

Shakespeare's "Sonnet 130": Satirical or Serious?

By Allison W

"Sonnet 130" is one of the hundreds of sonnets that Shakespeare wrote during his lifetime. It is a love poem about an unknown woman whom Shakespeare describes as his mistress. (During Shakespeare's time, mistress meant girlfriend). "Sonnet 130" is different from most love poems in the fact that it can be interpreted in two different ways. This poem can be seen as a satirical and funny sonnet, or it can be viewed as a serious poem that expresses true love.

To begin with, Shakespeare's "Sonnet 130" can be interpreted as a satirical sonnet that is meant to [written at eastern alamanca hs in 05] be funny. During Shakespeare's time, a new form of poetry called blazon poetry was becoming increasingly popular. Blazon poetry is poetry that describes a human, usually female, and makes all of the features of that human seem ideal and perfect. "Sonnet 130" seems to satirize typical blazon poetry by making the mistress's features seem much less than ideal. Joanne Woolway says this about "Sonnet 130," "Shakespeare's 'Sonnet 130' is interesting because it works by inverting the traditions of the blazon form" (Woolway 253). The first line in "Sonnet 130" says this, "My mistress' eyes are nothing like the sun" (Shakespeare 1). In most blazon poetry, the writer would be trying to prove that the subject is more beautiful than the sun. In this poem, however, Shakespeare seems to be making fun of the blazon form by showing that his mistress is nothing like the sun. Another line in "Sonnet 130" says this, "I grant I never saw a goddess go; my mistress,

when she walks, treads on the ground” (Shakespeare 11-12). In most love poetry and blazon poetry, the humans being described are compared to gods and goddesses because gods and goddesses are viewed as perfect. In this line, Shakespeare again seems to be poking fun at typical love poetry by implying that his mistress is the farthest possible thing from a goddess. If interpreted as a satire, “Sonnet 130” is very humorous. Stephen Booth says this about the humor in “Sonnet 130,” “(the poem) appears to have no target and no aim but to be funny” (Booth 252).

Furthermore, other than being interpreted as a humorous satire, “Sonnet 130” could also be viewed as [written at eastern alamanca hs in 05] a serious love poem that expresses the true love that Shakespeare felt for his mistress. Joanne Woolway says this about the seriousness of “Sonnet 130,” “The poem could be said to flatter through the most unexpected means and to show...its author’s love for his mistress” (Woolway 255). Even though most every line in the poem seems to be satirizing typical love poetry by saying that the mistress is extremely imperfect, Shakespeare may have meant for these lines to show that he loves his mistress no matter what she looks like. In one of the lines of “Sonnet 130,” Shakespeare says this, “I love to hear her speak” (Shakespeare 9). This shows that Shakespeare really did love the mistress even though he described her as being less than ideal in looks and in manner. Also, the last two lines of “Sonnet 130” say this, “And yet, by heaven, I think my love as rare as any she belied with false compare” (Shakespeare 13-14). Here, Shakespeare shows that he is seriously in love because he says that he loves her even with all her faults and he doesn’t have to build her up to be something she is not. Philip Martin says this about “Sonnet 130,” “the poem has been

wrongfully dismissed as pure satire when in fact it is a passionate defense of all that is unstereotyped, unpredictable, and unique” (Martin 252).

All in all, “Sonnet 130” is a unique Shakespearian love poem because it can be interpreted in [written at eastern alamance hs in 05] two different ways. “Sonnet 130” can be seen as a humorous, satirical sonnet or it can be interpreted to be a serious expression of true love. This sonnet is one of Shakespeare’s most popular sonnets and also my personal favorite. I know that future readers will continue to enjoy “Sonnet 130” no matter whether they interpret it as satirical or serious.

Works Cited

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