

English 220: Prepared in-class essay

This essay will be written in class on Monday, October 21. You may bring this assignment sheet, and you may either annotate the assignment directly, on ONE side of the page with your chosen sonnet, or you may also bring ONE page of notes (one side only), to support your writing. Don't try to write out your essay in advance: the purpose of the mark-up or notes is to help you to organize your thoughts, and to act as a prompt for your writing. I will ask you to hand in your notes, whether they are on the assignment sheet or on a separate sheet, when you hand in the paper.

Write an analysis of ONE of the following sonnets by Shakespeare, paying particular attention to how the formal and thematic elements work together. To succeed in this assignment, you will need to decide *what* the sonnet is about; more importantly, you will need to work through *how* it expresses its central ideas. You may choose to make reference to other sonnets in your analysis if you like, but it would also be possible to succeed brilliantly simply by focusing closely on the particular sonnet you choose.

I give some lee-way on minor mechanics for in-class writing – while I hope you will be careful, I am not, for example, expecting perfect spelling – but I do expect correct grammar and careful attention to overall structure. You may choose to organize your essay in a variety of ways. You might have a general introductory paragraph that identifies your main focus; a section that moves through the poem line by line; and a summary conclusion, for example. Or you might choose to have separate paragraphs focusing on theme, on form, and on how they work together; you might have one paragraph on a particular metrical effect, and a second on another; you might identify a dominant metaphor and move through it section by section... what is important is that there should *be* a structure. Your job is to think about how the poem works, and to show that working to your reader.

Be careful not to settle for simply paraphrasing the sonnet, and be cautious, too, about simply identifying various formal features. Think of this writing as a two-stage process – a useful shorthand is “what?” and “so what?” Remember, too, that your role is to be an analyst: your job is not to praise, blame, or describe the poem, but rather, to explicate how it works. You might well find certain aspects of the poem most interesting or appealing because of your own tastes, or experiences, or reactions, and it's fine to recognize your own stance (indeed, it can be important to do so), but remember that the goal is to aim for a space in which critical analysis can happen.

Since brass, nor stone, nor earth, nor boundless sea,
But sad mortality o'er-sways their power,
How with this rage shall beauty hold a plea,
Whose action is no stronger than a flower?
O, how shall summer's honey breath hold out
Against the wreckful siege of battering days,
When rocks impregnable are not so stout,
Nor gates of steel so strong, but Time decays?
O fearful meditation! where, alack,
Shall Time's best jewel from Time's chest lie hid?
Or what strong hand can hold his swift foot back?
Or who his spoil of beauty can forbid?
O, none, unless this miracle have might,
That in black ink my love may still shine bright.

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 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.