

Analyzing Poems

Iambic Pentameter

Definition: Here it is, folks. Probably the single most useful technical term in poetry (and in drama, too). Shmoopers, if you learn one term in poetry, let it be the old I.P. Or maybe [metaphor](#). But you already knew that one.

Let's break it down:

- An [iamb](#) is a [metrical foot](#) that consists of an unstressed syllable followed by a stressed one—daDUM.
- Penta- means five.
- Meter refers to a regular rhythmic pattern in poetry.

So iambic pentameter is a kind of rhythmic pattern that consists of five iambs per line, almost like five heartbeats: daDUM daDUM daDUM daDUM daDUM.

Let's try it out on the first line of [Shakespeare's *Twelfth Night*](#):

If *music be the food of love*, play on.

Just read that line aloud to yourself, and you'll be sure to hear those daDUMs.

Of course, though many poets use this rhythm, it might get pretty stinkin' boring after a while if they didn't shake it up a bit. So while a ton of poems are written in iambic pentameter, you'd be hard pressed to find one that follows the meter perfectly. Poets like to mix it up with metrical variations like extra syllables or out-of-order stresses. Be sure to check out our page on [meter](#) for more.

Iambic pentameter has some majorly early roots, dating back to Latin verse and Old French, but [Chaucer](#) is considered the pioneer of the verse in English and used it for his famous [Canterbury Tales](#). Yep, it's been around *that* long.

Sonnet 130 is part of a group of poems by [William Shakespeare](#) that scholars think was addressed to someone they call "The Dark Lady." We get little glimpses of her in this poem. Shakespeare talks about her hair, the color of her skin, etc. Mostly, though, this poem is a gentle parody of traditional love poetry. Shakespeare uses this sonnet to poke fun at the kinds of exaggerated comparisons some poets of his day made when talking about their lovers. He makes fun of clichéd images that were worn out even then, like "eyes like the sun," and "skin as white as snow." These kinds of over-the-top compliments appear everywhere in poems by writers like [Petrarch](#), who wrote famous Italian sonnets in the 14th century. Although no one is sure whether the woman Shakespeare is talking about really existed, readers can see how well he uses this sonnet to skewer lame poetic clichés.

WHY SHOULD I CARE?

So, when we say the words "love poem," what pops into your head? Maybe you've always thought that a love poem had to be sappy, like something you'd find in a Valentine's Day card. If we told you that the love poem we had in mind was over 400 years old, that might make it even worse, right? Old love poems bring to mind flowery language and the kind of unrealistic glop that you could never bring yourself to say with a straight face.

But, if you think sappy love poems are ridiculous, you're not alone – that's pretty much how [Shakespeare](#) felt too, and he spends these fourteen lines ripping that kind of poem apart. Shakespeare's Sonnet 130 is a parody of the kind of insincere, sickly sweet love poems that authors have been writing (and a lot of people have been hating) for centuries. Now, don't get us wrong, we're not anti-love poetry and we can get into the sappy stuff sometimes too. But we're not fans of lame clichés, and we think it's pretty fun to watch Shakespeare go to town on them in this sonnet. ❌

Sonnet 130 is like a love poem turned on its head. Usually, if you were talking about your beloved, you would go out of your way to praise her, to point all the ways that she is the best. In this case, though, [Shakespeare](#) spends this poem comparing his mistress's appearance to other things, and then telling us how she doesn't measure up to them. He goes through a whole laundry list, giving us details about the flaws of her body, her smell, even the sound of her voice. Then, at the end, he changes his tune and tells us about his real and complete love for her.

SONNET 130

My mistress' eyes are nothing like the sun;
Coral is far more red than her lips' red;
If snow be white, why then her breasts are dun;
If hairs be wires, black wires grow on her head.
I have seen roses damasked, red and white,
But no such roses see I in her cheeks;
And in some perfumes is there more delight
Than in the breath that from my mistress reeks.
I love to hear her speak, yet well I know
That music hath a far more pleasing sound;
I grant I never saw a goddess go;
My mistress when she walks treads on the ground.
And yet, by heaven, I think my love as rare
As any she belied with false compare.

