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'The 'I' experiences both the negative state of not having something and the positive state of yearning for that thing at one and the same time: the two senses that the modern English usage of the word 'want' conveniently holds side by side' [Catherine Bates]. Is loss the dominant feeling of lyric?

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Through the analysis of three sonnets from the late 16th and 17th centuries, this essay will explore the differing ways in which 'loss' is presented in the lyric. Furthermore, it intends to emphasize how the lyric form engenders a kind of poetry dominated by feelings of absence and desire. Lyric poems are 'subjective' and 'personal', depicting a speaker's voice engaging in a 'reflective thought process or a sequence of feelings'.[1] This conveyance to the reader of an emotion 'at its moment of greatest intensity' is integral to the feeling of loss.[2] Lyric is non-narrative, and thus the poetic voice relates an emotional state that is atemporal. This portrayal of an intense emotion outside of time, without progression or resolution, creates a 'negative state … of wanting or of not having'.[3] This 'gaping hole' that 'lies at the heart' of lyric poetry assumes myriad forms, and reveal how the conventions of loss and yearning pervade the genre.[4] The lyric is often written to try to enact an external change and satiate this desire. However, as the 'form that most stringently attempts to banish physicality' the emotion is left in stasis.[5] In Sidney's *Astrophil and Stella* the sense of loss is presented in the form of unrequited love, in Donne's Devotional Sonnets it emerges as a yearning for a closer relationship to God, and in Shakespeare's Sonnets a mourning for the corruption of innocence. While the imagery and subject matter varies, the parameters of the lyric consistently invite the recurrence of yearning and loss.

Taking Sonnet 106 from *Astrophil and Stella* as the first example, Philip Sidney's speaker, Astrophil, expresses loss in the form of unrequited love. Written in the 1580's and sparking a trend of Sonnet sequences, Sidney utilized the same form and similar subject matter of what came to be referred to as Petrarch's *Canzoniere*. Just as Petrarch's speaker passes from a 'state of ardour to a state of despair',[6] using the figure of Laura as the unobtainable muse, so Sidney's sonnets follow a similar trajectory. The sense of inescapable loss is apparent even in the naming of his characters, 'Astrophil' being the combination of the Greek words 'Aster' (Star) and 'Phel' (lover), who is infatuated with the 'star' (Stella); a symbol of inaccessible beauty.[7] Sonnet 106 is situated near the end of the sequence and its tone is suggestive of a loss of hope. However, when analysed aside from the sequence, it still exhibits these feelings of loss and the language of desire. As Bates states, 'Astrophil sets out the … logical steps by which … Stella will know of his suffering … and grant him her grace' throughout the sequence.[8] However, across the 108 sonnets (excluding the songs) Sidney only portrays the voice of the speaker and his displays of suffering in the hope that his desire will be met. This unrequited sense of loss and yearning was taken up by many sonneteers of the period, and 'in virtually every case, the sonnet speaker's words … fall on deaf ears … as the beloved is absent, distant'.[9] Though Bates' observation concerns the sonnets of Sidney and his contemporaries, it can be applied in a wider context. Within the confines of the poem, the subjective voice of the lyric is always unanswered, and this absence is often felt in the subject matter as well.

Absence is at the heart of Sonnet 106 and the loss of hope is particularly pertinent given its placement at the end of *Astrophil and Stella*. An 'exemplar' of the Petrarchan tradition, Sidney applies this rhyme scheme of two quatrains (*abbaabba)* followed by a variant sestet (*ccdede*), inviting the reader

[1] Leland, R., *The Devotional Poetry of Donne, Herbert, and Milton*, Crossway (31 August 2014) (p.8)
[2] ibid.
[3] Eds. Cousins, A.D., Howarth, P., *The Cambridge Companion to the Sonnet*, Cambridge University Press 3 Feb 2011 (pp.104/5)
[4] ibid.
[5] Jeffreys, M., *New Definitions of Lyric: Theory, Technology, and Culture*, Taylor & Francis 1998 (p. x)
[6] Jones, F.J., *Structure Petrarch Canzoniere*, Boydell & Brewer (1995)
[7] Braden, G., *Sixteenth-Century Poetry: An Annotated Anthology*, John Wiley & Sons (15 Apr 2008) (p.348)
[8] Cousins, A.D., (p.111)
[9] ibid. (p.113)

to associate the piece thematically with the Laura poems.[10] The sonnet begins with Astrophil apostrophizing to the personification of hope:

