

ASTROPHIL
AND
STELLA.

WRITTEN BY THE NOBLE KNIGHT
SIR PHILIP SIDNEY.

HOving in truth, and faine in verse my love to show,
That she (deare she) might take some pleasure of my paine:
Pleasure might cause her read, reading might make her know,
Knowledge might pity win, and pity grace obtaine,

I sought fit words to paint the blackest face of woe,
Studying inventions fine, her wits to entertaine:
Oft turning others leaves, to see if thence would flow
Som fresh and fruitfull showers upon my sun-burn'd brain.

But words came halting forth, wanting inventions stay:
Invention, Natures childe, sted step-dame Studies blowes,
And others feet still seem'd but strangers in my way.

Thus great with child to speak, and helpelesse in my throwes,
Bitin g my trewand pen, beating my selfe for spite,
Foole, said my Muse to me, looke in thy heart and write.

Not at the first sight, nor yet with a dribbed thor
Love gave the wound, which while I breathe will bleed:
But knowne worth did in mine of time proceed,
Till by degrees it had full conquest got.

I saw and liked, I lik'd but loved not,
I lov'd, but streight did not what *Love* decreed:
At length to *Loves* decrees, I forc'd agreed.

**UNDERSTANDING SIDNEY:
ASTROPHIL and STELLA**

Robert A. Albano

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Understanding Sidney

SIR PHILIP SIDNEY

Sir Philip Sidney lived from 1554 to 1586. He was only 32 years old when he died. And, as some scholars remark, when he died, all of England mourned. However, the people of England, in 1586, were not mourning the death of a poet. Rather, they were mourning the death of a hero, of a popular figure and a noble lord in the court of Queen Elizabeth I. Like many writers of times long past, Sidney's poetry and other literary works were not published until after his death. England's mourning would surely have been increased if the majority of the people at that time had realized that they had lost not only a great lord, but also a great poet.

In all likelihood, the members of Queen Elizabeth's court, though, were quite familiar with Sidney's poetic gifts. Reading poetry was a common practice in the court at that time. And Sidney's poetry would have been passed around in **manuscript** form as would the poetry of other individuals connected with the court, including the Queen herself. Thus, in only a few short years after his death, and still during the reign of Queen Elizabeth, Sidney's poetry was published and made available to all of the people in England.

Sidney, like other Renaissance poets, did not make a career of writing. Writing poetry was an avocation, a labor of love. It was not a job. Sidney was a courtier and a soldier. He served as a diplomat for Queen Elizabeth. Like most aristocrats, Sidney had certain advantages not available to the commoners. He attended Oxford University, but he never graduated. Because he was financially established, he could also

support other writers. Sidney was a **patron** of other poets. And the student should note that Sidney was even the patron of Edmund Spenser, one of the greatest Renaissance poets.

Sidney died the death of a hero. Queen Elizabeth criticized Sidney because he would often fight for Protestant causes. During the 16th century the growth of the Protestant Reformation led to serious and deadly political conflicts between Catholic countries and Protestant ones. In 1586 Sidney went to the Netherlands to help that Protestant country fight against their enemy, Spain (a Catholic country). During the conflict a musket ball (an early form of bullet) struck Sidney. The wound that he received became infected, and soon after Sidney died from that infection.

Sidney is known for writing three great works of literature, all of which, as mentioned, were published after his death:

- (1) His *Arcadia*, published in 1590, is a pastoral romance. This long work is actually, for the most part, written in prose. However, many poetic passages are intermixed with the rest of the text.
- (2) Sidney's *Defence of Poesy* (Poetry) was published in 1595. This book is a major work of **literary criticism**, and many authorities still consider it as one of the most essential works of criticism of all time. In it, Sidney emphasizes moral poetry. Poetry should present moral lessons and moral attitudes.

- (3) *Astrophil and Stella* was published in 1591, but it was written circa 1582. This is the first great **sonnet cycle** or sonnet sequence in Elizabethan literature. For this work, Sidney found inspiration in the Italian poet Francis Petrarch. More than 200 years before Sidney wrote his sonnets, Petrarch wrote a series of sonnets chronicling his emotional ups and downs because of his **unrequited love** for a woman named Laura. Sidney revived this approach in his own sonnet sequence that also depicts a man's unrequited love for a woman.

THE REAL-LIFE MODELS FOR ASTROPHIL AND STELLA

Astrophil and Stella contains 108 sonnets. In addition, it also includes 11 songs (longer poems that are lighter and more lyrical than the sonnets). The sequence is based on a real-life relationship between Sidney and a woman named Penelope Devereux. Sidney's relationship with Devereux never did develop into anything permanent. In fact, Devereux married a man named Lord Robert Rich in 1581. And in 1583 Sidney himself married a woman named Frances Walsingham.

However, the student should be aware that the loose events noted in the poems are more **fictional** than factual. Sidney purposely creates names for his fictional characters. Astrophil is the male lover, the speaker in the poems, who suffers from unrequited love. Stella is the woman that Astrophil adores. The names are **symbolic**. *Stella* means star, and *Astrophil* means a lover of a star. Of course, there is an obvious problem for an earth-bound human who is in love with a star. The star is too distant. The star is unreachable. Thus, even from Sidney's title, we can deduce that Astrophil will never achieve his goal. He will never win the love of Stella.

On the other hand, students should note that the name *Astrophil* does contain part of Sidney's own name: Phil is short for Philip. So, the emotions that Astrophil experiences may, in all probability, reflect some of Sidney's own emotions for Penelope Devereux.

