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The Eye of the Beholder

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The Eye of the Beholder

Cassidy Cox, Jessica Hahn, Whitney Howard, Taylor Pearson, and William Pitcher

Sonnet 127

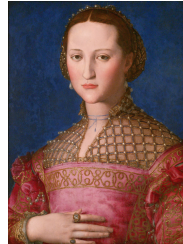
In the old age, black was not counted fair,
Or, if it were, it bore not beauty's name;
But now is black beauty's successive heir,
And beauty slandered with a bastard shame.
For since each hand hath put on nature's power,
Faireing the foul with art's false borrowed face,
Sweet beauty hath no name, no holy bower,
But is profaned, if not lives in disgrace.
Therefore my mistress' eyes are raven black,
Her eyes so suited, and they mourners seem
Sland'ring creation with a false esteem.
Yet so they mourn, becoming of their woe,
That every tongue says beauty should look so.



*Girl with
Cherries,
Giovanni
Ambrogio
de Predis,
ca. 1494.*

Overview

The majority of Shakespeare's sonnets are devoted to the fair young man, but Sonnet 127 introduces a new love interest, commonly known as the dark lady. Here Shakespeare speaks of an attraction to a person of darker hair and complexion in stark contrast to the fair romance figures that were the norm of the time. In this sonnet, he challenges the standards of beauty while exploring whether love is found in the eyes or in the heart.



*Portrait of
Eleanora of
Toledo,
Bronzino,
1544-1545.*

Dark Lady Challenges Conventional Beauty

The dark lady is not the typical blonde, blue-eyed beauty. She is almost the exact opposite of the fair young man and the poet is distressed over his love for her. She is unexpected, yet entrancing. The dark lady challenges conventional beauty through the differences brought up in descriptions:

- ▶ The dark lady is older and more sexually experienced.
- ▶ "Black was not counted fair," yet her eyes are "raven black" and suited for her.
- ▶ The dark lady sonnets use less elevated language. Unlike the fair young man, readers can actually picture her.
- ▶ Sonnet 130 (see introductory poster) uses very physical, very easy to visualize, characteristics. The reader is able to understand what the dark lady looks like.
- ▶ The fair young man is harder to visualize. Poems like Sonnet 18 liken him, the beloved, to a summer's day. Readers are not sure what he looks like except that he was beautiful.
- ▶ The visual differences demonstrate the differences in the relationships.

Subverted Use of Eyes and Heart

- ▶ Although the poet knows he should not love the dark lady because she is not conventionally beautiful, he does. He relies less on his eyes to inform his emotions.
- ▶ His love, as expressed in Sonnet 127, is a love built around new conventions of beauty that cannot be falsified. The eyes cannot lie and he relies more on his heart.
- ▶ Sonnet 141, "In faith, I do not love thee with mine eyes," expresses how different the poet's feelings are for the dark lady compared to the fair young man.
- ▶ The poet calls love a "blind fool" (Sonnet 141) for creating confusion between what the poet sees and what the poet feels. The poet can no longer trust his eyes to understand love.
- ▶ In the couplet at the end of Sonnet 127, the poet suggests that conventional standards of beauty should change to support love.