Get out the microscope, because we're going through this poem line-by-line. ❌

Line 1

My mistress' eyes are nothing like the sun;

- Here we are introduced for the first time to the main character in this poem, the speaker's "mistress."
- Today, when we use the word "mistress," it's usually to refer to a woman who is dating a married man. In Shakespeare, though, it was more general, like "my love" or "my darling."
- The speaker jumps right into his anti-love poem, letting us know that this lady's eyes aren't like the sun. Well, so what? We wouldn't really expect them to be, would we?
- As we read the next few lines though, we see that the comparison is a standard way of praising a beautiful woman in a poem. It's like saying, "her eyes are like sapphires."
- Our speaker is refusing to fall back on clichés though, instead telling us that this simile doesn't apply at all.

Line 2

Coral is far more red than her lips' red;

- If you imagined a stereotypically beautiful woman, like a model in a magazine, she'd probably have red lips, right?
- Certain kinds of very red coral are polished and used to make jewelry so if you compared lips to coral, you'd be thinking of the most beautiful, shiny red thing you could imagine.
- Nope, says the speaker, that doesn't sound like my girlfriend's lips at all.

Line 3

If snow be white, why then her breasts are dun;

- Next come the mistress's breasts.
- They get pretty much the same treatment as her lips.
- If the reddest red is like coral, then the whitest white is the color of snow. A poet could praise a woman for having skin as white as snow.
- Not here, though. This woman's skin isn't white, or even cream colored. Instead, the speaker calls it "dun," a sort of grayish-brown color.
- Be sure to notice the little changes here. In the first two lines, we hear only that the woman isn't like these other things (the sun, coral).
- Now we get an actual description, an adjective ("dun") that applies to her. Unfortunately, it just makes her sound uglier. Dun is a word often used to describe the color of a horse, and definitely not the kind of thing a woman would be thrilled to hear about her breasts.

Line 4

If hairs be wires, black wires grow on her head.

- Now things just get worse.
- If a poet wanted to be sentimental and sweet, he might compare his lover's hair to something soft, smooth, and shiny, like silk. Here though, the mistress's hair is compared to black wires sticking out of the top of her head.
- Keep in mind that the whole point of this poem is to push back against standard ways of talking about women in poems. So it's not necessarily bad that she has frizzy black hair.

Lines 5-6

I have seen roses damasked, red and white,

But no such roses see I in her cheeks;

- There's a tricky word here: damasked. Basically it just means a pattern of mixed colors woven into expensive fabric.
- So imagine a rose with a white and red pattern on it, or maybe a bouquet of red and white roses. Our speaker has seen beautiful roses like that, but his mistress's cheeks don't remind him of them at all.
- Maybe some perfectly beautiful woman has cheeks that are white with just a little blush of red, but that's not the woman he's talking about.

Lines 7-8

And in some perfumes is there more delight

Than in the breath that from my mistress reeks.

- By now we've got the idea, right?
- The speaker tells us that some perfumes smell better (give more "delight") than this woman's lover's breath.
- Apparently she stinks, too.
- Let's recap quickly: so far the speaker said that his mistress's eyes aren't that great, that her lips aren't that red, that her skin is yellowish, that her hair is like wires, that her cheeks are nothing like roses, and that her breath reeks.
- What a way to start a love poem.

