

*O from what pow'r hast thou this pow'rful might,  
 With insufficiency my heart to sway,  
 To make me give the lie to my true sight,  
 And swear that brightness doth not grace the day?  
 Whence hast thou this becoming of things ill,  
 That in the very refuse of thy deeds  
 There is such strength and warrantise of skill,  
 That in my mind thy worst all best exceeds?  
 Who taught thee how to make me love thee more,  
 The more I hear and see just cause of hate?  
 O though I love what others do abhor,  
 With others thou shouldst not abhor my state:  
     *If thy unworthiness raised love in me,  
     More worthy I to be belov'd of thee.**

Once more the subject and the argument are those of immediately preceding sonnets, and once more the tone is different. The lamentation of Sonnet 148 and the angry protest of 149 give way to wonder and serious persuasiveness. Shakespeare shows his skill at taking a single situation and turning it about to suggest the changing attitudes of the speaker. The contrasts among the three poems make for subtle drama.

Here the speaker's wrath has softened. The first rhetorical question cannot be answered; the power from which the mistress derives hers is a mystery, and the speaker is in awe of it. He is serious, not scathingly ironic, in asking how her unworthiness ("insufficiency," l. 2) could sway his heart. He has been touched so strongly that his sight has been distorted, and he has been forced to swear that brightness is not as beautiful as her darkness.

Next (in the second quatrain) he asks again how she could ever make ugly things look attractive with such strength in the meanest of her deeds ("refuse," l. 6) that he could, in his own mind, be made to see her worst aspects exceed the best of all others.

Finally, he asks her who taught her how to make him love her more despite what she had done to provoke hate. After this, the argument takes over: Just because, he says, I love in you what others ("the world" is implied) abhor, you should not (like "the world") abhor *my* state. If your corruptness aroused love in me, I should be more worthy of your love. There may be irony in this, but it is much more winning than that in Sonnet 149.