

Sonnet No 55: Not marble nor the gilded monuments By William Shakespeare

Not marble nor the gilded monuments
Of princes shall outlive this powerful rhyme,
But you shall shine more bright in these contents
Than unswept stone besmeared with sluttish time.
When wasteful war shall statues overturn,
And broils root out the work of masonry,
Nor Mars his sword nor war's quick fire shall burn
The living record of your memory.
'Gainst death and all-oblivious enmity
Shall you pace forth; your praise shall still find room
Even in the eyes of all posterity
That wear this world out to the ending doom.
So, till the Judgement that yourself arise,
You live in this, and dwell in lovers' eyes.

Summary: Neither expensive stone statues nor gold-covered monuments to the ruling class will live as long as this mighty poem. Through this sonnet, you will shine more brightly than any statue ruined by messy, careless time. When wars come along and topple statues, and conflicts undo the skilled work of masons, not even Mars (the god of war) himself or war's speedy fires shall destroy this living memory of you. Defeating the forces of death and indiscriminate hostility, you will march ever onwards. Praise of you will always have a place among *all* future generations, until the forces of history bring this world to the end times. Until the end of time at Judgment Day, when you will be resurrected, you live through this poem, and in the eyes of the lovers who read it.

Poetry and Immortality

One of Shakespeare's best-known sonnets, "Sonnet 55" promises the speaker's lover everlasting life through verse. The speaker argues that poetry alone has the power to grant immortality. Kingdoms will fall and statues will crumble away, the speaker says, but this poem will keep the lover's memory (and the speaker's love itself) alive.

The speaker argues that even the most imposing statues, palaces, and monuments will eventually fall, despite their seeming solidity. Rulers often commission stone monuments to symbolize their strength and lasting power. But these "gilded" (decorated with gold) statues, made of the finest marble, offer no protection against time's ravenous appetite. If natural decay doesn't get these monuments, wars will "overturn" them, or mere squabbles ("broils") will "root out" the fine handiwork of masons (craftspeople who work with stone). The word "root" even hints that

nature itself might reclaim these objects. Time eats away at the physical world, puncturing the grandeur of rulers who think they can immortalize themselves in stone or gold.

That's where poetry comes in. A good poet can immortalize someone—in this case, the poet's lover—in a way that sculpture can't. The poem refers to itself as a "powerful rhyme" that will "shine more bright[ly]" over the course of time than any stone. Even Mars, the great God of war, won't be able to "burn" the "memory" of the speaker's lover with his destructive fire. That's because the lover is immortalized and memorialized within the poem itself. In other words, as long as the poem lives on—which it clearly has!—so too does its addressee.

But nothing lives *forever*-forever: only until the Christian "Judgement" brings the speaker's beloved back from the dead for an eternal life in heaven. This is when Jesus will return to the earth, ushering in God's final judgment of all humans that have ever lived. The speaker naturally believes that the beloved will meet God's approval.

The speaker also insists that poetry is more powerful than statuary because, while statues offer a motionless, stony "record" of people's lives, poetry makes this record "living." Unlike statuary, poetry can be easily and perfectly reproduced: it travels from person to person, on paper or in memory. The speaker's lover's memory will also survive because new generations of lovers will read the poem. Poetry doesn't depend on physical material in the same way that statues do—and, as the poem has already insisted, the physical world is always prone to decay. Poetry alone, then, opens a door to immortality.

But with all this in mind, the reader might observe that what has really survived here is "Sonnet 55" itself, rather than the "memory" of its addressee. Nobody knows for sure who Shakespeare's beloved "Fair Youth" was (though theories abound!). So, while the poem has proved the enduring power of poetry itself, it's worth asking whether it has *truly* achieved the immortality it claims—or whether it was seeking immortality for itself rather than its beloved all along.