Sonnet 33: Full many a glorious morning have I

POEM TEXT

Full many a glorious morning have I seen
Flatter the mountain-tops with sovereign eye,
Kissing with golden face the meadows green,
Gilding pale streams with heavenly alchemy;
Anon permit the basest clouds to ride
With ugly rack on his celestial face,
And from the forlorn world his visage hide,
Stealing unseen to west with this disgrace.
Even so my sun one early morn did shine
With all-triumphant splendour on my brow;
But out, alack! he was but one hour mine,
The region cloud hath mask'd him from me now.
Yet him for this my love no whit disdaineth;
Suns of the world may stain when heaven's sun staineth.

SUMMARY

I've seen plenty of beautiful mornings—mornings when the lordly sun looks kindly on the mountains, kisses the green meadows with his golden light, and turns pale brooks to gold with his celestial magic—when then, all of a sudden, the sun lets lowly clouds disfigure his heavenly face, hiding him from the sorrowful world, and then creeps away, ashamed, to set in the west. My "sun," my lover, "shone" on me just that way one lovely morning, both blessing and conquering me with the light of his love. But alas! That only lasted a short while. Now, the clouds have come to separate him from me. But in spite of that, I don't love him any less: mortal men will certainly fail sometimes, if even the sun itself does.

THEMES

LOVE AND FORGIVENESS

The speaker of "Sonnet 33" is trying his best to get over his lover's betrayal. Comparing his straying or withholding lover to the sun, the speaker reflects that even the most beautiful morning sometimes lets itself be spoiled by storm clouds. If even the mighty sun can be "staine[d]" this way, then it only follows that even the most wonderful of people should fail sometimes, too. Not even a truly glorious lover, this speaker concludes, can be expected to be perfect all the time, meaning that love can't survive without forgiveness. In other words, love has to outlast even painful disillusionment.

The love that the speaker and his beloved have shared is like morning sunlight: it transforms and glorifies the whole world with its "kiss[es]." But the sun itself sometimes ducks behind the clouds—so it follows that a mere "sun of the world" (a pun on "son of the world," an everyday mortal) should also falter from time to time. Imagining the sun slinking off to the west to set in "disgrace," the speaker hints that his lover has done something truly shameful: if his lover was only "an hour mine," it seems pretty likely that he's cheated on the speaker.

But even the worst misbehavior doesn't have to mean the end of love. If the glorious sun itself can't shine all the time, the speaker concludes, he can't expect his lover to behave perfectly all the time, either.

This doesn't mean the speaker isn't clearly hurt by his lover's betrayal! The speaker imagines the "clouds" of bad behavior that have blocked out his lover's metaphorical light as "ugly" and "base[]" (or lowly). But, taking the long perspective, he's also willing to be philosophical about his lover's inconstancy, and to go on loving in spite of his suffering. Even if his *lover* can't shine steadily all the time, in other words, the speaker's *love* for his lover can. To love, the speaker implies, one has to learn to forgive.

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-14

THE PAIN OF DISAPPOINTMENT AND DISILLUSIONMENT

While the speaker of this poem swears that he loves his beloved as much as ever in spite of his betrayal, the poem hints that the speaker is also seriously disappointed. The speaker's images of his lover as the sun suggest that he's used to seeing his lover in an idealized and even divine light. But when his lover cheats on him, he has to accept that his lover *isn't* perfect: he's just a man "of the world," an ordinary mortal. Imperfection, this poem suggests, is a fact of life, and it doesn't have to mean the end of love—but it's also a bitter pill to swallow.

This speaker's image of a sun covered by storm clouds suggests that he's gone from seeing his lover as an ideal, almost godlike figure to understanding that he's actually fallible. Just as the sun goes from benevolently blessing the world with golden light to shamefacedly scurrying behind the clouds, the speaker's lover has lost his shine. Through some unknown

betrayal or failure, he's gone from seeming like a glorious god to an ordinary, disappointing person.

In the wake of this disappointment, the speaker might even be questioning his whole relationship with his lover. When he imagines the sun "flatter[ing]" the mountaintops, there's a hint that he's reexamining the love they shared, wondering if it might have been founded more on convenient lies than sincere feeling.

While the speaker accepts that even his idealized lover is a flawed, mortal man—and vows that he doesn't love him any less for it—a hint of bitterness in the speaker's tone suggests that accepting this kind of disappointment isn't easy. Imagining his lover as a mere "sun of the world"—that is, in a pun, a "son of the world," a guy just like any other guy—he at once seems to accept that his lover is flawed, and to feel as if he's lost some special magic. It's really as if the life-giving light of the sun has flickered out for him.

Romantic disappointment isn't just inherently painful, this poem suggests: it's also disillusioning, a disenchantment that can bring an idealized love right down to earth.

