

Sonnet 147: My love is as a fever, longing still



POEM TEXT

1 My love is as a fever, longing still
 2 For that which longer nurseth the disease;
 3 Feeding on that which doth preserve the ill,
 4 Th' uncertain sickly appetite to please.
 5 My reason, the physician to my love,
 6 Angry that his prescriptions are not kept,
 7 Hath left me, and I desperate now approve
 8 Desire is death, which physic did except.
 9 Past cure I am, now reason is past care,
 10 And, frantic-mad with evermore unrest,
 11 My thoughts and my discourse as madmen's are,
 12 At random from the truth vainly expressed.
 13 For I have sworn thee fair, and thought thee bright,
 14 Who art as black as hell, as dark as night.

defying reason—and, in doing so, filling people with both passion and misery.

The speaker presents himself as a sick patient beyond saving. He deems his “love” a “fever” that makes him “long[]” for the very same thing that made him so sick in the first place (i.e., more love!). He's trapped in a destructive cycle that overrides his sense of reason.

The poem, then, shows how love can destroy a person's capacity to think or act logically. The speaker, after all, *knows* that this relationship is damaging and toxic. He even [personifies](#) his own sense of reason as a doctor who's finally abandoned the speaker because he won't take his medicine. The speaker can logically understand that his desire is unhealthy, but he simply can't stop indulging his passion.

Overcome with this desire, the speaker's mind has travelled far “from the truth.” By hinting that his desire has put him out of touch with reality, the poem implies that the speaker has overlooked certain things about his lover. Passion, in other words, has made him willing to ignore the possibility that his lover is undeserving of his affection.

The speaker sometimes views his lover as “fair” and “bright”—in short, like a good thing—even if the lover is, [metaphorically](#) speaking, “black as hell” and “dark as night.” Some readings of the poem interpret the closing couplet as an accusation of betrayal or deceit, as if, perhaps, the speaker's lover has intentionally wronged him (by sleeping with someone else, for example). But the speaker, like countless wronged lovers before and after him, exists in a “frantic-mad” state of perpetual “unrest.” Even if he *can* see that he's been wronged, he still can't change how he feels—and this disconnect, understandably, makes him feel like he is going insane.

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-14



SUMMARY

My love is like a sickness that wants nothing more than the one thing that will make this disease last longer. It feeds on the very thing that's making me so ill, in an attempt to satisfy my sickening appetite.

My sense of reason—which is like a doctor treating my love sickness—is furious that I haven't followed any of his advice. He's abandoned me—and now I know that my desire will kill me, something he could have prevented.

I can't be cured, and I don't even care. I'm frantic and anxious, constantly restless. I think and sound just like a madman, spouting out pointless nonsense.

Because I thought you were beautiful and virtuous, but you're as black and evil as hell itself, and as dark as the night.



THEMES



LOVE AND DESIRE VS. REASON

Part of Shakespeare's “Dark Lady” [sonnet](#) sequence, “Sonnet 147” describes love sickness at its most maddening and frightening. The speaker says his “love” is like a disease that's robbed him of his ability to act rationally. Despite being fully aware that his desire is making him sick and mad, he can't help but long for more. The poem thus presents the dark side of love, depicting it as an all-consuming force capable of



LINE-BY-LINE ANALYSIS

LINES 1-4

*My love is as a fever, longing still
 For that which longer nurseth the disease;
 Feeding on that which doth preserve the ill,
 Th' uncertain sickly appetite to please.*

The poem opens by declaring that the speaker's love, by which he means something more like sexual passion and infatuation, is like a feverish disease. In other words, the speaker, often taken to be Shakespeare himself, has got it *bad*.

What's more, this love-fever traps the speaker in a destructive cycle. The speaker longs for the exact thing that "nurseth"—feeds or nourishes—this fever: his lover. Indulging in his love might briefly satisfy his longing but, soon enough, that longing would return even more strongly, having been fed "on that which preserve the ill" (that is, having gotten a taste of the very thing that made the speaker so lovesick in the first place). His "love" and his "longing" are thus inseparable, the one feeding on the other like a snake eating its own tail.

The slippery, [alliterating](#) /l/ sound ("love," "longing") makes this link clear. Consonance of the same sound appears throughout this [quatrain](#) ("still," "ill," "sickly," "please"), imbuing the lines with the speaker's slippery desire.

The [polyptoton](#) of "longing" and "longer," meanwhile, emphasizes the fact that this state is ongoing. The speaker's "longing" for "love" makes the situation go on "longer," seemingly without end. It's worth noting, too, that the "fever" has subtly sexual connotations through making the sufferer feel hot (and, perhaps, sending them to bed!). The poem is also [alluding](#) to—and subverting—the typical Elizabethan advice to "starve a fever and feed a cold." In failing to "starve" his "fever," the speaker is keeping himself sick.

