

Shakespearean Sonnets – Modern Paraphrase

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When forty years have gone by and carved deep wrinkles in your forehead, your youthful beauty, which everyone likes to look at now, will be worth little. Then, when someone asks you where all your beauty is—all the treasure of your virile youth—if you were to say that it's all there in your withered face and sunken eyes, that would be an all-consuming shame and nothing to be proud of. You'd have a much better excuse if, decades from now, you could say you spent your beauty and youth raising a child. If someone were to ask you why you looked so old, you could say, "The effort I spent raising this beautiful child explains the sorry old state I'm in"—and meanwhile your child's beauty would be a new incarnation of your own! Having a beautiful child would be like being born again in old age, with the blood that flows coldly in your old veins becoming warm again in his.

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Shall I compare you to a summer day? You're lovelier and milder. Rough winds shake the pretty buds of May, and summer doesn't last nearly long enough. Sometimes the sun shines too hot, and often its golden face is darkened by clouds. And everything beautiful stops being beautiful, either by accident or simply in the course of nature. But your eternal summer will never fade, nor will you lose possession of your beauty, nor shall death brag that you are wandering in the underworld, once you're captured in my eternal verses. As long as men are alive and have eyes with which to see, this poem will live and keep you alive

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When I'm in disgrace with everyone and my luck has deserted me, I sit all alone and cry about the fact that I'm an outcast, and bother God with useless cries, which fall on deaf ears, and look at myself and curse my fate, wishing that I had more to hope for, wishing I had this man's good looks and that man's friends, this man's skills and that man's opportunities, and totally dissatisfied with the things I usually enjoy the most. Yet, as I'm thinking these thoughts and almost hating myself, I happen to think about you, and then my condition improves—like a lark at daybreak rising up and leaving the earth far behind to sing hymns to God. For when I remember your sweet love, I feel so wealthy that I'd refuse to change places even with kings.

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Neither marble nor the gold-plated monuments of princes will outlive this powerful poetry. You will shine more brightly in these poems than those stones that crumble to dust, blackened by time. When devastating war overturns statues, with its battles uprooting buildings, neither the god of war nor his quick-burning fires shall destroy this record of you. Despite death and ignorant enmity, you shall continue on. All those generations to come, down to the weary end of time, will devote space to praising you. So until Judgment Day, when you are raised up, you will live in this poetry, and in the eyes of lovers who read this.

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When you look at me, you can see an image of those times of year when the leaves are yellow or have fallen, or when the trees have no leaves at all and the bare branches where the sweet birds recently sang shiver in anticipation of the cold. In me you can see the twilight that remains after the sunset fades in the west, which by and by is replaced by black night, the twin of death, which closes up everyone in eternal rest. In me you can see the remains of a fire still glowing atop the ashes of its early stages, as if it lay on its own deathbed, on which it has to burn out, consuming what used to fuel it. You see all these things, and they make your love stronger, because you love even more what you know you'll lose before long.

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Oh, never say that I was unfaithful to you in my heart, even though my absence from you suggested that my love had weakened. I can't separate myself from my feelings for you anymore than I can separate myself from myself. You are my home, and if I strayed away from you, like a traveler I have returned again, right at the appointed time, with my feelings unchanged, so I'm making up for my misdeed. Even though I have the same weaknesses in my nature as everyone made of flesh and blood, don't ever believe that I could be so morally compromised as to leave someone as good as you in exchange for something worthless. The entire universe except for you, my love, means nothing to me. You're everything to me.

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My mistress's eyes are nothing like the sun. Coral is much redder than the red of her lips. Compared to the whiteness of snow, her breasts are grayish-brown. Poets describe their mistresses' hair as gold wires, but my mistress has *black* wires growing on her head. I have seen roses that were a mixture of red and white, but I don't see those colors in her cheeks. And some perfumes smell more delightful than my mistress's reeking breath. I love to hear her speak; yet I know perfectly well that music has a far more pleasant sound. I admit I never saw a goddess walk; when my mistress walks, she treads on the ground. And yet, by heaven, I think my beloved is as special as any woman whom poets have lied about with false comparisons

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Curse you for making me suffer by hurting both my friend and me. Isn't it enough to torture me alone without making my friend your slave too? Because of your cruel attractions I'm no longer my own man, but my friend, who's like my second self, you've enslaved even more cruelly. So I've been abandoned by him, by myself, and by you; being frustrated like this is a triple torment multiplied by three. Go ahead and keep me as your prisoner, but then let me use myself to bail out my friend. Whoever you assign to watch me while I'm in this jail, let me be in charge of guarding my friend—then you can't torment me in my prison because I'll have my friend to keep me happy. And yet you *will* torment me, because I belong to you, so everything that's in me is yours, and since my friend is in my heart, he's yours too.

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Love, you blind fool, what are you doing to my eyes that's keeping them from accurately seeing what I look at? My eyes know what beauty is, and they see who has it, yet they decide that the worst woman is the best. Love, if my vision has been distorted because I look at her with too much bias, spending all my time staring at this woman who sleeps with every man, why have you used my misperceptions as a trap to fool my heart, so that I love the wrong person? Why should my heart think that she could belong to one man when my heart knows she's available to the whole world? Or why should my eyes witness her promiscuity but act like it's not true, putting a good face on an ugly truth? My heart and my eyes have been completely mistaken about the truth, and now they both love this unfaithful disease of a woman.

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My love is like a fever, always making me yearn for what will prolong my disease. It lives on whatever will preserve the illness, in order to prop up my fickle desire. My reasoning has acted as doctor and treated my love, but then it left me because I wasn't following its instructions. Now that I'm finally desperate enough, I realize that sexual desire, which was against the doctor's orders, is lethal. Now that my mind is past caring, I'm past the point where I can be cured, and I've gone frantically crazy and grown increasingly restless. My thoughts and speech are like a madman's, pointlessly expressing random untruths. For I have sworn that you're beautiful and thought you radiant when you're actually as black as hell and as dark as night.