

SHAKESPEARE CAN'T WRITE | FOOD FOR THOUGHT

Shakespeare's language can seem scary, but give it a try! Go at your own pace, and have fun!



SHAKESPEARE IN PRISON

DETROIT PUBLIC THEATRE'S
SIGNATURE COMMUNITY PROGRAM



Have you ever had something important to write... and you just couldn't do it? Shakespeare did! These sonnets are all about "writer's block." Enjoy!

NERD ALERT! NERD ALERT! NERD ALERT! NERD ALERT! NERD ALERT!

Some of these poems are written to a "Muse." Who the heck is that?

In ancient Greek mythology, **muses** were the goddesses in charge of inspiring scientists and artists of all sorts. Other than being super-powerful, though, they were just like people: they played favorites, fell in and out of love with people, got into fights and then made up, flaked out in the middle of projects but came back when they felt like it. In ancient Greece, performances usually began by asking a muse (politely!) to help out with the show.

By Shakespeare's time, poets mostly wrote to muses when they were frustrated.



Usually, Shakespeare's sonnets stand alone as one-off poems. But Sonnets 100 and 101 can be read together, like a kind of super-sonnet! You don't have to put them together, though. What do you think? Do you like one better than the other? Both together? Separate?



SONNET 100

Where art thou, Muse, that thou forget'st so long
To speak of that which gives thee all thy might?
Spend'st thou thy fury on some worthless song,
Dark'ning thy pow'r to lend base subjects light?
Return, forgetful Muse, and straight redeem
In gentle numbers time so idly spent;
Sing to the ear that doth thy lays esteem,
And gives thy pen both skill and argument.
Rise, resty Muse; my love's sweet face survey,
If time have any wrinkle graven there;
If any, be a satire to decay,
And make time's spoils despisèd everywhere.

Give my love fame faster than time wastes life;
So thou prevent'st his scythe and crookèd knife.

SONNET 101

O truant Muse, what shall be thy amends
For thy neglect of truth in beauty dyed?
Both truth and beauty on my love depends;
So dost thou too, and therein dignified.
Make answer, Muse: wilt thou not haply say
Truth needs no color, with his color fixed,
Beauty no pencil, beauty's truth to lay;
But best is best if never intermixed?
Because **he** needs no praise, wilt thou be dumb?
Excuse not silence so, for 't lies in thee
To make him much outlive a gilded tomb,
And to be praised of ages yet to be.

Then do thy office, Muse. I teach thee how
To make him seem long hence as he shows now.

Translation of Sonnet 100: Where have you been, Muse, that you have forgotten for so long to inspire me to write about the person who gives you all your power? Are you using up your inspiration on some worthless poem, eclipsing your true powers by making unworthy topics seem brighter? Return, forgetful Muse, and make up for the time you've wasted by inspiring me to write some gentle verses. Inspire poems addressed to my beloved, the person who actually likes your songs, and who gives you both poetic skill and a topic to write about. Get up, sleepy Muse: Examine my beloved's sweet face to see if time has engraved any wrinkles on it. If there are any, then make fun of aging and make everybody despise time's destructive powers. Make my beloved famous faster than time can destroy life; prevent time's knife from cutting my beloved down.

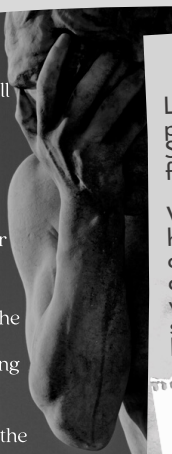
Translation of Sonnet 101: Oh absent Muse, how are you going to make up for neglecting my poetry, which is the truth dressed up as beauty? Both truth and beauty depend upon my beloved. You depend on my beloved, too, and my beloved dignifies you. Answer me, Muse; perhaps you'll say, "Truth doesn't need to be embellished when it's already attached to beauty. Beauty doesn't need to be poetically described in order for its truth to be apparent. Whatever is best is best when it's not mixed with anything else." But just because my beloved needs no praise, will you be silent? You can't excuse this silence, as you have the ability to make him live longer than a golden tomb and win the praise of future ages. Then do your job, Muse. I'll teach you how to make him look in the distant future like he does now.

STUPID MUSE!

The **speaker** (that's what we call the "character" who is "saying" the poem) is pretty frustrated with this muse.

How would you direct these two sonnets as a monologue? What is the speaker like in your show?

Where is it set? Should the audience sympathize with the speaker? Or laugh at the speaker? Or both? Something else? How would you decorate the stage? Is the actor alone on stage? Or is the muse there, too? (Or someone else?)



Help a poet out!

Let's say that these poems actually express Shakespeare's personal frustration.

What would you tell him to try to get his creative energy flowing again? What helps you when you're feeling stuck or have writer's block?

How would the muse respond to these poems? Write the muse's reply! (Bonus points for writing it as a sonnet!)

"he"
wait a minute! I don't know much about Shakespeare, but I know that there are totally sonnets written about women.

Great question! People have wondered about that for a long time. Most of the sonnets were written about women. A bunch of them were written about men. Why? We don't know! We do know that people used to hire poets to write sonnets for them, so it wouldn't be unusual for Shakespeare to be writing someone else's feelings into these poems.

Hold the phone!

You're telling me that Shakespeare might be faking it?? Like, these poems aren't even about him?

Well, sure! the dude was a playwright, after all!

