

**T10**

My mistress' eyes

In the following sonnet, which belongs to the sequence addressed to the 'dark lady', Shakespeare talks about his lover in an unusual way.

William Shakespeare
Sonnet CXXX
(1609)

My mistress' eyes are nothing like the sun;
Coral is far more red than her lips' red;
If snow be white, why then her breasts¹ are dun;
If hairs be wires, black wires grow on her head;

5 I have seen roses damasked², red and white,
But no such roses see I in her cheeks;
And in some perfumes is there more delight
Than in the breath³ that from my mistress reeks;

I love to hear her speak, yet well I know
10 That music hath a far more pleasing sound;
I grant I never saw a goddess⁴ go.
(My mistress when she walks treads on the ground).
And yet by heaven⁵ I think my love as rare
As any she belied with false compare⁶.

1 her breasts. Il suo seno.

2 damasked. Scritte.

3 breath. Alito.

4 goddess. Dea.

5 by heaven. In nome del cielo.

6 As any ... compare. Come qualsiasi donna falsamente decantata.

LITERARY COMPETENCE

➤ VOCABULARY

1 READ the sonnet and find the words which mean the following.

- 1 lady
- 2 grey
- 3 strings
- 4 pleasure
- 5 comes out smelling
- 6 swear, admit
- 7 sets her foot
- 8 not common

➤ COMPETENCE: READING AND UNDERSTANDING A TEXT

2 COMPLETE the summary considering the comparisons used by Shakespeare in lines 1-12.

The lady's eyes are (1) like the (2) Her (3) are not as red as (4) Her breasts are not as (5) as (6) Her hair is like (7) Her cheeks are (8) like (9) Her breath is not like (10) Her voice is not like (11) She doesn't move like a (12)

3 WHAT does the poet love about the woman? What adjective does he use in the final couplet to describe her?



➤ COMPETENCE: ANALYSING AND INTERPRETING A TEXT**4 ANALYSE** the poem as follows.

- 1 Point out the rhyme scheme and the organisation of the sonnet.
- 2 How many syllables are there in the first line?
- 3 Mark the stresses: use ˘ for unstressed syllables and ˙ for stressed syllables.
- 4 Insert the slant bars (/) in order to recognise the feet. How many are there? Identify the stress pattern.

5 FIND examples of repetition and assonance.**6 IDENTIFY** the comparison which is not conventional in lines 1-10 and explain it. What is Shakespeare trying to say?**7 EXPLAIN** how lines 9-12 prepare you for the couplet.**8 DISCUSS.** Do you agree that there is an ambivalence in this poem? Can you support either of these propositions?

- 1 The poet both loves and hates the lady.
- 2 The poet hates himself for loving her.

Or do you think that the poet simply dislikes the contemporary ideal of beauty? Explain your answer.

➤ COMPETENCE: ESTABLISHING LINKS WITH THE LITERARY CONTEXT OF THE AGE**9 IN PAIRS.** Sonnet CXXX has been defined 'anti Petrarchan'. Discuss this interpretation with reference to examples of conventional love poetry.

➤ COMPETENCE: LINKING LITERATURE TO PERSONAL EXPERIENCE**10 DISCUSS.** Shakespeare's assumption in the poem is that love and beauty are not necessarily related. Do you agree?**11 WRITE** a paragraph. Shakespeare dramatically describes his love by saying what she is not. Think of the modern clichés in love songs or films and write down what your love is not.