

Poem 3: A Sonnet by Henry Howard, Earl of Surrey

Alas, so all thinges nowe do holde their peace,
Heaven and earth disturbed in nothing;
The beastes, the ayer, the birdes their song do cease,
The nighes chare the starres aboute doth bring.
5 Calme is the sea, the waves worke lesse and lesse:
So am not I, whom love, alas, doth wring,
Bringing before my face the great encrease
Of my desires, whereat I wepe and syng
In joye and wo as in a doutfull ease;
10 For my swete thoughtes sometyme do pleasure bring,
But by and by the cause of my disease
Geves me a pang that inwardly doth sting,
When that I thinke what grieffe it is again
To live and lacke the thing should ridde my paine.

(Alas, so everything now remains quiet, heaven and earth are disturbed by nothing; the creatures, the air, the birds stop their song, the night's chariot makes the stars appear. The sea is calm, the waves move less and less. But I am not the same, I whom love, alas, contorts, bringing in front of my face the great increase of my desires, at which I weep and sing in joy and woe as if I am in an unsettled ease; because my sweet thoughts sometimes bring happiness, but by and by the cause of my distress gives me a pang that stings inwardly, when I think what a misfortune it is once more to live and yet lack the thing which would rid me of my pain.)

Context: Henry Howard, Earl of Surrey was a nobleman and soldier. He was a member of Henry VIII's court and served the king as a military commander. In 1547, he fell out of favour with the king and was executed following accusations of conspiracy and other offences. He translated sonnets and wrote other short poems, paraphrased Scripture and translated Books II and IV of Virgil's *Aeneid*. This poem is a translation of a sonnet by Petrarch. Petrarch's sonnet was inspired by the description of Dido's sleeplessness in Virgil's *Aeneid*:

"It was night, and everywhere weary creatures were enjoying peaceful sleep, the woods and the savage waves were resting, while stars wheeled midway in their gliding orbit, while all the fields were still, and beasts and colourful birds, those that live on wide scattered lakes, and those that live in rough country among the thorn-bushes, were sunk in sleep in the silent night. But not the Phoenician [i.e. Dido], unhappy in spirit, she did not relax in sleep, or receive the darkness into her eyes and breast: her cares redoubled, and passion, alive once more, raged, and she swelled with a great tide of anger." (Virgil, *The Aeneid*, IV.522–28)

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Poets in the late medieval and early Tudor period often used descriptions of nature to convey ideas about love. Sometimes descriptions of nature were used to symbolise how love was a natural part of a harmonious, happy universe in which all creatures pair up and procreate. Love poems often began with beautiful descriptions of new growth and flowers in springtime. Sometimes, by contrast, descriptions of nature were used to symbolize how abnormal the state of being in love was in comparison with the harmony and order of nature and natural things, revealing love to be a state of disorder and irrationality. Such descriptions of love became tropes (a trope is a theme or motif which recurs in many different examples). As well as discussing love, such tropes were a means by which poets could join in with a long tradition of writing about love by different authors.

Questions to think about:

- How is nature described in this poem? What time of day is it?
- Is the speaker in Surrey's poem in sync with nature or out of sync with it?
- What should he be doing at this time of day?
- How and why does love prevent him from doing what the rest of the natural world is doing at this moment in time?
- In Virgil's *Aeneid*, the text which inspired Petrarch's original Italian version of this sonnet and a text which Surrey would have known well, the description of Dido's sleeplessness comes after her lover Aeneas has abandoned her and after she has decided to die. This motif or trope was thus repeated by Petrarch and then Surrey. Does knowing about this allusion to an earlier literary work change how you view the poem? What extra information does it add to Surrey's poem?

Form, Structure and Language:

- Poets have licence to use unexpected word orders in their verse (i.e. not the usual order of subject-verb-object, for example). Can you find places where Surrey uses an unusual word order? Why does he do this? What effect does it have?
- How does he use form and language to evoke harmony and disorder?
- A line of verse can be endstopped (where the ending of the line coincides with the ending of a clause, phrase or sentence) or it can be run-on or enjambed (where the clause, phrase or sentence carries on in the next line). Look at how Surrey uses endstopping and enjambment. Can you relate this to the content of different parts of the sonnet?
- In this poem Surrey uses simple language in an evocative and powerful way. Can you find examples of this?