



# GRADE 12 ENGLISH HL

## POETRY NOTES: Sonnet 130

31 January 2026

## **Notes Compiled by Ms J.Govender**

1. Sonnet 130 My mistress' eyes are nothing like the sun Shakespeare

My mistress' eyes are nothing like the sun; 1

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, 5

But no such roses see 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 sou

I grant I never saw a goddess go:

My mistress, when she walks, tre

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

As any she believed with false compare

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## Poet – William Shakespeare

- Born 1564; Died 1616
- English (born and died in Stratford-upon-Avon)
- He was married to Anne Hathaway, and they had three children.
- He is still known as one of the world's greatest poets, dramatist and playwright. He wrote 37 plays and 375 poems.

## Historical Context:

This is sonnet number 130 in a series of 154 sonnets. It **parodies** the famous (and often over-the-top) Petrarchan sonnets in which poets described their partners in highly exaggerated and unrealistic ways. Although this poem contains similar themes as found in traditional sonnets (Female Beauty, Love and Admiration), Shakespeare does not idealise his beloved. He describes her in ways which are realistic and, therefore, more accurate and 'real'.

## Diction

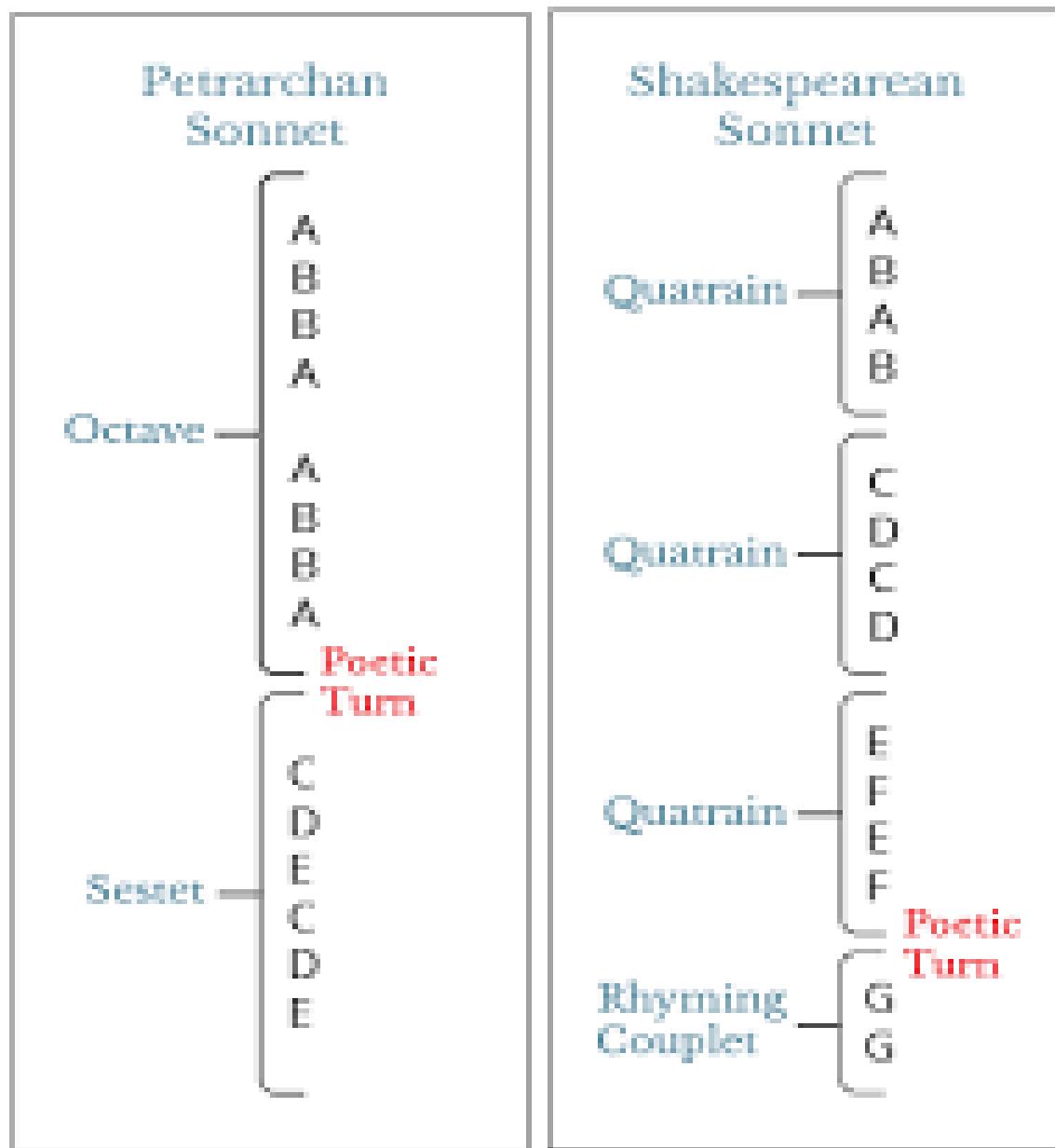
Word	Meaning
Mistress	The woman I love
Coral	a hard stony substance, typically forming large reefs in warm seas. Known for its bright red or pink colour.
Dun	a dull, greyish-brown colour
Wires	Ornamental headgear for females during Shakespeare's time often contained gold wires. It was quite normal to compare blonde hair to the gold wires in that headgear. Blonde hair was fashionable then, as now. The mistress however, has black not blonde hair.
Damasked	patterned in pinks and red
Reeks	Smells/stinks
Grant	Admit
Go	Walk as if floating on air
Treads	Plods/tramps/ stamps (not a delicate movement)
Rare	precious, unique
Any she	Any other woman
Belied	falsely portrayed