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Lines 5-8
- Lines 11-14

LINE-BY-LINE ANALYSIS

LINES 1-2

Full many a glorious morning have I seen
Flatter the mountain-tops with sovereign eye,

"Sonnet 33" begins with a reminiscence: the speaker thinks back on beautiful mornings he's known, when the sun shone beautifully on the mountains.

Already, in the first two lines, something metaphorical seems to be going on here. The speaker personifies the remembered lovely morning: its "sovereign eye"—that is, the sun itself, full of regal power—doesn't just shine down on the mountains, but "flatter[s]" them. It's as if the sun is gazing admiringly at the world, like a lover. And since this poem is a sonnet—a form of poetry that often deals with love—the reader might already get the sense that the relationship between the sun and the world here might be about human lovers, too.

The image of the sun in particular makes that reading especially likely: the idea of the beloved as the sun was so common in Shakespeare's time that it was almost a cliché. (Shakespeare even makes fun of this trope himself in "Sonnet 130.")

If this sun is indeed an image of the speaker's beloved, there's not just romance in the air, but a hint of danger. The word "flatter" has some less-than-happy connotations: it can mean merely to compliment or praise, but it most often suggests *insincere* praise. In other words: the landscape the speaker is imagining here is already charged with both romance and deceit. This poem will certainly be about love. But it will deal not just with love's glory, but with dishonesty, disappointment, and disillusionment.

There's danger here, but there's also plenty of beauty. The delicate, harmonious assonance of "glorious morning," for instance, makes those mornings a pleasure to hear about, not just to envision. Here at the start of the poem, the speaker is going to luxuriate in memories of what it was like when the sunshine of his life—his beloved—was shining on him full force.

LINES 3-4

Kissing with golden face the meadows green,
Gilding pale streams with heavenly alchemy;

Over the next couple of lines, the speaker sinks even deeper into his memory of past gorgeous mornings. In fact, he slides subtly from a focus on the *morning* to a focus on its "sovereign eye": the sun, and the "glorious" light it sheds.

The sun, in these lines, is personified both as a lover and a sorcerer, first "kissing" the world and then performing "heavenly alchemy" on it, magically turning it into gold. This sun's love, in other words, is a powerful enchantment: it has the power to transmute the ordinary world into something shining, rich, and rare.

Take a look at the way the speaker uses parallelism here:

Kissing with golden face the meadows green,
Gilding pale streams with heavenly alchemy;

Starting both these lines with a verb, the speaker makes it clear that the sun is a living force here, acting on the earth. The earth just sits back, dazzled, and lets itself be "kiss[ed]" and "gild[ed]" (or turned to gold).

The rich imagery of these lines evokes what it feels like to be deeply in love—and makes it even clearer that the sun here is a metaphor for the speaker's beloved. Just as the sun seems to turn all of nature to gold, the lover's presence makes ordinary life feel overwhelmingly beautiful to the speaker.

The speaker might even be looking at the world both metaphorically and literally here. He might well have shared some *actual* golden mornings with his beloved—and seen the world looking even more glowing and gorgeous in the light of his own darling "sun." These lines, in other words, are a powerful evocation of the way that deep love can transform one's life. The "heavenly alchemy" of a lover's presence can turn any morning to gold.

But alas, this speaker knows only too well that the weather never stays sunny forever.

LINES 5-6

Anon permit the basest clouds to ride
With ugly rack on his celestial face,

In these lines, it turns out the speaker isn't just thinking back fondly on sunshiny mornings. Instead, all those images of the amorous sun's "golden" light have just been a lead-up to memories of how quickly that light can fade.

As the speaker imagines the sun getting covered up with clouds, his personification gets a lot more pointed. The sun, now clearly imagined as a man, isn't a helpless victim of the clouds: he willingly "permit[s]" them to cover "his celestial face." And the clouds themselves aren't innocent fluffy beings going about their business, but the "basest," lowliest, unworthiest creatures. And they're "ugly," too.

Clearly, the speaker is not just talking about clouds here. All this personification suggests that the speaker's beloved "sun" has betrayed him. What's worse, the beloved has betrayed the speaker with someone the speaker clearly feels is second-rate, "base[]" and "ugly."

Listen to how alliteration evokes the speaker's sorrow and rage at this betrayal:

> Anon permit the basest clouds to ride
> With ugly rack on his celestial face,

Those two rough /r/ sounds make it seem as if the speaker is practically growling these lines. There's also an intense contrast here between the dense, lumpy sound of the word "ugly" and the airy delicacy of the /s/, /t/, and /l/ sounds in "celestial face." These clouds, the speaker clearly feels, are a true affront to the sun's heavenly beauty, unworthy of the sun's loveliness and dignity.

