

Expression and
emotion in "with how
sad step"



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Courtier Sir Philip Sidney was a prominent and highly influential literary figure in the Elizabethan age. Critics agree that Sidney was ahead of his time as a writer, and Alexander Gavin refers to the 1590's as a decade in which he 'dominated literary culture',[1] despite his death 4 years earlier. His most famous works include *Astrophel and Stella*, a sequence consisting of 108 sonnets and 11 songs. The progression of sonnets follow the speaker's emotional state as he endures in an initially unrequited love affair, which results in his lover ending the relationship after she realises they are incompatible. In the thirty first sonnet,[2] Sidney draws on a more sinister side of love, and in particular the suffering endured after it is lost or unrequited. The sonnet carries a deep sense of misery and bewilderment as the speaker tenderly begins to come to terms with rejection. It is widely accepted that *Astrophel* acts as a parallel to Sidney's and his own heartbreak[3] and a strong feeling of pathos is established through the speaker's questioning of the fate of love. By confiding in the moon, the speaker is able to express his feelings in confidence as well as relate to it, which acts as a source of comfort to the distressed *Astrophel*.

This tightly structured sonnet works to explicitly highlight the raw emotions of the speaker; sorrow, grief and bitterness are all expressed as he dwells over his woes. The sonnet begins with the speaker projecting his sorrow onto the moon:

' With how sad steps, O moon, thou climbs't the skies

How silently, and with how wan a face!' (ll. 1-2)

Rich in pathos, the opening line immediately establishes the mood of mournfulness and sorrow. This is contributed to by the apostrophe ' O moon', as the speaker comments on it rising ' with how sad steps'. The use of caesura decreases the pace of the opening line whilst simultaneously reflects the laboriously slow movement of the moon as it climbs the sky. This combines with Sidney's placement of a spondee on ' sad steps' to convince the reader of both the speaker' and moon's misery.

The poem adopts the shape of a Petrarchan Sonnet, where typically the lady is always unobtainable and the lover often hopeless[4], and Sidney was likely influenced by the form during his year-long visit to Italy, where he studied the works of many literary scholars. A melancholic tone is created by Sidney's utilisation of sibilance with the syntactical choices: ' sad steps' and ' climbs't the skies', which add a sense of wistfulness to the introductory line. The assonance of the vowel sound ' aʊ' prolongs the line length, and the combined repetition of fricative consonants create a slower pace, further reflecting the extent of the speaker's tormenting thoughts.

As a result of pondering over his thoughts to the moon, the speaker learns that he can also relate to it. The idea of misery is reinforced through the description of the moon as ' wan', which connotes to it appearing pallid and unwell. This deviates from typical descriptions of the moon in which it's complexion appears ' glimmering' or ' orb-like' and instead presents it as humanlike. Sidney's use of ecphrasis: ' wan a face!' (l. 2) demonstrates an abruptness as the speaker attributes the moon's appearance as stemming from woes similar to his own. Astrophel universalizes his experiences, [5] expressed through the friendly term of address ' Oh Moon' (l. 1) and the <https://assignbuster.com/expression-and-emotion-in-with-how-sad-step/>

collective noun 'our' (l. 3). This signifies that the concept of being able to relate to an entity as powerful as the moon is comforting to him, and the soft rhymes in the sestet reinforce the idea of the moon being a pain relief. The synecdoche 'love-acquainted-eyes' again personifies the moon, and the speaker recognises its infinite presence in the sky, where it has witnessed many people affected by love.

Interestingly, the later juxtaposition of 'languished grace' (l. 7) suggests that the speaker has not always viewed the moon in a sorrowful way. The verb 'grace', which is typically associated with the elegant manner of the moon, is contrasted against the adjective 'languished'. The abrupt contrast adds to the melancholic sentiment by providing connotations of weakness, which isn't typically intrinsic to descriptions of the moon. More often presented as immortal and wise, the speaker's lexical choices hint that Astrophel's perspective has been tainted by his wounded pride. This is reflected in the adverbial of manner 'descries' which implies that the moon's sad appearance has before gone unnoticed, explaining Astrophel's lifeless descriptions.

