Sonnet 29: When, in disgrace with fortune and

POEM TEXT

When, in disgrace with fortune and men's eyes,
I all alone beweep my outcast state,
And trouble deaf heaven with my bootless cries,
And look upon myself and curse my fate,
Wishing me like to one more rich in hope,
Featured like him, like him with friends possessed,
Desiring this man's art and that man's scope,
With what I most enjoy contented least;
Yet in these thoughts myself almost despising,
Haply I think on thee, and then my state,
Like to the lark at break of day arising
From sullen earth sings hymns at heaven's gate;
For thy sweet love remembered such wealth brings
That then I scorn to change my state with kings.

SUMMARY

Whenever my luck turns bad and people look down on me
I sit by myself and cry because I'm all alone,
And I pray to God, who doesn't listen or answer my prayers,
And I look at my life and curse the way it's turned out,
Wishing that I was like someone with better prospects,
That I was more beautiful, that I had more influential friends,
Wishing that I had this man's skill and that one's range of skills,
And even the things I love best don't bring me any pleasure;
Yet whenever I think like this, almost hating myself,
I think about you and then I feel
Like a bird at the break of day that flies up
From the ground, and sings songs at the pearly gates,
Because thinking about your love brings so much richness to my life
That I would rather have it than be king.

THEMES

SELF-PITY, ISOLATION, AND DESPAIR

"Sonnet 29" is, in part, a poem about isolation, envy, and despair. In the first eight lines, the speaker lists a series of anxieties and injuries, comparing himself negatively to more prosperous, successful, and beautiful people. The speaker thus suggests that his sense of self-worth depends on others: his social status and his emotional life are inextricably braided together, a combination the poem argues breeds only further isolation and discontent.

The poem begins with the speaker listing a series of misfortunes he has suffered. He describes himself as "disgrace[d]" and an "outcast," and implies that he is hopeless, untalented, and ugly; that he lacks political influence; and that he no longer takes pleasure in the things he once enjoyed. It might seem, then, that the poem is responding to some catastrophe—say, a bankruptcy or a death in the family. But the speaker opens the poem with the word "when," a conditional structure that frames the rest of the list of misfortunes the speaker supplies. He is not responding to a specific event but, instead, reflecting on something that happens to him often. This suggests that he *often* suffers from despair and anxiety; he often feels like an outcast and a hack.

Importantly, each of his complaints places the speaker in relation to other people. He compares his own beauty, wealth, and status to those around him—noting his "disgrace" in "men's eyes," wishing he were "featured [attractive] like him," and envious of "this man's art and that man's scope." The speaker clearly measures his own self-worth in relation to others. Given that he is so frequently despondent, the poem thus implicitly suggests that comparison is an unwise endeavor that results primarily in self-pity.

This self-pity, in turn, only serves to further separate the speaker from the rest of society; indeed, he bemoans how he "all alone" cries about his "outcast state" and resents those "with friends possessed." Perhaps this is understandable; it's difficult to deeply bond with people when relationships are plagued by envy and resentment. He also describes his relationship with other people in competitive terms: he does not want to share or collaborate with others, but instead wants to have more power, money, and influence than them.

The first eight lines of the poem thus pose an implicit question as to whether there are values that do not rely on hierarchy and competition to validate and assign worth. Regardless of the answer, it's clear that defining oneself solely in relation to others does little to boost contentedness, confidence, or camaraderie.

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-8

LOVE AND WEALTH

"Sonnet 29" is not just a poem about disappointment and despair: it's a poem about the way that love

comforts, soothes, and repairs the many injuries that one endures in life. After the poem's bitter opening eight lines, the speaker reflects on the love he shares with his beloved (traditionally believed to be a young man). That love, he argues, offers compensation for all his insults, slights, and misfortunes. In this way, the poem contrasts love with wealth and status. Love stands outside those pursuits, and, with its intense pleasures and rewards, offers an alternate path to happiness.

When the speaker experiences the despair and self-doubt he describes in the poem's first eight lines, he thinks about the man he loves and his mood transforms. Thinking about the young man, he experiences something close to ecstasy: he compares his mood to an exalted, almost religious music that breaks free of the "sullen earth" and rises to heaven itself. The speaker's love for the young man radically improves his mood and his self-esteem. Love, here, not only improves the speaker's general well-being, but also offers a kind of compensation for the misfortunes he has suffered. He may not have the wealth or political standing he covets, but his love offers him a different form of riches.

The speaker's frequent use of economic and political terms reinforces the idea of love itself as a form of wealth. He notably describes himself as "in disgrace with fortune," envies those "rich in hope," and desires "that man's scope" (that is, his power, influence, or skill). Though not directly describing money in these instances, this use of language nonetheless suggests that an economic and political preoccupation that runs throughout the poem.

Furthermore, in the poem's closing couplet, the speaker directly describes the young man's love as a kind of "wealth"—a wealth which is so satisfying that he wouldn't give it up for anything, even to be king of England. The line echoes a complaint from earlier in the poem, "Wishing me like to one more rich in hope." Though the speaker uses the word "rich" metaphorically in the earlier line, the resonance between "rich" and "wealth" suggests that he is drawing a strong contrast between the kind of wealth that love provides and money itself.