It's worth noting here that the exact nature of the beloved's betrayal isn't totally clear. The beloved could have done anything from actually cheating on the speaker to merely turning his attention elsewhere for a while. (The image of clouds "rid[ing]" on the sun's "celestial face" does rather suggest some kind of physical contact, though.)

Whatever has happened, the speaker feels it deeply—not just because he's lost the "sunlight" of his beloved's attention, but because seeing his beloved behave this way is a painful disillusionment. How could that "celestial" creature choose to associate with such hideous "clouds"?

LINES 7-8

And from the forlorn world his visage hide,
Stealing unseen to west with this disgrace.

When those lowly, "ugly" clouds cover up the sun's "celestial face," the speaker goes on, the world is left "forlorn": lonely, longing, and heartbroken. But perhaps the sun doesn't feel totally great about things, either. In these lines, the speaker imagines the sun "stealing" away behind those engulfing clouds, creeping away to set in "disgrace."

Through this extended metaphor of the beloved as the sun, the speaker paints a subtle portrait of a real person's behavior—and of his own changing feelings about his beloved. Like a lot of people who are head-over-heels in love (including some of Shakespeare's most famous characters), the speaker can at first only see his beloved as an ideal: a "heavenly" figure like a sun god, bringing sublime light, warmth, and beauty to the world.

Now that he's watched his "sun" betray him, though, the speaker can also see the beloved as a guilty little boy, sneaking away, knowing he's done wrong. There's something almost funny about the unlikely image of the sun itself setting in "disgrace."

The ease with which mere clouds can block out the sun's almighty power is a vivid image of the problem the speaker finds himself dealing with as he's forced to reckon with his idealized beloved's failings. Even his beloved's apparent guilt over his bad behavior is disillusioning: who would ever have imagined that the sun itself could be ashamed?

LINES 9-12

Even so my sun one early morn did shine
With all-triumphant splendour on my brow;
But out, alack! he was but one hour mine,
The region cloud hath mask'd him from me now.

Having completed his elaborate metaphorical portrait of a sun defaced by ugly clouds, the speaker at last spells things out: yes, the sun has been an image of his beloved all along. But his glorious, life-giving time with this beloved was all too short: the beloved was with the speaker for what felt like "but one hour," and now he's "mask'd" by those clouds, those other, lesser lovers.

After all the rich imagery of the first eight lines, there's something poignantly straightforward about this quatrain. The speaker is still using vivid and powerful language, of course. When he imagines his lover's "light" shining on his "brow," he suggests the sheer power of the love they once shared: merely being touched by that "splendour" feels "all-triumphant," both like being utterly conquered and like winning the whole world. But the speaker is also simply describing what happened here: he spent a brief time with his beloved, and now his beloved is "mask'd" from him, hidden away. The speaker's dismay comes out, at last, in a plain exclamation of grief: "Out, alack!"

There's a subtle hint in this passage that the speaker feels like he's separated from his beloved, not just by his beloved's infidelity, but by class differences:

- The "region cloud" here could simply mean the clouds in the sky—"region" was one word for the

heavens. But "region" also had connotations of social standing: one's "region" was one's class.
- And the rest of Shakespeare's sonnets make it clear that the young beloved he's addressing here was a nobleman, well above the middle-class Shakespeare by birth. (See the Context section for more on that.)
- Perhaps the "clouds" that have obscured the speaker's beloved are also "above" the speaker in social status. If that's true, no matter how "base[]" and "ugly" they might seem to him, those clouds get to travel with the beloved in a social world the speaker doesn't quite have access to.

The speaker's dilemma, in other words, is a complex and deeply wounding one. Not only has the speaker's beloved betrayed him, he's left him "grounded," forlornly looking up to the heavens. The speaker only got a taste of this beloved's "all-triumphant splendour" before the beloved withdrew into his own lofty world again.

LINES 13-14

Yet him for this my love no whit disdaineth;
Suns of the world may stain when heaven's sun staineth.

All of this poem's complex and conflicted feelings come to a head in its concluding couplet. In an English sonnet like this one, the final two rhymed lines often introduce a *volta*, or turning point: they propose a solution to the problems that the first part of the poem has raised, or offer a surprising new angle. This couplet does both.

In spite of my beloved's betrayal, the speaker concludes, I still love him just as much as I ever did. If even the actual, real-life sun sometimes gets "stain[ed]" by clouds, how can I expect a "sun of the world" like my beloved to remain pristine?

These powerful lines hold a lot of conflicting feelings together at once. On the one hand, this is a statement of deep, mature forgiveness and profound love. If the speaker's love isn't altered one little bit by his lover's betrayal, he's accepting his lover fully as a fallible human being—loving him in spite of the fact that he isn't a radiant god, and in spite of the fact that he has wounded the speaker deeply.