## Summary:

Shakespeare uses **eight 'anti-compliments'** to describe the uniqueness and (non-idealised) beauty of his beloved. However, in the couplet he states that BECAUSE she is normal and 'real', he does not need to exaggerate her looks or his love for her. He loves her just the way she is – **perfect in her imperfection**. In other words, she is perfect to HIM – he does not need an idealised and superficial woman.

Although he seems **critical** and rather rude in the **first 12 lines**, the reader realises that he is, in fact, **sincere in his love** for her. He does not need exaggerated and unrealistic comparisons to declare his genuine love for her. In being so **brutally honest**, he has ironically given her a heightened beauty, simply because he **does not dote on her outward appearance**.

## Form/Structure:



This is a Shakespearean or Elizabethan sonnet. It consists of **three quatrains (4 lines each)** and a rhyming **couplet (2 lines)**. The rhyme scheme is consistent with this format: abab cdcd efef gg. The couplet serves as a final argument to drive home the speaker's point. The rhythm of the point is consistent, too, and follows traditional iambic pentameter. There are 10 syllables in each line. The mastery of this precise rhyme and rhythm shows Shakespeare's absolute genius!

## Analysis

Line 1 – “***My mistress' eyes are nothing like the sun***”

Mistress — this was a more general reference meaning **love/ darling'** and not as the term used today. When we use the word mistress' it's usually to refer to a woman who is in a relationship with a married man.

When Shakespeare wrote this sonnet it was all the rage to compare a lover's eyes to the sun and sunlight—Shakespeare completely negates this. using the phrase “nothing like” to emphasise the fact that this female's eyes are not bright. In this **simile**, the mistress' eyes are being compared to the sun, the sun creates the image or something bright and shiny. However, since the mistress' eyes are “nothing” like sun, her eyes are the opposite of bright and shiny. The speaker's use of the simile indicates that the woman's eyes are just plain and ordinary or nothing special.

Line 2 – “***Coral is far more red, than her Lips red***”

Coral'— a **hard stony substance**, typically forming large reefs in warm seas. Known for its **bright red or pink colour**. This was the perfect colour for the perfect female.

Her lips are not as red as coral; there is nothing special about the colour of her lips. She has ordinary lips.

Line 3 – “***If snow be white, why then are her breasts Dun***”

**Dun**-a dull, **greyish-brown colour**.

At that time, it was a huge compliment to have your skin compared to snow. His mistress has a dull complexion. '**Dun**' is a Word often used to describe the **colour of a horse**, and not something a woman would be thrilled to hear about. it makes her **sound ugly**.

Line 4 – “***If hairs be wires, black wires grow on her head.***”

Hair was after compared to golden thread. This metaphor compares her hair to black wires. It is not soft and flowing, but hard and spiky. She has **frizzy black hair**.

Line 5 – 6 - “***I have seen roses damasked, red and white,”***  
“***But no such roses I see in her***”

Damasked – pattern of mixed colours.