One might interpret this in several ways. On the one hand, the poem could be presenting love as something apolitical, divorced from the consequential decisions that shape the life of a state or a community. On the other, the poem might suggest that love stands as an alternative to the values that motivate people in politics and business (i.e., desire for money and power). Perhaps that alternative serves to critique the limitations of those values, suggesting another system of values altogether—which does not breed despair and anxiety.

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Lines 9-14

LINE-BY-LINE ANALYSIS

LINES 1-4

When, in disgrace with fortune and men's eyes,
I all alone beweep my outcast state,
And trouble deaf heaven with my bootless cries,
And look upon myself and curse my fate,

The poem opens with the word "When," and a quick survey of the poem reveals that sentence doesn't end for a long time—indeed, the only period in the poem comes at the end of line 14. The poem is an extended, single sentence, which can be divided in two: a conditional clause and a main clause. The conditional clause lists a series of circumstances and the main clause then explains what happens in those circumstances. The word "When" in the first line of the poem introduces the conditional clause, and the next four lines reveal what that "when" consists of. In other words, these four lines describe a situation: a situation of considerable despair and despondency for the speaker of the poem.

The speaker begins by declaring that he is doubly in disgrace—both fortune and other people have turned against him. The speaker uses synecdoche to bring those other people (and their judgment) into the poem. When he mentions "men's eyes" in line one, he doesn't mean (or doesn't *only* mean) that people are looking at him askance: the eyes stand in for the fact that people are judging him. Just as the eyes imply that there is some intelligence, some agency, making active decisions about his character and worth, so too the phrase "in disgrace with fortune" suggests that fortune itself is making judgments about him—that fortune has its own intelligence and agency, and thus has its own capacity to affect the speaker's life.

The next 3 lines of the poem register these effects on the speaker's life: he is "alone" and he is an "outcast." He weeps over his condition, and he prays to heaven for relief. But his prayers are "bootless"—that is, useless. They fail to improve his lot, and so he looks at himself and curses the circumstances that brought him to this point.

The lines are highly charged with emotion—when this speaker is not weeping, he is crying out to heaven or cursing his fate. Indeed, they may even be melodramatic. Immediately, then, the reader faces a major interpretative issue: whether to take the speaker seriously. If the reader does, the eventual resolution of the poem is a powerful testament to love's capacity to assuage the wounds of the world. If the reader doesn't, however, the poem becomes melodramatic and unconvincing.

LINES 5-8

Wishing me like to one more rich in hope,
Featured like him, like him with friends possessed,
Desiring this man's art and that man's scope,
With what I most enjoy contented least;

In lines 5-8, the speaker continues the conditional phrase he began in the poem's first line and describes what it feels like to be in an "outcast state." Where the first four lines of the poem describe that state and the various ineffective remedies the speaker takes to improve his condition (cursing and praying), the next four lines focus on the speaker's state of mind: how his "outcast state" affects the way he *feels*. There have been already been hints about his mental state in the poem's opening lines—certainly weeping and cursing suggest that he isn't exactly *happy*. But lines 5-8 explore the dynamics of his mental state in considerable detail.

Throughout these lines, the speaker consistently compares himself to other people. He wishes that he was like someone with "hope." He wants to be like someone who is more physically beautiful and who has more friends (and more influential friends at that). He wants to have another man's skill and someone else's freedom to act and realize his dreams. The speaker is obsessed with other people and their success, wealth, and influence. If he feels himself to be an "outcast" he does so because he so obsessively compares himself to other people. An image of the speaker thus begins to emerge: he is a person obsessed with status, wealth, and success. He is constantly trying to 'keep up with the Joneses—and he sees the Joneses getting ahead.

Importantly, he also sees the pursuit of wealth, power, and influence as a competitive and exclusionary activity: if someone else has money or powerful friends, then he can't have them. These are scarce resources to go around, and he has to work hard to win them for himself. The poem thus poses an implicit question: should the speaker really be so obsessed with these things? Should he always compare himself to other people? Or are there other ways to build self-worth, feel happy, and value one's own life?

Line 8 begins to suggest that there might be. After three lines focused on the speaker's status in relation to other people, he turns and considers his own pleasures. He has lost the capacity to take pleasure in the things he loves best—that's part of what makes his state so desperate. But it also suggests a solution to his misery: instead of focusing on other people's success, he should return to the things he loves and try to draw joy from them again.

LINES 9-10

Yet in these thoughts myself almost despising,
Haply I think on thee, and then my state,

In lines 9-10, the poem undergoes a major shift—both grammatically and in terms of its content. Until the start of line 9, the poem is still made up of conditional clauses: the speaker lays out what happens *when* he's in an "outcast state," but the grammar of this sentence promises that there will be some consequence, conclusion, or reversal to that experience. At the start of line 9, that consequence finally arrives. The poem exits the conditional clause and enters the main clause of the poem's long sentence.

That transition is signaled by the word "Yet" in line 9. The interjection signals that the speaker will somehow slip out of the misery that he details, painstakingly, in the first eight lines of the poem, but not quite yet: even as line 9 signals that a pivot is about to take place, it doesn't *quite* deliver it. Instead, after the "yet," the speaker offers a summary of the past 8 lines: as a result of all his anxieties, of all the injuries he's suffered, he—almost—despises himself.

