

*O never say that I was false of heart,  
 Though absence seemed my flame to qualify;  
 As easy might I from myself depart  
 As from my soul, which in thy breast doth lie:  
 This is my home of love; if I have ranged,  
 Like him that travels I return again,  
 Just to the time, not with the time exchanged,  
 So that my self bring water for my stain.  
 Never believe, though in my nature reigned  
 All frailties that besiege all kinds of blood,  
 That it could so preposterously be stained  
 To leave for nothing all thy sum of good:  
     For nothing this wide universe I call,  
     Save thou my Rose; in it thou art my all.*

**T**he drama of this sonnet centers on the speaker's confession that he has strayed, and this time his "absence" is plainly sexual infidelity. In the earlier sonnets that describe his various travels that describe his various travels this has never been as clear as it is here. That his absence is not like previous travels is strongly implied in a key simile: "Like him that travels, I return again." (l. 6) That his absence is an emotional separation is evident in the opening lines, in which he disclaims falseness of heart. Unfortunately for the speaker, the rest of the sonnet belies this. He even says to his friend that his flame—that is, his sexual ardor—may seem to indicate a lessening of love. To forestall criticism by his friend, he repeats former avowals that they are one soul and that his friend's breast is his "home of love" (l. 5). If this is true, his absence must have been of another sort.

To reassure his friend, the speaker says in the second quatrain that he has returned punctually and has not changed during his absence (l. 7). Therefore he is bringing his own absolution for his "stain"—his nameless sin (l. 8). How convincing can this logic be? In the third quatrain, he asks, in advance, that his friend not believe that the speaker, though he succumbed to all his weaknesses, could be so badly "stained" that he left the goodness of his friend "for nothing" (l. 12).

In a clever turn, the speaker, in a grand hyperbole, protests that the “wide universe” is nothing—except for his friend: “my Rose.” This picks up the thread laid down in Sonnet 1 (l. 2) and makes it the ultimate compliment. The final clause clinches his case with a paradox: the friend is his “all” in the all-encompassing universe. But is this credible? He was absent from his friend, so he must have entered that wide universe of “nothing.” The speaker betrays himself with his sophistry.