On the other, there's terrible disappointment in the speaker's voice. Listen to how those feelings play out in the poem's final line:

> Suns of the world may stain when heaven's sun staineth.

There's a meaningful pun here. A "sun of the world" could also be a "son of the world," a regular old guy. Perhaps the speaker is even implying that his beloved is "worldly" in the negative sense, caught up in petty concerns—like, just for instance, the difference in social status between the two of them.

Watching his beloved turn from a figure of "all-triumphant splendour" to a mere son of the world is a pretty serious disillusionment for the speaker. And his image of his lover's betrayal as a "stain" suggests that this disillusionment is going to leave a permanent mark.

The speaker clearly feels like he's visited the very brink of heaven in his lover's company. Now, he has to accept that his lover both has the power to make him feel like the whole world has turned to gold, and to behave like a small-minded, disloyal, regular old human.

In the end, then, with Shakespearean subtlety, the speaker of this poem makes a grand claim of enduring love and a bitter statement of disappointment at exactly the same time.

POETIC DEVICES

CONSONANCE

This poem's consonance—and especially its sibilance—help to evoke the speaker's complex feelings.

In the first half of the poem, the speaker's consonance suggests his relish of an imagined morning, a day when the sun seems to turn the landscape to gold. Listen to the gentle repeated consonant sounds in these lines:

> Flatter the mountain-tops with sovereign eye,
> Kissing with golden face the meadows green,
> Gilding pale streams with heavenly alchemy;

Here, the speaker's delicate, tip-of-the-tongue /t/ sounds, whispery /s/ sounds, and muted /d/ and /g/ sounds all make it seem as if he's quietly relishing these words: this scene is as delicious to describe as it is to experience first-hand. And the long /l/ sounds of line 4 feel stretched-out and luxurious, just like those "streams" under the sun's golden touch.

But soon, the "basest clouds" come out and ruin everything. Describing this terrible change, the speaker uses some of the same sounds to very different effect:

> Stealing unseen to west with this disgrace.

Now, those sibilant /s/ sounds feel more like an angry hiss or a stormy wind than a soft whisper. And the /t/ sound feels sharper here, adding a sting to the speaker's tone.

Consonance, in other words, subtly gives voice to the speaker's feelings: the reader can hear both his pleasure and his pain in the sounds he uses.

Where Consonance appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "many," "morning"

- **Line 2:** “Flatter,” “mountain,” “tops,” “sovereign”
- **Line 3:** “Kissing,” “golden,” “face,” “meadows,” “green”
- **Line 4:** “Gilding,” “pale,” “heavenly,” “alchemy”
- **Line 5:** “ride”
- **Line 6:** “rack,” “celestial,” “face”
- **Line 7:** “from,” “forlorn,” “his,” “visage”
- **Line 8:** “Stealing,” “unseen,” “west,” “this,” “disgrace”
- **Line 9:** “so,” “sun,” “shine”
- **Line 10:** “splendour”
- **Line 12:** “mask'd,” “him,” “from”
- **Line 14:** “Suns,” “stain,” “heaven's,” “sun,” “staineth”

ASSONANCE

Assonance, like consonance and alliteration, helps to communicate the speaker's feelings—and to give the poem its music. In the very first line, for example, the assonance (and consonance) of "glorious morning" makes the phrase itself sound all the more glorious. The repetition of sound draws readers' attention to just how wonderful this morning is. The long /ee/ and short /eh/ sound of "streams with heavenly alchemy" in line 4 similarly add pleasant music to a line describing a pleasant scene.

Also listen to the repeated short /i/ sounds in one of the poem's most important lines:

> Yet him for this my love no whit disdaineth;

That /i/ sound is pretty gentle: it's an unassuming, closed-off little vowel. But it subtly binds this whole line together and suggests that the speaker might be delivering this dramatic statement quietly.

The speaker is making a pretty big claim here, insisting that his feelings for his beloved haven't changed one "whit" in the wake of betrayal. His gentle /i/ assonance, though, suggests that he's speaking softly: not bellowing his love from the mountaintops, but calmly (and perhaps sadly) accepting his persistent love for a disloyal man.

Where Assonance appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** “glorious,” “morning”
- **Line 2:** “tops,” “sovereign”
- **Line 3:** “green”
- **Line 4:** “streams,” “heavenly,” “alchemy”
- **Line 8:** “Stealing,” “unseen,” “this,” “disgrace”
- **Line 9:** “sun,” “one,” “shine”
- **Line 10:** “triumphant,” “brow”
- **Line 11:** “out,” “but,” “one”
- **Line 12:** “cloud,” “now”
- **Line 13:** “him,” “this,” “whit,” “disdaineth”
- **Line 14:** “may,” “stain,” “staineth”

IMAGERY

The poem's rich imagery evokes the speaker's deep (and conflicted) feelings about his lover.