According to historical sources, though, the real Penelope Devereux was a much warmer and kinder woman than Stella seems to be. In many of the poems, Stella is icy cold to Astrophil. However, the sonnets also do reflect occasions when Stella does show care and some affection for Astrophil. So, there could be more truth to the sonnets than historians have discovered.

RHYME AND METER

The Petrarchan or Italian sonnet contains 14 lines with a fixed rhyme scheme and meter. The sonnet can be divided into two parts: the octave (the first 8 lines) and the sestet (the remaining 6 lines). The rhyme scheme is usually the following:

OCTAVE	<i>abba</i>	<i>abba</i>	
SESTET	<i>cde</i>	<i>cde</i>	(or <i>cdcdcd</i>)

Sidney's **rhyme scheme** is similar to the Italian model. However, he usually breaks up the Sestet into a Quatrain (4 lines) and a Couplet (2 lines) to produce the following scheme:

OCTAVE	<i>abba</i>	<i>abba</i>
QUATRAIN	<i>cdcd</i>	
COUPLET	<i>ee</i>	

Often, the Octave will pose a problem, and the Sestet will suggest a solution. However, the sonnet may be divided in other ways. The Octave could present a generalization, and the Sestet could apply that generalization to a specific occurrence. Or the Octave might make a statement, and the Sestet could contradict that statement.

In Sidney's sonnets, the point where the poem moves in a new direction is not always after the eighth line (after the Octet). Sometimes, the shift will occur at the beginning of the Couplet (in line 13). But the shift could just as easily occur in line 6 or line 11 or anywhere else in the poem.

For most of his sonnets, Sidney uses **iambic pentameter** for his **meter**. A line of poetry in iambic pentameter is 10 syllables long. It contains 5 iambs. An **iamb** is a foot of poetry that is two syllables long. The first syllable is unaccented, and the second syllable is accented. The syllables of an iamb are traditionally labeled in the following way:

IAMB *u /*

Iambic pentameter, which contains 5 iambs, would thus have the following metrical pattern:

IAMBIC PENTAMETER *u / u / u / u / u /*

In English, words that are nouns, verbs, adjectives, and some adverbs usually receive an accent. If the word is more than one syllable long, the accent belongs on the root syllable. Prepositions, conjunctions, articles, and helping verbs usually do not receive an accent. Pronouns (including possessive pronouns) often do not receive an accent as well.

The first two lines of Sonnet 7 are fairly typical in showing the iambic pentameter pattern:

u / u / u / u / u /
When Nature made her chief work, Stella's eyes
u / u / u / u / u /
In colour black, why wrapped she beams so bright?

The student should note that nouns (*Nature, eyes, colour,* and *beams*) and verbs (*made* and *wrapped*) and adjectives

(*chief*, *black*, and *bright*) receive accents. The observant student may notice that there is one exception in the example. The noun *work* should receive an accent as well. Although Renaissance poets did wish to create a steady meter or rhythm in their poetry, they would not sacrifice the meaning of the poem in order to adhere slavishly to the metrical pattern. Breaking a rule in poetry is called **poetic license**. A poet may also break traditional rules of grammar, spelling, or pronunciation in his or her poetry if he or she feels that, by breaking the rule, the poem will be improved. Good poets will never sacrifice meaning or sense in their poetry. However, when they break the rules that they are following elsewhere, they usually do so purposely as a means to improve their artistic creation.

Meter is important for poetry. It turns ordinary language (prose) into an artistic language, into musical language. Poetry should not be read silently. It should be read aloud. Reading poetry silently is like reading the lyrics to a song. The reader is only experiencing part of the artistic creation.

Sidney uses iambic pentameter in all but six of his sonnets. In those six sonnets, he uses iambic hexameter. Hex, here means six. Thus, a line of iambic hexameter has six iambs:

IAMBIC HEXAMETER *u / u / u / u / u / u /*

Sonnets 1 and 6 of *Astrophil and Stella* have iambic hexameter lines.

STRUCTURE

Although Sidney's sonnet cycle does not have a plot like a short story or novel would have, the sequence does present a loose story when all of the pieces are put together. Largely, the "plot" or story of the cycle presents the stages of a love relationship. More precisely, the sonnets present the complexity of emotions and feelings that the speaker of the poem, Astrophil, experiences throughout the many years that he is longing for Stella.

Most of the sonnets can fit into one of the following categories:

- (1) Praise of Beauty and Virtue: Astrophil declares his attraction to Stella and praises her beauty and/or her virtue.
- (2) Trials and Suffering: Astrophil suffers because his love is unrequited. Stella does not seem to care for him.
- (3) Moments of Encouragement: Occasionally, Stella smiles or expresses some emotion to Astrophil. Astrophil feels encouraged or hopeful.
- (4) Mixture of Positive and Negative Feelings: Astrophil experiences opposite emotions simultaneously in loving a lady who does not return his love.

In a sense, Astrophil's emotions are on a seesaw. They go up and down. As noted above, sometimes the positive and negative feelings occur at the same time. Some of these opposite emotions appear in the following chart:

POSITIVE

Hope or Joy
Tenderness
Exultation

NEGATIVE

Despair
Bitterness/Regret
Modesty

Sometimes Astrophil will be excited to be so much in love. Love is the magic that keeps him alive. At other times (or possibly at the same time) Astrophil will feel that he can never obtain "the lady on the pedestal." She is too far up for him. He is too lowly for her. She is a star, and he is hopelessly earth-bound. Worse, Astrophil often regrets the time he has wasted in loving a woman that will never love him back.

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