention—his love and desire for the fair youth.

Pricked (Line 13) - The verb "to prick" means to select something or to puncture a small hole in it, as in someone pricking their finger with a needle. In the poem, though, the speaker puns on this word, using it also as a euphemism for the fair youth's male anatomy.

FORM, METER, & RHYME

FORM

"Sonnet 20" is, as the title indicates, a sonnet, a traditional 14-line poetic form that dates back to 13th-century Italian love poetry. The Italian poet Petrarch popularized the sonnet in the 14th century, and, during the western European Renaissance, Shakespeare and other English poets revitalized it, creating a distinct kind of sonnet now known as the Shakespearean sonnet.

In general, the first part of any sonnet introduces a problem or difficulty. Then, after a "turn," or *volta*, the second part of the sonnet replies to this difficulty. In Shakespearean sonnets, this pivotal "turn" doesn't happen until the closing couplet. This ending, then, can reply to the rest of the poem in a surprising way, having the effect of an epiphany or unexpected resolution.

"Sonnet 20" follows the form of the Shakespearean sonnet, for the most part. The poem begins with three quatrains, or four-line stanzas, and ends with a final rhyming couplet that offers a clever response to the issue at hand; in lines 13 and 14, as the speaker suggests that the fair youth (who has been made "for women's pleasure") can continue to have sexual relationships with women, since the speaker knows that he has the fair youth's love.

In a certain sense, though, the poem *also* follows the traditional structure of *Petrarchan* sonnets, given that there's a subtler "turn" popping up after the opening eight lines. The first two quatrains simply praise the young man's beauty; there isn't really any issue yet. But in line 9, the speaker shifts from praising the fair youth to talking about the fact that nature made the fair youth a man (and, thus, incapable of being with the speaker physically). In a way, then, the speaker doesn't actually introduce the poem's dilemma until more than half-way through!

Sonnets usually begin by proposing a difficulty, which the speaker then replies to—in other words, the reply to the problem takes up the shorter part of the sonnet. Yet in "Sonnet 20," the "problem" (the fact that the fair youth has been made male bodied) comes *second*. This means that the speaker's praise of the fair youth, and his expression of love and desire for the fair youth, is afforded the most space—and implicitly, the most importance—within the poem. The poem's ever-so-slight revision of the traditional structure, then, suggests that this love is profoundly meaningful and lasting.

METER

As with most sonnets, "Sonnet 20" uses iambic pentameter. In this meter, each line has five iambs—metrical feet consisting of

an unstressed syllable followed by stressed syllable, da-DUM. This meter creates a pattern of alternating unstressed and stressed syllables, with each line of the poem ending on a stress: da-DUM | da-DUM | da-DUM | da-DUM | da-DUM.

"Sonnet 20" sticks to this meter pretty closely throughout, but it also departs from it in a crucial way. While all the lines follow iambic pentameter (with minor variations here and there), each line contains one additional syllable—an eleventh syllable—that is unstressed. For instance, the opening lines of the poem read:

> A wom- | an's face | with na- | ture's own | hand painted
> Hast thou, | the mas- | ter-mis- | tress of | my passion;

This subtle divergence from the meter is important to the poem's meaning. Within discussions of meter, stressed syllables are considered "masculine," while unstressed syllables are considered "feminine." In sonnets that follow a meter of iambic pentameter, then, each line ends with a "masculine" syllable, and the poem as a whole would end with a "masculine" stress.

Yet in Sonnet 20, each line ends with a *feminine* syllable, an unstressed "addition" that changes the music of the poem and also enacts with what the speaker describes as he praises the fair youth for having both masculine *and* feminine qualities—for being, in a certain sense, neither entirely male nor female. The poem then embodies this vision of beauty in its form: while most of the poem's metrical *feet* end with masculine syllables, the *lines* end with feminine syllables, creating a balance between the two.

These "additions" to the line endings can also be read as a subtle reply to the speaker's idea of the "addition" that nature made to the fair youth's body—which changed him from the woman he was originally "created" to be into the male bodied person he is.

RHYME SCHEME

"Sonnet 20" follows the traditional rhyme scheme of a Shakespearean sonnet. In this rhyme scheme, the poem is organized into three quatrains (or clusters of four lines) and a closing couplet. The quatrains follow rhyme schemes of alternating rhyme endings. Altogether, the pattern looks like this:

ABABCDCDEFEFGG

The poem follows this traditional rhyme scheme, but also introduces some very slight variations to it. First, the rhyme words "a-doting" and "nothing" in lines 10 and 12 are arguably closer to a slant rhyme. This slant rhyme stands out in the poem, and suggests the possible disjunction of the "addition" nature made to this person who was "first created" to be a woman. At the same time, this slant rhyme also calls attention to the word "nothing," suggesting that for the speaker in his attraction for this person, the fact that the fair youth has this "addition" is actually "no thing," or inconsequential as far as the speaker's desire and love are concerned.