The long promised-pivot finally arrives in the first half of line 10, where the speaker announces: "Haply I think on thee." Since the poem is one long sentence—and since this is the main clause of that sentence—"think" is the main verb of the sentence, the verb on which the rest of the poem hangs. Everything in the poem has been building to this moment where the speaker "thinks on thee"—and everything that follows from it. (The person addressed here is traditionally believed to be a young man).

The grammar of the poem thus poses an implicit, important question: what difference does thinking about someone you love make? What can love itself do to repair the injuries and insults that the speaker suffers? It also poses questions about the act of thinking about the young man: why does the speaker think about him? The answer to this question is suggested by the word "haply"—which does not mean "happily" but by accident or chance. This suggests that the speaker does not consciously think about the young man as a way to escape from his negative thoughts. Instead, those thoughts arrive mysteriously, without his intervention. This might lend weight to the sincerity of the poem in the sense that the speaker is not performing his devotion to the young man; instead, his love acts as a comfort without the speaker actively seeking it out.

LINES 11-12

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

In the poem's main clause—"Haply I think on thee"—the speaker suggests that just thinking about the young man he loves can serve as a comfort when he is consumed by negative thoughts. The next two lines substantiate that suggestion with a complex simile. He compares his "state"—his mental condition—to a lark singing at the break of day.

The lark is a traditional symbol of morning (and a traditional symbol of poetry itself): it's a bird that often greets the daybreak with song. Shakespeare frequently invokes the bird in his plays as well, using it as a kind of timekeeper that helps farmers organize their days. The lark is thus a symbol of regularity, a return to the normal rhythms of life. For the speaker to compare himself to a lark after describing himself as an "outcast" 9 lines earlier suggests that he has reconciled himself to society and its expectations—after being violently

out of joint with them.

The lark is also a bird that sings as it flies. This makes it a good symbol for prayer itself as it travels upward from earth to the heavens. The speaker draws a contrast between the bird's lively song and the "sullen earth" from which it rises, suggesting a break from despair, as though his condition has been released from the earth and is experiencing a new freedom. This is a commonplace metaphor (even Shakespeare uses it elsewhere) to the point of almost being a cliché. It suggests that the speaker—after being at war with his own culture—has begun to feel comfortable with its resources. He might even be happy to use them to express his own joy.

In this reading, love not only improves his mood, transforming him into a singing bird, but it also reconciles him to the society in which he lives. This sense of reconciliation is reinforced by the echo between lines 3 and 12. Where the speaker's prayers fall on deaf ears in line 3, in line 12 the hymns arrive at heaven's gate. The switch between line 3's "cries" and line 12's "hymns" is also significant: the speaker has gone from pleading with God to celebrating him. He no longer has the sense that his songs are being ignored or slighted; he has joined the heavenly choir.

Yet there is a slight hesitation or an ambiguity in these lines: who actually signs these hymns at heaven's gate? The punctuation of these lines is uncertain. The 1609 first printing of these poems puts line 11 in parentheses: "(Like to the lark at break of day arising)." This suggests that it is the speaker's "state" that breaks free from the "sullen earth" and "sings hymns at heaven's gate." Stephen Booth's definitive scholarly edition puts a comma at the end of line 10 and another in the middle of line 12: "From sullen earth, sings hymns at heaven's gate." The commas imply that the lark breaks free from the "sullen earth" but the speaker's state is the one singing "hymns at heaven's gate."

The question is made all the more complicated by the unsteady use of punctuation during Shakespeare's period: most likely, the punctuation isn't even Shakespeare's but belongs instead to the person who set the type for the 1609 printing. The best option then is to keep all the possible readings in mind at once: perhaps all of line 11 applies to the lark; perhaps all of it belongs to the speaker's "state"; perhaps the lark and the state share parts of the line or all of the line.

LINES 13-14

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

The final 2 lines of the poem serve as a clarification: they try to explain why thinking about the young man produces such a radical transformation in the speaker's mood. His explanation, though, is complex and equivocal. Remembering "thy sweet love" brings "wealth"—so much so that he wouldn't give it up to be King of England. The final line of the poem—"then I scorn to change my state with kings"—suggests that the speaker has given up the obsession with other people's status and success that marks lines 5-7: instead of seeking to improve his status, he is content with what he has.

But line 13 complicates the matter: he doesn't want to be king because of the "wealth" that the young man's love brings him. Is this literal wealth? It could be—in one traditional (albeit unsubstantiated) reading of the *Sonnets*, the young man Shakespeare loves comes from a higher class, and so offers him the money and connections he doesn't have in the opening lines of the poem. But even if the wealth is purely metaphorical, one is left with some significant questions.

The speaker has found an alternate form of value, something that comforts him even when he's down and out. He may have even found an alternate way of relating to people: love is not a scarce resource like wealth and status. But he describes this new source of self-worth in terms which are strikingly similar to the ones he uses above: line 5's "rich in hope"—which may imply actual wealth—reverberates in line 13's "wealth." Perhaps the speaker has found a new source of value and self-worth, and lacks the language to describe it, so he falls back on the language of wealth—or perhaps his obsession remains an obsession with wealth and status.

SYMBOLS

HEAVEN

In poetry, "heaven" is often both a literal and a symbolic place. On the one hand, "heaven" is the Christian paradise, the place beyond the skies where God, the angels, and the souls of the righteous live in eternal bliss. On the other hand, poets often use the word "heavens" as a fancy word for the sky—without necessarily intending that their readers reflect seriously on Christianity.