The first eight lines of the poem are one long description of changing morning sunlight. The speaker first imagines a "glorious" morning when the sun seems to be romancing the earth: it "flatter[s]" the mountains and "kiss[es]" the meadows. Under this sun's "golden" light, the fields are a vivid "green," and even "pale streams" are "gild[ed]," turning to pure gold. There's something magical about this sunlight: it has "heavenly alchemy," a sorcerer's power to transform the ordinary world into something richer, brighter, and more precious.

All these images evoke not just the beauty of a spring morning, but the way the speaker feels when his lover is around. To this speaker, his lover's presence is like the sun itself, bringing heavenly warmth, light, and beauty to his ordinary life.

But there's trouble in paradise: clouds appear on the scene to hide the sun from the speaker. To the speaker, these clouds aren't just a passing nuisance: they're a "stain," an "ugly" blot on the face of the sun. They're also a "mask[]," something that conceals the sun's true nature.

All this imagery helps readers to feel the depth of the speaker's emotion. The transition from the transcendent beauty of the sunlight to the "ugly rack" of the clouds feels like a real fall from grace: through his lover's betrayal, the speaker seems to have been cast from paradise.

Where Imagery appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-8
- Line 12
- Line 14

PERSONIFICATION

The speaker's personification of the sun hints that this sun is a metaphor for the speaker's beloved right from the start—and also gives readers a clear portrait of that beloved.

The personified sun in the first lines of the poem behaves both like a lover and a magician. It's an active force, bestowing its gifts on the earth: it "kiss[es]" and "gild[s]" the landscape, romancing it one minute and transforming it the next. More ominously, it also "flatter[s]" the world. Flattery might be, well, flattering, but it also might be insincere. As early as the poem's second line, there are already hints that the speaker is thinking back on his lover's behavior a little skeptically: was his beloved's affection for him all talk, after all?

And indeed, this personified sun also misbehaves: it "permit[s]" the lowliest of clouds to mar its "celestial face," an image that suggests the beloved has betrayed the speaker with someone the speaker sees as deeply unworthy. At least the sun has the decency to be ashamed about it: behind the clouds, it "steal[s]"

away in "disgrace."

All this personification gives the reader a pretty vivid portrait of the speaker's beloved. On the one hand, he's a man so heartbreakingly beautiful and generous that he enchants the speaker, casting a "heavenly" spell over him. On the other hand, he's a false "flatter[er]," one who betrays the speaker with the "basest" company—and who, judging by his "disgrace," knows only too well that he's behaved badly.

Where Personification appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-8

PARALLELISM

The speaker uses parallelism to evoke the behavior of both the literal sun and his metaphorical "sun": his lover. For instance, take a look at the poem's first lines:

> Full many a glorious morning have I seen
> Flatter the mountain-tops with sovereign eye,
> Kissing with golden face the meadows green,
> Gilding pale streams with heavenly alchemy;

Here, the speaker shapes lines 2-4 in exactly the same way, starting them off with a striking verb that describes the sun's actions as it "flatter[s]," "kiss[es]," and even "gild[s]" the earth. By drawing attention to the sun's actions, parallelism here suggests the sun is an active, benevolent force, bestowing its almost magical light and warmth on the world below.

When that parallel sentence construction returns a few lines later, though, things have changed. Now, the sun is not shining, but creeping away behind the clouds in shame:

> Stealing unseen to west with this disgrace.

Here, parallelism makes it clear that even the benevolent sun isn't totally reliable: it can switch from "kissing" to "stealing" away in a matter of moments.

A sharp moment of parallelism also shapes the poem's closing line:

> Suns of the world may stain when heaven's sun staineth.

The second half of this line mirrors the first, making the speaker's final comparison crystal-clear: if even the actual sun gets "stain[ed]" by clouds, why shouldn't a mere "sun of the world" like his lover "stain," too?

Where Parallelism appears in the poem:

- **Lines 2-4:** "Flatter the mountain-tops with sovereign eye, / Kissing with golden face the meadows green, / Gilding pale streams with heavenly alchemy;"
- **Line 8:** "Stealing unseen to west with this disgrace."
- **Line 14:** "Suns of the world may stain when heaven's sun staineth."

PUN

"Sonnet 33" ends with a pun that encapsulates all the speaker's complicated feelings about his straying lover. Having lamented his lover's betrayal, the speaker at last concludes that he still adores his beloved as much as ever: for if even "heaven's sun" can be "stain[ed]" by clouds, "[s]uns of the world" can certainly be less than perfect, too.

