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The use of imagery, versification, sound patterning, and sound effects in Shakespeare's sonnet

33¹

I discuss some ways the words of sonnet 33 combine to produce effect, focusing on sounds of words in addition to their overall sense.

The sonnet is organized into three quatrains followed by a couplet. The quatrains develop a metaphor of sun as person, and of clouds as something that obscures that person. In the first quatrain the speaker recalls many beautiful sunrises. In the second, he adds that these sunrises were soon obscured by clouds. In the third quatrain, he remembers a sun that rose and is now hidden by clouds. In the concluding couplet he affirms his love for this sun is constant though the appearance of the sun is not.

¹ FVII many a glorious morning haue I feene,
Flatter the mountaine tops with foueraine eie,
Killing with golden face the meddowes greene;
Guiding pale streames with heauenly alcumy:
Anon permit the bafest cloudes to ride,
With ougly rack on his celestiaall face,
And from the for-lorne world his vifage hide
Stealing un'eene to west with this disgrace:
Euen fo my Sunne one early morne did shine,
With all triumphant splendor on my brow,
But out alack,he was but one houre mine,
The region cloude hath mask'd him from me now.
Yet him for this,my loue no whit diddaineeth,
Suns of the world may staine,whê heauens sun stainteh.

From the 1609 quarto ("XXXIII", "33").

Flowing, dynamic rhythm, regal, magical imagery, and sprightly words combined with smooth, round ones contribute to the joyful, savoring mood of the first quatrain. Only the first line of the quatrain could plausibly be read as regular iambic meter, yet it could also be read as starting with a spondee followed by two anapests. I read a 10-syllable first line beginning with a spondee and ending with a caesura, as in the 1609 quarto. This produces a thoughtful, drawing effect, and sets the first line distinctly apart from the following three. It is like a sigh. The trochaic inversion in the first foot of the second, third, and fourth lines helps to unify those lines and to establish a faster tempo, while the caesura at the end of the third line, the spondee in the second foot of the fourth line, “pale streams,” and the mouthy, rhyming final two words of the quatrain, “heavenly alchemy,” slow the flow of the sonnet to a meander. “Heavenly alchemy” echoes the smooth sound of “glorious morning” in line one.

This sound patterning is suggestive of a stream running down a mountain. The stream falls from steep slopes, pauses in high meadows, and slows in bottomland valleys. The staccato of “flatter the mountain tops” suggests a small waterfall, and “pale streams,” a dam the sonnet’s rhythm overflows. The path and pace of the stream I visualize follows the sun’s rays in a mountain sunrise: the sun strikes the mountaintop in the first two lines, brightens the meadows in line three, and finally, as the morning grows, gilds streams in the bottomlands in the last line. The colors of this quatrain are gold and green, but the streams are pale, not dark, which seems unusual.

While the first quatrain is flowing, by the first two words of the second quatrain, “anon permit,” we have entered a sequence of three lines that feels in comparison like wading through muck. Only the last line, with a trochaic inversion in the first foot, varies markedly from regular iambic meter. This trochaic inversion, part of “stealing unseen,” is appropriate in that its rhythm suggests a sliding or sneaking rather than a regular walking movement. The short vowels, hard

endings, or negative connotations of the words “basest,” “ugly rack,” “visage,” “disgrace,” and “stealing” help the quatrain to embody shameful desertion.

I tended to see the clouds in the sonnet as an ugly expression obscuring a beautiful face or as behavior on the sun’s part that the speaker found unkind. Whatever the clouds represent, the speaker does not hold them entirely separate from the sun: the sun allows the clouds to hide him from the world, and the speaker finds that disgraceful. Prince Hal’s monologue in the middle of act one of *King Henry IV, Part I*,² which may have been composed years before this sonnet, uses similar imagery. The context of Hal’s monologue emphasizes that the clouds may be a constellation of behavior including not only facial expressions but also being in places, associating with people, and committing crimes that hide one’s virtue. The clouds could also represent a rival whom the speaker believes unworthy. While the speaker comes down hard on the sun for allowing his beauty to be masked, it is possible to see the speaker’s own actions as

² Yet herein will I imitate the sun,
 Who doth permit the base contagious clouds
 To smother up his beauty from the world,
 That when he please again to be himself,
 Being wanted, he may be more wondered at
 By breaking through the foul and ugly mists
 Of vapors that did seem to strangle him.
 If all the year were playing holidays,
 To sport would be as tedious as to work;
 But when they seldom come, they wished-for come,
 And nothing pleaseth but rare accidents.
 So, when this loose behavior I throw off,
 And pay the debt I never promisèd,
 By how much better than my word I am,
 By so much shall I falsify men’s hopes;
 And like bright metal on a sullen ground,
 My reformation, glitt’ring o’er my fault,
 Shall show more goodly and attract more eyes
 Than that which hath no foil to set it off.
 I’ll so offend to make offense a skill,
 Redeeming time when men think least I will. (1.2.190-210)

similar to those of the sun. In particular, the speaker's exclamation in the third quatrain suggests he is crestfallen, angry, or resigned at the dimming of his morning.