Love here, then, is not joyful, youthful, and carefree, but rather a kind of parasite destroying its host from within. The poem's [meter](#) subtly reflects this idea. As with most [sonnets](#), the poem is written in [iambic pentameter](#)—meaning there should be five feet, each with a da-DUM syllable pattern, per line.

But to emphasize the greediness of this sickly (sexual) appetite, line 3 varies swaps a [trochee](#) into its first foot, placing the stress on the line's first syllable instead of the second:

Feeding on that which doth preserve the ill,

This metrical variation surprises the reader, emphasizing the eager destructiveness of the speaker's love-disease.

Then, in line 4, the poem uses more consonance and [assonance](#) to emphasize just how "sickly" this appetite really is:

Th' uncertain sickly appetite to please.

Try saying this out loud. The hissing /s/ [sibilance](#) perhaps suggests saliva, while the /t/ and /p/ sounds have a sharp, biting quality that evokes insatiable hunger.

LINES 5-7

*My reason, the physician to my love,
Angry that his prescriptions are not kept,
Hath left me,*

At the start of the second [quatrain](#), the speaker focuses on his faculties of reason, and in short, his total inability to use them. Like many lovers before and after him, the speaker *knows* that

his desire is bad for him—but he can't help but want to indulge it anyway!

This section [personifies](#) the speaker's "reason" as a kind of doctor. Let's call him Dr. Reason. Dr. Reason has tried and tried to help the speaker, offering multiple "prescriptions" (meaning instructions on how to get better rather than written orders of a particular medicine). Dr. Reason, then, has given all his best advice, trying in vain to help the speaker overcome his love-disease. But even the calmest, most patient doctors have their limits—and, so, Dr. Reason, exasperated by his patient's unwillingness to listen, has "left" the speaker. In other words, the speaker is beyond hope. Now, remember that this is all part of the poem's [extended metaphor](#) comparing love to a disease; this is thus the speaker's *own* way of acknowledging that he is a hopeless case. Well aware that his love is killing him, all he wants is more.

Line 3 uses another [trochee](#) in its first foot (just like the one found in line 3), making the first syllable of the line **stressed** rather than unstressed:

Angry that his prescriptions are not kept,

This is probably how the line was intended to scan metrically, but "his" and "are" are not natural stress words—and "not" *could* receive a stress. In any case, the line seems flustered and angry, as if it too, like the speaker's rationality (Dr. Reason), might burst out the door, sick and tired of the speaker's repetitive and damaging behavior. The disruption to the poem's regular [iambic pentameter](#) thus reinforces the idea that all is not well.

The [caesura](#) after "left me" in line 7 also creates a little pause that portrays the speaker as alone in the silence left by Dr. Reason's departure (the doctor is no longer around to tell the speaker what to do).

LINES 7-8

*and I desperate now approve
Desire is death, which physic did except.*

After the [caesura](#) in line 7, the speaker assesses the consequences of his own desperate situation. The poem creates dramatic tension through the speaker's ability to see what his happening very clearly versus his complete refusal to change this situation—not because he *couldn't* do so, but because he doesn't really *want* to.

The sense of this part of the poem is not entirely clear and has been debated by critics ever since. "And I desperate now approve / Desire is death" probably means something like "now, in my desperation, I know for a proven fact that desire leads to self-destruction." Reason could have prevented this but, alas, it's too late.

"Desire" and "death" are linked together through [alliteration](#)

like "longing" and "love" in the first line, demonstrating that they go hand in deadly hand. It's worth noting that sexual pleasure has often been compared to death—the French euphemistically describe an orgasm as "la petite mort" (the little death), and some people in Elizabethan Britain believed that orgasms shortened one's life. Shakespeare, for his part, often links the two in his plays.

The most likely meaning of "which physic did except" is probably something like "which medicine takes exception to." Physic here is a noun meaning "established medical knowledge." As part of the poem's [extended metaphor](#), this probably just relates to Dr. Reason's attempts to convince the speaker to try and give up his desire and longing. Additionally, it could be the speaker acknowledging that his rational self has told him that desire doesn't *have to* mean death—that things could be different, if only he would give up the "love" that causes his metaphorical fever.

LINES 9-12

*Past cure I am, now reason is past care,
And, frantic-mad with evermore unrest,
My thoughts and my discourse as madmen's are,
At random from the truth vainly expressed.*

The [sonnet](#)'s third [quatrain](#) builds on the references to medicine in lines 5-8. The speaker says that, since his love has caused him to lose his reason, he now feels like he is going insane.