Astrophel questions if love is also present in the heavens:

'What, may it be that ev'n in heav'nly place

That busy archer his sharp arrows tries?' (ll. 3-4)

Sidney uses allusion to reference the traditional figure of Cupid, who characteristically wounds lovers with his arrows to inspire feelings of love. The Renaissance period viewed Cupid as a catalyst of desire,[6] and the

figure arranges spectacles of love throughout Sidney's sonnet sequence.[7] However, Cupid's inaccuracy as an archer was something which fascinated poets and was a topic of endless debate; perhaps the rhetorical question utilised by Sidney reflects this. In this case, the adjective 'sharp' is incorporated to highlight the pains of love, and the interrogative illustrates Astrophel's wavering belief in cupid, as he has been inflicted with heartbreak rather than happiness.

In fact, the speaker's disillusionment with Cupid results in idolising the moon as an expert of love. The reference to a 'heav'nly place' brings attention to the moon's eternal presence in the sky, and presents it as God-like.

The night time setting alludes to the speaker's sleeplessness, but the presence of the moon allows the speaker to accumulate his thoughts in a composed manner. The form contributes to this - particularly the rhyming of soft 'ʌ' and 'e' vowel sounds in the octet which emphasise the calm and collected tone of the speaker. This starkly contrasts to the explosive vowel rhymes and interrogatives present in the sestet, which represent the speaker's sadness slowly deteriorating into anger.

Sidney uses elision in order to maintain his tight structure, and the regular enclosing rhyme scheme of the octet upholds Astrophel's calm manner. Additionally, the strict iambic pentameter metre provides structure which balances out the speaker's uncertainties regarding love, infiltrating a sense of security to Astrophel's otherwise doubtful mind.

'Then' (l. 8) acts as a Volta, and foreshadows Astrophel's change of tone as the second part of the sonnet is entered. Here he becomes less focussed on

the moon's languished appearance and more fixated on his own feelings of bitterness. The succession of interrogatives reflects his increasing impatience at Stella, but also their repeated nature represents his unrelenting torment. The questioning is also significant as it demonstrates the relationship that the speaker has built with the moon – he idolises it as an expert of love and demands answers from a rejection which has left him in a bewildered state of mind. The term of address used in the opening line is repeated:

' Then even of fellowship, Oh Moon, tell me,' (l. 9)

The repeated address and caesura add a sense of familiarity, and reinforce the idea that the moon is a form of comfort for the speaker. The use of apostrophe leads the voice to become much softer, contrasting with the generally bitter and harsh tone of the sestet.

The speaker's mood quickly deteriorates as he questions Stella's unreturned feelings in the alliteration ' want of wit'. The emphasis placed on the harsh mono-syllabic words convey his anger at his affection being dismissed so easily. The lexical choice ' scorn' (l. 10) furthermore is indicative of the speaker growing frustration as he questions whether ungratefulness is a virtue.

The repeated use of the plosive consonants ' t' and ' d' in words such as ' yet' (l. 10) serve as a harsh reminder of the incessant pain the speaker has endured over Stella, despite his ' constant love' (l. 10) for her. The punchy masculine rhymes such as ' be' (l. 11) and ' me' (l. 9) quicken the pace of the

lines, and create a more upbeat flow to the second part of the sonnet, which add to the sense that the speaker's bitterness is unceasing.

Despite Sidney probably being influenced by Petrarch during his year-long visit to Italy, he does deviate from its usual structure in terms of the rhyme scheme. The sestet rhyme ends in a rhyming couplet, which are not normally associated with Petrarchan sonnets,[8] and suggests that Sidney incorporated the feature from a Shakespearian sonnet instead. However perhaps the unconventional ending along with the final rhetorical question is symbolic. Astrophel is left unsatisfied and the final interrogative voices his uncertainties over love that have been ongoing throughout the sonnet.

Overall, Sidney utilises a tight iambic structure in order to draw explicit attention to the thought procession of the speaker, and highlights the pains of unrequited love. The sonnet's portrayal of unrequited love as unrelenting is reflective of the author's own experiences, and the rejected lover is often left confused and hurt, demonstrated by repeated rhetorical questions. However, the speaker is comforted by the familiar figure of the moon, and decided that it too is suffering with lovesickness, which acts as a form of relief from his heartbreak. Ultimately, the speaker works himself up into a state of rage which leaves him in the same miserable mind set which he began with, demonstrating a darker side to love.

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