There's an obvious pun here between "sun" and "son": the beloved here is both a "sun of the world," a sublime and beautiful creature, and a mere "son of the world," a guy like any other.

And that pun sums up exactly the dilemma the speaker is grappling with. Head over heels in love, he sees his beloved as an idealized figure like a sun god, a force of "glorious" beauty and power. But when his beloved strays, he's forced to acknowledge that he's *not* a god: he's a normal, fallible human being.

There's thus something at once poignant and bitter in this pun. Through a play on words, the speaker manages to both *maintain* his image of the beloved as a "sun"—as beautiful and adored as ever—and *undercut* that image. The speaker's problem, this pun suggests, isn't merely that he's disillusioned and disappointed. It's that he's disillusioned, disappointed—and just as deeply in love as he was before his beloved betrayed him.

Where Pun appears in the poem:

- **Line 14:** "Suns of the world may stain when heaven's sun staineth."

METAPHOR

The central metaphor of this poem—the lover as a sun—wouldn't have been an unfamiliar one to Shakespeare's readers. The sun/lover metaphor was so common in Elizabethan poetry that it was almost a cliché. (Shakespeare himself even made fun of this trope in "Sonnet 130.")

But here, the speaker is interested not only in the beautiful ways a lover might be like the sun—shining, warm, life-giving—but also in the painful ways. The gorgeous morning sun, the speaker notes, has a way of letting itself get smothered by the "basest" (or lowliest) clouds. And his sun-like beloved has behaved in just the same way, shining on the speaker for "but one hour" before hiding his light. The implication is that the beloved has turned his attention to someone other than the

speaker—and the speaker is not happy about it.

Of course, it's not just the sun that's metaphorical here, but the clouds. Take a look at the language the speaker uses to describe them: they're "base[]" and "ugly," and they bring "disgrace" upon the sun. These clouds could at once represent the other lovers who have stolen the beloved away, and the beloved's betrayal itself. Either way, they're a "stain" on the beloved in the speaker's eyes.

There's the sense here that the speaker isn't just hurt and disappointed that his lover has turned away from him. He's also outraged. His language suggests that he feels his beloved's behavior is totally unworthy: how could a person of such sun-like glory behave so "base[ly]," and with such "ugly" company? But then, he concludes, the literal sun itself gets "stain[ed]" this way, too. Nothing, this disillusioned speaker's metaphors suggest, is perfect.

Where Metaphor appears in the poem:

- **Lines 9-12:** "Even so my sun one early morn did shine / With all-triumphant splendour on my brow; / But out, alack! he was but one hour mine, / The region cloud hath mask'd him from me now."
- **Line 14:** "Suns of the world may stain when heaven's sun staineth."

ALLITERATION

Like consonance and assonance, alliteration helps readers to feel the speaker's emotion. For instance, listen to the /r/ sounds the speaker uses as he describes the clouds coming to cover his beloved "sun":

> Anon permit the basest clouds to ride
> With ugly rack on his celestial face,

The aggressive /r/ sound in "ride" and "rack" might evoke both the rumbling of thunderclouds and the speaker's own pain and anger: there's an enraged growl in these words.

In other moments, alliteration adds emphasis to the speaker's imagery. Note the /g/ sounds of "golden," "green," and "Gilding" in lines 3-4, for example, which calls readers' attention to the immense beauty of the sun's gaze on the world below.

Where Alliteration appears in the poem:

- **Line 3:** "golden," "green"
- **Line 4:** "Gilding"
- **Line 5:** "ride"
- **Line 6:** "rack"
- **Line 7:** "from," "forlorn," "his," "hide"
- **Line 8:** "Stealing," "unseen," "west," "with"
- **Line 9:** "so," "sun"
- **Line 10:** "splendour"
- **Line 12:** "mask'd," "me"
- **Line 14:** "Suns," "stain," "sun," "staineth"

VOCABULARY

Full many (Line 1) - Plenty, a lot of.

Sovereign (Line 2) - Lordly, powerful.

Gilding (Line 4) - Coating in a thin layer of gold.

Alchemy (Line 4) - A branch of magic dedicated to turning lesser metals into gold—here used metaphorically to describe the way sunlight makes the water look golden.

Anon (Line 5) - Soon, shortly.

Basest (Line 5) - Lowliest, most ignoble.

Rack (Line 6) - This word can mean both "torment" and "a mass of clouds."

Celestial (Line 6) - Heavenly.

Forlorn (Line 7) - Longing and lonely.

Visage (Line 7) - Face.

Stealing (Line 8) - Creeping away.

All-triumphant (Line 10) - Completely overpowering.

Out, Alack! (Line 11) - A cry of dismay—like "Alas!"

