

Sonnet No. 144: Two loves I have of comfort and despair

By: William Shakespeare

Two loves I have of comfort and despair,
Which like two spirits do suggest me still
The better angel is a man right fair,
The worser spirit a woman coloured ill.
To win me soon to hell, my female evil
Tempteth my better angel from my side,
And would corrupt my saint to be a devil,
Wooing his purity with her foul pride.
And, whether that my angel be turn'd fiend,
Suspect I may, yet not directly tell,
But being both from me both to each friend,
I guess one angel in another's hell.
Yet this shall I ne'er know, but live in doubt,
Till my bad angel fire my good one out.

Summary: In the first lines of '*Sonnet 144*,' the speaker says that there are two loves in his life. From previous sonnets, it's clear that he's speaking about the Dark Lady who has been recently tormenting him and the Fair Youth. The latter is a young man (who historians have never identified) with whom the speaker had some kind of romantic relationship. They are like "two spirits" he adds, one of whom is an angel and the other is a "worser spirit a woman coloured ill." The latter is a reference to the Dark Lady's skin color. She has a dark complexion and she brings darkness into his life. The angelic side belongs to the Fair Youth who made the speaker far happier.

The speaker goes on to say that the darker side of the two spirits tries to tempt him into sin. She is a "female evil" who wants to "corrupt my giant to be a devil." He realizes that she's bad for

him but as the previous sonnets suggest, he can't stop himself from lusting after her. His purity as a good Christian and human being is at risk when she's around. Her "pride" is an issue.

In the third and final quatrain, the speaker wonders whether or not his "angel" or the Fair Youth has been corrupted by the Dark Lady. She wants to corrupt him, she knows that, but he doesn't know whether or not it happened. Neither of the two is spending time with the speaker at this point. Instead, they are "being both from [him] both to each friend." He has to assume that the Fair Youth has been ruined by the Dark Lady. She clearly has a power over men that no one is really capable of resisting. He uses the image of the Fair Youth being dragged down to hell at the end of the quatrain.

In the concluding couplet, the speaker completes the volta, saying that his speculation is leading to nothing. He is never going to know for sure until the Fair Youth is gone for good. It appears that as the sonnets go on, the Dark Lady is controlling more and more of the speaker's life. She isn't content with controlling him, she has to take the people he loves as well.

Theme: Throughout this poem, the poet engages with themes of love and corruption. The speaker loves the Fair Youth and feels some kind of affection or at least lust for the Dark Lady, but things are falling apart. She's destroyed his life and now may or may not be taking the Fair Youth into her corrupt circle. He doesn't want this "good spirit" or "angel" to fall into hell, but there's nothing he can do about it.

Readers might also consider the misogynistic undertones this piece presents. The speaker places the blame on the Dark Lady for corrupting him and others. But, as the other sonnets reveal, he was desperate to have sex with her. Her presence corrupts despite the fact that he's just as guilty of lust as she is.