In this case, the speaker largely uses the word in the first sense. The clue here is the word "deaf," which grants agency and intelligence to heaven. Heaven could listen to the speaker's prayers but it has either lost the ability or the inclination to pay attention to him. At work here is a further refinement of the traditional Christian symbol: the word "heaven" is not only a symbol of Christian paradise, it is also a metonym for God himself, the being who listens to and answers prayers.

If the literal sense of the word seems largely absent from line 2, it nonetheless returns in line 12, where the lark "sings hymns at heaven's gate." Here the lark is rising into the sky and singing as it does so. The second use of the word "heaven" thus blends the symbolic and the literal. The bird is literally in the sky singing, but unlike the speaker's "bootless cries," its songs do actually reach "heaven's gate." The implication, though it remains an implication, is that the speaker's prayers are heard in the second half of the poem: that his relationship with his lover

changes his relationship to Christianity and indeed to the Christian God.

Where this symbol appears in the poem:

- **Line 3:** "heaven"
- **Line 12:** "heaven"

THE LARK

The "lark" that appears in line 11 is symbolic in two ways. Birds often appear in poems, and their beautiful, expressive songs serve as symbols for poetry itself—or for any passionate utterance, including the declarations of young lovers and prayers. Indeed, Shakespeare refers to more than 60 separate species of birds in his complete works. He particularly favors birds like nightingales, kestrels, and martins for these romantic similes. He reserves spookier birds like the owl and the loon as symbols for despair and disturbance. In *Richard II*, for instance, the doomed king uses bird imagery to register the shock of political revolution: "For night-owls shriek where mounting larks should sing" (III.3.183).

As this passage suggests, the particular bird that Shakespeare invokes here—the lark—is important. Even as birds (and bird song) frequently serve as symbols for the beauty and musicality of poetry, the *specific* bird matters. The lark is, for instance, a morning bird: Chaucer refers to it as "the messenger of day," and Shakespeare himself frequently invokes at as a time-keeper, a bird whose habits help human beings organize their daily tasks in the absence of widespread time-keeping devices. For example, in the songs that close *Love's Labour Lost*, Spring sings, "merry larks are ploughmen's clocks" (V.2.894). The lark is thus not simply a singer: the bird helps to regulate human activity.

The presence of a lark in a poem like "Sonnet 29" thus suggests an organized world, in which people behave in accordance with expected standards. To compare himself to a lark, as he does in line 11, suggests that the speaker has achieved some reconciliation with the rituals and standards of the world he protests against in the first eight lines of the poem.

The lark also sings as it flies—not while it's sitting on a branch or on the ground. This makes the lark a frequent symbol of prayer, since its song seems to rise (literally) into and through the heavens. The simile is proverbial, even clichéd. In a poem so much concerned with speech and its effects, it is striking that the speaker turns to such a commonplace, expected symbol here. It is as though, in his bliss, he is willing to accept the linguistic and symbolic resources of his culture without complaint.

Where this symbol appears in the poem:

- **Line 11:** "lark"

POETIC DEVICES

ALLITERATION

"Sonnet 29" contains one moment of particular alliterative intensity: the chain of /th/ sounds that appear in lines 9 and 10. These lines also contain moments of consonance, adding to the effect:

> Yet in these thoughts myself almost despising
> Haply I think on thee, and then my state

Almost every word in the lines exhibits either alliteration or consonance, binding them together in a tight net of sonic sameness. This raises interesting questions for the interpretation of the poem. This sonic sameness appears in the poem precisely at the moment when the speaker is trying to draw a distinction between two kinds of thoughts—his obsessive, anxious worries and his pleasurable, liberating love. The alliteration and consonance in the lines belie this distinction—suggesting that the two may not be so different after all. Perhaps the pleasure the speaker derives from reflecting on his love is related to the intensity of his anxiety—or a continuation of it.

Where Alliteration appears in the poem:

- **Line 2:** "all alone"
- **Line 9:** "these thoughts"
- **Line 10:** "think on thee, and then"
- **Line 11:** "Like to the lark"
- **Line 12:** "sullen earth sings," "hymns at heaven's"

APOSTROPHE

Like many of Shakespeare's sonnets, "Sonnet 29" speaks to someone. The poem is a love poem and its speaker addresses the man he loves directly, referring to him as "thee" and "thy"—almost as though we are overhearing a conversation between the two lovers. However, this conversational quality is a fiction: unlike in a play, where the lover might respond to or participate in the poem, the lover remains mute—even absent, more a literary convention than an actual person.

When the speaker addresses his lover in lines 10 and 13, then, he is engaging in apostrophe, rather than intimate conversation. This use of apostrophe has important consequences for the interpretation of the poem: if the poem initially feels like a very intimate and sweet communication between two people who care deeply about each other, the use of apostrophe might make it seem less intimate and less sweet.

The poem becomes, instead, a masterful invocation of the cliches and commonplaces of love poetry—a demonstration of poetic mastery rather than a document of heartfelt affection.

Where Apostrophe appears in the poem:

- **Line 10:** "Haply I think on thee"
- **Line 13:** "For thy sweet love"

CAESURA

"Sonnet 29" contains two caesuras, in lines 6 and 10. In iambic pentameter, caesuras generally fall after the fourth or the sixth foot in the line: roughly about the middle of the line. Putting the caesura there has a number of advantages. It feels natural to take a breath, to pause and reflect, in the middle of a line. Most importantly, it gives the poet an opportunity to balance the two halves of the line against each other, contradicting or complicating a thought introduced in the first half of the line.