Region (Line 12) - In this context, this word is an adjective meaning "of the sky or the heavens," but there also might be subtle class connotations here: one's "region" could also be one's social status.

No Whit (Line 13) - Not even a little bit.

FORM, METER, & RHYME

FORM

This poem is a classic Shakespearean sonnet. That means that it's a 14-line poem broken down into four sections: three quatrains and a concluding couplet. The first three quatrains work together to establish an idea or a problem, and the final couplet introduces a *volta*, a new twist or a surprising conclusion.

This particular sonnet has more than one twist. Here, the first two quatrains paint a vivid picture of a gorgeous sunny morning ruined by clouds. The third quatrain then introduces a metaphor that compares the shamed and clouded sun to the speaker's unfaithful lover. And in the couplet, the speaker concludes: *in spite of my lover's failings, I love him still.*

METER

This poem, like most English-language sonnets, is written in iambic pentameter. That means that every line is built from five iambs, metrical feet with a da-DUM rhythm.

Here's how that looks in line 12:

> The re- | gion cloud | hath mask'd | him from | me now.

But—like a lot of sonnets—"Sonnet 33" doesn't stick to that rhythm all the way through. In fact, a lot of the lines here lead in with a trochee, a front-loaded foot with a DUM-da rhythm, as in line 3:

> Kissing | with gol- | den face | the mead- | ows green,

Trochees like this turn up at the beginning of every line in which the speaker imagines the glorious sun at work, "flatter[ing]" the mountains, "kissing" the fields, and "gilding" the streams. Those strong initial stresses make it feel as if the speaker is getting swept up in his wistful memories of those sunlit mornings.

And take a look at the emphasis a trochee lends to the poem's blistering conclusion:

> Suns of | the world | may stain | when heaven's | sun staineth.

Stressing the word "suns" (a pun on "sons"), the speaker's initial trochee here makes his final point crystal clear: his glorious, idealized lover is, after all, only a normal guy.

RHYME SCHEME

"Sonnet 33" uses the traditional rhyme scheme of a Shakespearean sonnet, which runs like this:

ABABCDCDEFEFGG

These rhymes help to break the poem into sections: three quatrains with that back-and-forth ABAB pattern, and a closing couplet with two quick rhymes in a row.

In this particular poem, the movement from the quatrains into the couplet almost works like the setup and punchline to a bitter joke. In spite of everything, the speaker concludes, he can still adore his cheating lover: why should a mere "sun of the world" not duck behind the clouds sometimes, just like the real sun? The pun on "sun" here suggests that, for all the speaker still feels his love deeply, he's also disillusioned: he sees his lover as a mere "son of the world" now, not a godlike ideal. Saving that pun for the last couplet, the speaker conveys his disillusionment with a powerful one-two punch of rhyme.

SPEAKER

The speaker of this sonnet is suffering. Deeply in love, he's trying to come to terms with the fact that his beautiful young lover has betrayed him. At the end of the poem, he seems to have reached a calm, philosophical conclusion: even the sun allows itself to be "stain[ed]" by clouds, so it only makes sense that a mere mortal like his lover should sometimes do wrong. The speaker's love can endure in spite of his lover's weakness.

But it's clear that this thought is cold comfort. The simple fact that the speaker compares his lover to the sun suggests that his lover once seemed almost godlike to him: a force of magical, life-giving beauty, light, and warmth. Now, the speaker might even be questioning whether their former love was all that it seemed, or merely cheap "flatter[y]." At the very least, he knows now that his lover is no sun: he's just a "sun of the world"—or *son* of the world, a flawed mortal guy like any other.

We're calling the speaker "he" here because of this sonnet's larger context. "Sonnet 33" is part of a long sequence of Shakespeare's sonnets, poems traditionally (though not exclusively) read as autobiographical. And in his subtle wit, his complicated feelings, and his powerful imagery, this speaker is—if not Shakespeare himself—then certainly Shakespearean.

SETTING

This poem's setting is more metaphorical than literal. The sun-kissed dawn landscape that the speaker imagines at the beginning of the poem seems real and vivid, but it's also an image of the way the speaker feels about his lover's behavior.

This setting evokes both the enchantment of love and the pain of disappointment. The sun, which represents the speaker's lover in this imagined landscape, "kiss[es]" the fields and "gild[s] pale streams," making the everyday world shine as if it were made of gold. But it also "permit[s]" ugly clouds to cover its face, hiding it from the world that seems to love it so. And in doing so, it knows it's in the wrong: it scurries away in "disgrace."

This landscape thus evokes the feeling of a good thing gone wrong! This speaker's disappointment and pain over his lover's betrayal feels like the sinking feeling of watching a perfect spring morning get ruined by low, dull rainclouds. (This setting thus feels not just emotionally precise, but deeply British, grounded in Shakespeare's native turf.)