Lines 9-10

I love to hear her speak, yet well I know

That music hath a far more pleasing sound;

- Now, after all of that criticism, the speaker starts to get a little bit nicer.
- He admits that he really does "love to hear her speak." Seems like she was due for a compliment, doesn't it?
- The speaker can't just let it go at that, though, and immediately he starts to back up a little.
- Basically, that "yet" in the middle of line 9 gets us ready for a negative comparison. It's like saying, "You're really great, but..."
- Then, in line 10, we get the negative half of that thought: he thinks that music is "more pleasing" than the sound of her voice.
- Well, maybe that's not so bad after all. If your boyfriend or girlfriend said, "I like music more than the sound of your voice," you might not exactly be thrilled, but it sure beats having him or her tell you that your breath stinks.
- Maybe the speaker is softening up a little bit.

Line 11-12

I grant I never saw a goddess go;

My mistress when she walks treads on the ground.

- Here's another thought that is split over two lines. In line 11, the speaker essentially tells us that he's willing to admit that he's never seen a goddess move. (See why Shakespeare's the poet and not us? Listen to how smoothly those words flow together: grant...goddess...go. Nice, huh?)
- Now, when the speaker finishes his thought on line 12, he's not actually being mean at all, just stating the facts. His mistress isn't a goddess, she doesn't fly or soar or float along. She just walks (treads) like a normal person, on the ground.
- A pretentious poet might say: "My love walks like a goddess," but we would know that it isn't true. Has he ever seen a goddess? Maybe the best way to tell someone you love him or her in a poem is to be simple, honest and straightforward.

Lines 13-14

And yet, by heaven, I think my love as rare

As any she belied with false compare.

- Now, at long last, we get to the sweet part, but it might take a little bit of translating.
- Here are two lines in plain English: the speaker thinks that his lover is as wonderful ("rare") as any woman ("any she") who was ever misrepresented ("belied") by an exaggerated comparison ("false compare").
- These last two lines are the payoff for the whole poem. They serve as the punch-line for the joke. They drive home the speaker's main point, that unlike other people who write sonnets, he doesn't need flowery terms or fancy comparisons. He can just tell his mistress, plainly and simply, that he loves her for who she is. Awww...

Shakespearean Sonnet (Form and Meter)

There are lots of different ways to write a sonnet, which is basically a kind of short poem. Shakespeare's sonnets have a very specific form, though, and scholars have named that form the "Shakespearean sonnet" after the great bard. These kinds of sonnets have several things in common:

1. They are 14 lines long.
2. They are written in iambic pentameter.
3. Usually, they include a feature called a "turn." This is a moment in the poem where the theme or the tone changes in a surprising way. This particular sonnet gives a really nice example of the turn. It comes in the last two lines, where the speaker switches his strategy completely. He has been criticizing his mistress, and then, all of a sudden, he starts telling us how much he loves her.
4. The first twelve lines rhyme in alternating pairs. To show how this works, we can assign a letter to each rhyme: We'll show you how it works:
 - a. My mistress' eyes are nothing like the sun; A
 - b. Coral is far more red than her lips' red; B
 - c. If snow be white, why then her breasts are dun; A
 - d. If hairs be wires, black wires grow on her head. B

So, for the whole poem, the rhyme scheme would be ABABDCDEFEGG.

5. See those last two letters at the end? This is the last important thing to know about the form of a Shakespearean sonnet: the poem always ends with two rhyming lines, one right after the other. We call this a couplet. Here's the one from the end of this poem:
 - a. And yet, by heaven, I think my love as rare G
 - b. As any she belied with false compare. G

ANALYSIS: SPEAKER

This speaker sounds like the guy at the back of your class who is always cracking jokes. He can't stand to do anything the way other people do, and even when he's supposed to be serious, he has to find a way to poke fun. In this case, it feels like his teacher has told him to write a love poem. He's finally done it, but not without making fun of the whole idea of love poems. So, yeah, he might drive people around him crazy. On the other hand, his sarcastic tone keeps us from taking ourselves too seriously, and he has a way of turning things on their head and making us see them in a new way. Finally, even though the speaker can't be serious for more than two lines, he still shows, at the end, that he has a sincere and thoughtful side, and that he can let his guard down long enough to let people see that side.