Additionally, it could be argued that the feminine line endings (the fact that each line ends with an unstressed syllable) makes the rhyming pattern more subtle; since these rhyming sounds are unstressed, they are given less emphasis within the poem. This makes the poem as a whole feel both beautifully crafted, and in a sense, natural—much as the speaker depicts the fair youth's beauty as both a work of fine art (a painting) and a creation of nature.

SPEAKER

While the speaker of "Sonnet 20" remains unidentified, most critics view the speaker as a representation of the poet, William Shakespeare. Several aspects of the poem support this reading.

First, the poem expresses love and desire in ways that feel both deeply personal and highly specific; what the speaker notices and praises in the fair youth is distinct and seems to emerge from real, lived experience. Additionally, the poem is part of a collection of sonnets that were published, in 1609, without Shakespeare's authorization; it's been reported that a local publisher effectively "pirated" the sonnets. This has led some scholars to regard the sonnets as private missives, unintended for a more public audience.

The poem arguably contains clues to the identity of the fair youth as well, which would also identify the speaker of the poem as Shakespeare. Some critics have read the poem's repetition of the word "hue" and "hues" (in Shakespeare's time, spelled hew or hews) as a clue to the identity of the poem's addressee. Scholars have speculated that the letters "h" and "e" refer either to William Herbert (the Third Earl of Pembroke) or Henry Wriothesley (the Third Earl of Southampton), both of whom were patrons of Shakespeare. In this reading, the poem may deliberately connect the "He" of "Herbert" or "Henry," with "w" and "s," the initials of William Shakespeare.

Over time, critics have argued for different interpretations of the speaker and his sexuality. While many modern readers regard the poem as a clear expression of what would now be considered gay or queer love, some scholars have argued *against* this reading of the poem. These critics cite the speaker's apparent conformity to heterosexual norms, since the speaker seems to suggest that nature has created the fair youth's male body "for women's pleasure."

In actual fact, however, the speaker leaves the possibility of his *own* physical intimacy with the fair youth ambiguous; it could well be that the speaker simply acknowledges the possibility that the fair youth will *also* continue to have sexual relationships with women—a likelihood that accords with social expectations of the time.

What *is* clear about the speaker is his love, admiration, and passionate attraction for the fair youth, which he communicates throughout the poem. The speaker is steadfast in this love, and in his expression of it, in contrast to the "shifting change" of "false women"—and also, implicitly, in contrast to the "shifting change" in the many interpretations of the poem that have followed.

SETTING

While "Sonnet 20" doesn't depict a clear physical setting, the poem *evokes* several settings that are important to its meaning. First, the poem invokes a natural setting in which nature "first created" the fair youth. The speaker describes nature as having "painted" the young man's face, and later says that nature "fell a-doting"—or became overly affectionate—while creating the fair youth.

The poem also implicitly conveys public settings in which the speaker has seen the fair youth interact with other people. When the speaker says that the fair youth's beauty "steals men's eyes and women's souls amazeth," he conjures settings in which the speaker, the fair youth, and numerous other people are present. Within these public scenes, it is the fair youth who stands apart in his beauty and commanding presence.

Finally, and most importantly, the poem conjures a private setting—what might also be considered the emotional setting of the poem—in which the speaker can address the fair youth directly, and openly express his love. Presumably, the speaker utters the poem, and recounts his love and desire for this young man, in a setting *apart* from the public and even natural scenes that the poem has evoked. This third, implied setting suggests that the speaker and fair youth share a relationship and bond untouched by nature's intervening actions, and also by the public settings that the fair youth also inhabits. The poem emerges, then, from this private setting of the *relationship* between the speaker and the fair youth, an emotional setting that the speaker implies always exists, even alongside the more public worlds the poem describes.

CONTEXT

LITERARY CONTEXT

"Sonnet 20" belongs to a sequence of Shakespeare's sonnets addressed to a "fair youth," an unidentified young man with whom the speaker is in an intimate relationship, and for whom the speaker expresses love, desire, and admiration. Of the collection of Shakespeare's 154 sonnets published in 1609, critics differ on how many are addressed to the fair youth; many of the sonnets expressing love do not specify the gender of the person they address, and later sonnets in the collection are addressed to a different beloved, often referred to as the "dark lady."