Line 9 [alludes](#) to and plays with an old Elizabethan proverb which originally went "past cure, past care"—meaning something along the lines of more contemporarily popular [idiom](#) that there's no use crying over spilled milk. The poem flips this on its head, saying that the speaker is incurable because his reason—his only hope of helping himself—has "left him." So he's not technically past help—he could just cut off the damaging relationship with his lover—but his "reason" no longer "care[s]" about helping him. In other words, with Dr. Reason long gone, there's no way back to health for the speaker.

This line uses [parallelism](#), with each clause either side of the [caesura](#) using similar grammatical elements. With "past cure" at the start of the first clause, and "past care" at the *end* of the second, this is also an example of [epanalepsis](#). Proverbs often use devices like this—particularly parallelism—because it makes them more memorable (check out the LitCharts definition for a well-known example). Proverbs are also traditionally a source of wisdom. The speaker's proverb-like assessment of his situation, rather than showing his wisdom, makes his lovesick attitude seem all the more foolish, desperate, and helpless.

Lines 10-12 make explicit the speaker's feeling that he is going insane. The repetitive nature of these three sentences—each of which basically says "I'm going mad"—reminds the reader that the speaker's sorry state is self-perpetuating. His own desire is

the master—and therefore the destroyer—of his own destiny. Line 10 dramatizes this insanity through three loud [assonant](#) /a/ vowels: "And, frantic-mad." This is the poem's equivalent of turning up the volume, as though the line itself is growing "frantic."

Line 11 takes advantage of the flexibility of Elizabethan grammar and syntax by placing the verb—"are"—right at the end of the line. This has a chaotic, confusing effect, making the speaker's "thoughts" and "discourse" seem more like ("as" works as a [simile](#)) those of "madmen." "Discourse" here refers to the speaker's speech and his ability to reason (and, as we know, Dr. Reason has left the building). It's worth noting that the poem *itself* is part of this "discourse," providing the reader with a somewhat clear-eyed, yet undeniably hopeless, account of the speaker's situation.

Line 12 is another tricky one for modern readers. In short, the speaker is saying that his "thoughts" and speech express themselves without any actual meaning or purpose (they are in "vain"). They are at "random from the truth" because they have little to do with the truth. "Random" also had a meaning that is lost now—to rush at great speed and force. In other words, his thoughts and speech run away from the truth like bolted horses.

There is a [paradox](#) at work here: the poem actually expresses the speaker's thoughts and feelings eloquently and clearly, and with admirable honesty. It's what he does with this truth—which is, essentially, to ignore it—that makes it seem so remote and, ultimately, pointless.

LINES 13-14

*For I have sworn thee fair, and thought thee bright,
Who art as black as hell, as dark as night.*

Lines 13 to 14 are the closing [couplet](#) of the poem. In Shakespearean [sonnets](#), the final couplet sometimes summarizes—or reframes—what has come before. This, though, is far more dramatic!

For a start, the mode of address changes. At no point in the poem has the speaker aimed his words directly at his lover (the one who is causing all of this love-sickness). He's been talking in general terms. Now, though, he turns towards the source of all his problems, who is commonly known as the Dark Lady (she is the subject of sonnets 127-154). This is definitely a world away from the cliché of a sonnet as a form for expressing joys of love. The speaker doesn't just love his lover—he *hates* her too.

The couplet sheds light on how far "from the truth" the speaker has strayed. In a moment of painful clarity, he realizes that his lover is not "fair" and "bright," but "black as hell," and "dark as night." Much has been made over whether the darkness of the lady refers to hair color or skin color, but, regardless, the main thrust behind the use of light and dark here has more to do with morality and [symbolism](#).

Put simply, the speaker once thought his lover was good—light—but she is bad—dark. As the poem states and states again, she's a terrible influence on the speaker's life. The speaker vilifies his lover, effectively blaming her for all his problems—his deadly desire disease.

These lines use [parallelism](#) (and specifically [antithesis](#)) for dramatic effect, first referencing the lover's supposed good qualities in line 13 before tearing them apart in line 14. Subtly, this suggests a kind of cyclical relationship, with the grammar forming a pattern that seems to echo the lovers' repeating pattern of sexual intimacy and emotional distance.

Line 13 uses the past tense—indicating that the speaker no longer believes the lover is "fair" or "bright"—before switching into the present tense to make the poem's damning conclusion. As the reader has already learned, the speaker exists in a state of perpetual "unrest"—and this switch to the present tense indicates that the situation between the two lovers has no end in sight. In fact, it's easy to imagine the speaker seeking out his lover immediately after putting the final touches to his sonnet!

