

Sonnet No. 130: My mistress' eyes are nothing like the sun

By: William Shakespeare

My mistress' eyes are nothing like the sun;
Coral is far more red than her lips' red;
If snow be white, why then her breasts are dun;
If hairs be wires, black wires grow on her head.
I have seen roses damasked, red and white,
But no such roses see I in her cheeks;
And in some perfumes is there more delight
Than in the breath that from my mistress reeks.
I love to hear her speak, yet well I know
That music hath a far more pleasing sound;
I grant I never saw a goddess go;
My mistress, when she walks, treads on the ground.
And yet, by heaven, I think my love as rare
As any she belied with false compare.

Summary: The speaker describes the eyes of the woman he loves, noting that they are not like the sun. He then compares the color of her lips to that of coral, a reddish-pink, concluding that her lips are much less red. Next he compares her breasts to the whiteness of snow. His lover's skin, in contrast, is a dull gray. He suggests that his lover's hair is like black wires. Then he notes that he has seen roses that blend together pink and white hues like a lush embroidered fabric, but that his lover's cheeks lack such colors: they are not rosy pink. He then notes that some perfumes smell better than the breath his wife exhales. He loves to listen to her talk, but he understands that music sounds better. Though the speaker admits that he has never seen a goddess move, he is still sure that his lover moves like an ordinary person, simply walking on the ground. But, the speaker swears, the woman he loves is as unique, as special, and as beautiful, as any woman whose beauty has been inflated through false comparisons by other poets.

Theme of Beauty and Love: In “Sonnet 130,” the speaker unfavorably compares his lover's body to a series of beautiful things (implying that she is less beautiful than the sun, snow, roses, a goddess, etc.). Ultimately, the speaker concludes that, even if his mistress cannot be credibly compared to the typical imagery of love poems, his love is still real and valuable, and his mistress is still beautiful. In this way, Shakespeare suggests that love and beauty should not be understood through abstract comparisons, but rather should be valued for being real and flawed.

The poem begins with the speaker comparing parts of his lover's body to beautiful objects, finding, in each case, that her body is less beautiful than the thing to which it's being compared. For example, he writes that her eyes aren't as bright as the sun, and her breath isn't at all like perfume—in fact, it “reeks.” These comparisons at first seem to paint a portrait of a woman who is not very appealing. She is lackluster in comparison to the beauty of roses, snow, or music, which implies that the speaker might be able to find more beauty and pleasure in the everyday things that surround him than in the woman he loves. The comparisons, in other words, seem to degrade her value.

However, since the comparisons are rarely overtly negative, it's possible that they are not meant to debase the speaker's mistress. For example, the first line notes that the speaker's mistress' eyes are “nothing like the sun,” but it does not say what they are like. This leaves open the possibility that her eyes are better than the sun, or are at least beautiful in a different way. Similarly, the speaker notes that “if snow be white” then his mistress' “breasts are dun,” which seems more like a statement of reality (even the whitest skin is actually tan, or dun) than a criticism. The only truly insulting thing that the speaker says is that her breath “reeks” and, because of this, he finds “more delight” in “some perfumes.” But even this is a reasonably mild statement; he's not even saying that all perfumes are more delightful than her reeking breath, so clearly he doesn't mind it all that much.

The poem's final two lines cement the interpretation that the comparisons are not meant to be degrading to the speaker's mistress or to the love that they share. When the speaker claims that he finds “his love” as beautiful as any other woman “belied with false compare,” he's making the point that no one's eyes are as beautiful as the sun and everyone's breath smells kind of bad, and that, therefore, such comparisons are not actually a useful way to think about beauty or love.

