

## One day I wrote her name upon the strand (Sonnet 75)

Just picture it: the speaker and his lady-friend are at the strand (i.e., the beach). He writes her name in the sand, but a wave comes and washes it away. He writes it again, but alas, a wave washes it away again (no big surprise there, really).

The woman says that it's silly for the speaker to be writing her name in the sand to begin with; she's going to die one day and disappear from the earth, just as her name has disappeared.

Then the speaker works his magic. He tells his sweetie that he'll immortalize her by writing about her in his poems. Their names will live forever in his poetry, and their love will live on forever and ever. Aw, how sweet.

Lines 1-2

One day I wrote her name upon the strand,  
But came the waves and washed it away:

Okay guys, let's jump on in. The poem begins by setting the scene: the speaker (the "I") of the poem is at the strand with his gal pal. The strand, in case you are not up on Spenser's lingo, is another name for the shore—you know, the sandy part of the beach.

So the speaker and his beloved are chilling at the beach, and he decides to get all romantic and write her name in the sand. Aw, cuteness.

But then the waves wash away her name—sadness.

Before we move on, let's just take note of the poem's form. We know from the title that it's a sonnet (what's up, 14-line poem) but we're not so sure about the rhyme scheme yet. There's no rhyming going on in these lines.

You might also want to note that the poem has ten-syllable lines, which should put you on iambic pentameter alert.

Surprise, surprise. These lines are actually written in perfect iambic pentameter. Spenser even lets us know that we should pronounce "washed" with two syllables (that's what the accent mark means): as "washed," to preserve the poem's perfect iambic rhythm. Dude was a stickler about iambic pentameter. (For more on the poem's rhythm, check out the "Form and Meter" section.)

Lines 3-4

Again I wrote it with a second hand,  
But came the tide, and made my pains his prey.

Our speaker is pretty intrepid. He writes his girlfriend's name in the sand again—in the words of the poem, "with a second hand."

And then, uh-oh, the tide comes in and washes her name away again. The beach is just downright cruel.

Let's take note of the speaker's diction (or word choice) here. He refers to his writing as "his pains," and this language seems to suggest that writing—even just the writing of his beloved's name in the sand—is hard work.

The speaker also makes a metaphor; he refers to his writing as the "prey" of the waves. He basically imagines that the waves are like a mean ol' predator, just waiting to pounce on his poor defenseless writing. A little dramatic, dontcha think? The speaker's got a flair for the dramatic (or, we might even say, a flair for the poetic) if you ask us.

And one more thing: we've got some rhyming going on. "Strand" (1) and "hand" (3) rhyme, as do "away" (2) and "prey" (4).

This is a basic ABAB rhyme (where the letter stands for that line's end rhyme).

Lines 5-6

"Vain man," said she, "that dost in vain assay,  
A mortal thing so to immortalize;

Look out, it's dialogue. It's not too often that dialogue shows up in a sonnet, as sonnets are pretty short poems. But we find it pretty snazzy that Spenser included some speech in "Sonnet 75."

Now, don't be afraid of this dialogue just because the beloved uses old-school words like "dost." We'll translate for you. She basically says, "Hey speaker: you're vain (i.e., full of yourself) and your assay (or attempt) to preserve (immortalize) my name (a mortal thing) in the sand is silly (in vain)." Got it?

She's telling him that his gesture will never work, that he's being proud in thinking that his writing is more powerful than the forces of nature. He's trying in vain—or uselessly—to make her name immortal, when in fact it's mortal (it will die).

Note that the speaker's lady-friend is using the word "vain" twice in one line; she knows this word has multiple meanings, and she's drawing on both of them. We've got a smart chick on our hands in this poem.

And when we stop to think about it, this dialogue is pretty cool, since we get to have the direct perspective of someone other than the speaker in the poem. It's pretty rare for multiple points of view to find their way into short poems like sonnets, especially back in Spenser's day.

And before we move on, let's just make one more note: there's more perfect iambic pentameter here, and an interesting twist to the rhyme. The first lines of the poem had an ABAB rhyme scheme, and these lines continue the B rhyme—"assay" rhymes with "prey" and "away," and introduces another rhyme (the C rhyme) with the word "immortalize." Stay tuned for the word that rhymes with "immortalize"...

Lines 7-8

For I myself shall like to this decay,  
And eke my name be wiped out likewise."