The last line's double-whammy of insulting [simile](#)—"as black as hell, as dark as night"—associates the Dark Lady with an almost supernatural capacity for evil. It's as though the speaker feels that she is an ambassador for the devil himself, sent to earth with the express purpose of tormenting the speaker. Blackness and darkness are also suggestive of death, which has already been linked with "desire" in line 8. The Dark lady, then, is a kind of void into which the speaker, against all his better judgement, wants to disappear—with all the sexual innuendo that that implies!



POETIC DEVICES

ALLITERATION

The poem uses [alliteration](#) to link concepts and words together. The speaker is stuck in a perpetual state of "unrest" caused by his love sickness. It's a state that is cyclical, with the speaker craving more of the very thing that makes him sick, thereby making him more sick, which leads to more craving! Repeated sounds like alliteration thus suggest the presence of a repetitive pattern of behavior.

This effect is especially clear in the opening two lines:

My love is as a fever, longing still
For that which longer nurseth the disease;

"Love" is linked to "longing," which in turn joins up with "longer." The speaker's love *creates* his longing which only prolongs his suffering, which makes him feel his desire more strongly... and so on until infinity, or death. The slippery, liquid /l/ sounds throughout these lines also subtly evoke sexual intimacy.

In line 8, the speaker says that "Desire is death." Here, too, alliteration joins the two concepts together. This is the speaker's point—that desire and death are inseparable. The /d/ is a dull, thudding sound, befitting the mention of being dead.

Line 9's alliteration pops up alongside [parallelism](#), as the speaker says he's "past cure" and "past care." In other words, it's too late for the speaker; his love sickness is here to stay, and he's in so deep that he doesn't even care. The alliteration draws attention to these phrases. There's only one vowel of difference between these phrases, making them sound almost like gibberish—the ravings of a madman (which the speaker feels he is becoming). Line 11's alliteration has a similar effect, linking the speaker "My" with his own perception of his madness ("madmen's").

Where Alliteration appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "love," "longing"
- **Line 2:** "longer"
- **Line 7:** "desperate"
- **Line 8:** "Desire," "death"
- **Line 9:** "Past cure," "past care"
- **Line 11:** "My," "my," "madmen's"
- **Line 13:** "bright"
- **Line 14:** "black"

ALLUSION

The main imaginative idea of the poem—that desire is a kind of deadly fever—was possibly inspired by a work by Shakespeare's contemporary, Philip Sidney. At the end of his *Arcadia*, Sidney uses a similar idea: "Sicke to the death, still loving my disease." Perhaps, then, this poem's [extended metaphor](#) here is itself a kind of [allusion](#).

The more obvious allusions appear in lines 3 and 9, and both are part of this extended metaphor (in fact, *everything* is until the last couplet). Both involve the speaker taking common Elizabethan ideas and twisting them on their head in order to show just how far from a normal condition the speaker's desire has taken him.

In line 3, the speaker makes reference to the 16th-century advice for treating a fever. The old saying "starve a fever, feed a cold" comes from around this time. But the speaker is doing the opposite: ravenously feeding his fever. This spells serious trouble!

Line 9 riffs on another old proverb—"past cure, past care." In other words, if something is *beyond* cure, there's not much point in worrying about it. The poem flips this around: the speaker is incurable because his reason (his metaphorical doctor) has stopped trying to help him. Reason has ceased caring—and therefore the speaker can't be helped. By alluding to conventional wisdom of the time, the poem portrays the speaker as doubly mad.

Where Allusion appears in the poem:

- **Line 3:** "Feeding on that which doth preserve the ill,"
- **Line 9:** "Past cure I am, now reason is past care,"

ASSONANCE

[Assonance](#) adds to the poem's musicality and intensity. For example, note how long /ee/ sounds build up over the first few lines—from that first "fever" though "reason" in line 4. This build up of repetitive sound evokes the way that speakers desire "feeds" on itself; /ee/ sounds lead to more /ee/ sounds.

The short /eh/ sound is another that repeats as assonance in the poem, particularly in lines 6-8. Again, this repetitive sound evokes the speaker's insistent, hungry desire. The chain of sounds propels the reader forward through the poem, creating a sort of frantic energy that reflects the speaker's state of mind.

Where Assonance appears in the poem:

- **Line 2:** "disease"
- **Line 3:** "Feeding"
- **Line 4:** "sickly," "please"
- **Line 5:** "reason"
- **Line 6:** "kept"
- **Line 7:** "left," "desperate"
- **Line 8:** "death," "except"
- **Line 10:** "And, frantic"
- **Line 11:** "as madmen's"
- **Line 12:** "At"

CAESURA

Caesurae create brief pauses throughout the poem in order to slow the poem's pace or call readers' attention to a specific image or idea. (Do note, though, that it's important to exercise some caution when it comes to punctuation-based devices like caesura. This is a modernized version of the text, and even the original publication in 1609, known as the Quarto, isn't definitive!)