CONTEXT

LITERARY CONTEXT

"Sonnet 33" is one of William Shakespeare's 154 sonnets—a series of poems that reflect on love, desire, beauty, time,

mortality, and faith. The first 126 of these sonnets are known as the "Fair Youth" sequence, and address a beautiful young man the speaker has fallen deeply in love with. The rest of the sonnets are devoted to another beloved, the mysterious "Dark Lady" (except for the final two, which are mythological tales about the love god Cupid himself). In their interest in the pains and pleasures of love, their elegant wit, and their ingenious construction, these poems epitomize the sonnet form.

Sonnets were wildly popular during Shakespeare's lifetime. The English sonnet's tight, intricate shape demanded a lot of poetic skill, and was an ideal place to deploy the clever wordplay Elizabethans loved. And with their steady, heartbeat-like meter and harmonious rhymes, sonnets were also strongly associated with an evergreen subject: love.

While Shakespeare is the best-known sonnet-writer in English, he's far from the only one. The sonnet is still a popular form to this day, and poets from Donne to Milton to Keats to Rossetti have written famous examples.

But part of what makes Shakespeare's sonnet sequence special is the insight it gives readers into the life of one of the most influential—and most mysterious—of poets. As a playwright, Shakespeare seems to inhabit myriad different characters without ever revealing himself. But the sonnets have traditionally been read as at least somewhat autobiographical, and in them readers find a poet grappling with his own overwhelming feelings—and transmuting them into intricate, elegant art.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Readers new to Shakespeare's sonnets might be surprised that most of them are addressed from a male speaker to a young man. Explicitly erotic and romantic, these poems don't necessarily fit in with how a modern reader might expect the Elizabethans (that is, people who lived under the 16th-century reign of Queen Elizabeth I) to think about sexuality.

But in Renaissance Europe, ideas about same-sex love and passion worked a lot differently than they do today. The people of the Renaissance certainly policed sexuality carefully. Sex outside marriage was a major scandal (and an important plot point in many of Shakespeare's plays for that reason!). And sex between men was often a literal crime (albeit one that many governments chose to prosecute selectively or to overlook). But Renaissance people also didn't really have concepts like gayness, straightness, bisexuality, or queerness. Instead, they acknowledged that powerful forms of love could exist in many different contexts. Marriage and the *act* of sex might have been intensely regulated, but love and *sexuality* were fairly free.

Love between men was even sometimes seen as part of a longer intellectual tradition as well: while men weren't supposed to have sex with each other, art about their love for each other could be seen as a reference to classical tradition. Renaissance thinkers venerated ancient Greek and Roman literature and philosophy, and in the classical world, love between men was often seen as an honorable and beautiful rite of passage. (No lesser thinker than Plato wrote a whole series of dialogues about the philosophical import of love between an older and a younger man, in fact.) In addressing his poem to a lovely young man, then, the speaker of "Sonnet 33" isn't so far outside the cultural standards of the time as one might at first imagine.

MORE RESOURCES

EXTERNAL RESOURCES

- The Original Poem — Check out what the poem looked like when first published in 1609. (https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sonnet_33#/media/File:Sonnet_33_1609.jpg)
- The Poem Out Loud — Listen to the great Shakespearean actor Simon Russell Beale read this poem aloud. (https://youtu.be/3fWvIrejfFc)
- The Sonnet in Context — Read about how this poem might relate to some of the other sonnets in the "Fair Youth" sequence. (http://www.shakespeare-online.com/sonnets/33detail.html)
- The Fair Youth — Learn more about the "Fair Youth" sequence—the group of Shakespeare's sonnets addressed to a young man. (https://www.bl.uk/shakespeare/articles/shakespeare-sexuality-and-the-sonnets)
- A Short Biography — Learn more about Shakespeare's life and work. (https://www.bl.uk/shakespeare/articles/shakespeares-life)

LITCHARTS ON OTHER WILLIAM SHAKESPEARE POEMS

- Sonnet 116: Let me not to the marriage of true minds
- Sonnet 129: Th' expense of spirit in a waste of shame
- Sonnet 130: My mistress' eyes are nothing like the sun
- Sonnet 138: When my love swears that she is made of truth
- Sonnet 147: My love is as a fever, longing still
- Sonnet 18: Shall I compare thee to a summer's day?
- Sonnet 19: Devouring Time, blunt thou the lion's paws
- Sonnet 20: A woman's face with nature's own hand painted
- Sonnet 29: When, in disgrace with fortune and men's eyes
- Sonnet 30: When to the sessions of sweet silent thought
- Sonnet 55: Not marble nor the gilded monuments
- Sonnet 60: Like as the waves make towards the pebbl'd shore
- 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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