

Pathway Advanced: Elizabethan Theatre – Edmund Spenser, *Amoretti* (1595)

Material

Of this world's theatre in which we stay,
My love like the spectator idly¹ sits
Beholding² me that all the pageants³ play,
4 Disguising⁴ divers⁵ly⁵ my troubled⁶ wits.
Sometimes I joy when glad occasion fits,
And mask in mirth⁷ like to a comedy:
8 Soon after when my joy to sorrow flits⁸,
I wail⁹ and make my woes a tragedy.
Yet she beholding¹⁰ me with constant¹¹ eye
Delights¹² not in my mirth nor rues¹³ my smart¹⁴:
But when I laugh she mocks¹⁵, and when I cry
12 She laughs and hardens¹⁶ evermore her heart.
What then can move her? If nor mirth nor¹⁷ moan¹⁸,
She is no woman, but a senseless stone.

From: *Norton Anthology of English Literature*, eds. Stephen Greenblatt *et al.* 9th edition, 5 vols. New York: W.W. Norton 2012. vol. B: pp. 986-987, modernized spelling. (109 words)

Tasks

Comprehension

1. Sum up the contents of the poem in your own words.

Analysis

2. Make a grid, collecting expressions belonging to the same word families, and label them.
3. Analyse the imagery of this poem and its structure.

Evaluation

4. *Discuss the relationship of the speaker and the woman he addresses in the light of gender roles – whom do you side with, him or her?
5. *Compare the key image of the “world as theatre” in Jaques’ soliloquy from Shakespeare’s comedy *As You Like It* with Spenser’s sonnet.

5 assignments

3 Must-do (1-3)

2 Can-do (4,5)

Minimum: 4 Assignments

¹ idle = relaxed, lazy

² behold = watch

³ pageant = mobile stagewaggon

⁴ disguised = masked

⁵ divers[e]ly = in various ways

⁶ troubled = worried

⁷ mirth = joy

⁸ flit = turn

⁹ wail = cry

¹⁰ behold = look at

¹¹ constant = fixed

¹² delights = [verb]

¹³ rue = to be sorry for

¹⁴ smart = pain

¹⁵ mock = make fun of

¹⁶ harden = become hard

¹⁷ nor...nor = neither...nor

¹⁸ moan = cry, wail, whimper

Solutions

Introductory remark:

This worksheet refers to the worksheet dealing with Jaques' soliloquy "All the world's a stage..." (As You Like It, Act ii.5). Task no. 5 below initiates a comparison of both Jaques' soliloquy and Edmund Spenser's sonnet, so it is mandatory to discuss both worksheets directly one after the other. In case you would like to discuss only this one, it is recommendable to use the editable word-document rather than the pdf, and change or delete the final task. It still may be possible to include some differentiation measures in the remaining tasks 1-4, when the grid and the analysis are declared alternative options. Then 3 assignments out of 4 have to be submitted, and the choice is between tasks nos. 2 and 3.

Fokus Literaturvermittlung: pp. 268-269

Task 1: Summary

The speaker of the poem addresses his mistress and criticizes her for being indifferent to everything he does. He likens his situation to that of an actor on stage, playing tragic as well as comic parts, whose performance is either not regarded by the mistress, or she responds to him in a way contrary to his expectations.

Task 2: Word families / semantic fields

Theatre	Emotions	Actions
this world's theatre (l. 1) pageant (l. 3) disguising (l. 4) masks (l. 6)	troubled wits (l. 4)	[the spectator] idly sits (l. 2)
spectator (l. 2), sits (l. 2), beholds (l. 3)	mirth (l. 5), joy (l. 6)	I laugh / she mocks (l. 11)
Comedy (l. 6) Tragedy (l. 8)	sorrow (l. 7) woes (l. 8) moan (l. 13)	I wail / I cry / she laughs (l. 8; 11/12)
	move her (l. 13)	hardens ... her heart (l. 12)
	senseless stone (l. 14)	

Task 3: Analysis of imagery and structure

The speaker in Spenser's sonnet uses many metaphors in order to describe his relation to the nameless mistress whom he addresses. He declares the human existence itself as a theatre performance, including the reader ("this world's theatre in which we stay", l.1), and thus begins with a generalisation about humans, which in the following he specifies. Afterwards, the description of the relation between speaker and mistress depends on this theatre metaphor: The actor and all the things he does represent the speaker and his "performance", whilst the spectator his mistress. The way these individual metaphors are connected to each other expand the notion of a metaphor and form an analogy: As theatre is an analogy of the world, the relation of this actor and his spectator is analogous to the relations between men and women: They sometimes resemble the form of a classical tragedy (ending in a catastrophe) or that of a comedy (with a happy ending).