In line 7, for example, the short pause after the word "reason" is the first true mid-line pause in the poem. It's no coincidence that the speaker spots for a beat when talking about reason—the very thing that could tap the brakes on his illness, if only he'd listen to it.

In the next line, the brief silence after the word "death" evokes the word itself; death is sometimes depicted as a kind of silence, and using caesura lets the speaker's statement—that "desire is death"—sink in.

In the poem's closing [couplet](#), the speaker uses caesura to simply balance the clauses on either side of the pause:

For I have sworn thee fair, and thought thee bright,

Who art as black as hell, as dark as night.

The caesurae makes the speaker's final insult feel cool and measured—and, in turn, all the more damning.

Where Caesura appears in the poem:

- **Line 5:** "reason, the"
- **Line 7:** "me, and"
- **Line 8:** "death, which"
- **Line 9:** "am, now"
- **Line 13:** "fair, and"
- **Line 14:** "hell, as"

CONSONANCE

As with [alliteration](#), [consonance](#) creates a kind of music in the poem that helps dramatize its images and ideas, bringing them to vivid life on the page.

In the poem's opening line, for example, consonance links "love" and "fever," pre-empting the speaker's discussion of how the one feeds on the other. Love and fever are stuck in a perpetual cycle, and this subtle consonance connects the concepts right from the start.

Elsewhere in the first [quatrain](#), the poem uses a number of consonant and alliterating /l/ sounds:

My love is as a fever, longing still
For that which longer nurseth the disease;
Feeding on that which doth preserve the ill,
Th' uncertain sickly appetite to please.

These /l/ has a liquid, luxurious sound, hinting at the poem's conflation of sickness with pleasure. The final line here is also quite [sibilant](#). Those hissing, menacing /s/ and /z/ sounds evoke the "sickly" nature of the speaker's "appetite," while the sharp /t/ and /p/ sounds have a biting quality to them that suggests insatiable hunger:

Th' uncertain sickly appetite to please.

This /t/ sound gets used as consonance again later in the poem in lines 9 and 10, along with hard /c/ and hissing /s/ sounds:

Past cure I am, now reason is past care,
And, frantic-mad with evermore unrest,

These two sounds are spiky, sticking out prominently in these lines. This helps portray the frantic and pained state of mind of the speaker, giving the section restless quality that chimes with the idea of perpetual "unrest."

Lots of spiky sounds pop up in the closing [couplet](#), too:

For I have sworn thee fair, and thought thee bright,
Who art as black as hell, as dark as night.

Here, the speaker chastises his lover for putting him in this sorry state (possibly by deceiving him). He bitterly insults her, ending the poem on an angry note (which is a bit unusual for a sonnet). The harsh sounds here give the lines a spitting, venomous quality.

Where Consonance appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "love," "fever," "longing still"
- **Line 2:** "longer"
- **Line 3:** "ill"
- **Line 4:** "uncertain," "sickly," "appetite," "to please"
- **Lines 4-4:** " // ."
- **Line 5:** "reason," "physician"
- **Line 7:** "desperate"
- **Line 8:** "Desire is death"
- **Line 9:** "Past cure," "past care"
- **Line 10:** "frantic," "unrest"
- **Line 11:** "My," "my," "madmen's"
- **Line 12:** "random"
- **Line 13:** "thought," "bright"
- **Line 14:** "art," "black," "dark," "night"

EXTENDED METAPHOR

[Extended metaphor](#) is an essential part of the [sonnet](#), as the speaker uses to compares his "love" to an illness, a "disease" or "fever."

This fever craves more of what caused it (in this case, love/desire/sexual satisfaction). Technically the poem starts this long metaphor off with a [simile](#) in line 1: "My love is as a fever." The language throughout the poem then relates to illness. The speaker metaphorically deems partaking in desire "nurs[ing] the disease," for example, and calls his lust a "sickly appetite." There's a bit of [personification](#) here too, with the speaker treating that appetite as some independent thing that demands being "please[d]." By doing this, the speaker tries to avoid the blame for his actions; it's like his sexual appetite has a mind of its own!

The poem then develops this extended metaphor in the second quatrain (lines 5-8). Here, the speaker's reason—his ability to think clearly about his situation—is metaphorically transformed, again through personification, into a doctor. Dr. Reason has tried everything he can to help the speaker, but the speaker just won't listen. Understandably, Dr. Reason has given up all hope of helping his patient, and left him.

The extended metaphor allows the speaker to portray himself as doomed, stuck in a perpetual cycle of desire and sexual satisfaction that only makes the cycle go round again. He is incurable ("past cure"), and, now that his beloved Dr. Reason

has taken a holiday, feels he is going insane.

