

Sonnets 1 to 10,
a free sample from

Unrequited Love:
Sir Philip Sidney's *Astrophil and Stella*

Modern Language Edition

by

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ASTROPHIL AND STELLA.

WRITTEN BY THE NOBLE KNIGHT

SIR PHILIP SIDNEY.

1

The poet claims to have searched everywhere for inspiration to write about his beloved but without success; his muse suggests that he look within himself instead.

Really in love, and shy in verse my love to show,
that my beloved might take pleasure in my pain:
pleasure she would suspect, which then would let her know;
knowledge might pity win, which then might grace obtain.

I searched for words to paint a portrait of my woe,
devising var'ious ways, her mind to entertain;
I rehearsed others' verse: perhaps from them could flow
some fresh and fertile showers to drench my sunburnt brain.

The words came haltingly and lacked creative play:
Creation, Nature's child, dodged step-dame Study's blows,
while others' rhymes still stood as strangers in my way.

My pregnancy now came to term, and in my birthing throes,
I chewed my wayward pen, and beat myself from spite.
Fool, said my Muse to me, look in your heart and write!

The poet admits that the wound from Love's arrow will be permanent. He is learning to love just as someone born into slavery accepts his lack of freedom.

Not at first sight nor with his arrow aimed
did Love wound me, though – while I live – I'll bleed;
my view of her worth slowly did proceed,
till bit by bit it had conquest proclaimed:

I saw and liked; I liked but loved her not;
I loved but did not do what Love decreed.
At long last, I to Love's decrees agreed,
but all the while bemoaned my unfair lot.

Now the last step of my old liberty
is gone and, like the slave-born Muscovit',
I call it praise to suffer tyranny;

I now employ what remains of my wit
to make myself believe that all is well,
while with consummate skill I paint my hell.

The poet realizes that, while other poets rely on ornamentation to embellish their work, he need not do so when describing Stella.

Let clever minds call on the Sisters nine
so, all dressed up, their musings may be told;
or explore Pindar's lines for phrases fine,
figures of speech bright'ning their thoughts of gold.

Or have them in more noble settings shine,
blending newly found styles with subjects old;
or with strange similes enrich each line,
like foreign plants and beasts we let take hold.

The truth is that only one muse I know;
phrases and answers out of reach do go,
and foreign things stay way beyond my sights.

What then? It's this: in Stella's face I read
what love and beauty are, so all I need
is to copy what Nature in her writes.

The poet tells Virtue to ease the tension that she causes between his will and his mind, adding that his heart will show her someone so divine (Stella) that even she will fall in love with her.

All right, Virtue, now let me have some rest;
 you've put a wedge between my soul and wit.
 If unrequited love has me depressed,
 leave what you do not like: do not touch it.

Go use your power in some stern old man's breast:
 churches or schools would be a better fit.
 I ask pardon for the fault I've confessed:
 my mouth is still too tender for your bit.

But if you commandeer, despite my plea,
 the little reason that is left in me
 and think you can your better way still prove,

My heart will point out someone whom you'll see
 has embodied just such a deity
 with whom, Virtue, you'll also fall in love.

The poet states that romantic love is a form of idolatry and that Virtue is the divine model for earthly beauty, but that it is our task to work our way up from the earth towards the heavenly realm, although he cannot help but love his Stella.

I believe that our eyes were made to serve
 our inner light; that our celestial part
 ought to rule us; and if we from it swerve,
 defying Nature, we cause ourselves smart.

I believe that what we call Cupid's dart
 an idol is, which for ourselves we carve
 and foolishly adore within our heart,
 till this god makes church and its churchmen starve.

It's true, true beauty is virtue indeed,
 but earthly beauty is only a shade,
 which elements with earthly mixtures breed:

It's true, too, that we are mere pilgrims made,
 and that our souls should toward heaven move:
 it's also true that I must Stella love.

The poet describes the artificial ornaments and devices that other poets need to dress up their work; for him, however, simply uttering the name of Stella causes him to express his love for her.

Some find their words when they their Muses entertain,
 of hopes brought on by fear, from who knows what desires:
 of glorious heav'nly light, inflicting hellish pain;
 of living deaths, good wounds, fair storms, and freezing fires.

Someone his song with Jove, and Jove's strange tales attires,
 edged round with bulls and swans, sprinkled with golden rain;
 the shepherd's flute another humbler wit inspires,
 yet often hiding royal blood in rural vein.

To some, the saddest tale the sweetest style affords,
 while tears pour from his ink, and sighs breathe through his
 words:
 his blank sheet cries despair, while pain makes his pen move.

I can say what I feel, and feel as much as they,
 but my entire being is out on display
 when I, with trembling voice, say that I Stella love.

*The poet praises Stella's black eyes and wonders
whether Nature gave her that colouring in memory of
all the suitors who had died on the altar of her love.*

Nature's greatest success was Stella's eyes:
but why are they black while their beams are bright?
Would Nature paint in black, like painters wise,
composing scenes by mixing shade with light?

Or did Nature this darkish hue devise,
so she can better shield our fragile sight;
should no veil these bright rays from us disguise,
and their great glare more dazzle than delight?

Or did Nature put on some magic show,
using black though it might seem contrary
and causing all beauties from black to flow?

Nature did both and, mindful Love should be
always placed there, gave Love these mourning wreaths:
to honor all who, for her, give their deaths.

*The poet extols the virtues of English hearts,
although the climate in England is somewhat cold.
Cupid thinks he has found a warm, safe haven with
Stella, but her coldness makes him flee to the poet's
heart where he sings his feathers and is trapped.*

Love, born in Greece, recently fled his native place,
forced by the evidence that a Turk's hardened heart
is not a fit target for his fine poisoned dart
and, pleased with our soft peace, here ended his mad race.

But finding our climate gave him a cold embrace,
unused to frozen hugs, he strove to find some part
where with more ease and warmth he might apply his art.
At length, he came to rest on Stella's joyful face.

Her fair skin, beaming eyes, like morning sun on snow,
deceived the shiv'ring boy, who thought from such pure light
a glowing heat to warm himself would surely grow.

But she, a cold beauty, made him resume his flight
toward my heart where, while a warm fire he did lay,
happened to burn his wings, and could not fly away.

*The poet analyses the anatomy of Stella's face,
describing her as a complex architectural fabrication
made of exotic materials.*

Queen Virtue's Court, as some call Stella's face,
is equipped with Nature's best furniture:
its façade is of alabaster pure;
gold is draped over the stately palace.

The door from which she sometimes shows her grace
red marble is, which pearl locks make sure;
her rich porches (whose names as cheeks endure),
red and white marble blends do interlace.

The windows through which our heavenly guest
regards the world, and can find nothing much
which dares claim from those lights the name of best;

Touchstone windows let touch without a touch,
which Cupid did from Beauty's mine withdraw:
their touch is gold, while I am their poor straw.

*The poet tells Reason that she would be well advised
to leave matters of the heart to the will rather than to
the mind.*

Reason, I don't understand why you're still
scrapping about feelings and love, you see.
I'd rather that you climbed the Muses' hill,
or plucked the fruit from Nature's tastiest tree.

Look inside heaven, learn its trajectory:
why should you plow here on my thorny hill?
Leave my feelings and their objects to me:
deal with powers of thought; leave love to will.

But you would rather fight both love and sense;
your sword of wit would wound with damning praise,
till outright blows foiled your clever defence.

As soon as you are struck by Stella's rays,
Reason, you'll kneel and then offer to prove,
using reason, why I must win her love.