The actor-speaker also refers to the emotions included in, or evoked by, a play. As an actor, he must be able to hide behind his theatrical part, and thus must sometimes "disguise" his true, "troubled wits" (l. 4) behind a façade of fun ("mirth") and joy (l. 5). At other times he plays a sad character's "sorrow" and "woes" (l. 7/8). However, whatever he does, she looks at him "with constant eye" (l. 9), that is, without any reaction, or she reacts in the opposite way to his performance: His laughter meets her mockery (irony), his tears evoke her laughter (l. 11-12). The speaker therefore concludes that his mistress must be a "senseless stone" (l. 14), a hyperbolic metaphor for a person without any emotional depth.

While the first eight lines are written from the speaker's point of view, a shift in perspective follows, introduced by the adversative conjunction "yet", indicating a contrast to the previous. Now, the speaker takes the viewpoint of his mistress ("she beholding me.../Delights not" and "hardens ... her heart", ll. 9-12), literally looking through her eyes, speculating on how and what she does or does not feel. These speculations are based on the unexpected and inadequate responses, mentioned above, to his performance.

With a view on form, the poem is written in the way Spenser used for most of his sonnets. This means, that in contrast to Shakespeare's sonnet with individual 4-line-stanzas (quatrains: abab cdcd

efef), the three quatrains are connected by the rhyme-structure: abab bcbc cdcd, the rhyming couplet concluding the poem.

Task 4: Discussion of the relation between speaker and the mistress

In the poem, the speaker argues that the lady, who seems to react contrary to his own speculations, is indifferent towards him and that she has no feelings for him. However, although he concludes at the end of his poem that she must be a “senseless stone” (that is, rather a stone without feelings than one without reason), he describes in the previous lines several reactions which are expressions of feelings: “She laughs” (l. 11) and she is ironic (“she mocks”, l. 11) in response to his performance, and generally she does not seem willing or able to sympathize with what he does (“Delights not in my mirth nor rues in my smart”, l. 9). Thus, the speaker presents himself as the victim of this woman for whom he seems to do everything, except that she does not accept his attempts at winning her heart. Seen from this angle, the poem is the speaker’s expression of these love pains caused by her insensitive conduct towards him.

At the same time, and from a 21st-century viewpoint, the poem is an expression of what nowadays may be called a “toxic relationship” between the male speaker and the woman. The lady repeatedly lets the speaker understand that she does not care about his approaches and therefore remains unmoved (she keeps a “constant eye”, l. 9, i.e. she does not show any feelings). Still, he never stops: Indeed, he might be seen as a stalker in our modern sense, because he obviously pays no respect for the feelings of this woman and does not leave her alone. Instead, he performs one show after the next, switching from tragedy to comedy and back, but never gives peace to her. Above all, his attempts at wooing her are literally theatrical: that is, one might even question his own emotional depth and the sincerity of his attempts.

However, the theatrical frame is also drawn around the woman who – like everyone else – is also part of “this world’s theatre” and may hide her true emotions from the speaker. Thus, the question of sincerity and honesty remains open on both sides, without any textual clues that might confirm any particular answer.

Still, even without a conclusive answer to this final question, the poem allows for two contrasting interpretations: The one, possibly more obvious, that sees the speaker as the victim in this relationship, because he has to suffer from the woman’s conduct, while the other, putting the focus on the woman and showing an equally valid understanding of the text, leaves her as a victim of the man who constantly intrudes on her privacy. Seen from this modern angle and judging the poem as a contemporary reader, it also allows to problematize the gender roles between men and women both in the 16th and 21st century.

Task 5: Comparison of the key image “theatre” in this sonnet and in Jaques’ soliloquy

In both these texts, the metaphor of the theatre is used as an analogy: In the sonnet, the erotic attraction between men and women is described in terms of the actor on stage and the audience; whilst in Jaques’ soliloquy, the theatre serves as an image for the life-course from cradle to death, limited to the male viewpoint. This description of a well-situated man’s life-course takes him from the inarticulate baby to the unmotivated schoolboy and the hot young lover, and further he plays the part of a soldier first and then a judge, before retiring and eventually drifting off into dementia. Even though this life-course spans a time which resembles that of one in the 21st century, such a long life would have been the exception in the Renaissance, when the average life expectation was not even nearing 40 years.

Furthermore, it is striking that especially the stages in adult life that Shakespeare describes in the roles of soldier and judge are public ones, which were unavailable to any Renaissance woman: In contrast to social roles in the 21st century, women had no official part to play in publicity and were expected to keep the household.

In l. 1 of his sonnet, Spenser’s speaker draws a wider perspective when he refers to “this world’s theatre”. What follows, however, is the narrowing of the perspective to the example of two particular people, the speaker and his mistress, and a focus on the phase of the “hot young lover” in Jaques’ soliloquy.