For example, in line 10, the caesura neatly divides the line into two metrical and rhetorical halves. The line starts with an action: the speaker thinks about his lover. The line ends with the consequences of that action: his "state" is somehow transformed by his thoughts. (One doesn't fully learn what happens to his state until line 12, however). The caesura breaks up cause and effect—allowing listeners to reflect on each, and to ask questions about their relationship to each other. One might wonder, for instance, if just thinking about the lover is enough to produce this immense, almost miraculous transformation in the speaker's feelings.

Where Caesura appears in the poem:

- **Line 6:** ","
- **Line 10:** ","

DIACOPE

"Sonnet 29" contains a number of instances of diacope (and these instances often overlap with other poetic devices, such as caesura and alliteration). In lines 6 and 7 the speaker uses diacope repeatedly. In these cases, the device helps the speaker quickly sketch a series of complaints and jealousies: he describes separate (and likely imaginary) men who possess talent, opportunity, and beauty, and influence. In each case, he measures his own abilities and opportunities against theirs and finds himself wanting.

Here diacope underlines the obsessive fervor of anxiety: the way that worries breed and pile up on one another. Yet, at the same time, it also subtly suggests that the speaker's worries might be a little melodramatic. By repeating himself so closely as he lays out his anxieties, the speaker suggests that these are not separate anxieties, but all part of one larger, consuming worry. Instead of dwelling on a particular insecurity—say, the speaker's fear that he isn't as beautiful as other people—one might focus on the larger issue: this is a person who feels that he must be at least equal to, if not better than, other people in order to succeed in life.

Where Diacope appears in the poem:

- **Line 6:** "like him," "like him"
- **Line 7:** "man's," "man's"

ENJAMBMENT

The poem contains only two moments of enjambment, in lines 11 and 13. Given that this part of the poem describes the speaker's positive shift in mental state as he thinks about his beloved, this enjambment suggests a newfound exuberance that cannot be contained. Where the prior lines describing the speaker's various anxieties are entirely end-stopped, creating a sense of rhythmic drudgery, these enjambed lines burst free from punctuation, reflecting the strength of the speaker's joy at the thought of his beloved. The poetic device further reflects the content of these lines, as the poem breaks free from punctuation just as the lark flies up from "sullen earth" towards heaven.

Where Enjambment appears in the poem:

- **Lines 11-12:** "arising / From"
- **Lines 13-14:** "brings / That"

HYPERBOLE

The speaker in "Sonnet 29" uses hyperbole throughout the poem—in the opening section, listing his anxieties (is he *really* an outcast?), and in the final six lines, describing how wonderful his love makes him feel. For example, in lines 11 and 12, he compares his "state" (after he thinks of his lover) to a bird whose songs reach the gates of heaven. The simile is exultant: it describes a kind of joy that borders on religious ecstasy. It's also a little hard to believe: does the speaker really feel *that* great every time he thinks about his lover? One imagines that his thoughts are, at times, a bit more banal.

The use of hyperbole thus serves to reinforce the poem's energy—the depth of the speaker's despair; the height of his joy. At the same time, it also calls into question the poem's sincerity. The speaker is so given to melodrama and outrageous analogies that one may begin to distrust him: is his despair really so deep? Is his joy so extraordinary? A more measured, realistic set of comparisons might ultimately be more convincing.

Where Hyperbole appears in the poem:

- Line 2

- Lines 3-4
- Line 8
- Lines 11-14

PERSONIFICATION

"Sonnet 29" poses an implicit question that it doesn't quite answer—*why* is its speaker in an "outcast state"? What has he done to lose his friends and influence? The speaker does try to provide an answer to this question through personification. In the opening lines of the poem, he personifies both "fortune" and "heaven" and blames them for his bad luck.

The opening line of the poem, for instance, equates "fortune" and "men's eyes": the speaker is not only in disgrace with other people, he is also in disgrace with fortune. In turn, this implies that fortune itself has eyes—and the capacity to pass judgment on the speaker and his actions. The blame for his unhappiness is thus spread across human and non-human forces—and the speaker's personal responsibility for his situation is lessened. Perhaps he can control how other men see him, but he can't control how a non-human force like "fortune" or "heaven" behaves. If there's an implicit question about why the speaker of the poem is so miserable, the use of personification lessens the force of that question. It's not that he did something wrong or bad: fortune has turned against him on a whim.

Where Personification appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "in disgrace with fortune and men's eyes,"
- **Line 3:** "deaf heaven"

SIMILE

In lines 11 and 12, the speaker of "Sonnet 29" compares his "state" to a "lark at the break of day arising / From sullen earth" who "sings hymns at heaven's gate." The simile is in many ways traditional. Poets often compare themselves to birds: larks and nightingales. And they also often compare the soul to a bird, because of the way that souls rise toward the heavens.

The speaker takes these traditional comparisons and warps them slightly. In this instance, the simile has been removed from its usual religious context: rather than by being elevated by religious sentiment, the speaker's state is lifted by a romantic relationship. The simile—and the tradition behind it—thus serves to elevate the speaker's relationship to hyperbolic heights. It attains the dignity and sanctity of a religious experience. It is also a potentially blasphemous rhetorical gesture that calls into question how seriously one should take the speaker's claims.