He has seen beautiful roses in **damask (pinkish colour red and white)**, but his mistress' cheeks don't remind him of them at all. He sees no such roses (colour) in his mistress's cheeks: **Her cheeks are pale**. This emphasises that his mistress is not the perfect female model.

Lines 7-8 - “*And in some perfumes is there more delight than in the breath from my mistress reeks.*”

reeks - very **strong, unpleasant smell**

Some perfumes are far more fragrant than the smell of her breath. This is deliberately **shocking and offensive**, to emphasise that she is just an ordinary person, she is human.

This idea of her being an ordinary person, and not a goddess, is further explained in lines 11-12.

Lines 9-10 – “*I love to hear her speak, yet well I know that music hath a far more pleasing sound*”

He admits that he loves to hear her speak, but the sound of music is better than the sound of her voice.

Lines 11-12 – “*I grant I never saw a Goddess go, My mistress, when she walks, treads on the ground*”

Treads on the ground - she is **not very graceful** when she walks.

He admits that he had never seen a Goddess move. She is not a **goddess that floats and glides when she walks**. She is very real person who is just an average human being.

Lines 13-14 – “*And yet by heaven, I think my love so rare, As she belied with any false compare.*”

“And yet” —introduces change “yet by heaven” - He denies that she possesses any heavenly qualities. Yet he **swears by heaven his love is sincere**.

The speaker thinks that his mistress is as wonderful and unique (rare) as any woman who was **misrepresented (belied)** by an exaggerated comparison (false compare).

The couplet drives 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. He embraces her flaws He loves her just the way she is.

### **Poetic Devices:**

- This sonnet contains various **metaphors and similes**. Lines 1-4 contain a comparison each: He states that her **eyes are not as bright as the sun**, her **lips not as red as coral**, her **skin is quite dull**, and her **hair is wiry**. Lines 5-12 contain a comparison extended over two lines: her **cheeks are quite pale**, her **breath “reeks”** and he would **rather listen to music than to her speak**. She also **walks on the ground like an average human, certainly not a “goddess”**. However, these are inverted to become **anti-compliments** in a way. Some readers might **perceive these as insults at first**, until the **couplet** states so elegantly that he loves her. So, by telling the reader exactly what his beloved is NOT, we see and hear how perfect she is DESPITE her imperfections.
- There are various uses of **alliteration and assonance** in the poem.

- **Repetition** occurs in lines 2 (“red”) and 4 (“wires”). This, again, emphasises the **importance of the colour and texture** – the idealised Petrarchan woman had blood-red lips and golden, luscious hair.
- **Anastrophe** (the natural **order of words is inverted**) occurs in lines 6 and 7: “But no such roses see I in her cheeks / And in some perfumes is there more delight” – this places the emphasis on the “roses” and “perfumes” – again mocking the Petrarchan ideal.
- **Hyperbole** abounds in the poem – all of the comparisons are exaggerated. This emphasises the **absurdity of the Petrarchan ideals**. He exaggerates the imperfections of his beloved to prove his point.
- The tone of the poem is **satirical in the first 12 lines** when he refutes and mocks the Petrarchan ideals. He is **sincere** and almost complimentary in the **couplet** when he states that he loves her in spite of her imperfections.

#### Tone :

##### 3 Quatrains

- Mocking
- Satirical
- Tongue-in-cheek
- Sarcastic
- **Couplet- Adoration/Sincerity/Appreciative/Impassioned**

#### Mood:

Playful/ humorous/ teasing

#### Themes:

**Escape from Idealism** — Shakespeare does not idealise his beloved. She is unlike the Petrarchan ideal — she is "real" and he loves her despite her imperfections. He states clearly in the couplet that people who describe their partners with idealised comparisons, are liars. This emphasises the **absurdity of Idealism**.

**Femininity** — This sonnet addresses the problem of **stereotyping female** beauty by setting **unreachable standards** for it. The fixed definition of beauty is unrealistic and will make females inferior by not achieving the ideal standards of beauty. He questions real love - we should love our partners in spite of their imperfections.

**Love**— The speaker expresses his love for his beloved. He describes his value of love. He states that real love is not based on outwards appearances and idealised looks. His **Love is based on connection and emotion, not the superficial**. Beauty is in the eye of the beholder.

## **Question 1: Essay**

In **Sonnet 130 – My Mistress' Eyes**, the speaker satires conventional views on love and beauty. With close reference to diction, imagery and tone, discuss the validity of this statement in relation to the poem.