The use of extended metaphor also sets the closing couplet up for a dramatic punch. Here, the poem *deviates* from the metaphor and turns its attention to the cause of the speaker's sickness—his lover. The ending is all the more bitter and shocking *because* the extended metaphor (which, let's face it, is also a demonstration of virtuoso poetic skill) is suddenly cast aside.

Where Extended Metaphor appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-12

PARALLELISM

This sonnet uses [parallelism](#) in three lines. The first example is in line 9:

Past cure I am, now reason is past care,

This line, which is also an example of [chiasmus](#), [alludes](#) to a well-known proverb of the time: "past cure, past care." The parallelism of the line is baked-in to the proverb itself. This kind of balanced grammatical construction helps proverbs be more memorable (e.g., "Easy come, easy go").

The proverb means that if something is incurable, there's no point trying to do anything about it. The speaker changes the meaning a little, saying that he's incurable *because* his ability to act rationally (his "care") has left the building.

The other parallelism occurs in the closing [couplet](#):

For I have sworn thee fair, and thought thee bright,
Who art as black as hell, as dark as night.

The parallel grammar and concepts of these lines lets the speaker build a contrast between what he thought of his lover in the past vs. what he thinks of her now. The lines are parallel on an individual level *and* with each other, with the balance of grammar and syntax in the first line—which talks about the lover's long-lost good qualities—setting up the venomous insults in the last line.

Where Parallelism appears in the poem:

- **Line 9:** "Past cure I am, now reason is past care,"
- **Lines 13-14:** " For I have sworn thee fair, and thought thee bright, / Who art as black as hell, as dark as night."

SIMILE

The first [quatrain](#) of the poem uses [simile](#) to compare the speaker's desire to a fever. This is part of the poem's [extended metaphor](#) and covered in that particular section of the guide.

The poem departs from its extended metaphor in the closing

[couplet](#), which turns its attention directly to the speaker's lover—the cause of all his pain and sickness. Here, the speaker compares his lover to "hell" and "night." Of course, this is meant as an insult, the poem taking a bitter and venomous change of direction.

Through these similes, the speaker associates his lover with evil and destructiveness. Hell, of course, is the underworld where damned souls are doomed to dwell in eternity. Pretty harsh insult, then! The blackness here seems to be primarily figurative, but some theories suggest that it also refer to either the speaker's hair or skin color (or both). "Dark," too, is meant [symbolically](#), presenting the lover as a kind of deadly black hole into which the speaker and his life are drawn. There's a subtle sexual connotation to this idea too—that the lover is a void that the speaker can't help but want to enter, even if it means his own destruction.

Where Simile appears in the poem:

- **Lines 1-4:** "My love is as a fever, longing still / For that which longer nurseth the disease; / Feeding on that which doth preserve the ill, / Th' uncertain sickly appetite to please."
- **Line 14:** "as black as hell, as dark as night."



VOCABULARY

Nurseth (Line 2) - "Nurses"—normally in the sense of providing care, but here meaning perpetuating the disease itself.

Doth (Line 3) - Archaic form of "does."

Preserve (Line 3) - Maintains and prolongs.

The ill (Line 3) - The speaker's sickness.

Reason (Line 5) - The ability to think rationally.

Physician (Line 5) - Doctor.

Prescriptions (Line 6) - Instructions for how to get better.

Hath (Line 7) - Archaic form of "has."

Physic (Line 7) - Acknowledge (and have proof of).

Physic (Line 8) - Established medical knowledge.

Did except (Line 8) - Either "took exception to" or "prevented."

Past (Line 9) - Beyond.

Frantic-mad (Line 10) - Anxious and crazy.

Evermore (Line 10) - Seemingly unending.

Discourse (Line 11) - Words and sentences spoken out loud.

Random (Line 12) - Far away from, and with the additional meaning of hurried and fast.

Vainly (Line 12) - Without meaning or purpose.

Sworn thee fair (Line 13) - "Insisted that you were beautiful/

gracious/virtuous/kind."

Art (Line 14) - Archaic form of "are."



FORM, METER, & RHYME

FORM

This poem is a Shakespearean [sonnet](#), meaning the structure can be divided into three quatrains and a closing couplet. As is typical for a sonnet, the first three quatrains build upon a single idea—here, that the speaker's love is a kind of illness.

The closing couplet, called the turn of volta of the poem, then responds to that idea in some way. Here, the speaker shifts in the final two lines away from discussing his illness to criticizing its cause: the lover who is causing the speaker so much pain.

