

Sonnet 29

William Shakespeare

When in disgrace with fortune and men's eyes
I all alone beweep my outcast state,
And trouble deaf heaven with my bootless¹ cries,
And look upon myself, and curse my fate,
5 Wishing me like to one more rich in hope,
Featured² like him, like him with friends possessed,
Desiring this man's art, and that man's scope³,
With what I most enjoy contented least;
Yet in these thoughts my self almost despising,
10 Haply⁴ I think on thee, and then my state⁵,
Like to the lark at break of day arising
From sullen earth, sings hymns at heaven's gate;
For thy sweet love remembered such wealth brings
That then I scorn to change my state with kings.

Notes on Sonnets

The **sonnet** is an important traditional poetic form. The characteristics of sonnets include the following:

- **iambic pentameter** (each line has five pairs of unstressed and stressed syllables)
- A length of fourteen lines
- A definite **rhyme scheme** (for **Shakespearean sonnets**: abab cdcd efef gg)
- A focus on classic **themes** such as love and mortality
- Strong emotional content
- Emphatic **imagery** and sharp contrasts
- Distinct stages and shifts in **tone**
- A final **rhyming couplet** that often sums up the **theme** of the poem

Questions for Discussion and Writing

1. What can we tell about the **speaker** in this sonnet? What is he saying about himself and his own mental state in the first eight lines? Specifically, consider the following details:

¹ futile

² "having features"

³ breadth of knowledge or ability

⁴ by chance or by luck

⁵ situation; condition

- What does it mean to be "in disgrace with fortune" and "in disgrace with men's eyes" (line 1)? Why does he "beweep [his] outcast state" (line 2) and "curse [his] fate" (line 4)?
 - What does it mean to "trouble heaven with [his] cries" (line 3), and in what way is heaven "deaf"?
 - What is he wishing for in lines 5-7? Who is he referring to with the pronoun *him* and the expressions "this man" and "that man"? What is he least contented with (line 8)?
2. In the next section of the poem (lines 9-12), the speaker's mental state changes. What causes this change, and how does it affect the speaker's **tone**? Discuss the **figurative language** he uses in describing his new state.
 3. Who do the pronouns *thee* (line 10) and *thy* (line 13) refer to? Who is the speaker's **audience**?
 4. The last two lines sum up the speaker's point. What do you think *wealth* (line 13) refers to? What does it mean that the speaker "scorns to change [his] state with kings" (line 14), and why?