> O absent presence, Stella is not here;
> False flattering hope, that with so fair a face
> Bare me in hand, that in this orphan place,
> Stella, I say my Stella, should appear:[11]

Opening with a classic example of the 'Petrarchan oxymoron', Sidney encapsulates the speaker's sense of yearning for what is lost.[12] This 'absent presence' is referring to the anthropomorphised figure of 'false flattering hope', with her alliterated body parts: 'fair face' and 'hand'. Astrophil feels deceived by the beautiful figure of hope, and laments to her that Stella 'is not here'. The final line of the quatrain is suggestive of the speaker's desperate state since it imitates the aural quality of a lover calling after his beloved, with the present tense verb 'I say' placed between calls of 'Stella'. The second rhyming quatrain compounds the accusatory nature of the first through a series of rhetorical questions:

> What say'st thou now? Where is that dainty cheer
> Thou told'st mine eyes should help their famished case?
> But thou art gone, now that self-felt disgrace
> Doth make me most to wish thy comfort near.[13]

Betrayed by the 'flattering' of hope, Astrophil's questioning, 'what say'st thou now?' pertinently highlights the parameters of the medium. Unable to receive a response, his sense of loss is compounded, 'he gains nothing and moves no further forward', and he remains in his state of yearning.[14] Sidney also uses the prevalent motif of loss as a wound or illness, describing his eyes as metaphorically 'famished'. This motif of unrequited love being injurious extends throughout the poem. Astrophil later uses the simile of a 'new maimed' man told not to 'think of his woe' in order to express the gravity of Stella's absence. Sidney ironically juxtaposes this absence against the abundance of female figures surrounding Astrophil, made explicit in the final sestet:

> But here I do store of fair ladies meet,
> Who may with charm of conversation sweet[15]

Together with the feminine depiction of 'hope' addressed at the beginning of the sonnet, Astrophil is surrounded by a 'store' of women, both referred to with the linking adjective 'fair'. Despite being surrounded by women who look to 'charm' him as 'false' hope did, the only woman who matters to Astrophil is the unobtainable Stella. Antony Low stated that 'desire' could be the one word that sums up Sidney's poetry, and this is apparent in Astrophil's reaction to losing Stella in sonnet 106.[16]

While the sonnet form is often considered an area of lyric poetry designated for romantic pursuits like *Astrophil and Stella*, John Donne challenged this notion with his Devotional lyrics published posthumously in 1633. Whilst many writers used the Petrarchan form to convey desire in an erotic sense, in Donne's *Batter my heart* desire takes the shape of a need to be closer to God. Struggling 'throughout his life with the fear of death' Donne's *Holy Sonnets* are evocative of a pennant stance, yearning to be closer to God and further from damnation.[17] Many of the sonnets of this sequence utilize similar techniques to the romantic lyric poetry of the early modern period. Bates suggests a model in which the 'situation of the speaking voice … is [always] the same: it lacks, it wants'.[18] Referring

[10] Ward & Trent, et al. *The Cambridge History of English and American Literature. Vol. III.XII.* §6 New York: G.P. Putnam's Sons, 1907–21; New York: Bartleby.com, (www.bartleby.com/cambridge/) (2000)