The third quatrain is similar to the first quatrain in its first half and to the second quatrain in its second half. The first two quatrains elaborate vocabularies based in repeated past experience that the third quatrain, in detailing an incident that began "one early morn" and extends to now, draws from. More specifically, the second line in each pair of lines in the third quatrain recalls the mood of the first or the second quatrain, while the first line of each pair shows transition from one mood to the other. With respect to sound effects and imagery, the first two lines of the third quatrain return to the smooth sound of the first quatrain, and the imagery is again of early sun, this time shining on the speaker. Apply the action of the sun in first quatrain to the speaker now. The second half of the quatrain, with "but out alack," and "hath masked" returns us to the slough of the second quatrain.

The concluding couplet stands out because it does not embrace either of the vocabularies of the three quatrains. It combines elements of each mood and the corresponding imagery and sound patterning within each line: "love" accompanies "disdaineth" in the first line, and "suns of the world" and "heaven's sun" contrast with "stain" and "staineth" in the last line. The final couplet is regular iambic pentameter with feminine endings, except, as I read it, for a trochaic substitution in the first foot of the last line. The trochaic inversion adds variation to the closing line but does not appear related to imagery. In combining the separate moods of the previous quatrains the speaker defines a perspective, outside of either mood, of acceptance of the nature of whom he loves. But he may not be comfortable with that perspective.

The concluding couplet, and its last line in particular, struck me as obscure and perhaps intentionally awkward, as if the speaker is describing a perspective he cannot make his own. As he describes the perspective his words betray his disease. In the first line of the couplet, "no

whit” may have a terse, exclamatory, businesslike tone; in meaning, feel, and sound it stands out between “love” and “disdaineth.” In the second line, “Suns of the world may stain, when heaven’s sun staineth,” it was hard for me to move beyond pondering the meaning and force of the concluding word “staineth” as it contrasts with and as it might apply to “suns,” “world,” and “heaven’s sun.” How “stain” is being used is not straightforward—it seems like saying, “I love you and there is a blot on you.”

A common transitive meaning of “stain” in the 16th century was, figuratively, “to throw into the shade by superior beauty or excellence; to eclipse,” while the intransitive sense, for which this line is used as an example in the OED, is “to lose color or lustre” (“Stain”). Thus, a possible paraphrase of the line could be: “Suns of the world may fade when eclipsed by heaven’s sun” (e.g., people may look ugly next to gods). Given the context, a more likely sense is: “Suns of the world may fade when heaven’s sun fades” (e.g., when the weather is bad people may complain). One could also read “when” not as an adverb but as a conjunction (e.g., “given that”): “As can happen to the sun so can happen to people.”

The couplet’s emphasis of “stain” could also include a message from the speaker to the one he loves. The speaker accepts and loves this person the way this person is but the speaker does not accept some of this person’s behavior, and concludes on that note. This tips the sense of the sonnet from “I love him regardless of what he does” to “I love him, and when he acts that way I cannot see whom I love.” It can be foolish, however, to pin meaning to a poem. Maybe the sonnet is shifting, wavering, shimmering sense.

An example of this shimmering is the transforming of mood that occurs as we pass into the first line of the second quatrain: the speaker has much experience with glorious mornings—mornings that are followed by clouds for the rest of the day. The mood flips as we pass, from savoring the net experience of many wonderful, well-appreciated dawns, to repeated and

persistent significant loss. Then the mood swings positive and negative again in the first and third lines of the third quatrain. The mood in the final couplet oscillates within each line as we pass from positive- to negative-connoting words, sounds, and images, and as we encounter words in contexts that demand uneasiness.

Experiencing the sonnet that way, it becomes a field of force shimmering, savoring, and defining. Like life, the sonnet contains states yet maintains not one state; the moods pull as we pass, creating landscape we travel, linger in, and return to. The shimmering is uncertainty, vague sense and form changing fast as in sparkling water seen through a translucent shade; the savoring is the act of creator and audience but can be said to exist in the sonnet due the sonnet's intricacy and integration; the defining is all that occurs as space forms from perception of sound.

To conclude, we've seen how the initial quatrains provide background for the third quatrain, and ultimately the final couplet, to draw from. And we've seen how words combine to help us feel a progressing sunrise, the muckiness of a feeling, and the speaker's effort to love in spite of his loss.

You are like the sun
Who lets clouds hide him.
Remember how we once were?
Now I never see you.
I love you.
You are like the sun.

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