

# Shakespeare's sonnets 138 and 147: the sado-masochism of love



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Shakespeare's sonnets 138 and 147 read like before and after accounts of a man's experience in leaving an unfaithful woman. Shakespeare's narrator first describes the almost masochistic way in which his speaker remains in a relationship with this disloyal woman out of desire to appear young and foolish to her. Later, when their charade has ended, he drives himself to near-madness, craving her attention and touch despite having been lied to for so long. This theme of self-inflicted pain for the sake of a lover's attention—sexual or otherwise—defies reason in both sonnets, but is at the same time desperate and earnest. While it is not the qualities of the lover herself the narrator yearns for, but her touch and a feeling she inspires in him, his longing for this woman is consistently intense enough to appear rational to the audience as well as himself. When my love swears that she is made of truth I do believe her, though I know she lies, That she might think me some untutor'd youth, Unlearned in the world's false subtleties. Thus vainly thinking that she thinks me young, Although she knows my days are past the best, Simply I credit her false speaking tongue: On both sides thus is simple truth suppress'd. But wherefore says she is not unjust? And wherefore say not I that I am old? O, love's best habit is in seeming trust, And age in love loves not to have years told: Therefore I lie with her and she with me, And in our faults by lies we flatter'd be. (Shakespeare 1041) The narrator's masochism in this sonnet is expressed in his willingness to be made into a cuckold in order to appear foolish and youthful. With Sonnet 138, Shakespeare's narrator insists that he realizes he is being cheated on, but that he remains with the woman in order to outwardly appear young to her and others. By appearing dumb, the narrator can also lie to himself and believe himself to still be young. The narrator explains, " I do believe her" in <https://assignbuster.com/shakespeares-sonnets-138-and-147-the-sado-masochism-of-love/>

a tone that suggests he has had to defend this decision before, and that his mind is made up to continue the charade of being with her for the sake of stupidity (line 2). His irrationality continues when he explains, " Although she knows my days are past the best," to mean he realizes she doesn't think he is any younger than he actually is, but he continues to try regardless (line 6). The narrator has now admitted to himself and the reader that few people see himself as young anymore, yet he continues the charade. Shakespeare has presented a relationship that provides no true benefits for the narrator: the woman is lying to him while he lies to himself in a lame attempt to appear youthful, but receives no real benefit from it. In line 13, Shakespeare says the narrator " lie[s] with her and she with [him]" with double meaning expressed in the word " lie." The two physically lie with one another night after night, but also continue to tell each other these silly lies about her fidelity towards him for their own respective gains. The question behind this sonnet remains, why does the narrator pretend to believe this woman so readily, and why is he so insecure about aging? The man puts himself through this deception of being part of a " love triangle," as well as pressuring himself tremendously to keep up the appearance of youth. He never describes, however, the pain this façade must obviously involve, for fear of exposing himself a madman grasping at his youth. Throughout the sonnet, the speaker attempts to be " blissfully ignorant" about his mistress for personal gains, but only comes across as foolish and masochistic. My love is as a fever, longing still  
For that which longer nurseth the disease, Feeding  
on that which doth preserve the ill, The uncertain sickly appetite to please.

My reason, the physician to my love, Angry that his prescriptions are not kept, Hath left me, and I desperate now approve  
Desire is death, which  
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physic did except. 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 express'd: For I have sworn thee fair and thought thee bright, Who art as black as hell, as dark as night. (Shakespeare 1042) Sonnet 147 follows 138, continuing the story of the narrator after he has left his deceitful lover. Though it is not clear as to how the relationship ended, it is obvious the ties between the lovers have been roughly broken. Though estranged, the narrator still feels a longing desire for the woman who scorned him, despite his mind's attempt to reason. The poem is filled with burning, fiery language to both suggest his disdain for what she had done to him and the yearning he still has for her. The first line references the " fever, longing still" inside him after their departure, and the language after it is spitting and fierce, full of contempt but still a passionate longing for her body. She, that " which longer nurseth the disease," has driven the narrator to a point of no return; his desperation has driven him to madness (line 2). The narrator now puts himself through the physical pain of craving his lover's body despite being lied to while with her. He struggles here to understand why his heart won't listen to his " physician," reason, acknowledging this time that he has a problem, but diagnoses himself as too far gone to be cured (line 5). While in sonnet 138, the narrator was able to lie to himself and pretend that he had accepted his lover's infidelity, here he cannot handle the lust and consequential pain he has been left with. The sonnet ends with a message to the woman, " I have sworn thee fair and thought thee bright, / Who art as black as hell, as dark as night" (lines 13-14). For the first time in either sonnet, he speaks to his malady long enough to tell her how " fair" and " bright" he thought she and their relationship to be at one

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time (line 13). He rescinds this feeling he once had, now calling her “ As black as hell, as dark as night” to serve as one final spit at her, but also a turning of the knife he has plunged in his own self (line 14). Shakespeare exposes love in these sonnets as a sickness from which his narrator cannot save or cure himself. In sonnet 138, he inflicts this illness upon himself by ignoring the fact that his lover betrays him, because of the way it makes him feel in response. This theme of self-hurt is embodied in the first sonnet in a calm, quite manner. Though the idea of staying with a cheating lover is not a rational one in the least, Shakespeare uses a fluid, easy rhythm to suggest that the narrator still has his wits about him. He recognizes the “ simple truth suppress’d” in his sham, and appears to have the upper hand in their game (line 8). Sonnet 147 has the narrator subjecting himself to the illness out of desperation and craving for the woman he was once with. He is no longer passive when speaking about the woman, but scornful and bitter about the relationship that once was. He spits out his words, fully incapacitated by his lover’s spell upon him, angrily shaking his fist at the rationale she was able to steal from him. The common theme of these two poems, the masochism a lover will put himself through while in a relationship, is better exemplified in the latter sonnet, as love’s spell has completely weakened him by this time. Though the speaker’s tone and attitude in 138 exposes his game and the pain he puts himself through, sonnet 147 appears driven by a madman, offering himself completely to a scornful woman despite her ill-affect over him. He no longer refers to her as “[his] love” as in sonnet 138, but with the utmost of disdain he can muster, despite wanting her so badly (line 1).

Shakespeare’s poetic language and devices throughout sonnets 138 and 147 suggest at least a few similarities between himself and the narrator, and the <https://assignbuster.com/shakespeares-sonnets-138-and-147-the-sado-masochism-of-love/>

audience is left to wonder if this story is autobiographical in the least. The style and tone used throughout the latter sonnet is filled with more of the physical pain of a longing lover craving his mistress like a drug, both exemplify the irrational means to which a person can go for the fulfillment brought on by a connection with another human being. The narrator addresses the audience in 147 with a simple message, " Desire is death," as a foreshadowing message of what will inevitably happen to him, as well as a warning to others to turn around from the self-inflicted pain brought on by relationships such as his (line 8).