[11] Sidney, P., "Astrophil and Stella", Sonnet 106, lines 1-4, ed. Duncan-Jones, K., *Sir Philip Sidney The Major Works* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989)
[12] Langer, U., *Lyric in the Renaissance: From Petrarch to Montaigne*
Cambridge University Press (17 Jun 2015) (p.152)
[13] Sidney, lines 5-8
[14] Bates (p.113)
[15] Sidney, lines 9-10
[16] Low, A., *The Reinvention of Love: Poetry, Politics and Culture from Sidney to Milton* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 1993) (p.12)
[17] Targoff, R., *John Donne, Body and Soul*, University of Chicago Press, 15 Nov 2008 (p.106)
[18] Bates (p.105)

predominantly to love sonnets, her argument can be applied to a wide array of poetic themes. She argues that however the speaker 'fills the frame', the 'focus of interest is not the desired object but the desiring subject'.[19] This means that the focus can vary, but the loss felt by the speaker remains crucial to the form. In this form the desired object will always be placed at a 'strategic distance' so as to emphasize the action of wanting.[20] Donne's sonnets substitute the romantic object typical of the Petrarchan form with God. However, in some instances his language echoes the love sonnets of the 1590's, drawing parallels between erotic desire and a desire for greater piety. Furthermore, the motif of courtship and unrequited love is noteworthy due to the increasingly prevalent teachings of the doctrine of predestination in England. Calvinism had influenced 'the theology of the Church when Donne was considering conversion and when he joined' and this clearly informs the 'helplessness and … depravity' of the *Holy Sonnets.*[21] Donne's awareness of the concept of predestination is discernible in his use of the lyric form: through attempting to woo God and change his actions he emphasizes the sense of powerlessness and loss.

Donne's *Batter My Heart* exemplifies the speaker's unique portrayal of religious desire in his *Divine Sonnets.* Throughout the piece, his control of mood and syntax provides a sense of desperation. In the first line, 'Batter my heart, three person'd God', the speaker creates a sense of a desire for action. Not only do they use an imperative, thus exhorting God to perform an action, but they also address him directly in the clause following the command. This sequencing engenders a sense of urgency, which will permeate the rest of the poem, and the blunt imperatives are suggestive of an unorthodox relationship to God. The first line also contains the motif of the trinity, which is echoed in the rhetoric of the opening quatrain:

> Batter my heart, three-person'd God, for you
> As yet but knock, breathe, shine, and seek to mend;
> That I may rise and stand, o'erthrow me, and bend
> Your force to break, blow, burn, and make me new.[22]

The speaker is imploring the 'three person'd' God to perform the tripartite actions of the second line with even greater vehemence, as shown in the fourth line. This acknowledgement of the Christian significance of the number three draws a syntactic link between the two lines. Through mirroring the sentence structure, Donne contrasts what God is currently doing ('knock, breathe, shine') against what he wishes God to do ('break, blow, burn'). Each verb has been replaced by a more visceral version, and the use of plosive alliteration compounds this with escalating intensity. Furthermore, the use of the modal verb 'may' in the third line juxtaposes the two trinities, showing how the speaker is referring to a desired change of state that is not yet available to him. These violent actions are then attributed to the first simile that Donne introduces in the second quatrain:

> I, like an usurp'd town to another due,
> Labor to admit you, but oh, to no end;
> Reason, your viceroy in me, me should defend,
> But is captiv'd, and proves weak or untrue.[23]

The shocking and violent imagery of the first quatrain is now transposed within the context of a city (a metaphor for the speaker's soul); 'usurp'd' by Satan, imploring God to lay siege to it. The speaker is thus rendered helpless and passive in his battle against sin, as his 'Reason' is 'captiv'd'. Donne's speaker suggests that grace is only achievable if God wills it to be, and thus constantly 'seeks external, material … evidence' of this.[24] The sense of passivity Donne has created continues through the Volta, however the metaphor changes, as the language of the besieged city transforms into the lexicon of marriage.