Where Simile appears in the poem:

- **Lines 11-12:** "Like to the lark at break of day arising / From sullen earth sings hymns at heaven's gate;"

SYNECDOCHE

In line 1, the speaker notes that he is in "disgrace" with "men's eyes." This note has both a literal and a synechdochal meaning. On the one hand, the speaker might be implying that people have started looking at him askance, giving him mean or judgmental glances. Yet eyes don't judge: people do. That means that if he's receiving nasty looks, it's because *people* have turned against him and judged him. "Men's eyes" thus stand in for men and the whole of their judgement.

Where Synecdoche appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "men's eyes"

VOCABULARY

Fortune (Line 1) - In its most straightforward uses, the word refers to chance or luck. However, the word has a range of secondary senses which remain relevant here. For example, "fortune" often refers to wealth, a sense that echoes the use of the word "rich" in line 5 and "wealth" in line 13. The poem thus suggests that there's a relationship between one's chances and one's wealth—if you have more money you have better luck.Additionally, in Roman religion, fortune was worshiped as a deity, the goddess of luck. Renaissance writers often played on this antiquated belief, invoking fortune as though they were speaking to someone or something that controlled their lives. That sense is active here: the speaker is not simply "in disgrace" nor does he simply have bad fortune. Rather, he is "in disgrace *with* fortune," which gives fortune a measure of power over his life—the power to give, and then withdraw, grace.

Beweep (Line 2) - To weep over or something or to lament about it. The word is an archaic form of the verb to "weep"—and probably already sounded antiquated in Shakespeare's day. This makes the speaker sound a little stuffy and old-fashioned, even as it helps him fill out the meter of the line.

Outcast (Line 2) - The word usually connotes a sense of isolation and loneliness—though the degree and severity of this isolation varies across its senses. In its mildest form, it refers to a person who has been ostracized by friends, family, or an institution. In its more severe form, it refers to someone who has been cast out of society. The word thus has a melodramatic quality. Reading it here, one wonders how seriously to take it. Has the speaker of this poem been forced into the wilderness? Or has he simply lost a few friends? How seriously one takes the word shapes how seriously one should take the speaker's sense of despair.

State (Line 2, Line 10) - The word "state" might refer to a range

of distinct conditions. On the one hand, the word could refer to the speaker's emotional or mental circumstances. On the other, it might refer to his economic or social position, his social status. Most likely, the speaker wants listeners to hear all of these senses at once—to reflect on the relationship between one's social and emotional statuses.

Bootless (Line 3) - It might seem like the speaker of the poem has lost his shoes somewhere. He hasn't. The word "bootless" draws on a now mostly archaic use of the word "boot," which connotes something profitable and useful. (This use of the word survives in the phrase "to boot"—for example, "And he threw in a free radio to boot"). It also can refer to atonement—that is, seeking forgiveness for one's sins. To call something "bootless" thus suggests that it's pointless or unprofitable. Shakespeare often uses the word in a religious context to suggest failed or ineffective prayers. In *The Merchant of Venice*, for example, Antonio announces, "I'll follow him no more with bootless prayers" (3.3.20).

Hope (Line 5) - The word "hope" has two senses here. The first is more or less the way one usually uses the word, to refer to happy expectations. In this sense, the "one" to whom Shakespeare compares himself is not literally rich, but he does have strong prospects for a bright future. In the second sense, "hope" refers to wealth. This sense is slightly archaic, but, in the Renaissance, one might refer to someone who expects to inherit a lot of money when his father dies as someone with "hopes." In this second sense, the "one" is, once again, not himself rich—but he will be, soon. In this sense, the word "hope" resonates with the financial language that appears throughout the poem.

Scope (Line 7) - "Scope" has two relevant senses. First, it often refers to someone's freedom—how far they might travel or how much they might do. Second, it can refer to someone's talent or ability: their capacity to execute their projects and desires. The two senses are closely related to each other: one's talent is irrelevant if they don't have the freedom to use it. In this sense, the word recalls "outcast" in line 2. A reader might ask whether the poem's speaker is truly not free—or if he simply lacks the talent he needs to do what he wants. Whichever meaning one selects effects the interpretation of the poem (that is, how seriously they take Shakespeare's speaker and his troubles).

Contented (Line 8) - To be happy or satisfied. In its use here, the speaker suggests that the things he usually loves—that usually bring him contentment—fail to do so. His traditional pleasures and comforts have failed him. Shakespeare often uses the word in contexts where his speakers have lost their contentment and are reflecting on it with nostalgia. For example, in *Richard III*, the Queen rues the loss of the ease and freedom she enjoyed before becoming royalty: "By Him that raised me to this careful height / From that contented hap which I enjoy'd, / I never did incense his majesty..." (1.1.83-5).

Haply (Line 10) - It looks like the word "Haply" might be a contraction of the word "Happily"—one of those word places where Shakespeare collapses a word, cutting out vowels, to make it fit his meter. In fact, the word means "by chance" or "accidentally." This detail is important because it helps us understand the speaker. He doesn't consciously think about the man he loves when he wants to feel better—instead, those thoughts come to him by accident, without his agency or intention. This might suggest that he is not actively trying to escape from his bad mood—he might even be wallowing in it.

