

Sidney's *Astrophil and Stella*: Not as Idyllic as You Might Think

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Unrequited love is no uncommon theme in sonnets—Petrarch, the man who popularized the form, made extensive use of the theme, and even the prolific William Shakespeare put his own spin on the trope. It is a theme captured in formulaic meter and rhyme, whether in octaves and sestetts, or in 14-line stanzas and couplets, and it is a theme heavily idealized. This tendency towards idealization is what makes Sir Philip Sidney's sonnet sequence *Astrophil and Stella* so unique. Instead of leaning into the idealization of unrequited love that plagued his predecessors, Sidney incorporates the theme in a way that expresses not the romantic nature of unrequited love, but instead its harmful nature—both for the lover and the object of his affections.

The sequence tells the story of Astrophil (literally, “star lover”) and the object of his affections, the woman Stella. Through 108 sonnets, Sidney shows the course of their relationship. The two begin as acquaintances, with Astrophil harboring deep romantic feelings for Stella, who does not seem inclined to indulge his pursuit. After some time, Astrophil discovers Stella has married another man. Up until this point, Astrophil's love for Stella is a quiet, tender, romantic love. His love is extreme, yes, but he is not overtaken by it. Stella's marriage, however, is not as untroubled as one might hope.

She and Astrophil begin a sort emotional affair; here, it is important to note that this affair is *not* physical. Stella, it seems to the reader—who, it must be said, can only view the story through the lens of Astrophil's desire—is determined to remain physically faithful to her husband. Astrophil sees the unhappiness of her present relationship and commits himself to wooing her away from it. But over the course of this affair, Astrophil's desire becomes increasingly sexual as their affair progresses, and his frustration with Stella's commitment to her own “virtue” is palpable. He begins to beg her for physical affection, usually kisses, and waxes poetic on her outward beauty. But his only consideration is for his own fulfillment, not for Stella's happiness. Eventually, Stella falls ill, and though she eventually recovers, she seems to have rejected Astrophil, finally, for good. The sequence ends with Astrophil's only thoughts still being of Stella.

Astrophil's own brand of unrequited love beings harmlessly enough; he spends a great deal of time describing and dwelling on his love for Stella, but aside from this the only person his love truly affects is himself. The sequence begins with our protagonist portrayed as a man of words, determined—as in the first sonnet—to use language to its best affect in order to depict the strength of his affection. But quite quickly we see the impact of his unrequited love on his own intellect. In Sonnet 21, a friend of Astrophil's expresses concern for Astrophil's intellectual decline. Astrophil himself acknowledges this decline, saying that "[his] own writings like bad servants show / [His] wits, quick in vain thoughts, in virtue lame." Later, in Sonnet 23, he says that "Of all [his] thoughts have neither stop nor start / But only Stella's eyes and Stella's heart." Already, he is totally consumed by his love for Stella and it effects not only his intellect, but his judgement.

This might be overlooked, however, if the only harm in unrequited love was for the lover. But Sidney would not be developing his theme with skill if he allowed Astrophil to be the only party hurt by this kind of all-consuming, toxic, unrequited love. Instead, he shows us clearly that Stella is just as hurt by this love as Astrophil himself is.

As Astrophil's physical desire for Stella grows, so does his insistence for her to give him that physical affection that he so desires. He himself acknowledges that his desire is all-consuming and nearly undeniable, and he is unable to separate it from his love. Of his own desire he says in Sonnet 72: "Desire, though thou mine olde companion art, / And oft so clinges to my pure Love, that I / One from the other scarcely can discry." Later in this same sonnet, he says that desire "would have all." What else, then, could be the outcome of such all-consuming desire but forced physical affection? In the very next sonnet, Astrophil tells how he "a sugred kisse, / In sport I sucke, while she a sleepe did lye." What might have begun as pure love quickly degenerated into consuming infatuation, and from there into blatant abuse. Astrophil steals a kiss from Stella, not only without her consent, but while she was in a vulnerable state and unable to give consent. And yet he still has the nerve to beg more kisses from her in Sonnets 79 through 81. Nothing, it seems, can satiate his lust, and this lust has resulted in harm for the object of his love.

We can no longer conclude that this love is harmless, nor that it is pure. It is selfish to the utmost, and cares not for the wellbeing of either the lover or the recipient. It dulls the senses, overcomes virtue, and abuses its object. By the end of the sequence, Stella has rejected Astrophil, and while he is saddened by this, it is not out of care for Stella. Instead, it is a selfish sorrow, because Stella is now removed from his life. Any comfort he takes is in moments of remembered affection. Sidney does not buck the traditional sonnet in topic—this sequence is full, possibly fuller than most, of unrequited love. What he does challenge is the traditional attitude towards unrequited

love. This version of unrequited love is not ideal, idyllic, or romantic. Instead, it is selfish, numbing, and hurtful. It cares only for itself and not for its object, and in the case of Astrophil and Stella, it results in actual, physical abuse. Sidney depicts a version of unrequited love that is as far from the purest form of love as man is from the stars, and that leaves Astrophil just as far from Stella.

Sidney, Philip. "Astrophil and Stella." *The Broadview Anthology of British Literature*, by Joseph Black, Broadview Press, 2018, pp. 731–740.

Sidney, Philip. "SIR P. S. HIS ASTROPHEL AND STELLA." *The Project Gutenberg EBook of Sir P. S. His Astrophel and Stella, by Philip Sidney.*, Project Gutenberg, www.gutenberg.org/files/56375/56375-h/56375-h.htm.