This sonnet is a bit unusual in that it's so full of suffering, anger, and insult. By the time Shakespeare was writing them, sonnets already had a reputation for generally being positive love poems. This sonnet (and others in the sequence) breaks with that tradition, steering clear of any sense of joy, romance, or admiration.

METER

As is typical of Shakespeare's [sonnets](#), this poem uses [iambic pentameter](#). That means each line has five iambs, feet with an unstressed-stressed syllable pattern (da-DUM). Take line 1:

My love | is as | a fev- | er, long- | ing still

In general, iambic pentameter provides a steady rhythmic pulse that kind of fades into the background—when it's working well, it's not too obvious. This steadiness provides the poet with an opportunity to create surprises and dramatic moments though varying the meter, as is the case here.

Line 3, for example, features a [trochee](#) (DUM-da) instead of an iamb in its first foot:

Feeding | on that | which doth | preserve | the ill,

The speaker's feverish sexual appetite is insatiable. Bringing the stress forward here suggests the overpowering strength of his desire, making "feeding" more active, hungry, and hurried.

Line 6 echoes the variation in line 3. Think about what people are like when they are angry; they might move about in a fast and erratic way, conveying their troubled state of mind. The speaker's "reason," [personified](#) as a doctor, is so "angry" that it's abandoned him. Another trochee in the first foot again makes the line feel more forceful:

Angry | that his | prescrip- | tions are | not kept

Notice how this *sounds* more angry than if, for example, the first word were something like "irate." It would mean the same thing, but it wouldn't sound as effective.

There is always more than one way to scan a poem, and changing the stresses can have subtle effects on the meaning. Line 9, for example, could receive two stresses on "past care"—this might sound more dramatic and heavy than "past care," which could sound more forlorn and resigned.

Do note that some lines that might look metrically funky are actually just the result of different punctuation/pronunciation during Shakespeare's time. Line 4's "Th' uncertain" should scan like this: "Th'uncertain." "Th'" and "un" make one sound together, indicating by that apostrophe, thus maintaining the iambic pentameter.

RHYME SCHEME

This poem follows the [rhyme scheme](#) of a typical Shakespearean [sonnet](#), which can be divided into three [quatrains](#) and an ending [couplet](#):

ABAB CDCD EFEF GG

Generally speaking, the rhymes propel the poem forward, giving it momentum that is brought to a dramatic close by the one-two punch of that couplet. Having two rhymes in simultaneous lines at the end gives this ending a bitter, venomous quality, matching the sudden directness of tone (the speaker, who hasn't addressed anyone specifically yet, suddenly aims his words straight at his lover).

Rhymes also create conceptual links between two words or ideas. The rhyme of "disease" and "please" in lines 2 and 4, for example, makes clear that the speaker's sickness is completely tied up with his lust for sexual pleasure. The disease is the lust for pleasure. In the last couplet, the rhymes also highlight the contrast between "bright[ness]" and darkness ("night"). Essentially, the speaker reevaluates his lover, realizing how much pain desiring her puts him in. The rhyme takes this contrast between what he once thought of her and how he now feels and makes it all the more stark.



SPEAKER

Given this [sonnet's](#) place within Shakespeare's Dark Lady sequence (see Resources for more), the speaker is generally read as male. There has always been, and will always be, great speculation about whether the sonnets are autobiographical or not. In truth, it doesn't really matter when it comes to the experience of reading them. The poem itself doesn't tell readers the speaker's gender, age, or occupation—which allows anyone who's experienced this kind of reason-robbing infatuation to identify with it.

What the poem does tell readers is that speaker is lovesick—and he's got it bad. This love sickness is also more like

desire-sickness; his feelings are carnal and lustful, not romantic and loving. The speaker constructs an elaborate [extended metaphor](#) to describe his state, pitching his love as a fever and his reason, which has left him out of frustration at being ignored, as his (ex-)doctor. He *knows* that his desire is what's making him sick, yet all he wants is more.

The speaker claims to have the "thoughts" and "discourse" of "madmen"—that is, he believes that what he thinks and says out loud proves he's going insane with feverish desire. In actual fact, though, the speaker is extremely eloquent and perceptive, able to talk honestly and authentically about his inability to act in his own interest. It's the fact that he doesn't *listen* to his better judgment that is making him feel mad.

For the most part, the poem doesn't have a specific addressee. In a way, the speaker is talking to himself—as befitting his fractured state of mind. But in the last couplet he seems to turn directly to his lover, aiming bitter and venomous words at her. He views her as the root cause of all his problems—and he's probably never wanted her more.



SETTING

There isn't really a strong sense of place or time here, though the conventional wisdom [alluded](#) to in lines 3 and 9 do give the poem an Elizabethan backdrop (along with the actual language here, of course!).