Lark (Line 11) - A lark is a small brown songbird that usually lives in meadows. Notably, it sings in flight, rather than singing while it's on a branch or in its nest. The lark is often used in literature as a symbol of the dawn. For example, Chaucer refers to it as "the busy lark, the messenger of daybreak."

Sullen (Line 12) - Though the word usually refers to gloomy or moody people—like teenagers—it can also refer to objects and things. When that happens, it might mean two different things. On the one hand, it might refer to the mood of the thing. Milton, for instance, refers to a gloomy day as "sullen." Or it might refer to the color of the thing: a solemn, dull color, usually gray or brown. Either—or both—senses are plausible readings here.

FORM, METER, & RHYME

FORM

"Sonnet 29" is a Shakespearean sonnet. Though the form bears his name, Shakespeare didn't actually invent it—he just popularized it. A Shakespearean sonnet uses iambic pentameter, has 14 lines, and follows a standard rhyme scheme. The first 12 lines consist of three quatrains that follow an ABAB rhyme scheme. The final two lines form a rhyming couplet.

Often in Shakespeare's sonnets, these units serve to organize the content of the poem so that Shakespeare starts talking about something new every four lines. "Sonnet 29" is a little different, however. For example, as one moves from line 4 to line 5, the speaker *continues* to lay out his anxieties: the first eight lines are a cascade of repetitive complaints. Indeed, readers don't even get a new sentence with the change of rhyme in each quatrain: the whole poem is one long sentence. It starts, in line 1, with the dependent clause of a conditional sentence.

Shakespeare is usually very careful with the way he organizes his poems, so that when a unit of rhyme ends a grammatical unit also closes. The long sentence—and the anxious, obsessive energy it embodies—thus disrupt the formal organization of the Shakespearean sonnet, with its usual rhetorical and grammatical divisions. It suggests that the speaker of this particular poem is so anxious and upset that he has lost control

of himself and his language.

The long sentence disrupts another important characteristic of the Shakespearean sonnet. Sonnets traditionally have a volta (or "turn), a place where the argument of the poem changes or where the speaker introduces a new perspective or idea. In Shakespeare's sonnets, the volta usually comes at line 13. In earlier sonnet structures, like the Petrarchan sonnet, the volta usually falls at the start of line 9.

Although this poem follows the usual rhyme scheme of the Shakespearean sonnet, its volta comes in line 9, where the sentence enters its main clause; lines 13 and 14 reiterate and expand what one learns in lines 9-12. Once again, the disruption to formal expectations for a Shakespearean sonnet suggests that the speaker has lost control and is experiencing real distress.

METER

"Sonnet 29" is written in iambic pentameter—a meter that Shakespeare uses throughout his dramatic and poetic work. Take, for example, line 2:

I all alone beweep my outcast state

Despite his immense skill with the meter, "Sonnet 29" contains a number of moments of metrical irregularity. There are trochees throughout the poem, for example. Lines 5, 6, and 10 start with trochees:

Wishing

Featured

Haply

Line 3 features stark metrical substitutions as well:

And trouble deaf heaven with my bootless cries

There is some debate whether "trouble" and "heaven" should be read as each having one syllable or two. Yet whether or not one swallows the final syllable of "trouble" or the final syllable of "heaven" as Renaissance speakers sometimes did, the line does not become fully regular. The result is a feeling of rhythmic instability, as though the speaker's anxiety was chopping his speech into taut, uneven bursts.

Lines 9 and 11 both feature feminine (or unstressed) endings that extend the line past the usual 10 syllables, but these disturbances are less severe than they initially appear. The stress in both words still falls on the tenth syllable of the line, right where one expects it. Indeed, reading the lines, one is not aware that anything is strange until reaching the eleventh syllable. The effect of these rhymes is thus like a slight syncopation, which does not ultimately upset the dominant rhythm of the poem. It is a notable moment, though, because Shakespeare so rarely uses feminine endings like these: another indication that this speaker is experiencing emotions that disturb the usual order and mastery of the Shakespearean sonnet.

RHYME SCHEME

"Sonnet 29" follows the standard rhyme scheme of the Shakespearean sonnet, consisting of three quatrains and a concluding couplet. There is one important substitution, however: lines 10 and 12 in the third quatrain rhyme with lines 2 and 4 in the first:

ABABCDCDEBEBGG

Typically, each quatrain would contain a set of new rhymes. This repetition—which doesn't simply rhyme, but directly *repeats* the word "state"—serves to remind the reader of the first part of the poem; as the speaker's mood shifts into a more positive one, the shared rhyme echoes the speaker's earlier declarations of misery in order to underscore how drastic his change in mood is—which, in turn, emphasizes the power of his love.

What's more, in most Shakespearean sonnets, the quatrains serve to mark out the internal boundaries of the sonnet's ideas: each unit of sound also functions as a unit of sense. However—perhaps as a result of the speaker's distress—this sonnet's single, repetitive sentence spills past these sonic boundaries.

Even so, the rhyme scheme is straightforward and assured. Nearly all of the rhymes in the poem are single syllable words; all of these single syllable words are also strongly stressed in their lines. Even if the lines are internally disturbed, they come to strong, confident end-points—suggesting, perhaps that the speaker's distress is not quite as serious as he says it is.

To modern ears, the rhyming of lines 6 and 8 looks like a slant rhyme. However, given the difference between Renaissance and modern English pronunciation, it's likely that Shakespeare's readers would have heard the word "least" as "lest."