These lines are the continuation of the beloved's speech. She says that she, too, will decay and disappear, just as her name has disappeared from the beach. She, too, will be "wiped out."

Is the speaker's lady-friend being all perverse and morbid here? Or is she just telling the truth? That one day, we'll all be "wiped out" by death? What do you think?

Oh and p.s., in Spenser's day, the word "eke" meant "also." It's one of those words that has been wiped out by the waves of time.

So to summarize, the beloved thinks that the speaker is being a little silly by continually writing her name in the sand, and she recognizes that, like her name, she won't live forever.

And now let's think about form for a second. We've got enough of the poem that we can see the rhyming pattern appear: ABAB BCBC. And (poetry spoiler alert) this pattern will continue throughout the poem. This rhyme scheme, is what makes the "Spenserian sonnet"... Spenserian. It was Spenser's innovation to the form. Nice work, Edmund.

Lines 9-10

"Not so," (quod I) "let baser things devise  
To die in dust, but you shall live by fame:

At this point in the sonnet, we get a classic volta (or turn), in which the poem changes its tune. So far, the poem has been all about mortality—how nothing and no one can live forever. But now, the poem begins to say that actually, yes, some things do live forever. The dialogue shifts from the beloved to the speaker himself (and we're just assuming that the speaker was a dude, given the lack of evidence to the contrary). He tells his girlfriend that "baser things [will] devise / to die in dust." Translation: things that are "baser" (or lower, less important, cruder) than you will die and become dust, but that "you shall live by fame." In other words: death is for suckers, yo. And you, my dear, are most definitely not a sucker (says the speaker).

And note all that alliteration of D words—"devise," "die," "dust." It all sounds very harsh, but the speaker eases up on these tough sounds when he addresses his girl at the end of the line. Check out "Sound Check" for more on how the poem sounds.

So, tell us, speaker, how will your lady-friend become famous?

Lines 11-12

My verse your vertues rare shall eternize,  
And in the heavens write your glorious name:

So how will the speaker's beloved live forever? Through his poetry, of course. (In this line, "verse" = "poetry"). The writing in the sand was just child's play. Poetry does all the heavy lifting involved in making someone eternal.

The speaker says that his verse will "eternize" all of his girl's virtues, and that it will write her name in the heavens, not in the sand. His poetry will be so awesome that it will make her immortal, basically.

Note the soft, alliterative V's in "verse" and "vertues"—they seem almost sweet compared to the hard D's in "dust" and "die."

He speaks to his sweetheart softly.

But not too softly: we are starting to think that the beloved is right when she calls the speaker "vain." Does his poetry really have the power to make someone immortal? Can her "glorious name" really live on forever through his poetry? Are his poems really that good? Or does the speaker have a serious over-confidence problem?

Lines 13-14

Where whenas death shall all the world subdue,  
Our love shall live, and later life renew."

Depending on your point of view, the speaker either reveals himself to be the most loving boyfriend ever, or the most clueless one. He pushes the envelope even more with this immortality stuff. He says that "death shall all the world subdue"—in other words, that death

will kill everyone in the whole wide world—but that their "love shall live, and later life renew."

Translation: everyone will die but their love will go on forever because of his poetry.

Now, here's where form gets really interesting. Have you noticed how the poem has become really alliterative, once the speaker begins his dialogue? In these final two lines, we have alliteration of W words in "where," "whenas," and "world," and alliteration of L words with "love," "live," "later," and "life."

It's like the speaker really wants to show off his poetry-makin' skills now. He's making these big claims—you will live forever through my awesome poems—and, to prove it, he shows off his alliterative skills. We feel very conscious that this poem is a Poem-with-a-capital-P, if you know that we mean.

This becomes doubly true when we notice that the last two lines of the poem form a rhyming couplet. So much rhyming, so much alliteration—this poem's poem-ness is undeniably poem-ish. This final couplet is the other hallmark of the Spenserian sonnet; it provides a sense of closure and finality to the poem.

So, do you think that the speaker is making promises that he can't keep? Can he really immortalize his gal in verse? Just think about it: are you reading Spenser's poem? Are you thinking deep thoughts about him and his beloved? Are you Shmooping this poem up or what?

We may not actually know his beloved's name, but we're all thinking about the speaker and his gal right now. Edmund Spenser and the immortal power of his awesome verse FTW. (That's "For the win," for all you technophobes out there).