The speaker's words construct the poem's elaborate [extended metaphor](#)—that love is a disease, and reason is a doctor (who, in this case, has abandoned his patient). It's a deeply psychological poem, showing a fractured speaker tortured by his insatiable desire. Accordingly, one way of thinking of the setting is that the poem takes place in the speaker's mind. That said, the poem does *borrow* elements of setting from its metaphor. The poem gives the impression of the speaker as metaphorically bedridden, knocking on death's door with a burning fever.



CONTEXT

LITERARY CONTEXT

"Sonnet 147" appears in a section of Shakespeare's [sonnets](#) known as the Dark Lady sequence. This forms part of a larger sequence of 154 sonnets published in 1609.

Most of the other poems in this sequence are addressed to a young man known as the "Fair Youth." The Dark Lady poems tend to be more anxious and of a more sexual nature than those addressed to this Fair Youth (though the latter certainly has some erotic moments!). The speaker of these sonnets—often taken to be Shakespeare himself—has a deeper and more loving attitude towards the young man, while the Dark Lady sonnets frequently display contempt and animosity (as can be seen in

this poem's closing couplet). Scholars don't know much for sure about the identity of the Dark Lady, and theorize that she might be anyone from Queen Elizabeth to Shakespeare's wife Anne Hathaway—or entirely made up.

This sonnet itself is possibly inspired by Sir Philip Sidney's *Arcadia*, which similarly found its speaker "Sicke to the death, still loving my disease." Sidney's sonnet sequence, *Astophel and Stella*, was also a major influence on Shakespeare.

The sonnet (which translates as "little song") originated in Italy in the 1200s, though the 14th-century Italian poet, Petrarch, is seen as its greatest early innovator. Petrarch established the sonnet as a form of love poetry, and also began the long tradition of poetic skill being read as evidence of powerful romantic feeling. The sonnet was later popularized in the English language by writers like Sir Thomas Wyatt (who translated/interpreted a number of Petrarch's sonnets) and the aforementioned Sir Philip Sidney.

So-called Shakespearean (or English) sonnets differ from Petrarchan sonnets through their rhyme scheme and structure. Shakespearean sonnets end with a couplet that responds to what came before.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Shakespeare's sonnets were composed in the 1590s and early 1600s, and first published together in 1609. This means the sonnets were mostly written in the Elizabethan period, but published in the Jacobean (that is, when King James succeeded Queen Elizabeth).

The Elizabethan era is seen as an age of adventure and discovery, with British ships exploring the globe and the age of colonialism just on the horizon. It was a culturally rich time, too: Shakespeare was one of London's many celebrated poets and playwrights, making a name for himself through exciting linguistic innovation and psychologically complicated characters.

Even though the poem is almost entirely metaphorical, it's worth considering the dominant medical system of the 16th century. Elizabethans believed that people's health was governed by the four humors: black bile, yellow bile, blood, and phlegm. A good balance between these four substances meant an individual was in good health—and, conversely, too much of one these humors resulted in a whole range of problems. While this poem doesn't mention any humors, it does reflect the general idea that having too much of one thing (here, desire) is dangerous.



MORE RESOURCES

EXTERNAL RESOURCES

- [The Poem Out Loud](https://www.youtube.com/) — A reading by one of England's finest actors, John Hurt. (<https://www.youtube.com/>)

[watch?v=NOsNQ--0xV8](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NOsNQ--0xV8))

- [The First Edition of the Sonnets](#) — See the sonnet in its original context: the 1609 Quarto edition. (<https://www.bl.uk/collection-items/first-edition-of-shakespeares-sonnets-1609>)
- [The Sonnet as a "Little Room"](#) — Listen to a fascinating lecture by the late, great scholar Russ McDonald, which interprets the sonnets in their historical context. (<https://backdoorbroadcasting.net/2011/10/russ-mcdonald-shakespeares-sonnets-in-context/>)
- [The Four Humors](#) — More about the dominant medical system of the 16th century, and how Shakespeare used it in his work. (<https://wellcomecollection.org/articles/W-MM-xUAAinxgs3>)
- [Shakespeare's Sonnets](#) — Find all the sonnets, plus some analysis, in one useful place! (<http://www.shakespeares-sonnets.com>)
- [In Search of the Dark Lady](#) — An article that investigates the identity of the speaker's lover. (<https://www.theguardian.com/books/2013/aug/10/search-shakespeares-dark-lady-florio>)

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 29: When, in disgrace with fortune and men's eyes](#)
- [Sonnet 30: When to the sessions of sweet silent thought](#)
- [Sonnet 55: Not marble nor the gilded monuments](#)
- [Sonnet 71: No longer mourn for me when I am dead](#)
- [Sonnet 73: That time of year thou mayst in me behold](#)



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