Your response should be in the form of a well-constructed essay of 250-300 words (about 1 page).

**TOTAL :10 Marks**

## **Suggested Answer for Question 1 : Essay**

The following are points that could be included in in your essay:

Sonnet 130 is to challenge those poets during Shakespeare's time, who used **hyperbole** when describing those they loved.

Shakespeare is making fun of the **clichés** of love poetry. He **satirises** the concept of ideal beauty and the use of hyperbole in describing a lover.

In the first twelve lines he is almost **insulting** about the fact that his lover does not meet these standards of beauty, he does this by the **repetition** of "not" when comparing her: that her "eyes are nothing like the sun" her breath "reeks" - **satirises the conventional use of extreme praise**.

Other poets might suggest she speaks like music, her skin is snow-white, that she is a "goddess".

His **tone** here is **mocking/ teasing/ playful**.

In doing this he shows how **unrealistic the conventional metaphors** are, he finds a way of undermining these by saying:

- Instead of **perfume**, her **breath** "reeks".
- Her skin is not "**snow**" **white**, but "**dun**" **coloured**.
- Her **cheeks** are not pink like roses.
- **Anastrophe** (the natural order of words is inverted) occurs in lines 6 and 7: "But no such roses see I in her cheeks /And in some perfumes is there more delight"

In the last two lines his tone changes and he is more adoring/ loving/ full of praise towards her.

Although she is not a "goddess" he still cares for her.

In fact, **he thinks that she is more beautiful than any of the women** who are written about using unbelievable metaphors.

**Couplet – Volta**- turn of thought/perspective -true love is not dependent on physical appearance.

He is showing that being **honest is more a demonstration of true love**.

To exaggerate would be to use "false compare" and to tell lies about his love - who is "as rare" as any of the women who have inspired such adoration.

## Questions and Answers

1. Explain how the **structure and tone** of this poem allows the poet to emphasise the central message. (3)  
(*The Shakespearean/Elizabethan sonnet consists of 3 quatrains and rhyming couplet. The quatrains deliver his exaggerated anti-compliments, and the couplet drives home his sincere love – he loves her despite her imperfections. The tone in the quatrains – sarcastic/sardonic/frank. Tone in couplet – sincere. Learner MUST mention structure and tone in both.*)
2. Are Shakespeare's observations in the **quatrains** **cynical or not?** Explain your answer. (2)  
(*No – no mark. Women, like men, are not perfect. He is not cynical, he is realistic. He loves her despite her shortcomings/imperfections. She is real!*)
3. Who is the speaker **ridiculing in the poem?** Why does he do this? (3)  
(*He ridicules the Petrarchan poets of the time who used exaggerations to describe their lovers. He proves that the idealised woman does not exist AND makes it clear that his beloved does not have to be perfect for him to love her genuinely.*)
4. Explain what is meant by: " My mistress, when she walks, treads on the ground. (2)  
(*She is REAL – she does not float above the ground, as described by Petrarchan sonnets, she walks. She is human, not an idealised and mythical goddess.*)
5. Refer to line 12. Comment on the **effect** **pace** has on the meaning of the line. (3)  
(*The pace slows down with commas and monosyllabic words. It indicates the heavy treading/walking of his mistress' gait. She walks like a normal person, she doesn't float like a goddess.*)
6. Show how the **last line completes his argument.** Refer, in particular, to the word "false". (2)  
(*He does not need to make false/untrue/exaggerated comparisons to let her know he loves her. Or to love her!*)
7. Identify **three sensory images** in this poem and how they relate to the central theme. (3)  
(*Sight – he sees her features; touch – her 'wiry' hair; smell – her breath; hearing – her voice. Learners must quote and explain. All relate to the theme of her imperfections making her 'perfect' in his eyes. She does not fit the mould of the idealised Petrarchan woman. She is real*)
8. Identify the **tone in lines 1-12** and how this **contrasts with the tone in the last two lines.** Is this an effective shift in tone? Justify your answer. (3)  
(*Tone in 1-12: sardonic, sarcastic, critical. Last two lines: sincere, heartfelt. Effective shift – he states very clearly what she is NOT and then says that he loves her DESPITE her imperfections.*)
9. Explain the use of "by heaven" in line 13. Why has this phrase been included? (2)  
(*It is a reference to God – he swears by the Almighty to prove his sincerity.*)