

# Sonnet 129: Th' expense of spirit in a waste of



## POEM TEXT

- 1 Th' expense of spirit in a waste of shame
- 2 is lust in action; and till action, lust
- 3 Is perjured, murderous, bloody, full of blame,
- 4 Savage, extreme, rude, cruel, not to trust;
- 5 Enjoyed no sooner but despised straight;
- 6 Past reason hunted; and, no sooner had,
- 7 Past reason hated, as a swallowed bait,
- 8 On purpose laid to make the taker mad;
- 9 Mad in pursuit, and in possession so;
- 10 Had, having, and in quest to have, extreme;
- 11 A bliss in proof and proved, a very woe;
- 12 Before, a joy proposed; behind, a dream.
- 13 All this the world well knows; yet none knows well
- 14 To shun the heaven that leads men to this hell.



## SUMMARY

To waste energy in the pointless, embarrassing act that's what it means to have sex. But until people have sex, their desires will be misleading, cruel, violent, shameful, wild, intense, inappropriate, merciless, and deceptive. As soon as people give in to their sexual desires, they hate them. Lust pushes people to irrationally chase after sex, even though, as soon as they have it, they hate the impulse that drove them toward sex in the first place—as though they were a fish that'd swallowed a fisherman's bait, a trap that was specifically set to attract them and make them go crazy. People go mad trying to fulfill their longings, and feel just as mad when actually doing so; such passions are intense and overwhelming regardless of whether people have already had sex, are in the middle of having sex, or are seeking out sex. Having sex feels great, but people are miserable once it ends; the prospect of sex is great, but once it's over, the pleasure vanishes as if it were all just a dream. Everyone knows this, but nobody has the good sense to resist the heavenly allure of sex in order to avoid the hellish torments of lust.

pleasure. The poem presents lust as an overwhelming urge that forces people to indulge in sex that, as soon as it ends, leaves them feeling depleted and ashamed. For the speaker, the fleeting physical satisfaction of sex isn't worth the emotional agony that follows. The fact that people keep indulging their lust anyway illustrates how powerful desire can be—so powerful, the speaker says, that it defies all "reason," compelling people to chase after something that they know will make them "mad."

According to the speaker, lust is merciless and unstoppable. It smolders inside people like a "murderous" energy, overriding all other considerations and making it near impossible to do anything else until people satisfy their craving for intimacy. In other words, sexual passion completely consumes people's good sense!

This intense, feverish state might be worth enduring, the speaker suggests, if sex itself were more rewarding. Yet the speaker believes that sex doesn't actually amount to much. It's a "waste," a mere "expense of spirit"—a phrase that implies that having sex costs something, as if people throw away precious energy when they indulge in their desire.

Because actually having sex seems to rob people of their "spirit," its aftermath is full of regret. People feel ashamed for seeking out satisfaction through sex, the poem implies, especially since that satisfaction disappears as soon as it has been "enjoyed." Post-sex embarrassed comes from people feeling foolish for having expended so much energy (both mentally and physically) on something so shallow and fleeting (in the speaker's summation, at least). And because of this apparently inevitable sense of shame, lust leads to nothing but "woe."

Such "woe" isn't enough to keep people from succumbing to their desires, however. "All this the world well knows," the speaker says, suggesting that everyone understands that lust is often more torturous than it is pleasurable. And yet, nobody "shun[s] the heaven that leads [...] to this hell," meaning that, although everyone knows that indulging in lust will only lead to pointless agony, they do it anyway. Lust is simply too powerful for people to overcome, the poem illustrates, even if relenting to desire means torturing oneself.

### Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-14



## THEMES



### LUST AND SHAME

"Sonnet 129" is about the painful side of sexual

# Expense Of Spirit

**M Lipman**



**Expense Of Spirit:**

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