Over time, critics have sought to identify the "fair youth" and the "dark lady." The most likely candidates for the "fair youth" are William Herbert, the Third Earl of Pembroke, and Henry Wriothesley, the Third Earl of Southampton. (For more on the fair youth's identity, check out the Resources section of this guide.)

Some scholars also speculate that Shakespeare's sonnets were not intended for public readership, and even that Shakespeare may have tried to suppress their publication because of their homoerotic content. It may be that the sonnets were, in fact, intended as private poems, missives to the people to whom they were addressed. They stand in contrast with Shakespeare's plays in their remarkably personal nature, though the sonnets, too, contain layers of coding and word play that make many aspects of them remain elusive.

The fair youth sonnets, "Sonnet 20 included," have provoked continual debate over the poems' speaker and his sexuality. While many contemporary readers take the poems as clear expressions of gay love and desire, some critics have argued that the speaker expresses primarily *platonic* love for the young man and disavows the potential of physical intimacy with the fair youth. Ultimately, however, the speaker offers a clear vision of his love for, and attraction to, the fair youth, leaving ambiguous the possibility of physical intimacy in their relationship but asserting the strength of the bond between them.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

The historical context of "Sonnet 20" is important to the poem's meaning and to the many ways the poem has been read—and published—over time. Importantly, Shakespeare wrote these sonnets during a period in which to be openly gay was not only illegal but also dangerous. While the Renaissance, with its emphasis on science, art, and creativity, was a period of relative freedom in which homosexuality was less frequently prosecuted, it was still profoundly unsafe for people to openly express what would now be considered gay or queer love. Additionally, even if, in certain circles, there was tacit acceptance of physical intimacy between two men or two women, what was impossible was for these men or women to have a *relationship*, or at least to sustain such a relationship publicly and openly.

Within this context, all of Shakespeare's "fair youth" sonnets are radical in their clarity and their praise for this young man. From this sonnet's challenging of gender norms (the "fair youth" is not *only* masculine or feminine, but both), to the speaker's assertion that what matters most *is* the relationship between the two, the poem turns many assumptions of Renaissance England upside down.

Perhaps for this reason, after the sonnets were first published in 1609, subsequent publishers sought to change the poems in

order to suppress and erase their homoerotic content. In editions published until 1780, editors created new versions of the poems, deliberately misgendering the "fair youth" to make the poems appear as though the male writer is addressing a woman.

In a way, this attempt to read the poems through a heteronormative lens has persisted in modern scholarship, as some critics have argued that the poems reflect not an expression of gay love, but only of platonic affection. The sonnets in their original form, however, remain intact for contemporary readers to explore, discover, and understand on their own terms.

MORE RESOURCES

EXTERNAL RESOURCES

- Who Is the "Fair Youth"? — Learn more about the potential addressee of "Sonnet 20" in this essay, which includes an analysis of the poem's repetition of the letters "h," "e," "w," and "s"—though to be clues to the "fair youth's" identity. (http://www.shakespeares-sonnets.com/sonnet/20)
- Biography of William Shakespeare — Learn more about Shakespeare's life—and his life as a poet—in this article from the Poetry Foundation website. (https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poets/william-shakespeare)
- The "Fair Youth" Sonnets — Read more about Shakespeare's "fair youth" sonnets, and how they have been interpreted in terms of gender and sexuality, in this essay from the British Library. (https://www.bl.uk/shakespeare/articles/shakespeare-sexuality-and-the-sonnets)
- Early Portrait of Henry Wriothesley — View an early portrait of Henry Wriothesley, one possible addressee of Shakespeare's "fair youth" sonnets. In this portrait, Wriothesley is depicted wearing rouge, lipstick, and earrings, with long, flowing hair, and critics have dated this painting to the time period when Shakespeare wrote his sonnets. (https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Henry_Wriothesley,_3rd_Earl_of_Southampton.jpg)
- Article about Henry Wriothesley — Read more about Henry Wriothesley, Third Earl of Southampton, who some critics have taken to be the "fair youth" of Sonnet 20 and the other sonnets in this sequence. (https://www.bl.uk/collection-items/portrait-of-henry-wriothesley-3rd-earl-of-southampton)
- Stolen Sonnets — Shakespeare's sonnets were first published without his authorization, by a local publisher who essentially "pirated" the poems from the poet. Read this article from NPR to learn more about this unauthorized publication, and why Shakespeare may have tried to prevent it. (https://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=104317503)

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 18: Shall I compare thee to a summer's day?
- Sonnet 19: Devouring Time, blunt thou the lion's paws
- Sonnet 29: When, in disgrace with fortune and men's eyes
- Sonnet 30: When to the sessions of sweet silent thought
- 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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