SPEAKER

The speaker of "Sonnet 29" is an anonymous lover. He addresses the person he loves (traditionally believed to be a young man) directly, referring to him as "thee." His relationship with his lover seems strong, even sustaining: he turns to that relationship as a source of comfort during difficult periods. The rest of his life, outside his relationship, seems like a mess: he spends much of the poem detailing his anxieties and injuries. The speaker also appears to be obsessed with traditional markers of success—wealth and power—even as he begins to imagine, in the poem's final 6 lines, alternative forms of value.

There is a long tradition (which begins in 1780, with Edmund Malone's edition of the *Sonnets*) of reading these poems autobiographically—that is, as if they tell a true story about Shakespeare and his love affair with a young man who comes from a higher class. There is no evidence in this poem to support that reading. However, if one accepts it, some suggestive possibilities open up.

For instance, the speaker of the poem may find comfort in his relationship *because* his lover comes from a higher class: his relationship with the young man gives him access to wealthy and powerful circles he would be excluded from on his own. This reading makes the ending of the poem less sweet than it initially appears—Shakespeare's speaker becomes mercenary, leveraging his relationship into political and economic power. This reading, however, should be approached with considerable caution: it relies on a controversial theory about the relationship between Shakespeare's life and his own poems, which is a theory that the poem itself does not clearly support.

SETTING

"Sonnet 29" is not explicit about its setting. It is most likely setting is Renaissance London, the city where Shakespeare made his career as a playwright and actor—and where he mixed with members of the aristocracy, despite coming from common roots. More broadly, the poem's setting is a stratified society where wealth and social prestige determine one's capacity to succeed in life. The speaker locates his aspirations and complaints within the context of this society, even as he protests against it—and describes himself as an "outcast," someone who lives (unhappily) beyond its boundaries.

CONTEXT

LITERARY CONTEXT

"Sonnet 29" was most likely written in the 1590s, during a fad for sonnets that followed the publication of Sir Philip Sidney's *Astrophil and Stella* (1590). The sonnet developed from low-brow tavern songs in medieval Italian; it was transformed into an exalted form of love poetry by the Italian poets Dante Alighieri and Francesco Petrarch in the 13th and 14th centuries.

From there, it spread across Europe—though it did not become popular in England until the early 16th century, when Sir Thomas Wyatt began translating Petrarch's sonnets into English. But Sidney's *Astrophil* released an explosion of creative energy among English poets, with Edmund Spenser, Samuel Daniel, Michael Drayton, Thomas Lodge, and Barnabe Barnes all producing sonnet sequences in the decade. "Sonnet 29" was thus written at a moment when the sonnet was at the height of its popularity and prestige in English.

Of course, "Sonnet 29" wasn't actually published until 1609, long after the fad ended. The circumstances of the publication of the *Sonnets* are murky, but it was most likely pirated by the printer Thomas Thorpe. Shakespeare's *Sonnets* were perhaps his least popular text during the Renaissance. They were only reprinted once in the 17th century (in an altered order, assembled by the editor John Benson in 1640). They were not republished in their original order until 1780. The *Sonnets* only became canonical in the 19th century. "Sonnet 29" thus has a complicated relationship to its own literary context. It is written in response to a literary fad, but it only becomes a popular and important text 200 years after its composition.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

"Sonnet 29" describes a highly stratified world, where money, influence, and social status determine one's opportunities. This is in many ways an accurate reflection on the highly stratified society of Elizabethan England. Unlike contemporary societies, where it is permissible—and theoretically possible—for someone born into poverty to become wealthy and influential, the Elizabethans jealously guarded class and professional distinctions. They even passed laws regulating what clothes each class could wear—and prosecuted people for wearing the wrong thing.

This intense anxiety about class—and this desire to closely police it—reflects the transitional character of the period, which was shifting from a medieval world into an emerging capitalist society. Shakespeare himself was part of this emerging capitalist class: a commoner born in the countryside, he came to London and made a fortune in the theater. At the time of his death, he had become a member of the gentry, the third highest social class.

MORE RESOURCES

EXTERNAL RESOURCES

- The Elizabethan Sonnet Sequence — An article from the British Literature Wiki covering the broad dynamics of the Elizabethan sonnet sequence, with special attention to Shakespeare's sequence. (https://sites.udel.edu/britlitwiki/the-elizabethan-sonnet-sequence/)
- Sonnet 29 Read by Sir John Gielgud — Shakespearean actor Sir John Gielgud reads "Sonnet 29." (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=lz4qyEyRiiY)
- When the Bard Had the Blues — Alicia Ostriker analyzes "Sonnet 29" and writes about how it has affected her approach to her own writing—and the struggles that come with writing. (http://www.slate.com/articles/arts/classic_poems/2013/04/shakespeare_was_depressed_in_sonnet_29_the_bard_writes_of

- Lovers' Laments — Former US poet laureate Robert Pinsky writes about the sonnet craze of the 1590s. (https://slate.com/culture/2009/02/crazy-love-exquisite-pain-and-the-great-sonnet-fad-of-the-1590s.html)
- The Social Structure in Elizabethan England — Liza Picard describes the class system of Elizabethan England for the British Library. (https://www.bl.uk/shakespeare/articles/the-social-structure-in-elizabethan-england)

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 20: A woman's face with nature's own hand painted
- 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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