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[19] ibid. (p.107)
[20] ibid.
[21] Guibbory, A., *Returning to John Donne,* Ashgate Publishing, Ltd., 28 Feb 2015 (p.208)
[22] John Donne, Divine Meditations 14, lines 1-4 Smith, A.J., Ed. *John Donne: The Complete English Poems* (Penguin Classics, 1996) (p.314)
[23] Donne, lines 5-8
[24] Guibbory (p.209)

Yet dearly I love you, and would be lov'd fain,
But am betroth'd unto your enemy;
Divorce me, untie or break that knot again,[25]

The speaker seemingly takes on the role of a woman who loves God and yet is 'betroth'd' to Satan. Coakley suggests this dual theme of femininity and passivity, tied to the violent imagery suggestive of 'rape and seduction'.'[26] This is further compounded in the final four lines, in which Donne provides two paradoxes, both of which attest to God's ability to override reason. He demands that God 'imprison' him so he 'shall be free', and 'ravish' him so he can be 'chaste'. The speaker echoes the romantic pleas and paradoxes that pervade the Petrarchan form, but these are subverted by the omnipotent figure of God. And yet Donne's speaker is left unanswered, longing for God to intervene in his imminent damnation, engendering the 'dominant mood of despair'.[27] The speaker has full faith in God's ability to save them from damnation. However, the desperate imperative tone and use of modality denotes the powerlessness felt by the believers of predestination.

Loss is also a prevalent feeling in Shakespeare's sonnet sequence, as the juxtaposition of his 'two loves'[28] creates dichotomies within the overarching motifs of beauty, love and time.[29] Firstly, the 'Fair Youth' of the initial 126 sonnets is variously associated with the 'Rose, King, Sun, Gold and Jewels'.[30] These symbols denote the wealth and status of the 'youth', but are also evocative of the motif of transience, and time's impact on beauty. Then, in an inversion of the young 'fair' man, the figure of the final 28 sonnets is the 'Dark Lady', widely thought to depict a renowned 'East Indian sex worker'.[31] Regardless of factual accuracy, the 'Dark Lady' sonnets are far more erotically charged, and the figure of femininity in the sequence is a corruptive one. It is thus the sonnets in which both characters intersect, along with their corresponding symbolic value, that are important when analysing the theme of loss. Taking sonnet 144 as an example of this, Shakespeare applies the 'medieval concept of the Psychomachia' to contrast the two symbolic characters.[32] Applying the imagery of a female devil enticing a male angel into sexual corruption, the speaker's sense of yearning is not for the loss of a specific person, but rather for the loss of innocence.

The theme of duality is crucial to Shakespeare's Sonnet 144, as the presence of 'two loves' means that no one person assumes the role of the desired object. Shakespeare thus invites the reader to view the loss in the poem as a conceptual one, with innocence and purity being corrupted. The first quatrain of the sonnet initiates the duality of emotion felt by the speaker, contrasting the figures of the 'Fair Youth' and 'Dark Lady'.

Two Loves, I have, of comfort and despair
Which, like two spirits, do suggest me still:
The better angel is a man right fair,
The worser spirit a woman coloured ill.[33]

The syntax of the first line gives prominence to the motif of duality, placing the dominant clause 'I have' after the object. It then goes on to address the first dichotomy referenced, 'comfort and despair', with the reader naturally associating the two states with the 'man right fair' and 'woman coloured ill', respectively. However, as the sonnet progresses this assertion is challenged as the two characters are conflated and the definitions of innocence and corruption become muddled. The two characters are referred to as 'spirits'; a term steeped in negative connotations, for instance in *Doctor Faustus* it specifically denotes 'an evil spirit or devil'.[34] While the youth loses this definition, becoming a 'better angel', the 'Dark Lady' retains it. This delineation is seemingly undercut in the next quatrain as the linguistic fields of the 'two spirits' are mixed. It is at this point that the imagery of the Psychomachia is most evident, suggesting that the 'two loves' represent moral halves of the speaker.