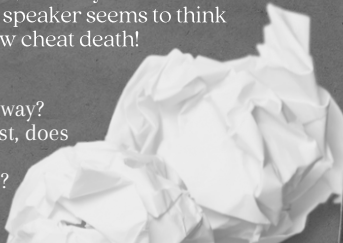
I don't know what to think anymore. Does this change how I look at these poems? Or at Shakespeare?

Does it matter to you whether these poems were based on Shakespeare's personal experiences? Why or why not? What do you want from a poem like this? Words that express something you've felt before? A window into someone else's life? Rhythm and beauty? Understanding the author's perspective? Something totally different? Some combination of things?

Flip the script! When you write, what do you want your readers to look for? What do you hope they'll see/feel/think about?

"prevent'st his scythe and crooked knife"
These poems are about writer's block, sure, but they're also about time, especially in the final few lines. The speaker seems to think that writing poems will somehow cheat death!

What do you think? When you write about something, does that keep it alive in some way? When you read about something in the past, does that make it "happen" again, in some way? Or is this just Shakespeare being dramatic? When you write about something, what are you trying to do for your subject?





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You can respond to these in any way you choose:

Write **ACT IT OUT**

Talk about it

Draw

THINK ABOUT IT

UP TO YOU!



SONNET 38

How can my muse want subject to invent
 While thou dost breathe, that pour'st into my verse
 Thine own sweet argument, too excellent
 For every vulgar paper to rehearse?
 O give thyself the thanks, if aught in me
 Worthy perusal stand against thy sight.
 For who's so dumb that cannot write to thee,
 When thou thyself dost give invention light?
 Be thou the tenth muse, ten times more in worth
 Than those old nine which rhymers invoke;
 And he that calls on thee, let him bring forth
 Eternal numbers to outlive long date.
 If my slight muse do please these curious days,
 The pain be mine, but thine shall be the praise.

Translation of Sonnet 38

How could I lack things to write about while you're alive? You pour inspiration into my poetry by giving me the sweetest subject to write about: yourself—too excellent a subject for ordinary writers to describe. Oh, give yourself the credit if you see anything in my writing that's worth reading. For who is so speechless that he can't write to you, when you yourself provide the creative spark? You should be the tenth muse, worth ten times more than those other nine called on by poets. And whoever calls on you for inspiration, let him write eternal verses, to outlive even the farthest reaches of time. If my little bit of inspiration happens to please today's demanding readers, the painful work can be mine, but the praise shall be yours.

Imagine you're auditioning for a part in a play, and you have to choose one of these three sonnets to use as your audition piece.

When you audition for a play, you want to showcase your performance skills while also allowing the director to envision you playing one of the characters in the script.

Which of these sonnets would you choose? Read the sonnets aloud and take your time with the language. See if the words stir any emotions or "as ifs" for you. Choose the one that feels most natural—and, hopefully, the most fun!

Now that you've chosen your piece...what would your acting choices be? No props or costumes allowed! Just you and the text.

"those old nine"
According to some versions of Greek mythology, there were nine muses, each responsible for a different type of inspiration

The poem proposes a new muse!
What is your muse like?
Does your muse look like a person? An animal? Something else? How does your muse act? Can you draw or describe them?

This sonnet is a little different from the last two. For one thing, the speaker is talking about the muse, not to the muse. Does that change the poem? How? Do you have a preference between these styles?



CAUTION

Hang on to your hats, word-nerds! Things are about to get super nerdy!!

38
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 Thine owne sweet argument, to excellent,
 For eury vulgar paper to rehearse:
 Oh giue thy selfe the thanks if ought in me,
 Worthy perusal stand against thy sight,
 For who's so dumbe that cannot write to thee,
 When thou thy selfe dost giue inuention light?
 Be thou the tenth Muse, ten times more in worth
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39
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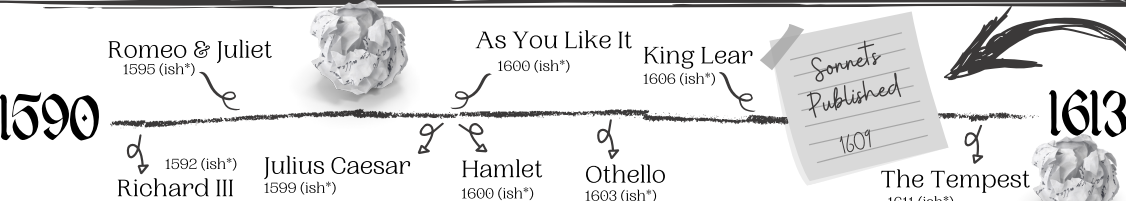
SHAKESPEARE CAN'T SPELL, EITHER | FOOD

Shakespeare's sonnets were published all together in 1609 in something called a quarto (a cheap-ish book, like a paperback today). If someone wanted to read Sonnet 38, this is what they would have seen. Check it out. Weird, right? You already know the sonnet; what do you see here that's different from above?

It might help to know three things:

1. There weren't rules about spelling in 1609. You could spell a word however you wanted. That explains a lot...
2. One letter looks totally different. The letter S was often written like this: f. We phased the "long S" out about 150 years ago. It shows up in the Constitution and everything! *Copyright © 2010 United States*
3. Some letters used to make the same sound. Think about how C can sound like K or like S now. A few other letters made more than one sound in Shakespeare's time. Can you figure out which letters were interchangeable in 1609?

Prepare for more word-nerding on this theme in the future...



By the time the sonnets were published, in 1609, Shakespeare had already written most of his "big" plays. He was one of the most popular writers in England, and the sonnets were an instant bestseller. Did he write any sonnets after 1609? We don't know.