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[25] Donne, lines 9-11
[26] Coakle, S., *"Batter my heart …"? On Sexuality, Spirituality, and the Christian Doctrine of The Trinity*, Graven Images 2 (1995) (p.74)
[27] Stachniewski, J., *John Donne: The Despair of the "Holy Sonnets*, ELH Vol. 48, No. 4 (Winter, 1981) (p. 677)
[28] Shakespeare, W., Sonnet 144, line 1
[29] Callahan, D., *Shakespeare's Sonnets*, John Wiley & Sons, 15 April 2008
[30] Sarker, S.K., *Shakespeare's Sonnets*, Atlantic Publishers & Dist, (1998) (p.65)
[31] Bloom, H., Foster, B., *The Sonnets*, Infobase Publishing (1 January 2009) (p.xiv)
[32] Duncan-Jones, K.D., ed., *Shakespeare's Sonnets* (London: Arden, 1997) (p.402)
[33] Shakespeare, W., Sonnet 144, lines 1-4
[34] Duncan-Jones (p.402)

> To win me soon to hell my female evil
> Tempteth my better angel from my side
> And would corrupt my saint to be a devil,
> Wooing his purity with her foul pride;[35]

In this section, femininity and sexuality are aligned with moral corruption, and it is hard to discern the corruptible 'better' half of the speaker from the fair youth. Referenced in Sonnet 129, Shakespeare euphemistically uses the word 'Hell' to connote the female sex organ and its power to 'win' 'tempt' and 'woo'.[36] Through Deixis, during this quatrain the symbolically opposing characters move closer together, and further away from the speaker. Initially referred to as possessions, 'my female evil' and 'my better angel from my side', the pronouns then begin to alter. In the seventh and eighth lines the speaker is losing deictic control of both characters: no longer '*my* saint', the fair youth becomes '*a* devil', and 'his purity' and 'her foul pride' are emphasized by the shift in pronoun. Furthermore, the modality of the seventh line creates a sense of narrative stasis common to the lyric form, suggestive of the speaker's jealousy and despair at the possible corruption of innocence. This thematic and linguistic sense of uncertainty pervades the remainder of the sonnet and is relayed in the Volta.

> Yet this shall I ne'er know, but live in doubt,
> Till my bad angel fire my good one out[37]

The speaker is left unsure as to whether or not the two characters have had sexual congress, but, symbolically, he is unsure over the victor of the Psychomachia. Both the 'fair youth' and the 'Dark Lady' are now referred to as angels. Having been corrupted, wooed by her 'foul pride' (the sin associated with the fall), the 'fair youth' now resides in 'another's Hell'. Bya conflating the themes of innocence and corruption through sexuality, Shakespeare exhibits a unique use of the lyric poem to represent loss. While the 'two loves' become united through sexual intercourse the speaker is left incomplete, mourning the loss of innocence. Shakespeare thus presents a sonnet in which the desired object is actually a desired state which has been degraded and possibly lost.

Although a plethora of feelings are represented throughout lyric poetry, the various genres and intrinsic subjectivity often result in a dynamic of a desiring subject and a desired object. This relationship, coupled with the non-narrative structure, gives rise to a sense of yearning that is not fulfilled. While all three examples here were sonnets, the variety of speakers and themes explored highlight how the feeling of loss appears in numerous forms and contexts. Sonnet 106 of Sidney's *Astrophil and Stella* takes the Petrarchan form of the speaker lamenting the absence of his beloved, mirroring the feeling of loss and unrequited love in the Laura poems of the Canzoniere. Alternatively, in Donne's '*Batter my heart'* he applies aspects of the Petrarchan love sonnet to the theme of devotion to God. Inflected by the religious upheaval of the period in which he was writing, Donne creates a sense of yearning through his evocative apostrophizing to God, and a feeling of loss as the speaker remains unanswered. Finally, the loss felt in Shakespeare's sonnet 144 is a conceptual one, as the speaker is riddled with uncertainty and worry due to the union of his two symbolically significant loves. The character of the 'fair youth' represents beauty and innocence, and is seduced by the sexually corruptive figure of the 'Dark Lady'. It is this symbolic loss of innocence that the speaker despairs over. Each of these poems attempts to capture and present the speaker's emotions in a state of intensity, and given that this emotion is recorded outside of a narrative sequence, the poem is often desired to enact change that it cannot represent within its own confines. This change may come in the form of recognition from a lover, the intervention of God or the preservation of innocence. However, the form dictates that these actions shall never occur and so the speakers are destined to remain in a state of longing for something they cannot possess.

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[36] Duncan-Jones (p.372)
[37] Shakespeare, lines 13-14

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